

Autocratization and international preferences towards the Liberal International Order

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Paper submitted for consideration for the 16th Annual PEIO Conference 2024.

Autocratization of IO membership is increasingly endangering democratic majorities in international organizations (IOs). While this has led to an extensive debate about the future of the liberal international order, we still know relatively little about consequences that both episodes of democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation might have for IOs. In this paper, we theorize international preferences of different sub-regime types vis-à-vis IOs. We argue that autocratization creates uncertainty for political elites that makes singling compliance with liberal norms towards international actors more likely. We test our argument with data from the Universal Periodic Review and find that autocratization increases the likelihood of acceptance compared to stable regimes and when comparing different sub-regime types. With this specific focus on the role of autocratization, we add to a more fine-grained understanding of the role of domestic conditions in global governance by moving beyond a dichotomous understanding of autocracy and democracy.

Introduction

Varieties of Democracies (V-Dem) just declared 2022 to be the 12th year of global democratic decline, with processes of autocratization happening across the globe. This development has sparked debates about a third wave of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), particularly affecting erosions within liberal democracies. About two-thirds of the autocratization episodes in the Varieties of Democracy 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).

Existing scholarship has highlighted potential international consequences that might result from backlash politics and political backsliding (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019), including effects on international organization (IO) legitimacy (Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Zürn 2018) and IO authority (Hooghe et al. 2019). Scholars also debate to what extent populism might affect state withdrawal from IOs (e.g., Choi 2021; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019a, 2021), while EU scholars ponder the role that populism and backsliding play for EU identity and disintegration (Krastev 2012; Sedelmeier 2017; Vollaard 2014; Walter 2021).

However, we still need to learn more about the international preferences of states undergoing autocratization. The democratic side of domestic regimes is more thoroughly studied. It is widely accepted in IR scholarship that democratic nation-states have been an important driver in the expansion of the liberal international order after the end of the Cold War. This development included a considerable rise in the number, authority, and jurisdiction of international institutions and a strengthening of decisively liberal norms and principles (such as human rights, the rule of law, democracy, and the free movement of people) (Börzel and Zürn 2021: 283; see also Lake et al. 2021). IR scholars have also argued that the uncertainty democratizing regimes experience during regime change results in different international strategies than established regimes. States that have experienced democratic regime change want to signal democratic commitment to domestic and international actors (Martin 2017; Moravcsik 2000; Pevehouse 2005; Simmons and Danner 2010).

So, what can we learn from the democratization literature for the preferences of autocratic regimes? The primary expectation should be that non-democratic countries are less supportive of the Liberal International Order. In particular, the demanding parts that protect individual rights and are more intrusive than the Westphalian order create tensions for autocratic regimes (Lake et al. 2021: 230). From this starting point, we argue in this paper that the relationship between regime types and the support of liberal multilateralism deserves

greater attention in the context of the ongoing wave of autocratization. We see reasons to assume that the dichotomization of domestic regimes into democracies and autocracies is as inadequate as the assumption of a linear effect. Some autocratic countries have long been active members of the Liberal International Order, whereas recently, backsliding democracies feature prominently among its most vocal critics. Research on electoral regimes and populist governments in different world regions suggests that the international preferences of these countries differ considerably from liberal democracies and consolidated autocracies (e.g. Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019).

The second part of our argument refers to the consequences of autocratization processes. Like democratization, they create uncertainty that results in specific international signaling behavior. States undergoing autocratization, defined as eroding democratic principles and norms, must navigate a challenging balancing game. On the one hand, they need to be able to manipulate domestic systems to uphold their rule. At the same time, they are averting more serious international measures in response to autocratization that would create reputational and material costs. To achieve this, autocratizers will try to signal a commitment to liberal institutions and norms internationally through active engagement in political and human rights institutions but simultaneously contest intrusive decisions of IOs that could hurt them in the future.

We test our theoretical expectations by employing information on the behavior of states in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The UPR is the human rights peer-review system of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), currently in its third cycle. States under review (SuR) are each reviewed by three states (reviewers) that prepare a report containing recommendations from all member states that offer comments. SuRs can accept or note these reports. The UPR is a good test case for our theory because states care about reputational status (Creamer and Simmons 2019; Kelley and Simmons 2015) and recommendations, particularly by geopolitical allies (Terman and Voeten 2018). Thus, participation and criticism voiced during the UPR cycles are taken seriously, particularly by norm-abiding states. The UPR can thus serve as a platform for non-democratic regimes to signal commitment to international norms credibly. At the same time, autocracies will try to limit reputational and material costs that could result from accepting critical recommendations voiced against them by contesting recommendations on politically sensitive issues.

We find that autocratic regimes are less likely to accept critical recommendations in the UPR. However, electoral autocracies and electoral democracies, as the middle categories on the autocracy-democracy continuum, show the highest acceptance rates. We also find support for our expectation that autocratizing regimes want to signal that they still support the Liberal International Order. At the same time, autocratizers are much less likely to accept criticism voiced against them in the review cycles when they belong to liberal or electoral democracies. In these cases, autocratization episodes lead to lower acceptance than consolidated counterparts.

Our findings contribute to other literature that has stressed the strategic adaptation of autocracies to signal commitment to international norms, for instance, through election monitoring (Hyde 2011; Kelley 2012) or gender reforms (Donno et al. 2022). However, we show that this behavior is not restricted to autocratic regimes but also applies to democratic backsliders and regimes that are dependent on upholding electoral legitimacy while limiting liberal dimensions of democracy. Donno et al. (2022) have likewise stressed that strategic adaptation was particularly evident for anocracies – which might be similarly because these regimes are not fully consolidated autocracies and, therefore, still have to appear as committed democratic actors on the international stage.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: We first develop testable hypotheses on the connection between autocracies, autocratization processes, and support for the Liberal International Order. We then present the research design and empirical results on accepting UPR recommendations. We finish by highlighting theoretical implications for current research on the authoritarian turn in international institution research.

Autocratic preferences and regime change

The domestic regime type matters for international governance in multiple ways. Two aspects dominate in existing scholarship on the role of regime types. We build on existing research to formulate expectations on autocratic preferences in international politics.

Democratic and autocratic preferences

IR scholarship has studied the consequences of democratic membership in international institutions. According to this literature, democracies and autocracies hold systematically different preferences on international institutions and norms. Scholars have argued that international organizations with a large share of democratic member states are more likely to

expand international cooperation (Hooghe et al. 2019: cf. ; Mansfield et al. 2008; Simmons 2009). Hooghe et al. (2019: 97) also posit that a large share of democratic member states may lead to the expansion of IO authority, as democratic regimes may be less fearful of transferring authority to the international level than authoritarian rulers (cf. Risse-Kappen 1995; Simmons 2009). Tallberg et al. (2016) argued that growing opportunities for non-state actors to observe, address, or even vote in interstate decision-making is partially driven by the polity preferences of the democratic component of an IO's membership. For autocracies, openness toward non-state actors is both foreign and dangerous, as processes of democratization have often been initiated by civil society actors, mobilizing popular opposition, demanding regime change, and supporting alternative elites (Diamond 1999; O'Donnell et al. 1986; Przeworski 1991; Tallberg et al. 2016). Similar arguments have been made on the positive effects of democratic regimes on the global spread of IO transparency policies (Grigorescu 2010) and IO policies reflecting liberal norms (Tallberg et al. 2020).

In this field of research, there is an almost exclusive focus on the effects of democracy, and only few studies have explicitly studied autocracies. For example, Debre (2021) found that a number of regional organizations, so-called "autocratic clubs", have maintained a largely authoritarian membership with little efforts at expansion of mandates, authority or transnational access. We build on this recent research agenda and argue that

H1: Autocratic regimes are less likely to support and accept institutions and norms of the liberal international order.

The underlying causal mechanisms remains relatively vague. What existing studies have in common is the clear differentiation between the categories of democratic and autocratic regimes, with little or no reference to differences that may exist among variants or subtypes of political regimes. The solid line in Figure 1 provides a graphical illustration of our interpretation of these expectations, with the point of inflection located at the transition from democracies to autocracies. In our view, however, it is important to go beyond the dichotomization of domestic regimes. The details of the domestic regime type deserve greater attention, and simply reversing the expectations on the effects of democracy may not be adequate.

As a first step into this direction, we want to look closer at the role of electoral regimes. Recent scholarship has revealed an increase in the number of electoral democracies and electoral autocracies (Lührmann, Tanneberg and Lindberg 2018). These regime subtypes differ

in terms of constraints that leaders face from domestic audiences. While leaders in liberal democracies are accountable to the general public in free and fair multiparty elections and have to conform to rule of law standards in their public policy choices, these constraints decrease with democratic recession. Liberal democracies are characterized by additional minority protection rights and ensure judicial and legislative oversight over the executive. In contrast, electoral democracies still conduct relatively free and fair multiparty elections but have largely done away with many of these checks and balances. Electoral autocracies are merely holding de-jure multiparty free and fair elections, without allowing meaningful competition or guaranteeing liberal rights. The role of electoral democracies and autocracies in international politics has attracted a lot of attention in recent years. For example, the role of backsliding countries like Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Brazil became interesting for EU and IR scholars (e.g. Holesch and Kyriazi 2020; Casarões and Barros Leal Farias 2021).

We argue that these regimes do not necessarily constitute a symmetric middle category in the relation theorized in H1. We take inspiration from the scholarship on domestic regime types and populist foreign politics and offer three alternative specifications for the expectation of electoral regime subtypes. So far, there is little evidence pointing in one of these directions. We aim to map the scope of possibilities and make these differences across regime types more amenable to future theorizing and testing.

First, the main watershed of the expected effects might not be located between the broader categories of democracies and autocracies but between democratic subtypes, as scenario a) in Figure 1 illustrates. We base this idea on research that has pointed out that some electoral regimes belong to the most vocal critics of the liberal international order. Prominent politicians and leaders from electoral democracies often contest international institutions (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 (Barnes and Johnson 2015; Jenne 2018). Leaders from other electoral regimes like Brazil or Turkey also frequently contested IOs (Börzel and Zürn 2020).

Second, it could be the case that international preferences of electoral regimes do not differ visibly from liberal democracies (scenario b) in Figure 1). First, their governments may not want to be branded as autocrats by international observers because of potential material and reputational costs. Democratic legitimacy has been an international norm since the end of the Cold War (Fawn 2013; Hyde 2011; Kelley 2009). In fact, autocracies have developed a host of adaptation strategies to comply with demands for democratic governance while at the same time securing their rule (Morgenbesser 2020). Through a multitude of adaptation

strategies including defamation and libel suits against opposition (Sim 2011), expanded internet surveillance (Gohdes 2020; Parkinson et al. 2019), international image management (Dukalskis 2021), and zombie election monitoring (Debre and Morgenbesser 2017; Hyde 2007; Kelley 2012), autocratic incumbents attempt to signal commitment to democratic governance while in effect inhibiting meaningful participation of democratic and liberal actors.

Third, we see some plausibility in the opposite scenario, where electoral democracies and autocracies are less supportive of the liberal international order than liberal democracies and closed autocracies (scenario c) in Figure 1). Consolidated autocracies have primarily done away with critical domestic actors and are no longer dependent on claiming democratic legitimacy internationally. They can be less worried about international interference. Scholars have found that closed autocracies are more likely to allow transnational non-state actors access to IOs than electoral autocracies, which have more to lose from criticism by civil society actors at the international level (Tallberg et al. 2013, 2016).

Recent literature on populist foreign policy supports the expectation that electoral regimes differ from other countries when it comes to the support of norms and institutions related to the liberal international order. There is a strong empirical correlation between populist governments and electoral regimes. The nature of populism is that it needs the legitimation through de jure or de facto elections in regular intervals (Helfer 2018). This reliance prevents populist governments from sliding into closed authoritarianism (Peruzzotti 2017; see also Canovan, 1999; Ochoa Espejo, 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012).¹ A common element of populist rhetoric is the strong criticism of an allegedly unresponsive elite and a corresponding demand for the restoration of sovereignty of the people (e.g., Stengel et al. 2019:2). Populist claims of protecting the ‘people’ can explain their suspicion of international or transnational institutions and their opposition to international elites (Chryssogelos 2017; see Destradi et al. 2021: 670). Coticchia and Vignoli (2020: 538) suppose “in line with a ‘sovereignist foreign policy’, [...] a significant opposition towards multilateral governance of transnational issues such as migration and general attempts to ‘restore the sovereignty of the nation and the people’”. The ideology of sovereignism could make governments of electoral democracies and electoral autocracies less supportive of LIO, for example with regard to contested issues such as migration and human rights.

Some caveats are in order. We acknowledge that it is difficult to generalize on populist regimes and their foreign policy preferences, as this would mean lumping vastly heterogeneous

¹ Populism is also clearly at odds with liberal democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018: 1670).

actors and ideologies (Stengel et al. 2019: 2f). To be clear, populist foreign policy does not tell us much about a party's position on any specific institution or policy. However, it is plausible that the formation of populist governments has a detrimental impact on countries' multilateral engagement (Destradi et al. 2021: 674).

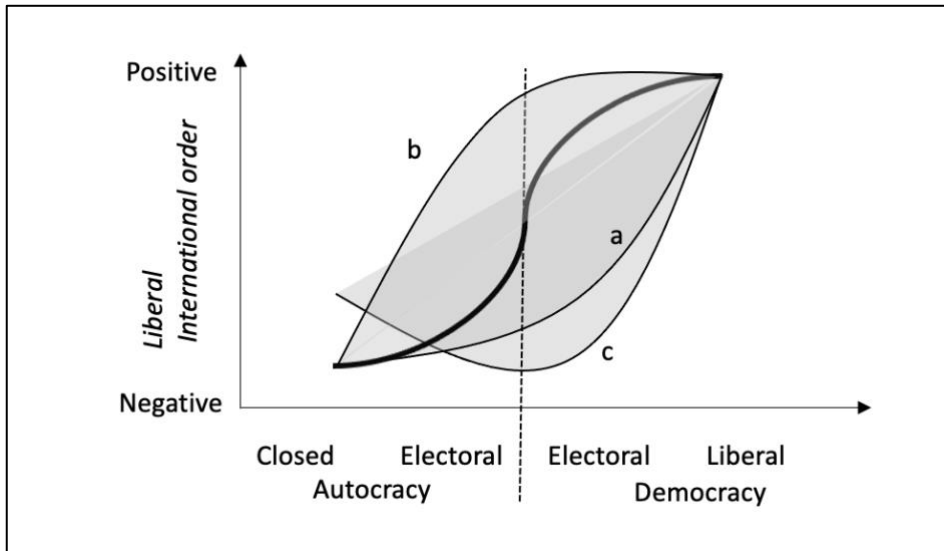


Figure 1: International Preferences of different sub-regime types

Regime change and uncertainty.

A second line of IR research has focused on the consequences of regime change. Scholars argued that democratization understood as regime change from autocracy towards democracy has consequences for international behavior. Because domestic regime change creates uncertainty, joining an international institution can help new regimes to alleviate uncertainty (Fearon 1997; Pevehouse 2005; Simmons and Danner 2010). States who are democratizing want to signal democratic commitment to domestic and international actors by joining democratic IOs (*ex ante*), and to prevent future governments from reversing democratic reforms by committing to international enforcement mechanisms (*ex post*). Mansfield and Pevehouse (2008) for instance found that democratizing states are more likely to join IOs with regulatory power to signal that they are willing to guarantee standards characteristic of democratic governance, while Moravcsik (2000) argues that democratizing states push for the creation of binding human rights institutions like the European Court of Human Rights that can prevent a reversal towards autocratic rule. A range of scholars also link democratic IO membership to successful completion of regime transitions (i.e., a move to consolidated liberal democracy) because newly democratizing regimes receive financial incentives and technical

assistance or learn democratic roles through sustained interactions with other democratic political elites (Pevehouse 2005; Poast and Urpelainen 2013, 2015). Regimes that have just experienced democratic regime change increasingly want to employ international commitments to overcome uncertainty, and therefore band together with established democracies within IOs to influence decision-making outcomes.

The regime change that leads a country away from democratic norms and institutions also creates uncertainty. Like above, we apply insights from the scholarship on democratization to studying autocratization as the complementary type of regime change. The concept of autocratization or democratic backsliding is a hotly debated topic in comparative politics and IR literature. Most scholars seem to agree that globally, recent episodes of democratic backsliding are 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). We build on Lührmann et al. (2018) and Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and conceptualize autocratization as a significant and prolonged movement away from liberal democracy. Autocratization can thus include moves across the whole spectrum of regime types, encompassing liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy.²

The reliance on electoral legitimacy creates uncertainty for backsliding regimes who need to appear committed to participatory governance but still be able to manipulate elections enough to ensure victory and avoid reputational and material international repercussions. Domestically, backsliding regimes need to assure the population that they will not lose basic participatory and human rights under the new government. Upholding this democratic façade is particularly important in electoral regimes because governments can only hold on to power by winning somewhat democratic elections, else they have to fear losing power to the opposition. At the same time, backsliding regimes have to restrict actors that might be overly critical of their work, which includes both institutional veto points as well as critical civil society (Bakke et al. 2020; Chaudhry 2022; Glasius et al. 2020).

However, when governments start (or continue) to restrict civil and political liberties and reduce institutional checks and balance, local civil society organizations will likely ring

² Others disagree with this type of measurement, calling for more qualitative measures (Cassani and Tomini 2020; Tomini 2021) or questioning the overall validity of current expert-based measurements of democratic backsliding in general (Little and Meng 2023).

the alarm which can lead to sanctions in the form of suspension from IOs or shaming campaigns (Murdie and Peksen 2013; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019b). Autocratizers are thus in a unique position to have to manage domestic opposition and dissent, while at the same time minimizing potential international pressure and punishment for their actions. They will be still fearsome of international interference from authoritative IOs that respond to autocratization with economic sanctions or suspension (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019b). The comprehensive transfer of authority to IOs has led to the establishment of powerful regional and international courts and institutions that can monitor failing compliance with international agreements and initiate costly procedures against norm-violating states (Hooghe et al. 2019). Because institutions are sticky, rolling back established institutional rights is difficult in the absence of necessary bargaining majorities.

The uncertainty associated with autocratization processes leads to systematically other international preferences than those of stable and consolidated domestic regimes. Regimes undergoing autocratization want to appear as engaged actors committed to democratic, open, and rules-based norms of international cooperation to reap reputational benefits. Membership in international institutions is also essential because it helps to pay the bills. Hungary and Poland, for instance, cannot wholly alienate the EU and risk losing redistributive payments (Kelemen 2020). The Brexit experience has served as a deterrence example across Europe, showcasing the problematic and costly post-negotiation adaptation facing a withdrawing state (Walter 2021). We thus hypothesize a positive effect for support of the international liberal order for all types of domestic regimes that have recently undergone an episode of autocratization. Yet another question is how long this strategic support will be sustained in a process of autocratic consolidation.

H2: Autocratizing regimes are more likely to commit to, and accept international norms and institutions compared to stable regimes, particularly on politically sensitive issues.

We built this framework on autocratic preferences by drawing theoretical expectations from IR literature on democracy and democratization and adding to this some specifications suggesting that an expectation of a simple reversal of the effect might not be adequate. If autocratizers indeed have different international preferences, how does this look more concretely with regard to the commitment of liberal norms? In the remainder of this paper, we will focus on a case illustration from global human rights politics to assess the plausibility of our assumptions and

provide some evidence for the further development and specification of theoretical expectations on the preferences of autocratic regimes.

Empirical analysis

To test our hypotheses, we employ data from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (first two cycles 2008-2014) collected by Terman and Voeten (2021), which is based on data from the non-profit organization UPR Info. The data includes dyadic information on recommendations from reviewer states (Reviewer) and the state under review (SuR). The overall data includes 58,224 dyads, including information on all 192 states under review in the first cycle and 112 in the second cycle. What we are interested in this paper is the reaction of states to recommendations by other UN members. The main dependent variable captures the likelihood of acceptance of a recommendation by a state under review on how to improve the domestic human rights situation. We use a dichotomous indicator of a state under review solely noting the critical review (0) or accepting it (1). For example, France demanded Mexico (an electoral democracy), in 2013, to “*take appropriate measures to combat violence and harassment against human rights defenders and journalists*” (UPR Info). According to the abovementioned dataset, Mexico accepted this recommendation. By contrast, the United States called Ethiopia (an electoral autocracy) in 2014 to review its Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and amend the law as necessary to ensure that it strengthens the rule of law (UPR Info). The Ethiopian government noted this comment but did not accept it.

We interpret acceptance of recommendations as a signal to support the international human rights regime and thus as an indication of support for the liberal international order. In line with our theoretical arguments, we expect for this concrete case that autocratic regimes are generally less willing to accept but that regimes that recently experienced a shift towards autocratization may be more willing to support existing institutions than consolidated regimes at different levels of the democracy/autocracy scale, due to the impact of uncertainty.

These assumptions rest on the fact that this type of international signaling of states indeed matters because they reveal a senders’ supposedly true preferences about democratic norms and human rights. Others have likewise found that autocracies strategically use international signaling to show commitment to international norms, for instance through adaption of women’s rights legislation (Donno et al. 2022) or through strategic accession to IOs (Simmons and Danner 2010). While this type of signaling might not necessarily fool international audiences in the long run, it does serve a temporary purpose because international

engagement is considered a normatively good value in itself and might thus ease some immediate pressure (e.g., Bush and Zätterberg 2021).

In our empirical analysis, we proceed in two steps. We begin by looking at the mean differences in the acceptance rate of recommendations from the Universal Periodic Reviews across theoretically relevant subgroups of countries. To reveal the differences across regime types, we use data from the Varieties of Democracy project. 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. The indicator for regime shift is based on the Episodes of Regime Transformations (ERT) dataset (Maerz et al. 2021). Autocratization is based on the variable *aut_ep*, which is a dichotomous variable coded 1 if a state has lost at least 0.01 on the electoral democracy index (EDI) (Coppedge et al. 2011) in a given year and at least 0.1 over a sustained period of five years.³ Episodes are either censored or terminate according to conditions set out in FN 3. Figure A.1 shows the distribution of autocratization episodes across world regions from 2009 to 2014, when the first two cycles of the UPR were conducted. Autocratization was already a global phenomenon, with most episodes happening in Asia, Europe and the Americas.⁴ Additionally, autocratization was not restricted to consolidation of autocracy (see Figure A.2). While most episodes in that timeframe are recorded in electoral democracies, there are cumulatively about the same number of erosions happening in liberal and electoral democracies. As becomes evident, autocratization is thus happening across the spectrum of regime sub-types.

Mean differences of acceptance rate

We begin our empirical analysis with a dichotomous measure of regime type. The left panel of Figure 2 shows the average acceptance rate of critical comments for autocratic and democratic states under review. Autocratic states are significantly less willing to accept these comments (73.7 percent; N=19,598)⁵ than democracies (76.3 percent; N=18,508). Thus, we find some confirmation for our first theoretical assumption (H1). The pattern looks different when we

³ In the ERT, autocratization episodes are coded as ongoing if (1) there is a change in at least one out of five consecutive years (tolerance), (2) there is no increase on the EDI of at least 0.03 (annual turn), and (3) there is no improvement of 0.1 over the five years (cumulative turn).

⁴ All episodes of autocratization in that timeframe were happening in Latin America; neither Canada nor the US were coded as autocratizing in that timeframe.

⁵ This figure refers to the dyadic dataset and corresponds to 1767 SuR-year observations

compare the mean difference across regime subtypes, plotted in the right panel of Figure 2. Surprisingly, both electoral democracies and electoral autocracies show higher acceptance rates than liberal democracies and closed autocracies and thus go beyond the most optimistic scenario b) from our framework. The strongest commitment towards improving the domestic human rights situation comes from electoral democracies (78.3 percent; N=10,137), followed by electoral autocracies (75.8 percent; N= 15,019). The acceptance rates of liberal democracies (73.8 percent) and closed autocracies (66.8 percent) are significantly lower. These differences suggest a non-linear relationship between the level of autocracy and the commitment to human rights. Above, we have theorized that electoral regimes may be interested in not being branded as autocrats on the international scene to avoid material and reputational costs. Signaling support for human rights – in this term, by accepting criticism and promising to improve the domestic situation, could thus be seen as an adaptation strategy that leads to even more outstanding support than the signaling from liberal democracies. Regardless of the potentially strategic nature of state behavior in response to UPR comments, we observe that electoral regimes differ significantly from other states on both ends of the democracy/autocracy scale.)

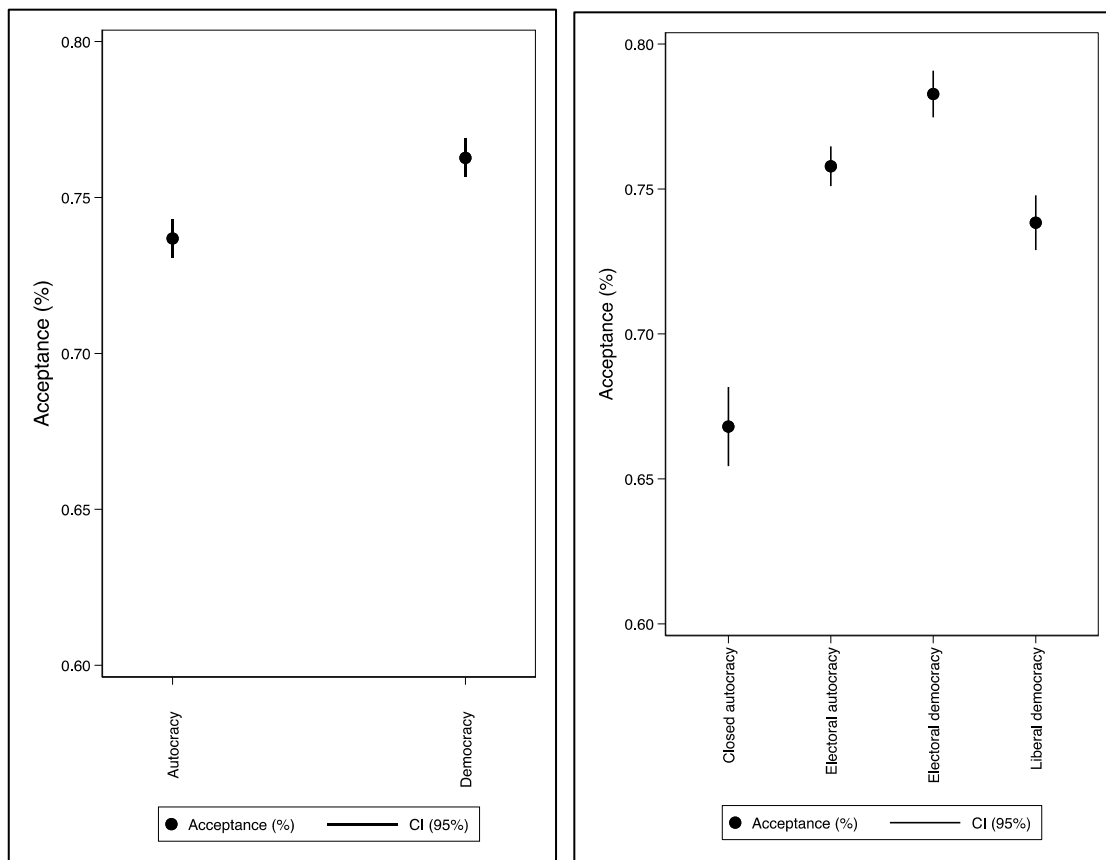


Figure 2: Acceptance rate of UPR comments by regime type, 2008-2014

To assess the consequences of regime shifts, we compare the differences in the average acceptance rate of critical comments in the UPR review process. Confirming our theoretical expectation of a positive effect of autocratization, Figure 3 reveals that the mean acceptance rate of autocratizing states under review (76.4 percent, N=4,673) is significantly higher than the mean for consolidated regimes (73.3 percent; N=31,946). As a control, we also plot the mean acceptance rate for countries with a democratization episode in recent years. For this group of countries, the scores are even higher (79.3 percent; N=4,414) – supporting evidence from previous scholarship on the positive effects of democratization. Our data supports the argument that simply reverting the expectation from the democratization literature is inadequate, as this should have led to a negative effect of autocratization.

Above, we have argued that we have no reason not to expect a positive effect of autocratization for all regime subtypes. The lower panel of Figure 3 indicates that this might not be the case. While the mean values for stable regimes under review closely follow the pattern displayed in Figure 2, we observe the positive effect of episodes of autocratization only for states that are electoral autocracies or closed autocracies. For these states, the acceptance rate is considerably higher than for their consolidated counterparts. For electoral democracies and liberal democracies, the uncertainty related to a regime shift away from democracy plays out differently. Our data shows that they are less willing to accept critical comments on the domestic human rights situation publicly. However, the difference for electoral democracies is not significant, indicated by overlapping confidence intervals. A different logic that has also been discussed in the literature on autocratic regimes could be at play. Whereas regime change in autocracies could motivate states to appear as exceptionally engaged actors committed to democratic norms, backsliding democracies could try to de-legitimize and contest intrusive functions, here in the form of refusing to accept criticism in the UPR. Other scholars have shown that backsliding states try to contest international legal institutions' authority in various ways. For example, Eastern European states often 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).

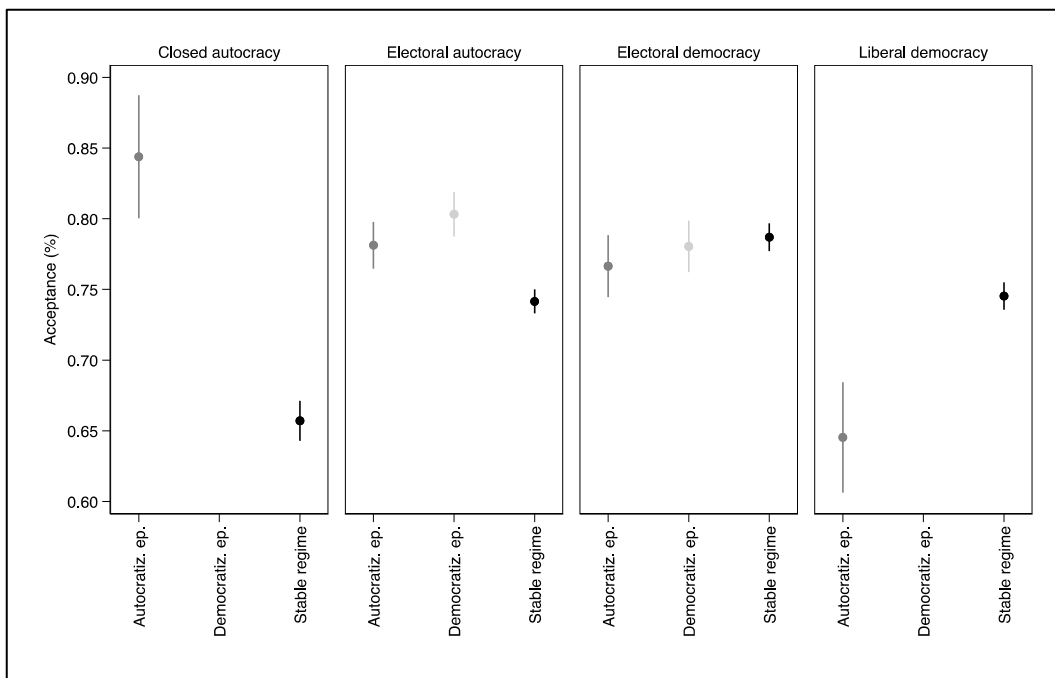
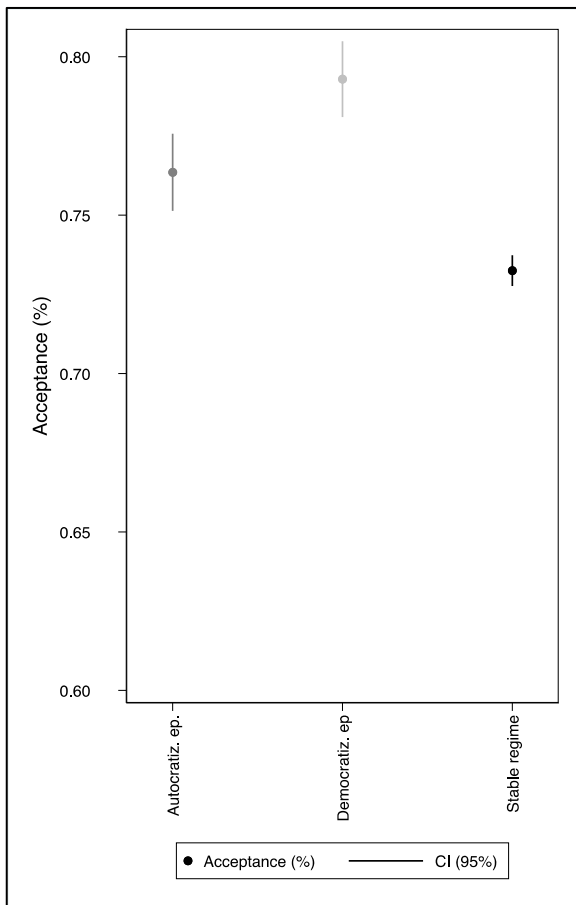


Figure 3: Acceptance rate of UPR comments by regime type, 2008-2014

In the third and final step of our descriptive assessment of the acceptance rate, we control for the regime type of the reviewing state. In the UPR system, all member states can criticize other countries, regardless of their domestic human rights record. Figure 4 presents the results of a disaggregation of the previous plot for the regime subtype of the reviewer. For liberal democracies as reviewers, the previous pattern is confirmed – autocratizing states are more willing to accept criticism from liberal democracies if they are already autocracies. The reverse can be observed for electoral democracies and liberal democracies that experienced autocratization episodes in previous years. The difference between states under review with a regime change and consolidated states is even more pronounced and significant. Uncertainty makes these countries more sensitive to critique from democracies. What is also interesting about the first panel of Figure 4 is that consolidated liberal democracies are generally more likely to accept criticism if it comes from fellow democracies. On the other hand, liberal democracies are less willing to accept criticism if the reviewer is less democratic.

What the lower panels in Figure 4 reveal is also interesting: uncertainty caused by regime change only seems to matter when reviewers are liberal democracies. There is no significant difference between consolidated electoral regimes and autocratizing ones when the reviewer's comments come from countries with similar or lower democracy scores, regardless of the direction of the deviation. The only exception from this pattern are reviewers from closed autocracies: In these cases, electoral autocracies and closed autocracies that underwent episodes of autocratization were significantly more willing to accept criticism of their human rights situation. This pattern could be interpreted as a different signaling strategy towards alliances with the most autocratic countries.

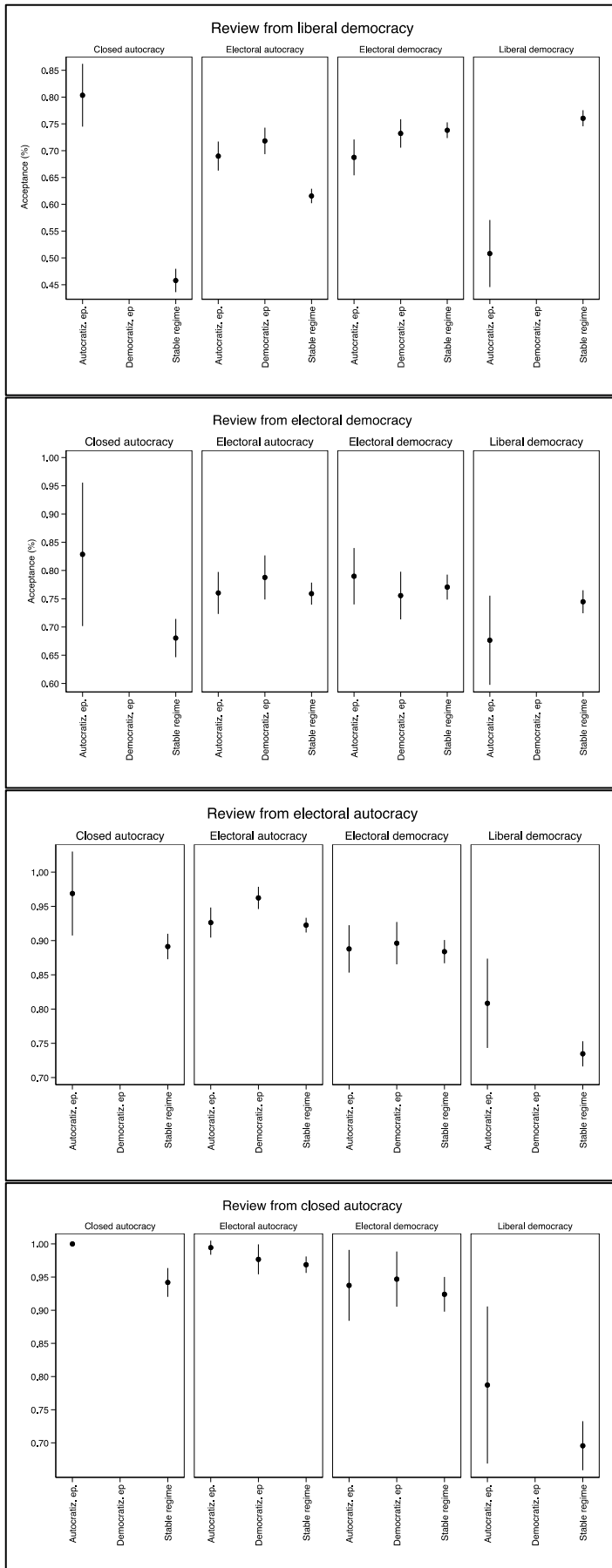


Figure 4: Acceptance rate of UPR comments by regime type (reviewer & SUR), 2008-2014

Multivariate analysis

We complement the comparative assessment of average acceptance rates with a multivariate regression analysis. We use logit models and the dichotomous variable on state responses in the UPR process. We include the same independent variables for regime type and change that we introduced in the first part of the analysis. In addition to the dichotomous and categorical variables, we use a metrical indicator of the level of democracy. We control for several additional variables identified as important determinants by other literature. We construct a dichotomous variable *sensitive political issue* if a recommendation is issued regarding physical integrity rights, migration, justice, or politics, which are particularly sensitive topics for all participating states (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018). This information for the variable is based on the coding from UPR and Terman and Voeten.

Furthermore, we include a control for geopolitical affinity based on distance of the country's ideal points from United Nations General Assembly voting data (Bailey et al. 2017). Terman and Voeten have shown that all else equal, states are less severe in their reviews against strategic partners (2021). This should also apply to states undergoing autocratization. By refusing to accept criticism from states they are less aligned with, the likelihood of a meaningful backlash from the reviewing state is more minor than recommendations from a strategic ally. We also control for membership of reviewer and SuR in the Human Rights Council (UNHRC), given that states are more inclined to participate in the UPR review if they are already part of the UNHRC system and have a diplomatic representation in Geneva. We furthermore capture if the reviewer state is also undergoing a review in the current cycle to account for reciprocity effects, as well as the distance between the human rights performance of the reviewer and SuR. Finally, we include a measure that indicates if the state under review and the reviewer are from the same region.

We test H1 and H2 to understand to what extent autocracies and regimes that recently shifted towards autocracy are more likely to accept critical comments regarding their human rights performance. Table 1 shows results for our logit models, with Models 1-4 using different indicators for the domestic regime type and Models 5-9 including interactions between regime type and autocratization. As expected from H1, reviewed states that are more autocratic are much less likely to accept critical recommendations. Model 1 shows a positive and significant coefficient for the metrical measure of the level of democracy. However, the weak and non-significant coefficients for a dummy variable for democracy (liberal and electoral) and autocracy (electoral and closed) and an ordinal variable for the four regime subtypes confirm the pattern from the descriptive analysis, suggesting that the relationship between regime type

and our dependent variable is not a linear one. As the pattern from Figure 1 suggested, we observe a positive relation between electoral regime types and the likelihood of accepting critical recommendations (Model 4). The coefficients for the four subtypes of domestic regimes in Models 6 to 9 add to this impression. We obtain additional confirmation that stable liberal democracies as SuR are generally less likely to accept recommendations. This might be because they are more selective in terms of filtering meaningful recommendations from those that are simply strategic retaliations.

We expect that autocratizing states will be more positive towards liberal norms and institutions (H2). In line with our expectation, the variable that indicates episodes of autocratization shows a positive and significant coefficient in some of our models. The uncertainty of regime change makes it more likely that states accept UPR comments, compared to the acceptance rate of consolidated regimes. Our assessment of mean differences has already shown that the positive effect can only be observed for some subtypes of domestic regimes. The interaction terms in Model 5-9 confirm these results. With a growing level of democracy, the effect of autocratization turns from positive into negative (Model 5) Figure 5 plots the interaction effect between the level of democracy and autocratization. It shows that, all other variables at their means, states under review that are undergoing autocratization are slightly more willing to accept comments the lower their level of democracy. Models 6 to 9 further illustrate this pattern for four regime subtypes separately. Autocratization has a significant negative effect when it occurred in liberal or electoral democracies. The coefficients of the variables for the respective subtypes in the models with interaction terms indicate the effect of consolidated regimes, showing that stable electoral democracies were more likely, stable liberal democracies less likely, to accept recommendations. The converse pattern can be observed for the two autocratic subtypes: consolidated electoral autocracies, where more positive towards acceptance (Model 8), whereas regime shifts further away from democracy in closed autocracies had a positive effect on the likelihood of acceptance, unlike the negative effect of their consolidated counterparts (Model 9).

Most control variables behave as expected. SuRs are more likely to accept recommendations from strategic partners and from more norm-abiding states, but less likely to accept recommendations from democratic reviewers and states within the same region.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Democracy, level (SuR)	0.37*** (0.09)				0.46*** (0.09)				
Democracy (level) * Autocrat. episode					-1.64*** (0.27)				
Democracy, dichotomous (SuR)		0.00 (0.05)							
Democracy, regime subtype (SuR)			0.02 (0.02)						
Electoral regimes (SuR)				0.40*** (0.05)					
Liberal democracy (SuR)						-0.17*** (0.06)			
Liberal democracy * Autocrat. episode						-0.79*** (0.14)			
Electoral democracy (SuR)							0.21*** (0.05)		
Electoral democracy * Autocrat. episode							-0.37*** (0.13)		
Electoral autocracy (SuR)								0.22*** (0.05)	
Electoral autocracy * Autocrat. episode								0.13 (0.11)	
Closed autocracy (SuR)									-0.54*** (0.06)
Closed autocracy * Autocrat. episode									1.77*** (0.25)
Autocratization (SuR)	0.12** (0.06)	0.11* (0.06)	0.11* (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.89*** (0.14)	0.20*** (0.06)	0.20*** (0.06)	0.01 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.06)
Autocratization (Reviewer)	0.03 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Democracy (Reviewer)	-0.76*** (0.10)	-0.69*** (0.10)	-0.70*** (0.10)	-0.66*** (0.10)	-0.75*** (0.10)	-0.64*** (0.10)	-0.73*** (0.10)	-0.62*** (0.10)	-0.73*** (0.10)
Sensitive issue	-0.50*** (0.03)	-0.51*** (0.03)	-0.51*** (0.03)	-0.52*** (0.03)	-0.51*** (0.03)	-0.51*** (0.03)	-0.50*** (0.03)	-0.52*** (0.03)	-0.52*** (0.03)
Geopolitical Affinity	0.47*** (0.03)	0.47*** (0.03)	0.47*** (0.03)	0.43*** (0.03)	0.47*** (0.03)	0.46*** (0.03)	0.45*** (0.03)	0.46*** (0.03)	0.45*** (0.03)
HRC Member (Reviewer)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.04)	0.18*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.18*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.20*** (0.04)
UPR Review (SuR)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Same Region	-0.10** (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.09* (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.11** (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.09* (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.09* (0.05)
Physical Integrity Rights (SuR-Reviewer)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)
Constant	2.96*** (0.12)	3.11*** (0.12)	3.08*** (0.12)	2.76*** (0.13)	2.91*** (0.12)	3.11*** (0.12)	3.04*** (0.12)	3.00*** (0.12)	3.18*** (0.12)
Observations	34,670	34,670	34,670	34,670	34,670	34,670	34,670	34,670	34,670
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by dyad*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

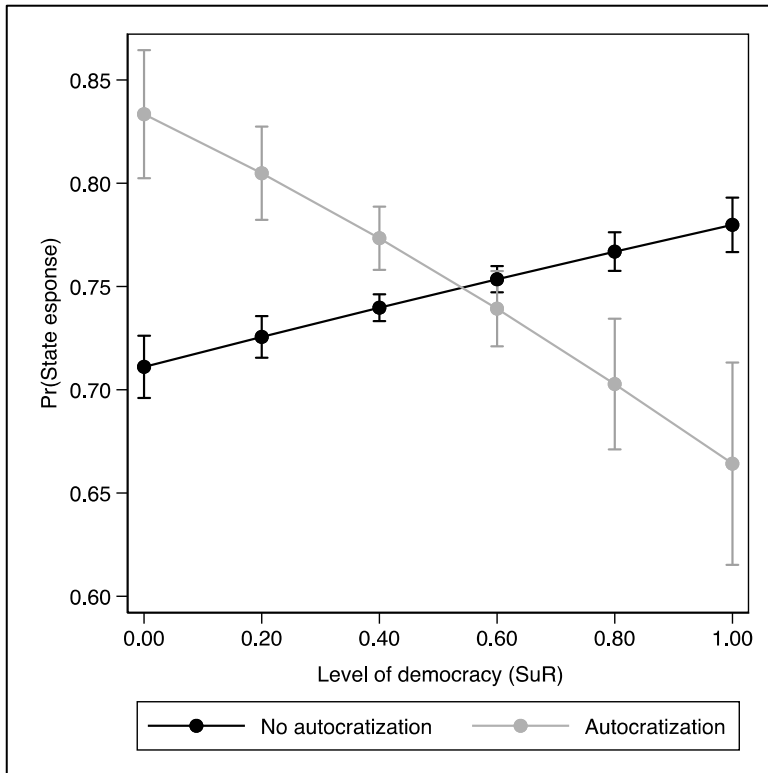


Figure 5: Predicted margins of autocratization

Conclusion

The ongoing wave of autocratization is increasingly changing international politics. While this has led to an extensive debate about the future of the Liberal International Order, we still know relatively little about the consequences that both episodes of democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation might have for IOs. In this paper, we theorize international preferences of domestic regimes and develop expectations that account for differences between four important subtypes: liberal democracies, electoral democracies, electoral autocracies, and closed autocracies. We argue that due to different domestic constraints, international preferences vary not only between autocracies and democracies. Backsliding away from liberal democracy towards electoral democracy and electoral autocracy creates uncertainties that are consequential for how states position themselves, and it may incentivize autocratizers to signal a strong commitment to liberal institutions and norms internationally through active engagement. With this specific focus on shifts between sub-regime types, we add to a more fine-grained understanding of the role of domestic conditions in the change of global

governance by moving beyond a dichotomous understanding of regime type and regime change.

Using data on the UPR, we show that autocratic regimes are less likely to accept critical reviews from other UN member states. However, our data reveals the highest acceptance rates for electoral regimes. At the same time, autocratizing states are less likely to accept recommendations when they are democracies. Electoral and closed autocracies, however, are more likely to accept these recommendations.

Our findings stress that it is essential to look more broadly into the characteristics of domestic regime types and the international behavior of states undergoing autocratization to understand the micro-foundations driving their international preferences. It is not necessarily the difference between autocracy and democracy that determines how states position themselves on matters of human rights and democracy on the international scene, but different domestic constraints and the uncertainty associated with political backsliding and autocratization. Extending the findings to years after 2014, when a bulk of autocratization occurred, will reveal further important patterns.

Our theoretical framework should also be further applicable to behavior in other institutions, where we would expect to see autocratizers signaling commitment, for instance, by voting with strategic partners where it might boost their reputation, but (discursively) contesting and, where possible, vetoing more intrusive decisions of IOs. Future research should thus pay more attention to the differing preferences of autocratizing states and how uncertainty associated with change processes plays out in international institutions.

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Appendix

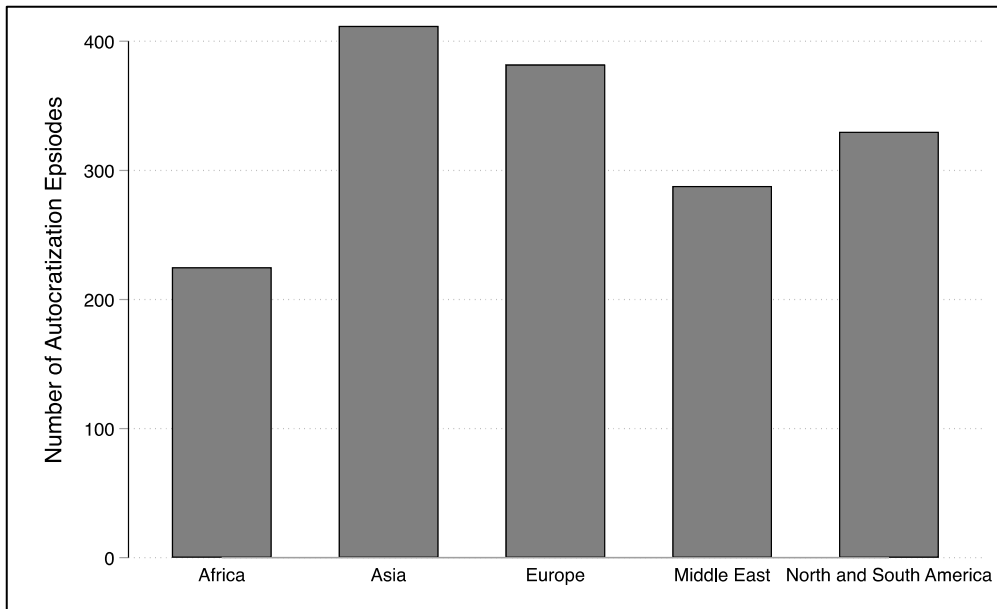


Figure A.1: Autocratization Episodes by Region, 2009-2014

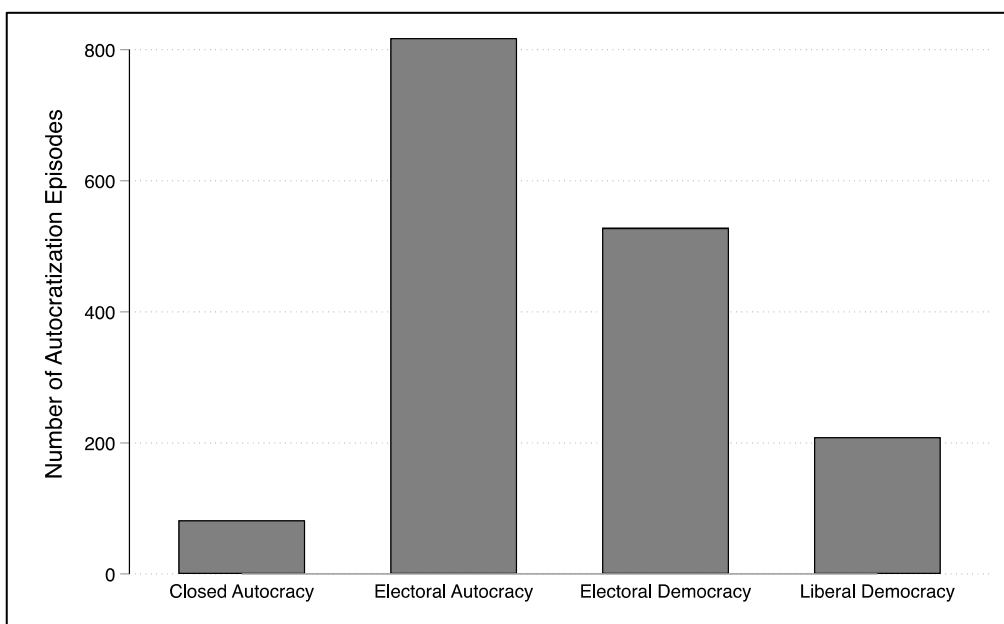


Figure A2: Autocratization by Regime Type, 2009-2014

