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Weathering the Storm? The Third Wave of Autocratization and International Organization Membership

Maria J. Debre, Thomas Sommerer

Abstract

Democratization scholars are currently debating if we are indeed witnessing a third wave of autocratization. While this has led to an extensive debate about the future of the liberal international order, we still know relatively little about the consequences of autocratization for international organizations (IOs). In this article, we explore to what extent autocratization has led to changes in the composition of IO membership. We propose three different ways of conceptualizing autocratization of IO membership. We argue that we should move away from a dichotomous understanding of regime type and regime change, but rather focus on composition of sub-regime types to understand current developments. We build on updated membership data for 73 IOs through 2020 to map membership configurations based on the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index. Contrary to current debates on the crisis of the liberal order, we find that many IOs are not (yet) affected by broad autocratization of their membership that would endanger democratic majorities or overall democratic densities. However, we also observe the disappearance of formerly homogenous democratic clubs due to democratic backsliding in a number of European and Latin American IO member states, as well as a return of autocratic clubs in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa. These findings have important implications for the broader research agenda on international democracy promotion and human right protection as well as the study of legitimacy and the effectiveness of international organizations.

Keywords: Autocracy, democracy, international organizations, international liberal order

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Introduction

Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) declared that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 was down to 1986 levels and counted a new record of 42 countries undergoing autocratization. Regime changes in recent years have sparked debates about a potential third wave of autocratization that is driven particularly by democratic recessions and breakdowns in established democracies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Skaaning 2020; Tomini 2021). Regime change may also translate into differing international preferences with respect to international cooperation (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Moravcsik 1997; Risse-Kappen 2017).

Since the end of the Cold War, international relations (IR) scholars have shown the various ways in which the third wave of democratization has affected international cooperation. Democracies for instance are more likely to liberalize trade (Mansfield et al. 2000), to protect human rights (Moravcsik 2000; von Stein 2016), or engage in peaceful dispute settlement (Davis 2012; Russett 1993). International organizations (IOs) with a growing democratic membership are also more likely to open up and allow the participation of transnational actors (Tallberg et al. 2013, 2016), to commit to liberal norms (Tallberg et al. 2020), and to adopt transparency and oversight mechanisms (Grigorescu 2010).

With the proliferation of the reverse wave in recent years, IR scholarship has already started to highlight potential international consequences that might result from backlash politics and political backsliding (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2019; Ferguson et al. 2017; Ikenberry 2018; Pepinsky and Walter 2019). Scholars debate to what extent populism might affect state withdrawal from IOs (e.g., Choi 2021; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019, 2021), while European Union (EU) scholars ponder the role that populism and backsliding have for EU identity and disintegration (Krastev 2012; Sedelmeier 2017; Vollaard 2014; Walter 2021a). The growing backlash against democratic institutions also leads states to cut funding for multilateral projects (Ege and Bauer 2017; Goetz and Patz 2017) and contest central principles of international cooperation (Börzel and Zürn 2021; Sommerer et al. 2022; Velasco 2020; Walter 2021b).

While scholars have highlighted prominent examples of how IOs have been affected by instances of autocratization (Kelemen 2020; Schuette and Dijkstra 2023; Zaccaria 2022), it is unclear if these are isolated cases or if IOs are undergoing a deep and far-reaching transformation. Particularly, there is so far little systematic knowledge on the scope, degree, and timing of the autocratization of IO membership. How have membership structures of IOs changed since the peak of democratization in the 1990s and particularly in the recent decade? Which IOs might be under threat because of growing

autocratization of members? And, importantly, what are the consequences of autocratization for the ways that IOs are organized, how they function, and to what extent they are perceived as legitimate?

In this research, we conceptualize three different ways of aggregating domestic regime type to the level of IO membership, we offer an overview of how autocratization has affected IO membership structures in recent years, and we discuss the implications of domestic regime change for global governance.

To explore the degree of autocratization of IO membership, we have updated membership data for 73 IOs from the Measuring International Authority (MIA) dataset (Hooghe et al. 2017) that were still active in 2020.¹ We then map membership composition according to the operationalization that is conventionally used to identify critical changes at the aggregate level: democratic density of membership (e.g., Pevehouse 2005; Tallberg et al. 2016). We then propose a second way of aggregation that focuses on changes in the homogeneity of IOs that were initially dominated by members with a specific regime type. Third, we argue that the emphasis on regime change between autocracies and democracies conceals more fine-grained developments within both camps. About two-thirds of the autocratization episodes in the V-Dem dataset do not include regime changes at all, with a majority of the most recent episodes of autocratization since the mid 1990s affecting only established democracies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, pp. 1102–03). We therefore consider how transitions between sub-regime types account for empirical trends identified by comparative politics scholarship and assess how changes between the four regime subtypes we identify matters for the overall composition of IO membership structures: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, as well as electoral autocracy and closed autocracy.

Interestingly, we find that autocratization of membership has not increased as dramatically as expected in the last decade based on conventional measurements. Only a few IOs have become under immediate threat from being controlled by an autocratic majority or experience a major decrease in their democratic density, and none of those IOs that are under threat have held stable democratic majorities over time. Instead, autocratization has had two main effects for IO membership composition. First, formerly homogenous democratic clubs like the EU or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have seen increasing backsliding and even democratic breakdowns over the last decade, endangering parts of their foundational identity. This has led to the disappearance of purely democratic clubs in global governance. Second, mixed IOs that have experienced some democratization of their membership, like the Southern

¹ The dataset covers 73 of the most prominent global and regional IOs, covering both task-specific as well as general purpose IOs. We have excluded all IOs that are no longer active in 2020 (NAFTA, COMECON, MERCOSUR).

African Development Community (SADC) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have returned to almost completely authoritarian clubs, thereby further reinforcing authoritarian survival in the future (Debre 2021).²

Second, we observe a rise in domestic changes from liberal to electoral democracies due to democratic recessions as one of the most significant differences between the first and the second decade of the 21st century. This does not lead to dramatic shifts in the ratio between democracies and autocracies in IO membership in most regional and global IOs. However, scholarship suggests the preferences of electoral regimes matter for multilateral collaboration (Mattes and Rodríguez 2014; Weeks 2012) and might differ substantially from those of liberal democracies and consolidated autocracies. Democratic backsliding might thereby have serious consequences for the design, legitimacy, and effectiveness of IOs.

Our research contributes to current debates on the drivers and consequences of political backlash and crisis of global governance institutions in several ways. We provide an updated picture of the state of crisis of global governance institutions and a point of reference for several ongoing debates in IO scholarship. We take up the recent discussion in comparative politics on conceptualization and measurement of autocratization processes and develop conceptualizations that can be used to assess the extent of changes at the aggregate IO level. Empirically, we map changes of IO membership regarding regime type composition for the last decade, which has seen many changes both with regard to democratic recessions and breakdowns, and also the growing consolidation of authoritarian politics in many autocratic regimes, leading to a return to more homogenous autocratic clubs. Finally, we discuss implications about the consequences that the patterns of autocratization of IO membership have for the ability of IOs to promote and protect democracy and human rights, for IO authority, and legitimacy.

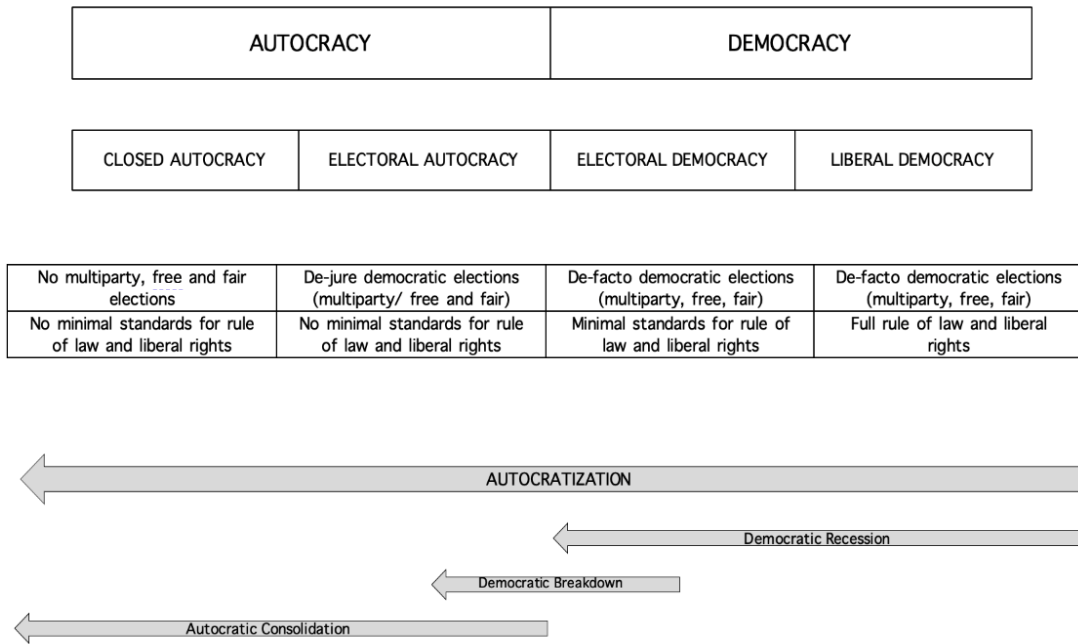
² However, there is also a converse trend for several IOs such as ECOWAS or the Pacific Island Forum (PIF). They have made some headway in terms of democratization of their membership across all three proposed measurements—a fact that is often missed in current debates that focus largely on democratic quality of Western countries and IOs.

Domestic and International Autocratization

In recent years, scholars of comparative politics have hotly debated how to conceptualize and measure the decline in the quality of democratic regimes. Most scholars seem to agree that globally, democratic backsliding is happening gradually through the slow concentration of power on the executive instead of instantaneous changes due to military coups and blatant election day voter fraud (Bermeo 2016; Svobik 2015). However, disagreement persists both on how to quantify this gradual erosion, and to what extent current political trends amount to a “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Lührmann and Lindberg define autocratization as “any move away from [full] democracy” (p. 1099) and measure autocratization episodes as substantial declines of at least 10% on the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) over connected periods of time. Based on this threshold, Lührmann and Lindberg conclude that we have been witnessing a third wave of autocratization since the mid-1990s when the number of democratization episodes started to decrease while the number of autocratization episodes steadily increased.

In contrast, Skaaning (2020) presents a skeptical view of the thresholds and trends used to define these waves of autocratization. In a minimalist approach, he suggests considering any negative move on the EDI as a potential episode of autocratization. When plotting net effects based using this operationalization, Skaaning concludes that autocratization episodes barely outnumber the net effects of democratization. Tomini (2021; Cassani and Tomini 2020) populates the middle ground of the debate in his piece “Don’t think of it as a wave.” Advocating to understand autocratization as any transition from one regime to another in terms of the fourfold regime subdivisions specified by Lührmann et al. (2018, see Figure 1), he suggests combining quantitative and qualitative strategies to identify such transitions.

Figure 1: Regime Subtypes and Autocratization (based on Lührmann et al. (2018) and Lührmann and Lindberg (2019))



The question of defining autocratization gets trickier once we move from the individual regime to aggregate membership structures of IOs. When aggregating domestic regime qualities, when do changes become consequential for IO decision-making? Is it sufficient if the democratic quality declines significantly in a single member state? Do we need to see a more substantial decline across several member states or even a wave of breakdown event(s)?

We argue that there are three different potential perspectives on the democratic and autocratic quality of IO membership: aggregated democratic density; the ratio between democratic and autocratic IO members; and finally, the representation of regime subtypes in the description of membership composition.

First, the IO literature has mostly relied on Pevehouse’s (2005) concept of democratic density to define democratic quality of IO membership (e.g., Debre 2021; Hooghe et al. 2017; Tallberg et al. 2016, 2020). Democratic density measures annual changes in the average democracy score of all IO members on various indices like Polity, Freedom House, or Varieties of Democracy. If average scores decline from one year to the another, we could talk about autocratization of IO membership corresponding to a minimalist understanding of autocratization. While this approach is widely used in IO research, it is also problematic because changes in the overall density could be driven by

larger changes in single, but not necessarily central IO member states or simply represent short-term fluctuations instead of long-term downward trends. We therefore supplement this measure with five- and ten-year trends as well as an analysis of major powers and their democracy scores.

Second, we prioritize the ratio between autocratic and democratic member states instead of average density scores to account for democratic thresholds. For example, we assume that IOs face critical changes to their membership when they lose a democratic majority, that is, less than 50 percent of members remain democratic. Such a shift regarding the dominant group of member states can lead to changes in the organizational culture. Moreover, many IOs have introduced majoritarian decision-making procedures (Blake and Lockwood Payton 2015; Hooghe et al. 2017). In these cases, losing a democratic majority can be consequential for procedural and substantial decisions in IO assemblies and decision-making bodies. Additionally, we look at decline of homogeneity amongst members, given that IOs with *de jure* or *de facto* consensual decision-making might be blocked if one or a few states change regime type.³ Focusing on majorities and homogeneity, however, assumes that democracies and autocracies generally exhibit similar international preferences, whereas research also shows that democracies often vote strategically in IOs to achieve domestic preferences that may violate democratic values (Vaubel 1986; Vreeland 2019).

Third, we look at the number of transitions between sub-regime types to get a more nuanced understanding of the instances of autocratization of IO membership. Following Lührmann, Tanneberg, and Lindberg (2018), we differentiate between four regime subtypes that vary in terms of the accountability of leaders, operationalized as a combination of multi-party, free and fair elections, and the degree to which liberal rights and the rule of law are upheld: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, as well as electoral autocracy and closed autocracy (see Figure 1). The assessment of autocratization at the subtype level complements the first two approaches because it provides qualitative insights on the characteristics of member states and the type of transition. While the decrease in the aggregate scores of democratic density might look the same, we expect that backsliding from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy already changes the nature of international cooperation, as we have for instance seen in the cases of Hungary and, at least until the elections in October 2023 in Poland, in the EU.

³ Of course, decision-making could be blocked by both authoritarian and democratic regimes.

Mapping the Autocratization of IO Membership

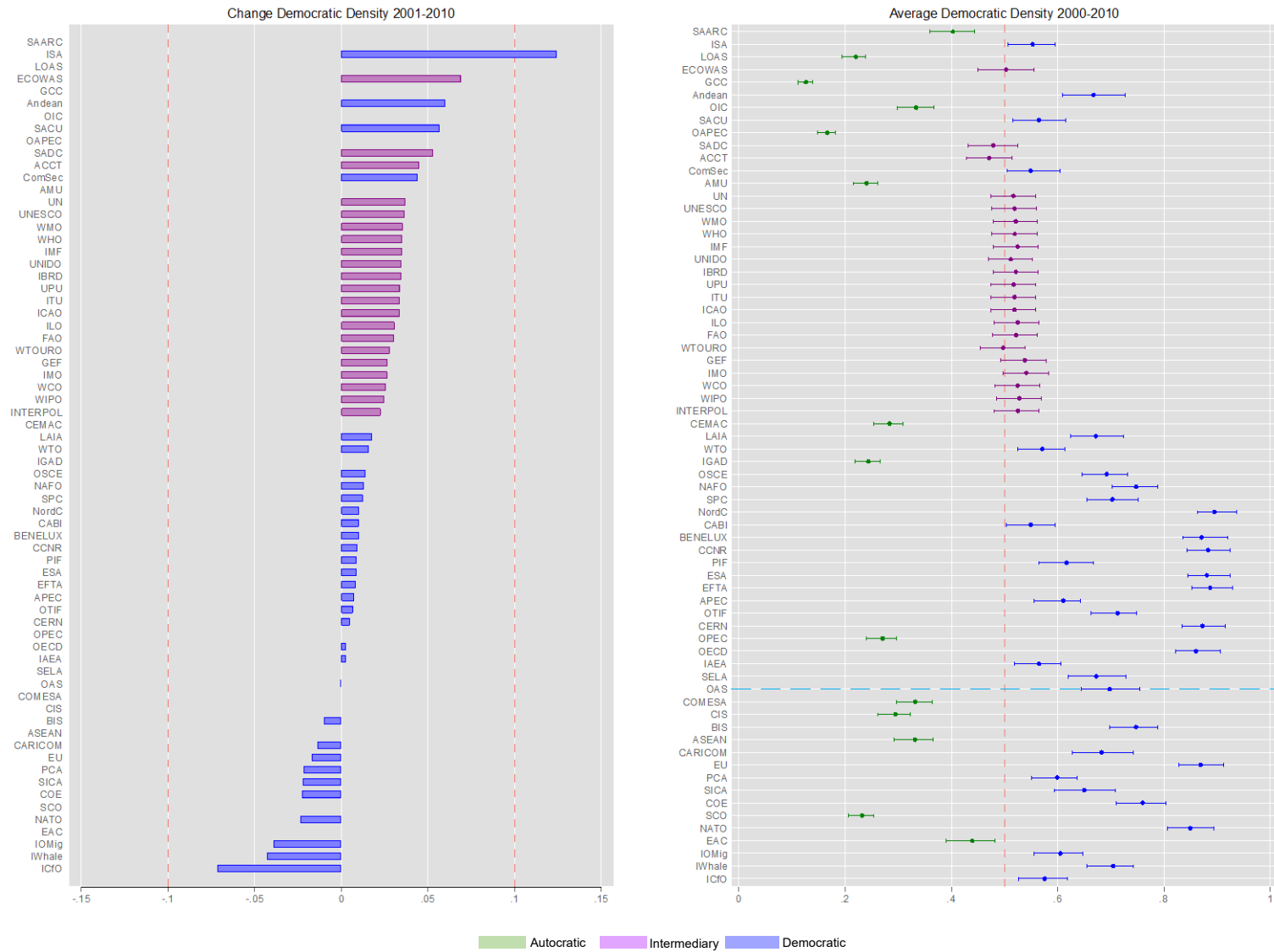
In the following section, we empirically analyze which IOs have experienced autocratization of membership since 2001 according to these three perspectives based on current data from V-Dem. We look at changes in IO membership for the 73 IOs from the MIA dataset, because these represent the most important IOs globally. We updated membership data for these IOs through 2020 (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

Democratic Density

We assess the development of democratic density of IOs over the last two decades based on average scores of the EDI across all members (Coppedge et al. 2021; see Figures 2 and 3 right panels). To register a visible and significant shift, they therefore require either a decrease across several member states, or an extreme case of autocratization in a single member state. When we turn to the biggest changes that have happened in IOs across the past decade in terms of democratic density (Figures 2 and 3 left panels), we find that the number of IOs with declining democratic density has increased almost threefold compared to the previous decade, from 16 to 62 IOs. At first sight, these numbers seem quite alarming.

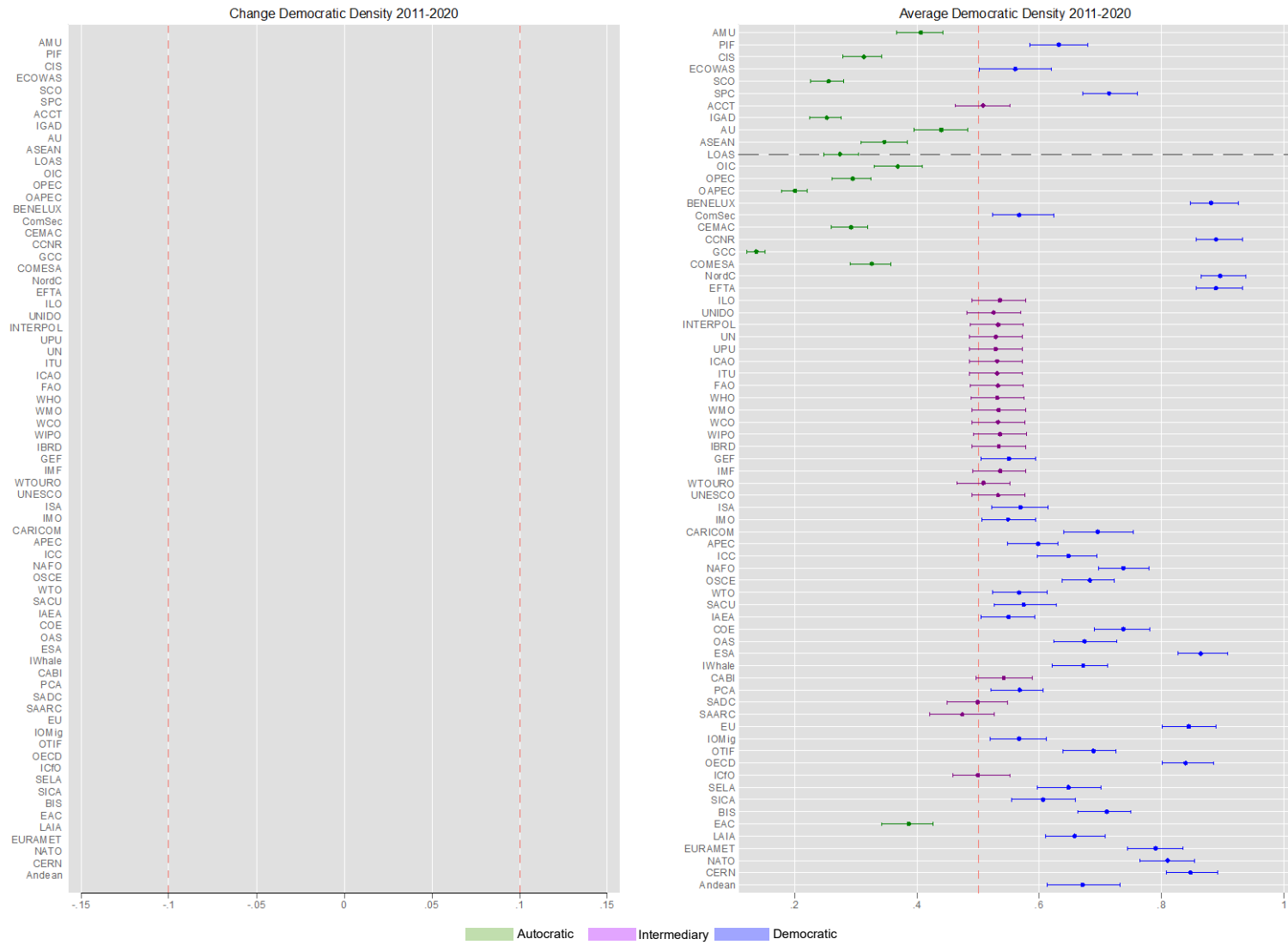
However, we can make some qualifications to this overall finding. Firstly, the extent of autocratization remains relatively small, with the average decline in both the last decades only at around three percentage points? Secondly, autocratization of IO membership already existed during the previous decade, with several IOs experiencing decline before 2010. This is in line with findings by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) that the third wave of autocratization already started in the early 2000s. Third, the size of the change in democratic density varies substantially, from very marginal shifts to changes up to 8 percentage points (autocratization) and 13 percentage points (democratization) at the extremes. Finally, there are several IOs that have seen an overall increase in their democratic density over both decades, even though they might have seen some decreases in single years or experienced autocratization episodes over several years. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), for instance, has experienced an overall increase of democratic density between 2000–2010 and 2011–2020, although it has seen some of the most significant decreases annually and in the time period 2012–2018 among all IOs (see Figure 4 below). This shows that while there is an overall downward trend of democratic decay, variation both between IOs and within single IOs over time is substantial.

Figure 2: Change of Democratic Density (left) and Average Democratic Density (right) between 2001 and 2010 by IOs*



*x-scale left panels: Total change EDI among all IO members (ECCAS and OECS omitted because of missing values)

Figure 3: Change of Democratic Density (left) and Average Democratic Density (right) between 2011 and 2020 by IOs*



*x-scale left panels: Total change EDI among all IO members (ECCAS and OECS omitted because of missing values)

Two factors complicate the democratic density measure. First, recent debates on the extent of democratic backsliding have raised concerns that indices based on expert coding might suffer from confirmation bias by coders who want to find backsliding because it fits the current narrative (Little and Meng 2023). While it seems unlikely that the high number of coders are all systematically biased in the same downwards trajectory, we control for possible errors by including confidence intervals based on the upper/lower bounds of the electoral democracy measure provided by V-Dem. The right panels of Figures 2 and 3 show the average density levels of all IOs including these confidence intervals. Accordingly, we coded IOs with an overall density above the threshold of 0.5 as democratic (blue), IOs below the threshold as autocratic (green), and IOs with a confidence interval across the threshold as intermediary (purple), given that they could be in both categories depending on underlying measurement errors.

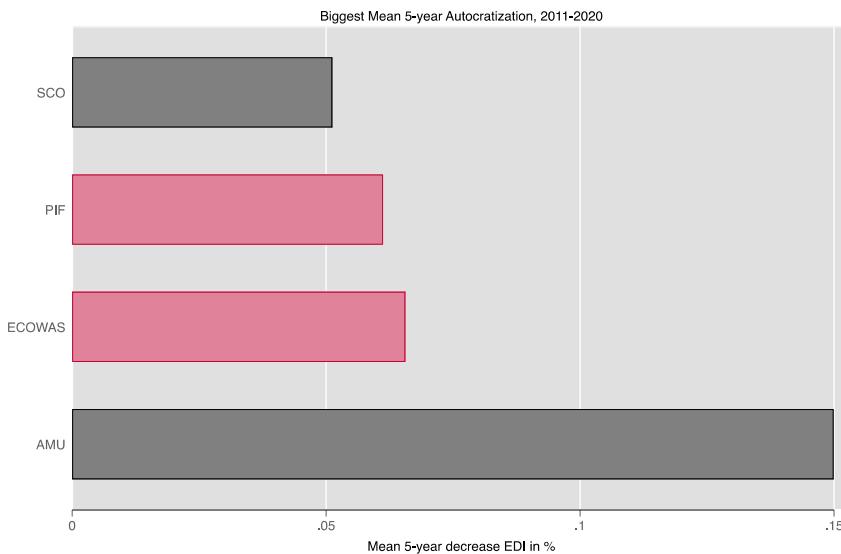
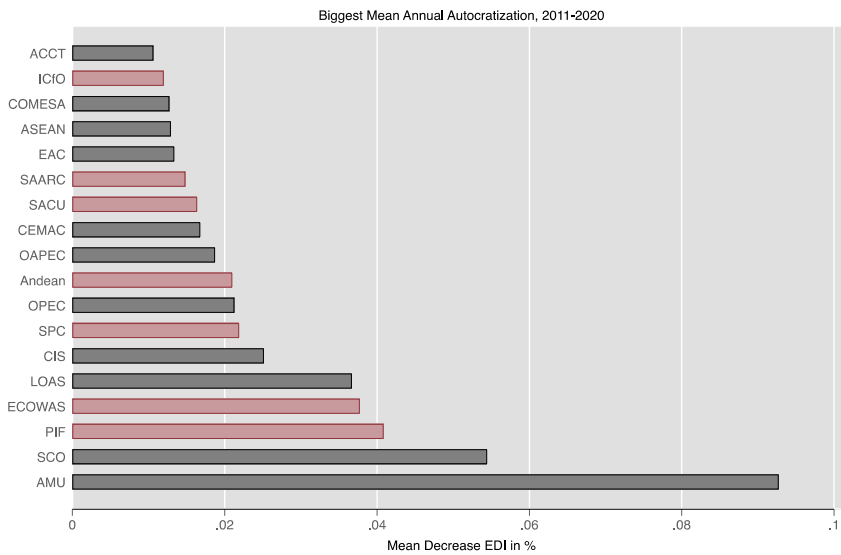
When taking these overall averages into account, the picture does not look as bleak. In absolute numbers, most IOs in the dataset retained their democratic density in both decades (35/36), the same number of IOs remain in the intermediary category (21/21) and only a small number of IOs is categorized as autocratic (15/14). After 2001, three new IOs entered the dataset (African Union (AU), International Criminal Court (ICC), Euramet), with two of them coded as fully democratic (ICC, Euramet). This means that overall, three IOs improved from intermediary to democratic (International Maritime Organization (IOM), Global Environmental Facility (GEF), ECOWAS), one improved from autocratic to intermediary (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)), and only two declined from democratic to intermediary (Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International (CABI), International Coffee Organization (ICfO)). Thus, there is little overall change in terms of the composition of IO membership according to the democratic density measurements.

Second, this simple operationalization might overestimate the importance of changes in single member states, which would hardly be consequential on the aggregate level. It might therefore be prudent to define thresholds to qualify substantial changes in line with Lührmann and Lindberg after all. We therefore look at substantial decline of democratic density, measured as decrease of the average V-Dem score, in two different ways: at least 5 percent over a span of five connected years, or the biggest decline over a decade. These different thresholds are chosen to ensure that we capture both short-term changes that could be the start of longer periods of decline as well as more long-term changes that affect several member states and are therefore also more likely to affect the aggregate IO level.

According to this perspective, a number of democratic IOs among developing countries have been affected by a significant decrease of democratic density in recent years (Figure 4), among them ECOWAS, which struggled to contain civil war and military coups amongst others in Burkina Faso, Mali, or Niger, but also made overall improvements due

to increases in democratic quality in several other member states. Additional coups in Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022), and Niger (2023)—after the data presented here—show the overall instability with regard to democratic quality among ECOWAS members that is mirrored in a volatile democratic density measure. Autocratic IOs like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), or ASEAN are getting even more autocratic. This is mostly due to many authoritarian states becoming more repressive in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and not only in the Middle East.

Figure 4a (top) and 4b (bottom): IOs that lost significant democratic density between 2011 and 2020 (IOs in red retain > 50 percent democratic members over in this time period)



Importantly, most of these developments do not seem to be driven by autocratization of major powers.⁴ Only two major powers, China and the United States, have seen significant decreases in their EDI scores over the last decade. With an almost 10 percent decrease, China is nearing bottom ratings. Despite this development, IOs like the SCO where China is one of the major powers, have seen an overall improvement over the last decade due to the entry of a new democratic member, India (Figure 3), and have managed to recover from major declines since 2011 (Figure 4b). Likewise, the United States has lost nearly 0.1 on the EDI since 2010, but decreases in overall democratic density in IOs like NATO are rather driven by backsliding and breakdowns in European member states, most importantly Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, but also Turkey.

Democratic Thresholds and Democratic Homogeneity

Second, we can prioritize the ratio between autocratic and democratic member states instead of average density scores. We assume that IOs face critical changes to their membership when they lose a democratic majority, and autocratic countries form the largest group. For example, given that many IOs have introduced majoritarian decision-making procedures (Hooghe et al. 2017; Blake and Lockwood Payton 2015), losing a democratic majority can be consequential for procedural and substantial decisions in IO assemblies and central decision-making bodies. Even where IOs retain a narrow democratic majority, decision-making might be more prone to gridlock particularly on controversial policies, given that democracies do not always vote in line with democratic values (e.g., Vaubel 1986; Vreeland 2019).

As Table 1 reveals, only four among the 73 IOs in the dataset have lost a democratic majority between 2011 and 2020: SADC, ICfO, the World Tourism Organization (WTOURO), and CABI. Among those, only two had a stable democratic majority during the previous decade, while the SADC and the WTOURO had apparently reached a temporary peak in 2010. However, Table 1 also indicates that a larger group of 14 IOs, including the United Nations (UN) and many other prominent organizations from the UN system have come relatively close to losing their democratic majority in 2020. In other words, a continuation of the trend toward autocratization of member states will turn the majorities in a significant number of global IOs.

⁴ We define a major power according to the Correlates of War system membership data (v2016), including the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, and Japan.

Table 1: IOs that lost a democratic majority between 2011 and 2020

	IO	Democratic percentage, 2010	Average democratic percentage, 2006–2010	Democratic percentage, 2020	Voting rule
Lost democratic majority	SADC	57.1	45.1	43.2	Unanimity
	ICfO	50.0	52.0	39.5	Weighted Majority
	WTOURO	51.0	48.2	47.4	Majority
	CABI	59.5	53.5	50.0	Majority
Close to losing democratic majority	UNIDO	53.9	51.6	50.3	Majority
	UPU	54.7	52.4	50.9	Majority
	UN	54.7	52.4	50.9	Weighted Majority
	UNESCO	55.0	52.8	50.9	Majority
	IBRD	54.9	52.4	50.9	Weighted Majority
	WCO	55.4	52.5	50.9	Majority
	ITU	55.0	52.4	51.2	Majority
	ICAO	55.0	52.7	51.2	Majority
	FAO	55.3	53.0	51.5	Majority
	INTERPOL	54.8	52.5	51.5	Majority
	WHO	54.8	52.9	51.5	Majority
	ILO	55.0	53.2	51.5	Majority
	IMF	56.2	53.6	51.8	Weighted Majority
	WMO	55.1	53.0	51.8	Majority

Note: Data on the voting rule is based on Blake and Lockwood Payton (2015) and own data. It captures rules in the body that commands greatest authority over the IO and the main substantive issues, typically the supreme decision-making body as defined by the founding treaty. We acknowledge that even in the presence of de jure majority rules, member states often de facto refer to unanimity.

The ratio between democracies and autocracies is also consequential for highly homogenous IOs. We have witnessed in recent years how difficult it is for the EU to move against backsliding member states in the European Council when member states are no longer committed to a democratic identity (Bellamy and Kröger 2021). While majority voting is possible in the Council of Ministers, about 90 percent of all legislative acts are agreed upon unanimously (Mattila 2009).

The EU is far from being the only organization affected by this dynamic. The assessment of our sample indicates that several of the most democratic IOs have lost their democratic homogeneity during the last decade. Table 2 identifies seven out of 73 IOs that have formerly been exclusively democratic (e.g., EU, NATO, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)) and ten IOs with a majority of at least 75 percent of democratic members (e.g., Council of Europe (CoE), Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), Organization of American States (OAS)) that all have experienced growing autocratization.⁵ Latin American IOs, most importantly the small Andean Community, also suffer from decreasing democratic homogeneity because of a democratic breakdown in Bolivia. Breakdowns in the Bolivarian group⁶ including Honduras, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (which had already reverted to autocratic rule in 2003) also endanger democratic dominance in the OAS and Latin American economic IOs (Latin American Integration Association (LAIA), Latin American and Caribbean Economic System (SELA)), which has already been consequential for some decisions as we will later discuss further.⁷

By looking at two significant thresholds for the ratio between democratic and autocratic countries—50 and 100 percent—we can identify fundamental shifts in the composition of IO membership that are not visible in the aggregate measure of democratic density. This second approach again marks similar organizations in the risk zone as the intermediary category in the previous section, suggesting a tipping point may be close for many IOs in 2020. Moreover, the most striking result so far refers to the disappearance of purely democratic clubs during the most recent decade of the observation period. This is remarkable, as it involves organizations like the EU, NATO, OECD, and to some degree, the CoE and the OSCE, which all had a very high share of democratic membership and were active in promoting democratic norms and practice.

⁵ In 2020, only four IOs in our dataset have a homogeneously democratic membership, e.g., the Nordic Council and EFTA.

⁶ The Bolivarian group refers to the ten members of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA).

⁷ In the wake of a major constitutional crisis after the end of our observation period, Peru was also downgraded on the Liberal Democracy Index from 0.73 to 0.61.

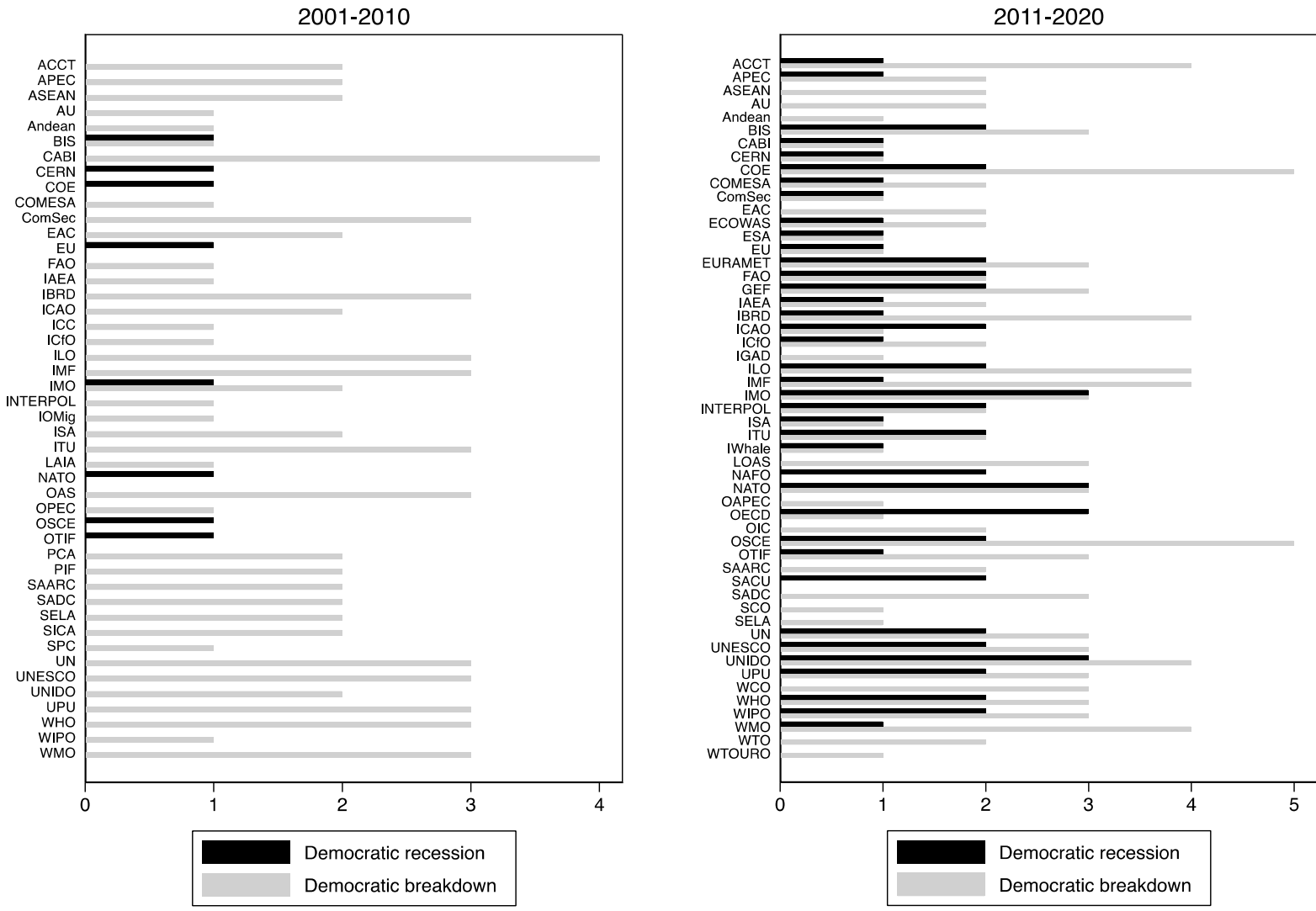
Table 2: IOs that lost a democratic homogeneity between 2011 and 2020

	IO	Democratic percentage, 2010	Average democratic percentage 2006–2010	Democratic percentage, 2020	Voting rule
Lost democratic homogeneity	EU	100.0	100.0	96.3	Weighted majority
	ESA	100.0	100.0	95.5	Majority
	OECD	100.0	100.0	94.6	Unanimity
	CERN	100.0	100.0	91.3	Majority
	NATO	100.0	100.0	90.0	Unanimity
	EURAMET	100.0	100.0	89.2	Unanimity
	Andean	100.0	100.0	75.0	Unanimity
Decreasing democratic homogeneity	COE	93.0	89.7	81.4	Unanimity
	NAFO	87.5	87.5	81.3	Majority
	BIS	87.0	85.6	77.6	Majority
	OAS	84.6	87.1	84.0	Majority
	LAIA	83.3	83.3	76.9	Unanimity
	OSCE	82.4	79.2	72.5	Unanimity
	OTIF	81.4	81.8	68.9	Majority
	SELA	80.0	82.6	76.0	Majority
	ICC	76.2	76.1	71.3	Majority
	IWhale	75.7	74.6	69.9	Majority

IO Membership and Changes in Regime Subtypes

Taken together, the first two approaches to analyze changes in the composition of IO membership find some evidence for a growing share of autocratic member states in the sample of 73 IOs. However, this trend is limited to a minority of organizations that does not mirror the widespread narrative on the ongoing challenge of the liberal international order. One explanation could be that the major threat debated by this literature stems from states that undergo democratic recessions without necessarily experiencing more drastic democratic breakdowns (yet). Therefore, we propose to also look at the number of transitions between sub-regime types, meaning categorical changes between any of the four types outlined previously (liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, closed autocracy) to get a more nuanced understanding of the instances of autocratization of IO membership.

Figure 5: Number of democratic recessions and democratic breakdowns per IO, 2001–2010 (left) and 2011–2020 (right)



A look at the aggregate number of subtype transitions across all IOs from 2011 to 2020 reveals that *democratic recession*, defined as the shift from liberal democracy to electoral democracy, was by far the most frequent type of autocratization for IOs ($N = 314$ accounting for multiple IO memberships; 15 countries in total), followed by *democratic breakdown* ($N = 265$; 22 countries; see Figure 5).⁸ This is in stark contrast to the previous decade, where only *one country* (Hungary) experienced a *democratic recession*. This pattern speaks in favor of integrating subtypes of domestic regimes: The most common nature of change in the recent decade did not lead to a rise in the number of autocratic member states, but it manifests in the sweeping decline of liberal democracies in many countries around the globe. In the following, we will mainly focus on democratic recession, as this dimension of autocratization was underrepresented in our analysis so far.

European-dominated IOs (EU, OECD, NATO, Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO)) that have experienced democratic recessions affecting more than 20 percent of their memberships figure most prominently among those IOs that have lost democratic quality. Figure 6 shows the extent of this dynamic for the OSCE and the EU in greater detail and illustrates the pattern of fading democratic homogeneity described in Table 2. If we aggregated the two subtypes “liberal democracy” and “electoral democracy” into one common regime type, the democratic majority in these organizations would still look strong. In the case of the OSCE, though, less than half of the members are liberal democracies in 2020, while they formed a majority in the 2000s. The pattern is similar for the EU. In 2020, there is only one autocratic member state, and democratic density is very high. Differentiating between the two democratic subtypes, however, reveals that the share of liberal democratic EU members went down from 100 percent in 2000 to two-thirds twenty years later. Both cases illustrate a substantial transformation of the membership that would not have been detected by a simple dichotomous distinction into democracies and autocracies or density measures.

⁸ “Autocratic consolidation” (see Figure 1) was a less common event for IOs during that period ($N = 74$; 9 countries).

Figure 6: Development of regime subtypes EU and OSCE since 2000



Figure 7: Development of regime subtypes ASEAN and SADC since 2000



A perspective that considers regime subtypes suggests that the loss of a democratic majority might already be closer for some IOs in the risk zone. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for instance, has experienced a drop in the share of democratic member states from 55.0 to 50.9 between 2010 and 2020, narrowly maintaining a majority of democratic member states (see Table 1 above). If we add to this the nine instances of democratic recession of member states from liberal democracies into electoral democracies, the changes in the composition of the organization membership looks more dramatic. The same dynamic can be observed for most of the other organizations listed in the bottom half of Table 3. If we now assume that even democratic recession is already an important step away from core democratic principles and norms, the autocratization of IO membership might look more advanced than conventional measures suggested.

Next to democratic recessions, democratic breakdowns and autocratic consolidations have also affected the composition of IO membership. The ICC, for instance, stands out with 12 transitions away from liberal or electoral democracy toward autocratic rule since 2011. Given that its authority as an international court has always been highly contested, increasing autocratization might further affect the legitimacy of judicial rulings handed down by the court and its ability to effectively pursue war crimes. Sub-regional IOs among less-developed countries that had experienced tentative democratization since the 1990s (ASEAN, the Andean Community, SADC) are now amongst the IOs with most democratic breakdowns and autocratic consolidations. Figure 7 shows how ASEAN has almost returned to being a complete dictator's club, while SADC is now dominated by a majority of autocratic members, with no liberal democracy left. However, for both IOs, the status of the IOs would change according to democratic density measures, with only very little overall decline in aggregate scores.

Implications for Global Governance

The composition of IO membership matters for international governance in multiple ways. Two aspects dominate in existing scholarship. One line of research has focused on the consequences of democratization of IO membership for the protection of democratic governance globally (Fearon 1997; Pevehouse 2005; Simmons and Danner 2010). Another line of scholarship has focused on the consequences of democratization for design and performance of IOs, arguing that IOs with a large share of democratic member states will be more willing to expand international cooperation (Hooghe et al. 2017: cf. Mansfield et al. 2008; Simmons 2009), to foster transparency policies (Grigorescu 2010), and to commit to liberal norms (Tallberg et al. 2020). In contrast, authoritarian states strategically form their own “clubs of autocrats” (Debre 2021b) that usually involve more intergovernmental cooperation and less authority transfer to international bureaucracies (Acharya and Johnston 2008).

Our findings lend strong motivation to revisit the consequences of regime change for international collaboration. If IOs are mostly affected by decreasing democratic homogeneity due to recessions and breakdowns, then we should consider to what extent these changes affect global cooperation. In the following sections, we discuss multiple mechanisms through which decreasing homogeneity might affect global cooperation: changing winning coalitions necessary to protect democratic governance and democratic norms, hindering formal strengthening of IOs, or decreasing the legitimacy of multilateral cooperation.

Democratic Standards and Democratic Norms

Parallel to credible commitment arguments advanced in the democratization literature (e.g., Moravcsik 2000, Pevehouse 2005), states that are undergoing autocratization face higher uncertainty compared to consolidated regimes. This may have serious consequences for voting coalitions that rely on democratic majorities to protect civil and liberal rights and democratic governance. The OAS is a good case to exemplify the importance of democratic thresholds. With a deteriorating humanitarian situation and political crisis in Venezuela following the death of Hugo Chavez in 2011, the head of the opposition party Juan Guaidó was recognized by some states as the legitimate interim government in 2019—all while the elected president Nicolás Maduro remained in power. At the OAS, Guaidó moved to achieve accreditation of a member of the interim government as official representative to the IO, a vote that almost failed due to the substantial opposition of nine members of the Bolivarian group, amongst them democratic members like Mexico and Uruguay (Deutsche Welle 2019). Subsequently, a debate on potential OAS sanctions on Venezuela remained without a decision, due to the two-thirds majority needed to decide on potential suspension cases (Reuters 2019).

Even though few IOs so far might have lost democratic majorities or faced extreme reductions of their overall democratic density toward authoritarianism as discussed earlier, the tides may change dramatically if we consider that backsliders exhibit different international behavior due to their interest in keeping intrusive international institutions at bay. With 84 percent of its members being democracies, the OAS seems to have a broad voting majority in favor of democratic governance. But once we consider that only 20 percent of these democratic member states are stable liberal democracies while 60 percent are electoral democracies, these majorities in favor of democratic governance and human rights protection suddenly become slim. Where backsliders protect each other or vote with authoritarian coalitions, IOs might lose their ability to protect democratic values or become even more gridlocked.

This is already evident across a number of IOs. Backsliders in the EU have protected each other from harsher measures taken by the EU Commission in response to major democratic transgressions (Kelemen 2020; Winzen 2022), populist parties join forces in the parliament of the Council of Europe to draw attention away from human rights matters (Lipps and Jacob 2022), and varying coalitions of electoral autocracies from less-developed countries use the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to protect each other from condemnation and sanctions (e.g., Voss 2019; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023).

Institutional Design

Autocratization of member states might also lead to different preferences about delegated international authority and open IO designs. When states decide to cooperate, they usually must delegate authority to international agents, although levels of authority and associated sovereignty costs vary across agreements (Hafner-Burton et al. 2015). IOs have gained more formal authority over time (Hooghe et al. 2017; Zürn et al. 2021) with levels of liberal intrusiveness of IOs rising particularly since the 1990s (Börzel and Zürn 2021). Autocratizing states can hardly be expected to be in favor of strong international authorities that may limit their sovereignty, monitor failing compliance with international agreements, and give other member states or even their own citizens the right to lodge a complaint at an international court. Accordingly, autocratizing regimes should be opposed to delegation of competences, majority voting, and broad policy portfolios.

However, contrary to this expectation, increasing member state autocratization does not seem to coincide with a decline in institutional design dimensions, although the expansions of delegation, pooling, and policy scope have decreased in the last decade (Hooghe et al. 2019). This might be due to the complexities involving renegotiations of institutional rules at the international level, which usually require consensus or high

hurdles of domestic ratification (Putnam 1988; Weiss 2005; Slapin 2011). Given that most IOs still hold democratic majorities, fundamental contract renegotiations are an unlikely outcome for many IOs.

At the same time, contestation of IOs might increase with the identified decreases in democratic homogeneity of many IOs. Since backsliders still need to conform to minimal standards of democratic legitimacy they will try to undermine and attack authoritative institutions to contest their output and limit their reach. These types of contestations are evident across regional and global IOs. In the UN Human Rights Council, contestation over the appointment of special rapporteurs on LGBTQ+ rights has gridlocked the process due to the increasing power of backsliders who also restrict gender equality at home (Voss 2019). The Interamerican Court of Human Rights is faced with decreasing financial contributions particularly by members of the Bolivarian Alliance (Urueña 2018). In Europe, electoral regimes from Central and Eastern Europe have criticized “the continuing transfer of power to the EU level—via majority voting in ever more areas—[which] threatens to deprive member states of their sovereignty” (MFA Poland 2017) and debilitated the sanctioning power of the EU (Holesch and Kyriazi 2022). In particular, Hungary and Poland spur debates about curbing alleged judicial activism of the Court of Justice of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights, essentially questioning the primacy of European law (Madsen 2020; Wind 2021). More generally, human rights courts across Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America are faced by open defiance of their rulings by member states as diverse as Russia, Tanzania, or the Philippines (Helfer 2020).

The same logic applies to transnational access as another dimension of institutional design. While electoral regimes have been particularly hesitant to grant access rights to non-state actors because they feel threatened by the presence of civil society organizations in IOs, closed autocracies have used formal access rights as low-cost window-dressing opportunities, because they simply have no meaningful critical non-governmental organization community to be worried about domestically. Consequently, autocratic IOs like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have provided a considerable amount of formal access to transnational actors over time (Sommerer and Tallberg 2017).

Similar to IO authority, increasing autocratization has so far not led to meaningful restrictions of formal access rights in IOs, although the expansion of civil society access has also slowed down in recent years (Sommerer and Tallberg 2017; Tallberg and Vikberg 2023). Instead, autocratizing regimes seem to move to informal practices to restrict regional civil society activism. ASEAN is a good illustration in this respect, mirroring the growing influence of electoral regimes documented in Figure 7. In recent

years, existing participatory arrangements like the ASEAN Civil Society Conference have been under pressure as more and more member states resist engagement with civil society and as harassments and travel bans increase (Grzywacz 2023; Uhlin 2023).

IO Legitimacy

Finally, the autocratization of IO membership may lead to growing challenges for the legitimacy of IOs that are already under pressure from public contestation. There is a popular assessment that the legitimacy of multilateral institutions representing the liberal international order is in decline. Empirical data shows that in recent years, at least some important IOs, like the EU, the ICC, the G20, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Health organization (WHO) have experienced legitimacy crises (e.g., Schweiger 2017; Newsome et al. 2021; Sommerer et al. 2022; Juszczak 2022). What is more, studies of the legitimacy of IOs have observed low levels of citizen confidence in IOs in less democratic countries like Brazil and Russia and revealed an elite-citizen gap in the confidence in IOs more generally: Across many different countries, ordinary citizens have less trust in these organizations than political, economic, and societal elites (Dellmuth et al. 2022). The rise of a new political cleavage that pits the losers of globalization and transnationalism against the winners represents a major challenge for global governance (Hooghe et al. 2018). The idea that the weakening of democracy at the international level might harm the legitimacy of multilateral institutions is not new. It has been argued that the non-democratic character of some UN Security Council members compromised the institution's legitimacy (Zaum 2013). The lack of democratic procedures has also fueled public contestation of global IOs like the WTO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Esty 2002; O'Brian et al. 2000) during the 1990s.

For the 1990s and 2000s, studies of legitimacy have shown that IOs like the UN, the IMF, the WTO, and the OSCE have legitimized their authority with references to the language of democracy, often in the context of organizational crises and growing politicization (Dingwerth et al. 2019; Stappert and Gregoratti 2022). Our data in Figures 2 and 3 illustrate that membership in these organizations became more democratic during these years but shifted toward more autocratic membership since then. This growing membership heterogeneity may have consequences for possibilities of self-legitimation, as for example shown by Schmidtke and Lenz (2023).

The crossing of thresholds of membership composition because of domestic autocratization will likely have consequences for the legitimacy of IOs. Some organizations root their legitimacy on a clear identity and a coherence of core values and norms. For example, NATO was founded by a group of liberal states on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law, a values-based identity of which its staff remain keenly aware (Billerbeck 2020). Our analysis revealed that some

formerly completely democratic organizations like NATO, but also the EU and the OECD (Table 2), have undergone a significant change of their member regimes. This loss of democratic homogeneity will have considerable bearing on the capacity to strengthen and uphold their legitimacy as democratic clubs.

Finally, the growing number of democratic recessions and breakdowns in IO member states may lead to further delegitimation and contestation. Leaders from electoral democracies often criticize international institutions to deflect attention from corruption (Vachudova 2019; Grzymala-Busse 2019). In the wake of the financial and migration crises, Hungary and Poland have been actively delegitimizing the EU and global institutions (Johnson and Barnes 2015; Jenne 2018). Leaders from other electoral regimes like Brazil or Turkey also frequently contested IOs (Börzel and Zürn 2021). For example, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly stated his distrust of the United Nations (Agence France Press 2012) and criticized the UN Security Council for making decisions against the Muslim world (Agence France Press 2015).

Conclusion and Outlook

In this paper, we study how the global democratic decline during the second decade of the 21st century has led to changes in the composition of IO membership and discuss how these dynamics might affect how IOs are designed and how they function. Building on recent debates among democratization scholars and based on data that allows for the identification of regime subtypes, we present three approaches for a more systematic understanding of changes in IO membership composition.

Empirically, we map the autocratization of membership across 73 IOs according to three proposed thresholds referring to democratic density of membership: majorities, homogeneity of democratic member states, and number of transitions between sub-regime types. We observe that the composition of IO membership has not changed as dramatically as expected. Only few IOs have come under immediate threat of losing a democratic majority that they obtained during the third wave of democratization. Several IOs have actually made some headway in terms of democratization of their membership. However, we find that formerly homogenous democratic clubs like the EU, NATO, and OECD have lost this feature, endangering parts of their foundational identity. Finally, a rise in domestic regime changes from liberal toward electoral democracies constitute one of the most significant developments in our data after 2010. It does not lead to dramatic shifts in the ratio between democracies and autocracies in IO membership but may still have significant consequences for the future of institutionalized multilateral cooperation.

Theoretically, we explore the consequences of autocratization for democratic processes and norms, the institutional design of IOs, as well as legitimacy, paying specific attention to international preferences of autocratizing regimes meant to overcome the dichotomization of regime types in the study of the effects of IO membership.

This paper is a first step toward a better understanding of the dynamics and potential consequences of the ongoing political backlash and crisis of global governance institutions by providing an analysis of the state of autocratization for IOs and potential consequences that current trends might have for global governance. We see three important avenues for this research agenda. First, the exploitation of new data sources, the update of existing measures, and the inclusion of a broader selection of IOs are necessary prerequisites for a full-fledged empirical test of theoretical expectations. Data on core dimensions of the institutional design and output of IOs is severely limited for recent years. Further, it might still be too early to fully grasp these consequences, because the effects of the growing autocratization might only materialize in the coming decade due to the slow pace of change in global governance.

Second, it is imperative to better understand international preferences of democratic backsliders. We have already witnessed how coalitions of right-wing anti-liberal advocacy coalitions, conservative democratic governments, and autocracies have joined forces to contest gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights internationally (Bob 2012; Velasco 2020). Moving away from a dichotomous understanding of regime type and regime change also means that we need to reconsider the formation and effects of global coalitions that advocate for democracy, liberal values, and human rights.

Third and finally, given the robustness and durability of formal rules, it might well be that the changes in the membership constellation of IOs are more significant for informal aspects and policy practices of the institutions. Future research should thus pay more attention to informal strategies of autocratic coalitions that might try to reinterpret norms, defund critical positions at IOs, or supply co-opted civil society actors.

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Appendix

Table A1: Adjusted MIA sample

Acronym	Name
ALADI/LAIA	Latin American Integration Association
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU/OAU	African Union
BENELUX	Benelux Union
BIS	Bank for International Settlements
CABI	Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International
CAN	Andean Community
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CCNR	Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine
CEMAC	Central African Economic and Monetary Community
CERN	European Organization for Nuclear Research
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CoE	Council of Europe
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
ComSec	Commonwealth of Nations
EAC	East African Community
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
ESA	European Space Agency
EU	European Union
EURAMET	European Association of National Metrology Institute

Acronym	Name
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GEF	Global Environmental Facility/Fund
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IBRD	World Bank
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICfO	International Coffee Organization
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMO	International Maritime Organization
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISA/ISBA	International Seabed Authority
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
IWhale	International Whaling Commission
LOAS	League of Arab States
NAFO	Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NORDIC	Nordic Council
OAPEC	Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries
OAS	Organization of American States
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OECS	Organization of Eastern Caribbean States
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation

Acronym	Name
OIF/ACCT	Francophonie
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OTIF	Intergovernmental Organization for International Carriage by Rail
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SACU	Southern African Customs Union
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SELA	Latin American and Caribbean Economic System
SICA	Central American Integration System
SPC	Pacific Community
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIDO	UN Industrial Development Organization
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization
UPU	Universal Postal Union
WCO	World Customs Organization
WHO	World Health Organization
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization