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To cite this article: Klaus Dingwerth & Julian Eckl (2022) Billionaires in world politics: donors, governors, authorities, Journal of Global Ethics, 18:2, 201-210, DOI: 10.1080/17449626.2022.2086901

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2022.2086901>



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Published online: 29 Nov 2022.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Billionaires in world politics: donors, governors, authorities

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ABSTRACT

Hägel's book is timely. As economic inequality has been on the rise, the increasing number of billionaires and their political activities have come under public scrutiny. The book contributes to such scrutiny and allows to ask questions about responsibility, accountability, and legitimacy. It also adds to scholarship on individuals in world politics. Our comment provides a critical discussion of two specific aspects of Hägel's analysis. First, we clarify that most of the book focuses on billionaires as transnational actors while few billionaires seem to exert influence on broader structures or processes of global governance. This clarification helps to understand the character of billionaires' activities in world politics. Second, we reverse the perspective from which Hägel looks at billionaires. We point out that, while Hägel tends to look over the shoulders of the billionaires and mainly observes how they exercise influence in world politics, we argue that the other actors matter, too. More specifically, we maintain that billionaires' roles in global governance are shaped through their specific recognition by international society (state actors) and/or by world society (non-state actors). This change in perspective sheds additional light on the conditions that affect the role(s) billionaires can play in world politics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Invited submission, received
27 May 2022

KEYWORDS

Billionaires; Bill Gates;
transnational actors; global
governance; specific
recognition by international
and world society

Introduction

It is hard to deny that *some* billionaires are agents in the game of world politics. The Forbes Magazine, for instance, lists Donald Trump as a billionaire, and we may assume that his wealth helped rather than hindered his successful bid to become the 45th US President. According to various sources, Vladimir Putin is a billionaire, too. In his case, however, the relation between his fortune and his exercise of power is likely to be the reverse. Rather than enabling him to gain power, a significant portion of his wealth is commonly assumed to be derived from the power he wields as a long-time President of the Russian Federation.

One of the many merits of Peter Hägel's book *Billionaires in World Politics* (2020) is that it goes beyond billionaires who have become presidents or presidents who have become billionaires. Following the work of James Rosenau, Hägel discusses billionaires as a special sub-category of 'individuals in world politics'. In very simple terms, he identifies two conditions

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for these individuals to make a difference in world politics. First, they have to have a lot of money. Second, they need to be willing to use this money to affect world politics. Being a billionaire, in other words, marks a potential, but this potential needs to be activated.

Hägel's study is timely. As economic inequality has been on the rise, the increasing number of billionaires and their political activities have come under public scrutiny. By giving us insights into how six prominent figures have sought – and succeeded – to turn their wealth into political influence, *Billionaires in World Politics* contributes to such scrutiny and allows to ask questions about responsibility, accountability, and legitimacy. It also adds to scholarship on individuals in world politics more broadly. Our comment provides a critical discussion of two specific aspects of Hägel's analysis. First, we clarify that most of the study focuses on billionaires as *transnational* actors while few billionaires seem to exert influence on broader structures or processes of global governance. This clarification helps us to understand the character of billionaires' activities in world politics. Second, we reverse the perspective from which Hägel looks at billionaires. We point out that, while Hägel tends to look over the shoulders of the billionaires and mainly observes how they exercise influence in world politics, we argue that the other actors matter, too. More specifically, we maintain that billionaires' roles in global governance are shaped through their specific recognition by international society (state actors) and/or by world society (non-state actors).¹ This change in perspective sheds additional light on the conditions that affect the role(s) billionaires can play in world politics.

The cases studied: billionaires as transnational vs. global actors

Hägel's book focuses on those billionaires who engage openly and directly in world politics (Hägel 2020, 9–11; see also 110–111). Following from this focus on billionaires as overt political actors and due to the methodological challenge of collecting empirical material on their activities, the six billionaires the author studies in detail are all based in the US where there is a tradition of billionaires as public figures (Hägel 2020, 7). Empirically, this leads Hägel to examine six cases in more detail: Sheldon Adelson, Raj Rajaratnam, the Koch brothers, Rupert Murdoch, Bill Gates, and George Soros.

The activities of these billionaires spread across various societal spheres, including industry, philanthropy, and the news media. Their political motives for engaging in world politics vary. While some pursue *public purposes*, others further their *private good*. This is a major difference between Bill Gates and George Soros on the one hand, and Rupert Murdoch or the Koch brothers on the other. With their philanthropic foundations, the former two invest in the improvement of global health or in promoting the idea and practice of an 'open society'; while this gives them the opportunity to promote their interpretation of these societal goals, there is little evidence suggesting that they seek *direct* (financial) benefits from such investments for themselves (Hägel 2020, 185–235). By contrast, Murdoch's media conglomerates supported the election campaigns of those candidates who were most accommodating in their approach to regulating the media, which is a genuine business interest for him. Similarly, Charles and the late David Koch supported a libertarian and anti-regulatory political agenda that directly protected their own investments in fossil fuel industry (Hägel 2020, 154–184). Hägel touches upon the distinction between public and private benefit in passing. His main analytical distinction, however, is tripartite and identifies three types of goals for which

billionaires strive in their open political activities: security, wealth, or esteem (Hägel 2020, 100–110). In the case studies, security translates into ‘security for specific groups’. Wealth translates into ‘personal profit’. And esteem translates into ‘improved population health’ and ‘open societies’.

But in which specific sense do their overt political activities relate to *world* politics? After all, ‘world politics’ is a broad concept that encompasses a diverse range of phenomena (Nye and Keohane 1971; Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006). Actually, among the six cases discussed in the book, four are best classified as instances of *transnational interactions* while another case is mostly *domestic*.² Moreover, one is about direct engagement in governance *at the global level*. Let us first take a closer look at the four cases of transnational interactions – that is, border-crossing activities where ‘at least one actor is not an agent of a government or an intergovernmental organization’ (Nye and Keohane 1971, 332).

As Nye and Keohane (1971, 330) observed in the early 1970s, ‘a good deal of inter-societal intercourse, with significant political importance, takes place without governmental control’. When US billionaire Sheldon Adelson spends over 200 million on a free newspaper to support ‘Benjamin Netanyahu and the “entrenchment-expansionism” position vis-à-vis Palestine’ (Hägel 2020, 13, 119–145), when Raj Rajaratnam supports the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization during Sri Lanka’s civil war (Hägel 2020, 145–153), when Rupert Murdoch’s business power in the media industry prevents political parties from taking certain positions in election campaigns in the UK (Hägel 2020, 170–184), or when George Soros’s Open Society Foundations promotes civil society and democratization in Central and Eastern Europe (Hägel 2020, 214–235), we are dealing with exactly that: individuals who ‘play direct roles vis-à-vis foreign governments or foreign societies’, often ‘without the individuals involved leaving their localities or the organizations maintaining any branches outside their countries of origin’ (Nye and Keohane 1971, 333 and 335).

The engagement of billionaires in domestic politics ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’ thus foregrounds the status of billionaires as potentially relevant *transnational* actors. This status depends, to a large extent, on the opportunity structures the domestic level (both at home and abroad) offers for billionaires and their resources. By showing both *that* and *how* billionaires matter in this regard, the book makes an important contribution.

Yet, those interested in world politics more broadly will want to know more about the role of billionaires in *global political structures*. Following Hägel’s study, it seems that only few billionaires (seek to) directly affect structures, processes or outcomes of global governance. The major exception in his book is Bill Gates. The foundation he used to co-chair with his former wife (and initially with his late father) has become a major player in global health governance. Further examples not discussed in *Billionaires in World Politics* would include the US billionaire Ted Turner who established the UN Foundation in 1998 based on an endowment of 1 billion USD (Seitz and Martens 2017) or the Swiss industrial Stephan Schmidheiny who, in 1991, co-founded the organization known today as the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD). In the following, we stick to Bill Gates as the case study in Hägel’s book that looks most closely at the specifics of billionaires in global governance.

International society and the recognition of billionaires

Due to the focus on billionaires as transnational actors and following from the author's tendency to look over the shoulders of the billionaires, the societal contexts in which billionaires act – the question of what everyone else is doing at the same time – receive less attention in *Billionaires in World Politics*. The other actors are somewhat passive and seem to fade into the general structures that Hägel discusses while the transnational focus implies that his attention is mainly directed to domestic structures (e.g. Hägel 2020, 29–45, 90–116). As a more systematic account of the roles that international (or world) society allows billionaires to play either personally or through their organizations is missing, we will seek to sketch the contours of such an assessment in the following paragraphs.

This sketch could help to get a more complete picture of the enabling and constraining factors that allow or prevent billionaires to 'act' in world politics. Moreover, it can shed further light on the relationship between billionaires and *their own* organizations in this specific context. Analytically, we ground our sketch on a well-established understanding that analyses social structures and roles against the background of the interplay of material resources, institutions, and ideas (e.g. Cox 1986). Building on this tripartite understanding, we ask in what roles or through what established practices billionaires like Bill Gates (or their organizations) have been recognized as actors that can offer policy-relevant resources, may be granted access to policy-making institutions, or can claim to be a knowledgeable authority whose ideas regarding certain policies should be taken into consideration.

Material resources: accepting private money

By definition, the wealth of billionaires is the starting point of any analysis of their relevance in world politics. At the global level, these financial resources would, however, be of little use if it had not become common practice to accept private (and earmarked) money as a financing source for international governmental and non-governmental organizations alike. Without this precondition, billionaires could not take on the role as donors. Generally speaking, private money is accepted in two ways. First, it is accepted as a payment to existing organizations, which offers the potential to informally influence policies as well as to impact the financial survival of organizations. Second, it is accepted as a financial basis for the creation of new organizations. These may include private organizations as well as public-private partnerships; importantly, moreover, donors can influence not only the mission of the new organizations but, through signaling a willingness to donate or through creating competing institutions, also put pressure on existing ones. In other words, billionaires can be donors in a specific sense (to a particular organization) and in a broader sense (to a wider field). In both cases, however, their role is made possible by accepting their resources that are thereby made policy-relevant.

Whether private money should be accepted has always been a contentious question and should therefore not be taken for granted. This applies also to global health where an early example of contention can be found in the very year when Bill Gates was born. At the World Health Assembly in 1955, during the discussion on the proposal to

start a high-profile global malaria eradication campaign, the US delegate Dr C. L. Williams rejected the eventually agreed possibility to accept private contributions since ‘it seemed unlikely that private concerns would contribute money without making conditions about the way in which it was to be spent’ (WHO 1955, 235). Episodes like this show that it is important to look not only over the shoulders of the billionaires but also at the other actors.

Moreover, while the billionaires’ wealth is the foundation for everything else, the case of Bill Gates suggests that, with the exemption of some initial endowments, they do not act in a personal capacity when they play the role of donors. Rather, they act as the executive heads of the organizations – usually philanthropic foundations – that they have created as financing channels. This entails a certain element of delegation that can become subject to change as witnessed by the recent Gates Foundation governance reforms that followed after the divorce of Bill and Melinda Gates (Gates Foundation 2022). In other words, although their wealth is quintessential, they need others who accept their money and, at the global level in particular, they seemingly need organizations in order to disburse it.

Institutions: granting access to policy-making institutions

The difference between the billionaires as individuals and their organizations becomes even more striking with a view to the question of how they get *formal* access to policy-making institutions. While it is certainly noteworthy that the Gates Foundation is meanwhile in official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO), and that it holds a seat at the boards of various global health organizations, the role in which it is recognized by the other actors is that of a private philanthropic foundation – regardless of whether the foundation speaks on behalf of itself or on behalf of a broader constituency. Global governance and diplomacy rest on the notion of representation and not on personal relations as they were known, for example, in dynastic medieval Europe. Let us briefly illustrate the difference.

In 2015, the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) partnership underwent a controversial and far-reaching reform that was mainly driven by those who financed it and the Gates Foundation was one of them (Pillinger 2020; Eckl 2017). At the time, the Gates Foundation was represented at the board by virtue of holding the seat for the ‘Foundations’ constituency. Among other things, the reformers had, however, some grievances regarding the functioning of the board as a whole which included the claim that it did not display enough leadership and was not able to mobilize enough financial resources. One of the reform proposals was therefore to create a council ‘above’ the board that would be filled with ‘global leaders’ such as Bill Gates himself.

Now the key point is that although it was clear that Bill Gates could de facto influence RBM through his foundation already (but not control it singlehandedly), there was massive resistance to give him (and other individuals) the possibility to *formally* govern the partnership *in a personal capacity*. While the reformers got much of what they wanted in other areas, they were not able to establish the forum of ‘global leaders’ as a directing governance body for RBM. Instead, it became eventually the independent ‘End Malaria Council’ that was created by Bill Gates and Ray Chambers without having any formal links to RBM.³ In other words, it is quite obvious that billionaires like Bill

Gates can make a difference in their field of engagement but the manner in which they are recognized as actors is through organizations while personal rule (or governance) is an uneasy thought for international (or world) society. We are not aware of any cases in which billionaires can formally engage in global policy-making institutions by virtue of who they are as an individual.

Ideas: recognizing billionaires as authorities

Bill Gates and his peers can probably act the most in a personal capacity when it comes to ideas and the role of being a knowledgeable authority although it can be challenging to disentangle their personal authority from the authority of their organizations. Moreover, when they express their views, they might be listened to in both their role as an authority and their role as a donor.

In any event, in terms of established practices, the manner in which they are recognized by international and world society resembles the roles that have been discussed under the label of ‘celebrity diplomacy’ (Cooper 2008). With a view to international institutions whose members are states, the authority of billionaires seems to be acknowledged primarily on an ad hoc basis. Examples for this could be the two speeches of Bill Gates at the World Health Assembly in 2005 and 2011 or his speech at the G20 in 2011. But also when Bill and Melinda Gates reformulated the global ambitions in malaria control in 2007 at their self-convened Malaria Forum, they did this in an ad hoc manner. Additionally, their forum bypassed existing institutions (Hägel 2020, 206–207; Eckl 2014).

The area in which Bill Gates is probably most clearly accepted as a peer and as an actor who can claim authority in a personal capacity is the public-private sphere that manifests itself in spaces like the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos where he is a regular participant and speaker. Finally, he tries to reach out to world society and the global public directly through formats such as his Twitter account or his blog ‘Gates Notes’. While it is presumably in the realm of ideas where Bill Gates personally performs most clearly as a ‘super-actor’ (Hägel 2020, 242), his authority is not only based on his personal business experiences but also on the name that his foundation has made for itself as a knowledgeable funder of global health research and partnerships (Eckl 2014).

What this brief sketch suggests from our perspective is that more often than not, billionaires who want to engage in global governance need to create organizations that other global actors recognize as peers – regardless if they accept these organizations on an equal footing (potentially in the case of non-state actors) or not (most likely in the case of state actors). Moreover, their financial means and their policy ideas seem to be more readily accepted than a formal governance role.

Concluding reflections: why we listen to billionaires

In February 2021, Bill Gates published his book *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster: The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need* (Gates 2021). In the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic, one might have expected a self-styled thought leader on global health governance to share his thoughts on the pandemic response. Yet, he wrote about a different global challenge, a challenge that was neither lacking in experts nor

one on which Gates, except for some investment decisions he had taken in recent years, was known to be an expert. Neither of these facts, however, prevented *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* from becoming a bestseller in the non-fiction segment of many Western markets. So, why would – and did – anyone listen to what Bill Gates has to say about climate change?

The arguments we have outlined above provide some answers. Starting with *material resources*, wealthy individuals can ‘buy’ the production, the promotion, and ultimately also the attention for a non-fiction book. On the production side, for instance, the acknowledgement section of *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* mentions a long list of individuals and groups who assisted the writing process. We thus learn that Josh Daniel was ‘an invaluable writing partner’, that Jonah Goldman and his team provided advice on climate policy as further ‘partners’, that Ian Saunders ‘led the creative and production process’, that research and advice from ‘the team at the Rhodium Group’ is ‘reflected throughout this book’, and that Larry Cohen, the CEO of Gates Notes, ‘managed all this work with his usual calm and wisdom’ (Gates 2021, 233–234). Similar arguments could be made for promotional efforts where a billionaire who wishes his message to be heard is able to invest in marketing and publicity to the extent that is necessary.

Finally, the material dimension also includes the possibility to read *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* as an outline of investment decisions Bill Gates and other wealthy individuals with whom he is well-connected are planning to take in the future, not least because they expect the returns on their investments to be larger in certain sectors or for certain types of businesses. In economies in which shareholding has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon, this, too, makes *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* a ‘must-read’ for those who feel a need to know the future of a carbon-restricted global economy and believe they can learn something about that future from a successful investor like Bill Gates. As a result, it is not only the political economy of the non-fiction book market, but also the political economy of investment that leads us to take note of how someone like Bill Gates thinks about global warming.

Second, *institutional aspects* matter but they are situated at the boundary of the private and the public sector. Here, billionaires seem to have a convening power that draws on their celebrity status as successful businessmen as well as their role as major investors. This power allows them to bring together actors, forge coalitions and establish new initiatives that can then gain access to the existing institutional landscape of global governance. Interestingly, demand for such a service occasionally comes from governments. In his book, for instance, Gates (2021, 10–11) writes the following:

‘A few months before the (Paris climate) conference, I met with François Hollande, who was the president of France at the time. Hollande was interested in getting innovation on the agenda. We both saw an opportunity. He thought I could help bring investors to the table; I said that made sense, though it would be easier to do if governments also committed to spending more on energy research. (...) I emailed two dozen wealthy acquaintances, hoping to persuade them to commit venture funding to complement the governments’ new money for research. (...) I was delighted by the response. The first investor said yes in less than four hours. By the time the Paris conference kicked off two months later, 26 more had joined, and we had named it the Breakthrough Energy Coalition.’

Based on this initiative, Gates was also invited as a speaker at the Joe Biden's Leaders Summit on Climate in April 2021 and at the UN climate conference in Glasgow in November 2021 (where he found himself in the company of fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos).

His story, moreover, resonates with how the WBCSD describes its own origins. Thus, the WBCSD website informs that its predecessor, the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD), was born when Maurice Strong, the then leader of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) 'was looking for a leader to inject a business voice into the global conversation on sustainability and environmental issues, especially at the upcoming Rio Earth Summit in 1992.' It continues, the BCSD 'charged Stephan Schmidheiny with the responsibility, challenging him to spread the concept of sustainable development among the world's business leaders and companies ahead of the Summit', leading Schmidheiny to '[recruit] 48 CEOs from around the world' (WBCSD 2022). Both stories thus respond to the power of billionaires, but they also highlight how their powers are enabled as well as constrained by the institutional structures that prevail at the international level.

Finally, the *ideational context* is key to understanding the attention we pay to someone like Bill Gates on climate policy. On the one hand, public fascination with celebrities matters. Here, the specific kind of fame billionaires have is their business success. In the case of Bill Gates, a popular narrative points to his visionary capacities as well as his ability to make things happen: because he was able to know the future of a computer-mediated work and life before anyone else did, he could create Microsoft. And because he knew how to turn vision into practice, he could become a creator of the reality we now live in. Once we accept that fairy tale version of the digital revolution, we might have reasons to believe that Bill Gates, who has proven his ability as a visionary and creator, can 'do it again' and save us from the climate catastrophe.⁴

Finally, the message Gates sends – more and faster innovation – is also substantially appealing because it appears less painful than, for example, the 'systems change' the Fridays for Future movements have been calling for. Ultimately, the specific combination of a culture that worships its modern prophets – the billionaires Hägel studies have many characteristics it will take to fill that role – and the content of the visions they espouse thus help to account for the roles a billionaire like Bill Gates can play in international and world society. In sum, the billionaires are not simply 'super-actors' by force of their wealth. Instead, the societies, in which they act, are complicit in assigning them specific roles. In world politics, billionaires are what international and world society allow them to be. Peter Hägel's book can help us to see this more clearly.

Notes

1. On recent discussions regarding international and world society as well as their interrelationship see, for example, Stivachtis and McKeil 2018.
2. It concerns the Koch brother's role as donors of the US Republican Party, a role in which they make sure that pro-regulatory candidates do not make it on the election ballot. Here, the international dimension mainly stems from the US role in international climate policy-making.
3. The current wording on the website of the council is actually quite humble and states the opposite of the original political ambition as it suggests that guidance was sought from RBM: 'Though the End Malaria Council is a separate body from the RBM Partnership to End

Malaria, the Council is dependent upon the strategic guidance and expertise of the Partnership and works in close coordination across its priority areas' (End Malaria Council 2020).

4. The prophetic capacity that people readily attribute to Bill Gates personally can also be illustrated with the fact that a TED Talk he gave in 2015 is often seen as a visionary anticipation of the COVID-19 pandemic while the broader global health community had feared a pandemic for years if not decades and while discussions around 'emerging infectious diseases' had started in the 1990s when the journal with the same name was founded.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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