

Abstracts

This paper examines how the World Trade Organization (WTO) shapes the design and enforcement of domestic regulations affecting trade, asking when governments modify or withdraw such measures under international scrutiny. While WTO rules require minimizing trade restrictiveness, states often invoke public interest goals—such as environmental protection or national security—that may inadvertently or strategically favor domestic firms. Existing research emphasizes formal dispute settlement, but I highlight the informal role of transparency, peer review, and evidentiary standards, theorizing the WTO as an epistemic regime where legitimacy is judged through documentation in the notification process. Using 50,540 notifications of Technical Barriers to Trade and Sanitary and Phytosanitary measures, I show that under protectionist pressure, countries are most likely to alter proposals when they submit either no supporting evidence or more than ten pages, suggesting both under- and over-justification raise red flags. The findings challenge enforcement-centered theories, underscoring the informal influence of evidentiary review in global trade governance.