Democracy, Autocracy, and International Organization Membership

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Abstract: Existing research consistently finds that democratic states are more likely than autocracies to join international organizations (IOs). Yet recent events suggest a more complicated picture, as several democracies have wavered in their support for IOs, while authoritarian states have stepped up their commitments. What explains this discrepancy between established wisdom and recent empirical developments? This paper offers the most encompassing study to date of the relationship between regime type and IO membership. Theoretically, we develop competing expectations about the nature of this relationship. Empirically, we test these expectations using newly expanded data on state membership in all formal IOs in the international system between 1816-2023. Our findings show that democracy is strongly positively associated with IO membership over the full time period. However, when disaggregating by period, we find this result to be time bound and limited to the second and third waves of democratization. We demonstrate that these temporal patterns reflect underlying dynamics in the propensity of democratizing and autocratizing states to join, form, leave, and dissolve IOs. Our findings have implications for debates and theories on international cooperation, regime type effects, and autocratic collusion.

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One of the most consistent findings in the study of world politics pertains to the relationship between regime type and international cooperation. With few exceptions, research finds that democratic states are more cooperatively oriented than autocratic states. Studies have shown that democracies are more likely to join international organizations (IOs) (Boehmer and Nordstrom 2008; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006; Shanks, Jacobson, and Kaplan 1996), sign international treaties (Ginsburg 2021, chap. 2), liberalize international trade (Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000; Milner and Mukherjee 2009), commit to human rights agreements (Simmons 2009; Simmons and Danner 2010), provide global public goods (Bättig and Bernauer 2009), foster accountable and inclusive cooperation (Grigorescu 2010; Tallberg et al. 2013), solve conflicts through dispute settlement (Davis 2012), and stay out of war with one other (Bueno De Mesquita et al. 1999; Russett 1993). Other studies in the same tradition highlight how states undergoing democratization are more likely to join IOs (Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006), found IOs (Poast and Urpelainen 2013), and sign onto human rights institutions (Hafner-Burton, Mansfield, and Pevehouse 2015; Moravcsik 2000).

However, events in world politics over recent years suggest a more complicated picture. Several democracies have wavered in their commitments to international cooperation. Notably, the US has withdrawn from IOs such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) and exited treaties such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Agreement. This trend extends to other democracies, such as Argentina, Brazil, the Philippines, South Africa, and the UK, all of which have either left or considered leaving major IOs.

Simultaneously, autocracies have stepped up their support for international cooperation. China has launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) together with other autocracies. In the wake of these developments, a new wave of scholarship

has emerged on how autocratic states, not only China, use IOs for authoritarian purposes (Cottiero et al. 2024; Cottiero and Haggard 2023; Debre 2022; Obydenkova and Libman 2019).

Nearly all past studies relied on data from the second part of the 20th century when democratic expansion co-occurred with growing international cooperation and the institutionalization of that cooperation. We know little about this correlation prior to World War II, but some have expressed skepticism that the same democracy-cooperation patterns hold (Farber and Gowa 1997; Gowa 2011). Meanwhile, the key development over the past fifteen years has been the decline of democracy around the world (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) and contention over the liberal international order (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021).

What do these events imply about the relationship between regime type and international cooperation? Was the correlation between democracy and international cooperation an artifact of the post-World War II era when conditions were particularly fortuitous for both democracy and international cooperation? Or are recent examples exceptions to an otherwise robust association? Or is this relationship more complex and conditional?

This paper revisits the relationship between regime type and international cooperation. We focus on state memberships in IOs as a critical expression of cooperative behavior in world politics (Davis 2023), incorporating issues related to states forming, joining, leaving, and dissolving IOs (Poast and Urpelainen 2018; Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2025), and providing a parallel to state participation in international agreements (Ginsburg 2021; Koremenos 2016). We address the overarching question of why, how, and under what conditions regime type is associated with state membership in IOs. The growing controversy over formal organizations belies their importance to those who wish to minimize their power (e.g., the US) and those who wish to imitate their power (e.g., China) (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021; Farrell and Newman 2021; Xu 2025).

Theoretically, we develop competing expectations about the relationship between regime type and IO membership. First, following the conventional understanding about democracies, we suggest that democracy as a system of government comes with features – responsiveness to popular demands, institutional constraints on executives, and a relative tolerance for sovereignty costs – that make democracies more likely to cooperate in IOs. The second expectation provides a contrarian outlook, suggesting that democracies and autocracies might not vary in their engagement with IOs, after all. It builds on research arguing that populism and nationalism reduce democratic cooperation, as well as scholarship arguing that autocracies have reasons to cooperate within IOs.

Empirically, we offer the most encompassing assessment to date of this relationship. Our analysis studies this association over a longer period than any previous study, from 1816 to 2023, based on newly updated data. This extensive time span allows us to assess the relationship between regime type and IO membership through multiple waves of democratization and autocratization in world history (Gunitsky 2017). Moreover, it makes it possible to incorporate the early and often neglected forms of cooperation that existed prior to the well-covered post-World War period, as well as the dramatic developments in autocratization and cooperation over the past fifteen years. Our data also allow us to explore the possibility that the relationship between regime type and IO membership varies over time.

We offer a novel understanding of the relationship between democracy, autocracy, and international cooperation. Our key findings are three-fold. First, we show that there is a strong positive correlation between regime type and IO membership for the full time-period 1816–2023, controlling for typical confounders. In short, we recover the prediction of traditional theories of regime type and international cooperation, also when studying this relationship over more than two centuries.

Second, we show that this aggregate result masks significant variations over time in the strength and even occasionally the direction of this correlation. Using a series of moving-window regressions, we observe that the positive relationship holds for periods coinciding with the second wave (1940s–1950s) and third wave (1970s–1990s) of democratization, but generally not for periods pre-1945, in-between the two waves, and after the turn of the millennium. Thus, the relationship between democracy and cooperation is time bound and more complex than conventionally portrayed. This presents a puzzle given that theories predicting a positive correlation are not time bound but focus on constitutive features of democracies.

Third, we provide a solution to this puzzle by further disaggregating how democracies and autocracies have engaged with IOs over time. Using a similar series of moving-window regressions, we examine how states democratizing or autocratizing change their institutional portfolios through joining, forming, leaving, or dissolving IOs. We find that the second wave of democratization was associated with a significant expansion in the number of IOs, establishing the institutions of the liberal international order in the aftermath of World War II. In contrast, the third wave of democratization contributed to the positive correlation primarily by way of new democracies joining existing IOs. In other time periods, more democratic states were usually no more likely than less democratic states to form, join, leave, or dissolve IOs.

We conclude that the classic relationship between democracy and international cooperation is fundamentally shaped by structural factors that vary over time. This relationship follows a punctuated equilibrium pattern where critical junctures in the international system—specifically the second and third waves of democratization—precipitated large-scale changes in IO creation and membership patterns. During these transformative periods, established democracies seized strategic opportunities to institutionalize cooperation in ways that advanced their position within the changing global order, while new democracies latched onto existing IOs to consolidate their political advances and create cooperative gains. This resulted in a

change in the relationship between regime type and international cooperation, even as the institutional features of democracies and autocracies remained the same.

Regime Type and IO Membership: Competing Expectations

Existing scholarship presents us with competing expectations on the relationship between regime type and IO membership.

A Positive Relationship: Democratic Mechanisms and Cooperative Behavior

The expectation that democracies are more cooperatively oriented than autocracies is at the core of a large literature on regime type and international collaboration. Studies in this tradition have found a positive relationship between democracy and range of international outcomes, such as international treaties (Ginsburg 2021, chap. 2), human rights agreements (Simmons 2009; Simmons and Danner 2010), trade liberalization (Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000; Milner and Mukherjee 2009), democracy promotion (Pevehouse 2005), public goods provision (Bättig and Bernauer 2009), dispute settlement behavior (Davis 2012), peaceful conflict resolution (Bueno De Mesquita et al. 1999; Russett 1993), IO accountability (Grigorescu 2010), and IO openness (Tallberg, Sommerer, and Squatrito 2016). Related studies show how states in a process of democratization are particularly likely to join IOs (Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006), found IOs (Poast and Urpelainen 2013), and sign human rights accords (Hafner-Burton, Mansfield, and Pevehouse 2015; Moravcsik 2000).

The literature on regime type and IO membership grew out of this tradition. A first set of contributions emerged during the post-Cold War decades of 1990 to 2010, finding a positive relationship between a state's level of democracy and its participation in IOs. Early quantitative work by Jacobson and colleagues (Jacobson, Reisinger, and Mathers 1986; Shanks, Jacobson, and Kaplan 1996) established clear effects of regime type on IO membership. Jacobson,

Reisinger, and Mathers (1986) found that states with higher levels of party competition were more likely to join IOs, while Shanks, Jacobson, and Kaplan (1996) concluded that free states on average had significantly more IO memberships than partly free or unfree states.

Work on regime type and IOs was then swept up in the broader literature on the democratic peace. Analyzing data from years prior to World War I until the late 1990s, Russett and Oneal (2001) concluded that democracies were more likely to be involved in IOs. However, the effects were quite modest – smaller than the effects for trade, income, and military disputes on IO membership (Russett and Oneal 2001, 215–16). Moreover, by their own admission, the analysis was cursory, since the main goal of their inquiry was to explore the effects of democracy on peace.

Mansfield and Pevehouse (2006, 2008) offered the first systematic analyses explicitly focused on the relationship between regime type and IO membership. Covering the period 1965–2000, they found a positive relationship between democracy and IO membership. Moreover, the substantive effect of democracy on state memberships in IOs was large: moving from autocracy to democracy in a given year yielded a 20 percent rise in the number of predicted IO memberships. When disaggregating by type of IO, they found that this relationship to hold for political and standards-based IOs, but not economic IOs.

Boehmer and Nordstrom (2008) instead used dyadic analysis to study determinants of IO membership, including regime type. The analysis revealed that the higher the level of democracy between two states, the higher the number of joint memberships in IOs. Their findings suggested that democracy partly affects IO membership by way of creating communities of states with the same regime type.

Recent years have brought additional contributions on the relationship between regime type and IO membership, often as part of efforts to examine a wider set of factors. These studies have tended to produce more mixed findings. For example, Poast and Urpelainen (2018, chap.

4) build on the same data as Mansfield and Pevehouse (2006, 2008) to examine states' propensity to form and join IOs. They find that being a democratizing state is positively associated with forming new IOs but not joining IOs, while being an established democracy does not increase the probability of either forming or joining an IO (2018, 85).

In another study, Davis and Pratt (2021) analyze a sample of 231 economic IOs between 1949–2014, with a focus on whether states are members of economic IOs whose memberships have certain characteristics, such as geopolitical alignment and trade interdependence. While regime type is only included as a control variable, they find this factor to be strongly significant in models on joining, forming, and enlarging economic IOs.

These findings on regime type and IO membership were based on a set of theories proffering a specific set of causal mechanisms linking democracies to cooperation. For example, a common mechanism involves the presence of elections. Because of elections, leaders in more democratic countries are more sensitive to popular demands for international cooperation as a means of reaping collective gains (Ginsburg 2021; Putnam 1988). In contrast, leaders in more autocratic countries are more focused on satisfying narrow selectorates (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). This public-oriented mechanism has been consistent throughout much of the early empirical work on this relationship (cf. Jacobson, Reisinger, and Mathers 1986; Shanks, Jacobson, and Kaplan 1996). For example, Mansfield and Pevehouse (2006, 145) argued that "to retain office, chief executives in democracies need to be more attentive to constituent demands than their nondemocratic counterparts, giving democratic leaders a particular impetus to enter IOs."

A related set of arguments examines the institutional constraints on democratic (versus authoritarian) states and leaders as a mechanism to explain the correlation between regime type and international cooperation. Features such as checks and balances and the rule of law better allow for credible commitments. Moreover, the presence of multiple centers of power in

democracies can make commitments to IOs more likely (cf. Lipson 2003) and also more binding (cf. Martin 2000). In theory, this makes other states more willing to cooperate with democracies contra authoritarian regimes, increasing relative membership rates.

A third argument emphasizes the varying sensitivity to sovereignty costs among democracies and autocracies. According to this argument, autocrats are generally more reluctant to accept sovereignty costs from international cooperation, as reflected in their greater emphasis on principles of state authority and non-interference in internal affairs (Cottiero et al. 2024; Ginsburg 2021, 48; Tallberg and Vikberg 2025b). Since IO memberships present states with sovereignty costs (Abbott and Snidal 1998), we can expect autocracies to be less eager to join IOs, especially if the organization can impose sovereignty costs through sanctions or disapproval of the government's behavior (Mansfield and Pevehouse 2008). Even if these punishments and sanctions do not threaten an authoritarian leader directly, they may reduce the resources available to distribute to a leader's core constituency (cf. Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).

What is notable about each of these causal mechanisms is that they are held to be general properties of democracies and autocracies that do not change over time. While it is possible that a certain country's democracy may be stronger or weaker at a particular historical moment, most of these mechanisms draw on aspects of democracy that are crucial to its definition. The same can be said of the incentives of autocrats to avoid international cooperation. Presumably, authoritarians' desire to privilege narrow selectorates, accept sovereignty costs, or generate credible commitments, should not vary over time. These are supposedly time-insensitive traits of autocracy.

Given these arguments, we hypothesize:

H1. States with a higher democracy level are more likely to be members of IOs than states with a lower democracy level.

A Null Relationship: Populism, Nationalism, and Authoritarian Cooperation

Even in the post-Cold War wave of research on the democratic peace, some scholars questioned the cooperative impulses of democratic states. For example, Joanne Gowa and co-authors suggested that democratic peace and cooperation were largely a function of the structure of the Cold War and common interests, rather than the inherent characteristics of democracy (cf. Farber and Gowa 1997; Gowa 2011). Indeed, a number of authors have suggested that confounders better account for the peaceful nature of democracies (cf. Gartzke 2007; Mousseau 2009).

Theoretically, Milner (1997) argued that democracies can find international cooperation difficult due to an inability for domestic actors to agree on the division of the gains from cooperation. If IOs bring gains from cooperation, as argued by institutional theorists, leaders and their publics will be concerned about the distribution of those gains both domestically and internationally. In her game theoretic model, she shows that these distributional concerns make leaders hesitate to cooperate in the first place.

Milner's logic provides microfoundations for arguments about how domestic concerns over gains from cooperation can undermine or prevent that very cooperation. Indeed, recent years have seen the emergence of research arguing that populism and nationalism present significant constraints on the international engagement of democracies due to domestic political backlash over the distribution of benefits. Scholars argue that the populist and nationalist actors can erode democratic states' attraction to cooperation by undermining the core mechanisms that theorists believe underlie democratic states' propensity to cooperate (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Pevehouse 2020). While studies often invoke examples from contemporary populism and nationalism, the patterns they point to have historical precedents, for instance, in US isolationism in the interwar period, French opposition to supranational European integration

in the 1960s, and the struggle of the developing world to create a New International Economic Order to replace existing international institutions in the 1960s and 1970s (Johnson 1983).

First, populism might heighten fears that the gains from international cooperation will accrue primarily to domestic political elites. Given that populists see IOs as ruled by elites, they assume elites will reap the benefits of cooperation at the cost of "everyday people". For example, in 2017, French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen argued that "Our leaders have chosen deregulated globalization --- Globalization is driven by the sole purpose of huge profit for the happy few." (Le Pen 2017) By painting the gains from international cooperation as unequally distributed domestically, populists suggest that these institutions should be abandoned.

Second, populists and nationalists raise the specter of an uneven distribution of gains across countries as well, echoing concerns of the relative gains raised in earlier theorizing in international relations (cf. Powell 1991). For example, the UK's Boris Johnson consistently complained that the European Union (EU) did not maximize his country's own payoffs and therefore was not worthy of British membership, just as Donald Trump often has presented IOs (such as NATO and the WTO) as vehicles for other states to rip off the US.

As these examples illustrate, populist rhetoric typically includes a strong component of IO criticism (Börzel and Risse 2018; Trubowitz and Burgoon 2023; Voeten 2020; Zürn and De Wilde 2016), especially when such actors perceive anti-IO policies to be politically rewarding (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Martini and Walter 2023). Recent research shows that such criticism of IOs gets greater traction with citizens than efforts to explain the benefits of cooperation, thus undermining popular support for cooperation in democracies (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023).

Third, given the populist critique of IOs, information from these institutions is likely to be less credible. The provision of information has traditionally been argued as a source of power

for IOs, especially with democratic publics (cf. Chapman 2011; Thompson 2006). We should expect individuals with populist-oriented beliefs to be unconvinced by information from and endorsements by IOs. Populists should dismiss the information as inherently biased against "the people," since it arises from elite institutions.

Fourth, a key link between democracies and IOs is a willingness to delegate authority. When states delegate, they encounter some level of sovereignty costs, defined as the legal surrendering of policy discretion to IOs (Moravcsik 2000). While sovereignty costs vary across agreements (Hafner-Burton, Mansfield, and Pevehouse 2015), without some tolerance of sovereignty costs, international cooperation through IOs becomes more difficult. Yet a key component of populist nationalism is the sanctity of national sovereignty and the rejection of international forces, from globalization to IOs, that may undermine sovereignty. Populist and nationalist actors are less likely to accept the policy constraints placed on their power through delegation of international authority. This is especially likely in democracies where these actors compete for votes and use these anti-IO arguments (e.g., "who elected the bureaucrats?") to garner political support.

Finally, nationalism as a force distinct from populism can have deleterious effects on how much democracies cooperate. For example, studies of public opinion have found that nationalism is associated with opposition to liberal trade policies and other aspects of economic globalization (Mansfield and Mutz 2013; Margalit 2012; Mayda and Rodrik 2005; O'Rourke and Sinnott 2001). This body of research suggests that nationalist sentiments are often based on in-group favoritism and superiority, leading individuals to support policies that promote interactions with their own population and limit interactions with out-groups. This dynamic should result in lower correlations between democracy and IO engagement, particularly for the international trade institutions that make up a large share of IOs. Indeed, Mansfield and

Pevehouse (2022) show democracies led by nationalist leaders and parties are less likely to join trade agreements than autocracies led by similar actors in the post-World War II period.

A related strand of research has shown that autocracies, too, have particular reasons to cooperate, resulting in the creation of authoritarian IOs. These studies argue that authoritarians in fact have their own distinct motives to engage with IOs, reflected in cooperative patterns often overlooked in previous research. Contemporary examples of IOs formed by autocratic states include the AIIB, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and SCO. But several of these studies also go further back in time and present historical findings on authoritarian cooperation that question the conventional wisdom.

Obydenkova and Libman (2019) focus on the puzzle of nondemocratic regional organizations in the Eurasian region. Combining case studies and quantitative evidence, they point to a specific kind of authoritarian regionalism that reinforces and spreads authoritarian rule through cooperation. In their theory, authoritarians form exclusive clubs to keep out more liberal states while providing some of the gains from cooperation with one another. In the post-Soviet space, non-democratic regional organizations have emerged both on the initiative of a powerful state and in attempt to constrain a powerful state, mimicking drivers of cooperation among democratic states.

Cottiero (2023) focuses on regional organizations in Africa, making the argument that these IOs help both autocratic and democratic state leaders address domestic security challenges. The implication is that regional cooperation helps to sustain authoritarian rule by aiding leaders in their efforts to suppress oppositions and populations. Analyzing military interventions in Africa and the Middle East 1990–2015, she finds that state leaders boost each other's security in a reciprocal pattern.

Debre (2025) argues that autocrats have particular interests to cooperate internationally and demonstrates how this dynamic is empirically observable through time and space. Debre

submits that regional IOs, rather than vehicles for democratization (Pevehouse 2005), often constitute "dictator clubs" that help authoritarian leaders to stay in office. Specifically, autocratic IOs provide their members with resources that empower autocratic incumbents, constrain regional challengers, and shield authoritarians from external pressures. She advances this argument based on a survival analysis of regimes among autocratic member states of 72 regional IOs 1946–2020, as well as qualitative evidence from the Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Cottiero and Haggard (2023) advance a very similar argument about the role of IOs in stabilizing authoritarian rule. They show that the number of regional IOs dominated by autocracies in fact surpasses the number of such organizations commanded by democracies. Following decolonization, the number of authoritarian regional IOs grew in the 1960s and 1970s, and then again in recent years. They argue that regional IOs support authoritarian rule by pooling resources, solving coordination problems, and providing legitimacy. Cottiero and Haggard's core analysis, covering 1951–2010, shows how state membership in these authoritarian IOs not only has helped to counter democratization but contributed to further autocratization.

Tallberg and Vikberg (2025a) offer additional evidence on the prevalence of autocratic clubs in world politics over time. They map and explain how autocracies and democracies sort into different IOs, driven by regime type affinities. Based on an analysis of all formal and informal IOs in existence, 1925–2023, they find that clustering of autocracies and democracies in separate IOs is commonplace and has expanded over time. They argue that such clustering results from benefits to states from cooperation with like regimes. These benefits accrue to autocracies just as much as democracies.[1]

[1] For a related argument concerning international law, see Ginsburg (2021, chapter 5).

Taken together, research on populism, nationalism and authoritarian cooperation suggests that democracies and autocracies might not be all that different in how they approach international collaboration. While democracies are constrained by the electoral success of populists with anti-globalist agendas, autocracies have discovered the benefits of cooperation for purposes of regime survival. This idea mirrors another development in the study of regime type, which challenges the conventional notion that democratic leaders are more constrained than autocratic leaders in the conduct of foreign affairs (Frantz 2018; Hyde and Saunders 2020; Weeks 2012). Much like research on populist nationalism and authoritarian cooperation, this literature calls into question the traditional view of democracies as distinctive in their international relations. Given these arguments, we hypothesize:

H2. States with a higher democracy level are neither more nor less likely to be members of IOs than states with a lower democracy level.

Research Design

We evaluate our hypotheses using a novel dataset covering all formal IOs that were in existence between 1816 and 2023. This dataset extends significantly beyond previous studies both historically and contemporarily, capturing all waves of democratization and autocratization in world politics. The breadth and depth of our dataset allows for a more nuanced examination of state involvement in IOs, revealing variations across historical periods and functional areas that have been less thoroughly explored in existing research.

Our main dependent variable captures the number of IO memberships of a particular state in a given year. We source these data from a recent update of the Correlates of War Intergovernmental Organizations (COW-IGO) data (Pevehouse et al. 2020), expanding the data from 2014 to 2023. We only count full memberships and treat associate membership and observer status as non-membership. On average, states were members of 68 IOs in 2023. Yet

the average number of IO memberships has varied extensively over time, with a particularly sharp increase after World War II.

Figure 1 provides a more detailed overview of the evolution of states and IOs from 1816-2023, including annual IO creation and the IO-to-state ratio. The data show modest growth until 1945, followed by rapid expansion in both states and IOs in the immediate postwar decades and again from the 1970s until the 1990s. This institutional expansion created vastly more opportunities for international cooperation, but these increases were not shared equally across all states.

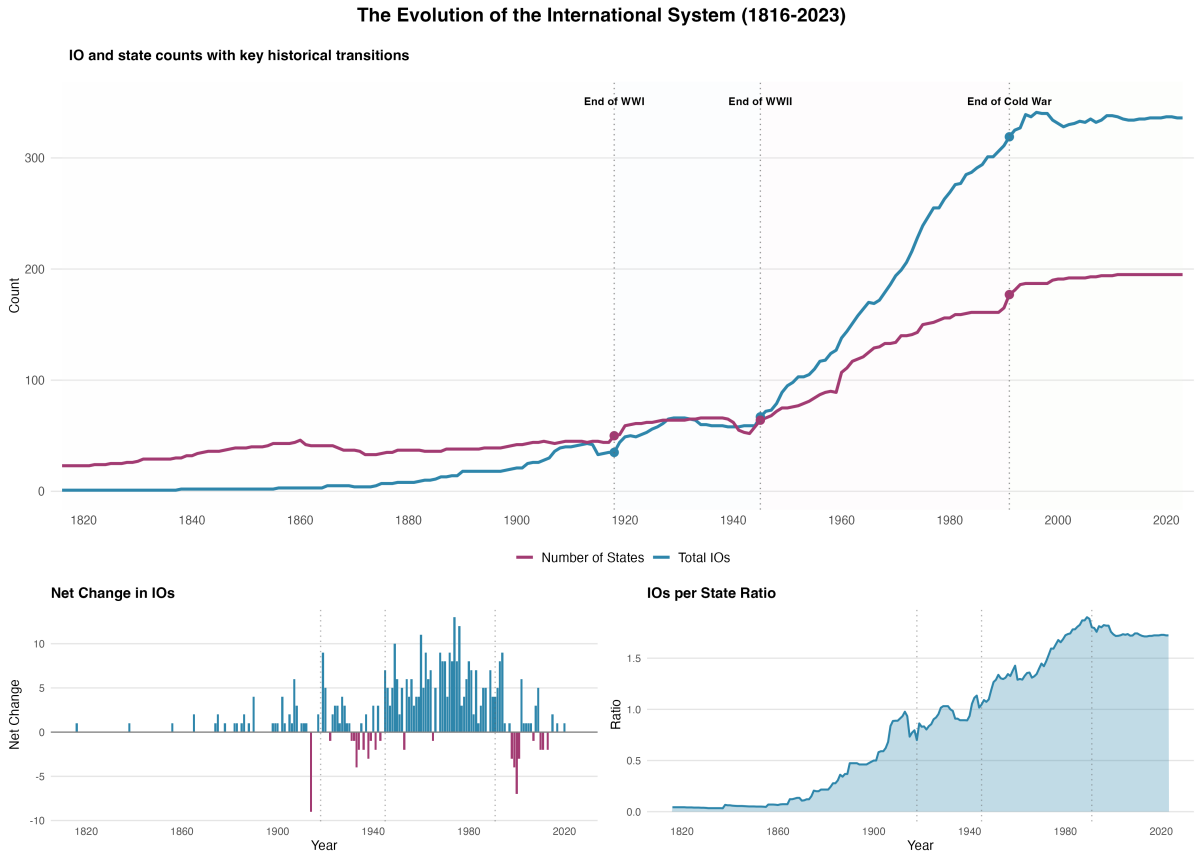

Figure 1. IO and state expansion, net organizational changes, and institutional density

Figure 2 shows average IO memberships for democratic and autocratic states over time (solid line), as well as the number of democracies and autocracies in the world (dashed lines). We measure democracy using V-Dem's polyarchy index, which captures core elements of electoral democracy, including freedom of association, freedom of expression, suffrage, free and fair elections, and the appointment of the chief executive and legislature through popular elections (Coppedge et al. 2024; Teorell et al. 2019). This variable aligns with the theoretical focus in existing research on electoral constraints and the importance of catering to (s)electorates for leader survival. The polyarchy index is also widely used in research on regime type and IOs (e.g., Cottiero and Haggard 2023; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2025). We define a democracy as any state whose polyarchy score exceeds 0.5, in line with previous research using this index.

Figure 2 illustrates a consistent empirical pattern: democratic states are members of more IOs than autocracies across the entire historical period. This differential persists with remarkable consistency but does increase in magnitude in the post-1945 period, narrowing slightly in recent years. Notably, autocracies follow a pattern that parallels democracies, albeit with a temporal lag.

These consistent patterns arise despite changes in the number of democracies and autocracies over time.[2] Interestingly, the recent rise in the number of autocratic states in IOs has come despite a falling number of authoritarian states in the international system. This is in contrast to the trend for democracies throughout the period, where small downturns in the number of democratic states seem to align with slight downturns in the average number of IOs for democratic states.

[2] To provide a broader overview of how democracy has developed over time, Figure A.1 breaks down this development across regime (sub)types over the full historical period.

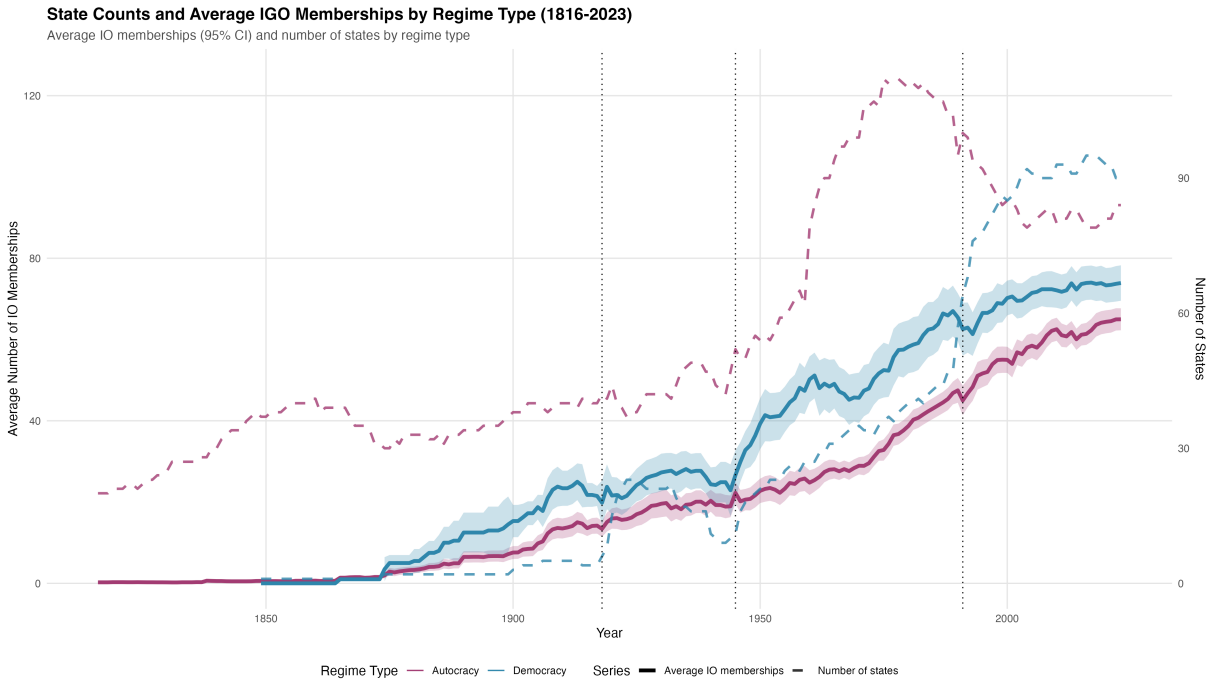

Figure 2. IO Membership Distribution by Regime Type.

These patterns challenge the dominant theoretical frameworks in international relations that predict static, regime-based disparities in institutional participation. Contrary to these theoretical expectations, the data reveal autocracies as latecomers to international cooperation rather than abstainers. This dynamic is reflected in Figure A.3, which shows the steady growth of autocratic IOs following the expansion of democratic IOs. The recent narrowing of the membership gap thus suggests that the relationship between regime type and international cooperation is more nuanced than was previously conceptualized.

Figure 3 shows the average number of IO memberships for all system members across four different time periods broken down by regime type. In the post-World War II periods, the variance of membership grows dramatically. This is a function of more IOs and more states, but it also illustrates that there is a much wider variation in state memberships. Figure A.2 further demonstrates that the pattern persists across different organizational types with democracies outpacing autocracies in cross-regional, global, and regional memberships. The

patterns show a distinct difference in the average number of IOs that democratic and autocratic states are a part of during each era.

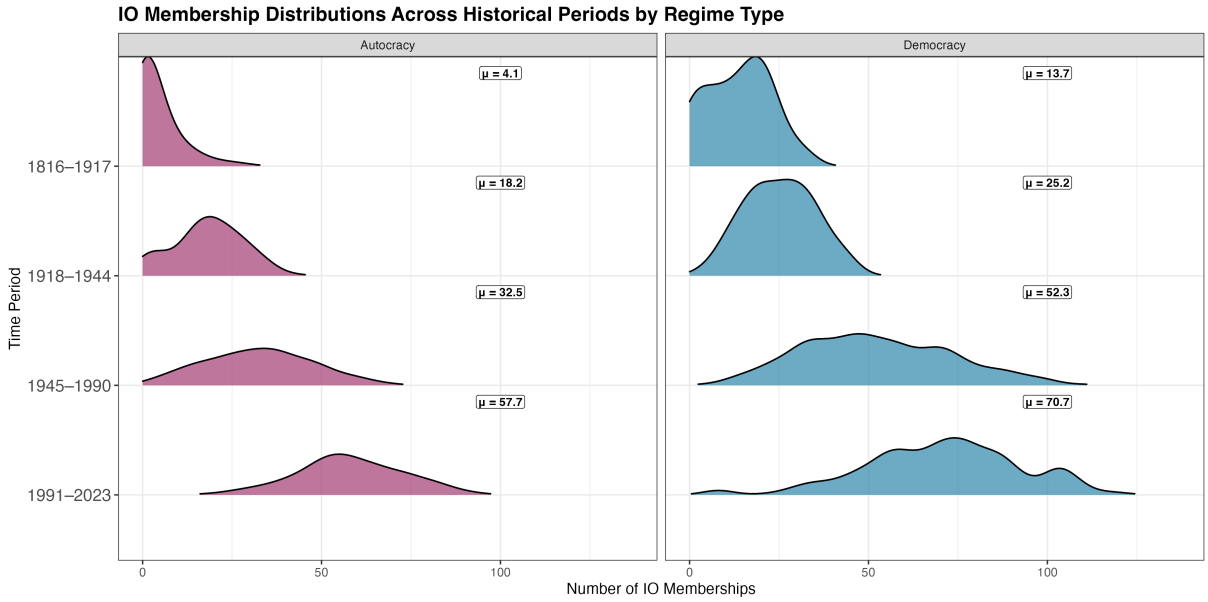

Figure 3. IO membership for democracies and autocracies over time

To establish whether there is a systematic relationship between democracy and IO membership, we also need to control for a set of potential confounding factors common in research on regime type and international cooperation (Davis 2023; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006, 2008; Poast and Urpelainen 2013): GDP and GDP per capita (Fariss et al. 2022); the number of militarized interstate disputes a country is involved in (Palmer et al. 2022); and whether the country was a major power at the time. We also include country fixed-effects that control for all unobserved time-invariant confounders. This implies that our estimates capture the association between democracy and IO membership *within* countries, over time. In addition, we include two different types of time fixed-effects. In some models, we rely on year fixed-effects, which control for trends that are common to all countries. In others, we operate with a more conservative strategy, and include region-year fixed-effects, which control for trends that

are common to all countries in a particular world region. All time-varying independent variables are lagged by one year.

Our main model thus takes the following form:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 X_{it-1} + B_k \boldsymbol{Z}_{it-1} + \gamma_i + \delta_{(j)t} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where Y_{it} is the number of IO memberships for a particular state in a given year; X_{it-1} is the democracy level of a state in a particular year; Z_{it-1} is a vector of control variables; γ_i are country fixed-effects; and $\delta_{(j)t}$ are year or region-year fixed-effects, depending on the model. Our main democracy variable ranges from 0-1, but in our regression analyses, we multiply it by 10 to capture a 0.1 change in the democracy level. Changes of this magnitude are a common threshold to identify episodes of democratization (Wilson et al. 2020) and autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). In our discussion of results, we use the term democratization to denote any increases to a state's democracy level, and the term autocratization to denote any decreases to a state's democracy level (difference in degree), rather than the stage at which a country moves across a qualitative threshold from autocratic to democratic or vice versa (difference in kind).

Results

Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we establish the baseline relationship between democracy and IO membership (1816-2023), controlling for confounders and confirming that democracy positively correlates with membership. Second, we disaggregate this relationship temporally. Third, we decompose membership patterns by state behavior (joining, leaving, forming, dissolving) to better understand these temporal dynamics.

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between democracy and IO membership for the entire time-period 1816–2023. Models 1 and 2 are pooled OLS models excluding and including control variables, whereas models 3 to 5 also include different combinations of country, year, and region-year fixed effects. In all models where we include controls, we operate with slightly fewer observations, since the militarized interstate dispute data end in 2014. We find a positive and significant relationship between democracy and IO membership across all models. According to our most conservative specification (model 5), a 0.1 increase in the level of democracy on a 0–1 scale is associated with one additional IO membership. The patterns across different models also point to the relevance of including year fixed effects, as they substantially reduce the coefficient size on democracy. This indicates that democracy and IO membership are subject to similar trends over time.

Table 1 Democracy and IO membership.

	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**
Constant	16.104**	-29.166**			
	(1.710)	(4.394)			
Democracy	6.219**	3.425**	2.716**	1.010**	0.956**
	(0.346)	(0.351)	(0.317)	(0.204)	(0.237)
Major Power		-22.741**	-3.470	-1.723	1.908
		(2.635)	(4.179)	(2.726)	(2.134)
MIDs		0.228	0.140	-0.266	-0.171
		(0.334)	(0.226)	(0.176)	(0.206)
GDP (ln)		6.085**	16.527**	-2.162	0.404
		(0.665)	(1.507)	(1.618)	(1.788)
GDP per capita (ln)		4.286**	0.155	6.236**	4.192*
		(1.227)	(2.809)	(1.793)	(2.098)
Country Fixed-Effects			X	X	X
Year Fixed-Effects				X	
Region-Year Fixed-Effects					X
Observations	15998	14645	14645	14645	14645

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01. Robust standard errors clustered on countries in parentheses.

Having found that the association between democracy and IO membership holds across a range of different model specifications, we proceed to disaggregate this relationship over time. Figure 4 displays the results from a set of moving-window regressions, where we run a variation

on model 5 (Table 1) for all 11-year periods between 1816 and 2023 (i.e., 1816–1826, 1817–1827… 2013–2023). To be able to cover the entire period, we run these models without control variables, but including country and region-year fixed effects. However, the results are substantively unchanged when including controls (Figure A.4). We note two key patterns.

First, the positive relationship between democracy and IO membership is bounded in time. For most periods of these 200 years, changes to a state's democracy level have not resulted in changes to its membership in IOs. Prior to World War II, there is only one positive and significant coefficient on the relationship between democracy and IO membership; indeed, the only consistent stretch of significant relationships is negative and occurs in the 1870s.

Second, two groups of time windows—the immediate post-WWII period and the mid-1970s–early 1990s—display a particularly strong and significant relationship. The first period exhibits a strong but comparatively brief positive association between democracy and membership, whereas the second period displays a slightly weaker association but over a longer stretch of time. These periods contribute substantially to the temporally aggregated result reported above. We run moving-window regressions that sequentially *exclude* each 11-year period, which allows us to analyze which periods provide significant leverage on our findings. As shown in Figure A.5, the coefficient decreases around each of these two time periods. And when we exclude both periods from the main analyses, the coefficient on democracy is reduced by more than a third compared to our most conservative model using the full sample (Table A.1).

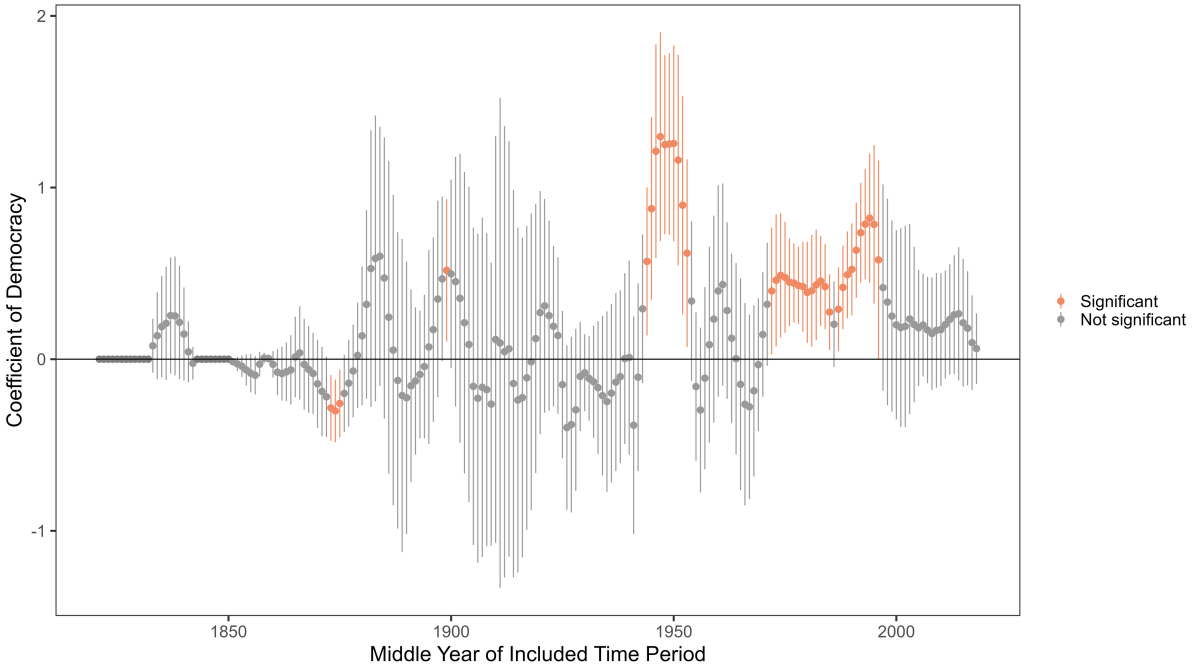

Figure 4. Democracy and IO membership over time.

What accounts for these time-bound shifts in the relationship between democracy and IO membership? To unpack this finding, we run moving-window regressions where the dependent variables capture the number of IOs a state has joined, left, formed, or dissolved in a year. This categorization accounts for all possible state behaviors along two dimensions: whether a state is entering or exiting an IO (joining/leaving) and whether it creates or eliminates an IO (forming/dissolving). Since these dependent variables capture short run changes to IO membership—i.e., the number of yearly changes to IO membership that are due to joining, forming, leaving or dissolving—we estimate the models using first differences of the independent variable, rather than country fixed effects. This means that the models capture the relationship between the year-to-year change in democracy levels, and the number of IOs a state joined, formed, left, or dissolved in a given year. This modelling strategy is thereby a short run equivalent of our model of IO membership. Due to limited variation in the disaggregated

dependent variables, these models start in 1900.[3] Like the models in Figure 3, these models include region-year fixed effects, but exclude time-varying controls.

Figure 5 corroborates the observation that the immediate post-WWII period and the mid-1970s–early 1990s were critical junctures when the relationship between democracy and IO membership was particularly strong. During the immediate post-WWII period, democratizing states were more inclined to form new IOs, but did not significantly differ from other states in their tendency to join IOs. Between 1970 and 1990, democratizing states participated more actively in IOs—primarily by joining existing organizations as well as by establishing new ones.

Across time, the coefficients for leaving and dissolving are generally small and/or statistically insignificant. In general, we know that the dissolution of IOs is relatively rare (cf. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2021), possibly because of institutional stickiness and inertia (Pierson 2000) or the preservation instincts of bureaucracies (cf. Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Similarly, given the relative rarity of states leaving IOs (cf. Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2025), it is possible that no clear patterns emerge over time with regard to democracy. Indeed, our findings confirm those of Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2025), who find no correlation between a state's level of democracy and withdrawals from IOs.

We also note an earlier period of significant change in cooperation, which was not visible in the aggregate patterns. In the early 1900s, the relationship between democracy and joining IOs was positive and statistically significant. This development is hidden in the aggregate, because in the same period, democratizing states also left more and formed fewer IOs than other states. Rather than a period of substantial democratic cooperation, this was a period when democratic cooperation was in flux.

[3] This limited variation is the result of no states joining, leaving, forming, or dissolving an IO in many periods pre-1900.

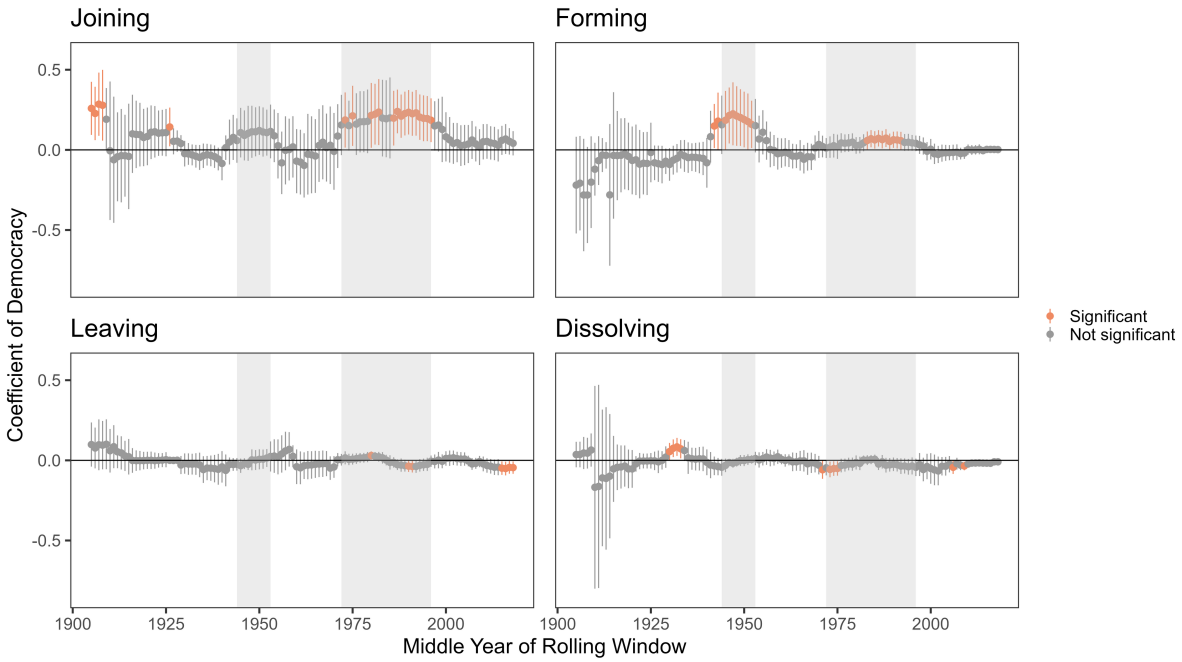

Figure 5. Democracy and different types of changes to IO membership over time.

Discussion

These disaggregated findings indicate that democratic incentives for international cooperation become more salient during periods of significant democratization in the international system. The post-WWII period presented the first major opportunity for this dynamic to emerge, as established and new democratic powers, including the United States and its allies, founded multilateral institutions like the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system, and NATO. We observe a large increase in the number of IOs founded in this era when democratic cooperation was first institutionalized on a large scale (Ikenberry 2019). Indeed, the relationship between democracy and IO membership in this first period was almost exclusively driven by states that grew more democratic and then formed IOs together with democratic states (Figure A.6). As Lake, Martin, and Risse (2021) suggest, the breadth and depth of this liberal order was extensive. We find that the relationship between democracy and IO membership in the immediate post-War period runs across a range of policy areas, covering issues from monetary

relations, security, and human rights to trade and agriculture (Figure A.7). The democratic victors of the war steered global governance toward a rule-based system that used IOs as a core architecture, resulting in a large increase in state memberships in these institutions.

A second critical juncture occurred during the third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991). One part of this juncture unfolded during the 1970s and 1980s, with democratization in Southern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, whereas it was more limited in Africa (Huntington 1991, 21-25). For example, Portugal and Spain transitioned from dictatorships to democracies in the mid-1970s; Argentina, Brazil, and Chile overthrew military regimes throughout the 1980s; and India, Korea, and the Philippines witnessed democratic improvements over the late 1970s to mid-1980s (Huntington 1991, 22-23). These geographic patterns are also reflected in the relationship between democracy and IO membership, which in this period was most evident in Europe, Asia, and to a lesser extent in the Americas, whereas the relationship was not significant in Africa (Figure A.8). As colonialism waned, democratic powers pivoted to institutional channels to preserve their influence, while newly democratic states used international forums to assert sovereignty, build coalitions, and lock-in the domestic turn toward democracy. The emergence of regionalism in this period helped states consolidate their independence but also allowed them to cooperate on functional goals to provide public goods (Haas and Schmitter 1964; Nye 1971; Schmitter 1969). The resulting expansion of IOs reflected this structural shift of institutionalized cooperation among the newly independent democracies (Poast and Urpelainen 2018).

A later part of this juncture followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, which created a structural opening for democratic powers to expand existing institutions and create new ones that embodied their preferences and consolidated their global position. The end of the Cold War led to rapid democratic expansion throughout Eastern Europe during the 1990s. This wave of democratic transitions translated directly into institutional engagement, with newly democratic

Eastern European states strategically pursuing membership in the EU, NATO, and Council of Europe. Reflecting these developments, the relationship between democracy and IO membership during this period is evident in Europe (Figure A.8).

The second and third waves of democratization brought a significant expansion to the number of democratic states in the international system. This proliferation soon confronted authoritarian regimes with a choice: remain isolated while democracies reap cooperative benefits; join these predominantly liberal institutions despite substantial sovereignty costs; or create alternative authoritarian clubs to safeguard their power structures. Autocratic states eventually appear to choose a combination of the latter two, both of which eventually expand their membership portfolios. The result is that in the aftermath of democracies joining and forming IOs, authoritarians follow – they become "late" cooperators. This can be seen clearly in Figure 3, where following increases in democratic memberships in IOs, authoritarians raise their rate of joining, closing the gap between the two regime types.

Alternative explanations could also account for these patterns. For example, over time changes to the relationship between democracy and IO membership may be driven by saturation effects among democracies. Insignificant coefficients in certain periods may have been caused by more democratic states reaching IO membership ceilings. To check for this possibility, we constructed a saturation variable, operationalized as the ratio of a state's existing IO memberships to its total eligible membership pool in the prior year.[4] The results in Figure A.9 indicate that our findings for the two periods of democratization remain stable even when controlling for democratic membership saturation.

In all, our findings place significant scope conditions on existing theories of regime type and IOs. They reveal that democratic states' relative enthusiasm for international cooperation

[4] We define eligibility based on geographic criteria, counting global IOs (accessible to all states), regional IOs specific to the state's region, and multi-regional IOs that include the state's region. This approach standardizes membership density by accounting for the fact that a state's potential membership pool is oftentimes constrained by regional organizational admission criteria.

varies considerably across different historical periods — a pattern that pure regime-type explanations cannot easily explain. Specifically, democracies were more likely than autocracies to engage in institutional cooperation in times of widespread democratization. During these periods, new and established democracies reshaped international cooperation by forming new IOs in the second wave and joining new IOs in the third wave. Our findings also clarify that autocratic states typically embrace IOs despite theoretical expectations to the contrary. Outside the second and third waves of democratization, democracies and autocracies expand their IO membership at comparable rates. Like democracies, autocracies seem to value the benefits of cooperation in IOs and have therefore maintained similar patterns of IO engagement.

Conclusion

While prior research has shown democracy to be positively associated with international cooperation, events over recent years suggest a more complicated picture, as democracies have wavered in their commitments and autocracies have stepped up collaboration. This paper has used this discrepancy as a backdrop for revisiting the classic relationship between regime type and international cooperation. Theoretically, we have developed two competing expectations about the nature of this relationship, contrasting the conventional expectation of a positive relationship with an alternative expectation on a null relationship, drawing on research emphasizing similarities between democracies and autocracies. Empirically, we have provided the most encompassing assessment to date, examining this association for all states and formal IOs in the international system from 1816 to 2023, thus covering all key periods of democratization and autocratization in world history.

Our core findings are three-fold. First, we have recovered the conventional prediction, establishing that democracy is strongly positively correlated with IO membership in aggregate analyses of the post-Napoleonic era. Second, we have shown that this aggregate result masks

important variation in the strength of this association over time. A closer look at specific periods finds this relationship to be time bound: in play for the second and third waves of democratization, but less so in periods prior to 1945, in-between the two waves of democratization, and following the turn of the millennium. Third, we demonstrate that these temporal patterns reflect underlying dynamics in the propensity of states undergoing democratization and autocratization to join, form, leave, and dissolve IOs. Specifically, the second wave of democratization led states to form many novel IOs, while the third wave of democratization mainly led them to join already existing IOs. The larger take-away from these empirical findings is that structural factors fundamentally shape the classic relationship between democracy and international cooperation.

While these findings are based on an analysis that is more encompassing than any previous assessment, our inquiry is also subject to limitations that present opportunities for future research. To start with, our analysis has focused on formal IOs, leaving aside other forms of international cooperation. Yet, over recent decades, informal IOs and other types of global governance have become increasingly common and relevant, suggesting new avenues for research on the association between regime type and international cooperation (Barnett, Pevehouse, and Raustiala 2021; Roger and Rowan 2023; Vabulas and Snidal 2021). Furthermore, our analysis has focused on state membership as an expression of cooperative behavior, bracketing other types of state actions within IOs. Future research could fruitfully explore how democracies and autocracies behave as IO members, for instance, in terms of proposing policy, adopting decisions, funding programs, and complying with rules (Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2025; Winzen 2023).

With these limitations in mind, our findings carry several broader implications. First, they suggest that regime type is a critical determinant of international cooperation, even as we expand the temporal scope to cover more historical and recent periods than earlier studies. Our

findings counter expectations that regime type would have lost its predictive power as a result of growing convergence between democracies and autocracies in incentives for, and constraints on, governments to cooperate internationally (Börzel and Zürn 2021; Cottiero et al. 2024; Hyde and Saunders 2020). Our analyses indicate that regime type has an independent effect on IO membership when controlling for alternative explanations such as power differentials (Drezner 2007), functional demands (Keohane 1984), and geopolitical affinities (Davis 2023).

Second, our findings suggest that the relationship between regime type and various outcomes in domestic and international politics may be more time bound than typically appreciated. The temporal variation we have observed in our analyses may apply to other international outcomes previously shown to be associated with regime type, such as international treaties (Ginsburg 2021), human rights agreements (Simmons 2009), trade liberalization (Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000), democracy promotion (Pevehouse 2005), public goods provision (Bättig and Bernauer 2009), conflict resolution (Bueno De Mesquita et al. 1999; Russett 1993), and IO design (Tallberg and Vikberg 2025b). Similarly, scholarship in comparative politics on consequences of democracy may benefit from exploring the time boundedness of this relationship (e.g., Carbone 2009; Gerring et al. 2021; Gerring, Knutsen, and Berge 2022; Halperin, Siegle, and Weinstein 2009).

Third, our results put recent evidence of growing authoritarian cooperation in a larger empirical context. A new wave of research identifies how autocracies appear to be increasingly willing to use the tools of international cooperation for authoritarian purposes, challenging key assumptions of the democracy-cooperation correlation (Cottiero and Haggard 2023; Debre 2025; Ginsburg 2021; Obydenkova and Libman 2019). Our findings indicate that this newfound enthusiasm for international cooperation among autocracies has weakened the association between democracy and IO engagement over the past 25 years. Yet this period is by no means

unique in world history: as we have shown, the relationship between democracy, autocracy, and international cooperation has always been more dynamic and conditional than assumed.

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Appendix

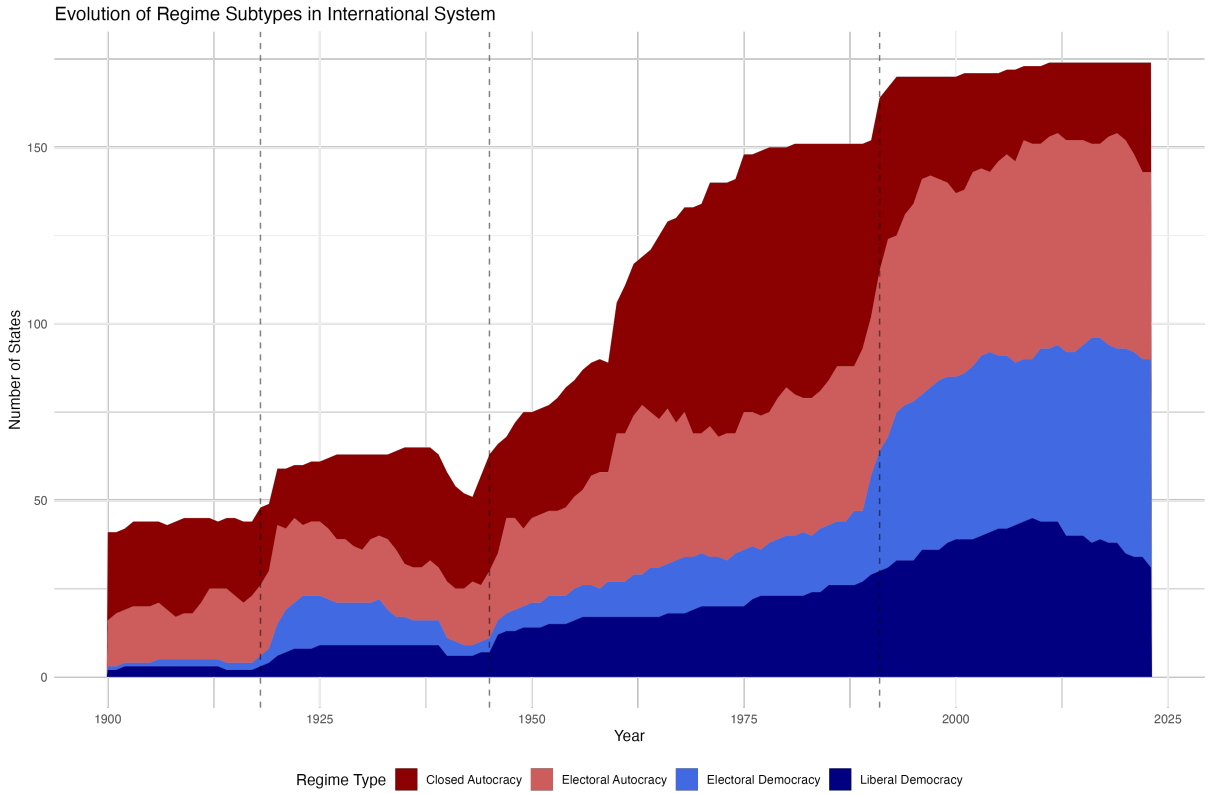

Figure A.1 Types of Democracies and Autocracies over time

Figure A.2 IO-subtype membership by regime type

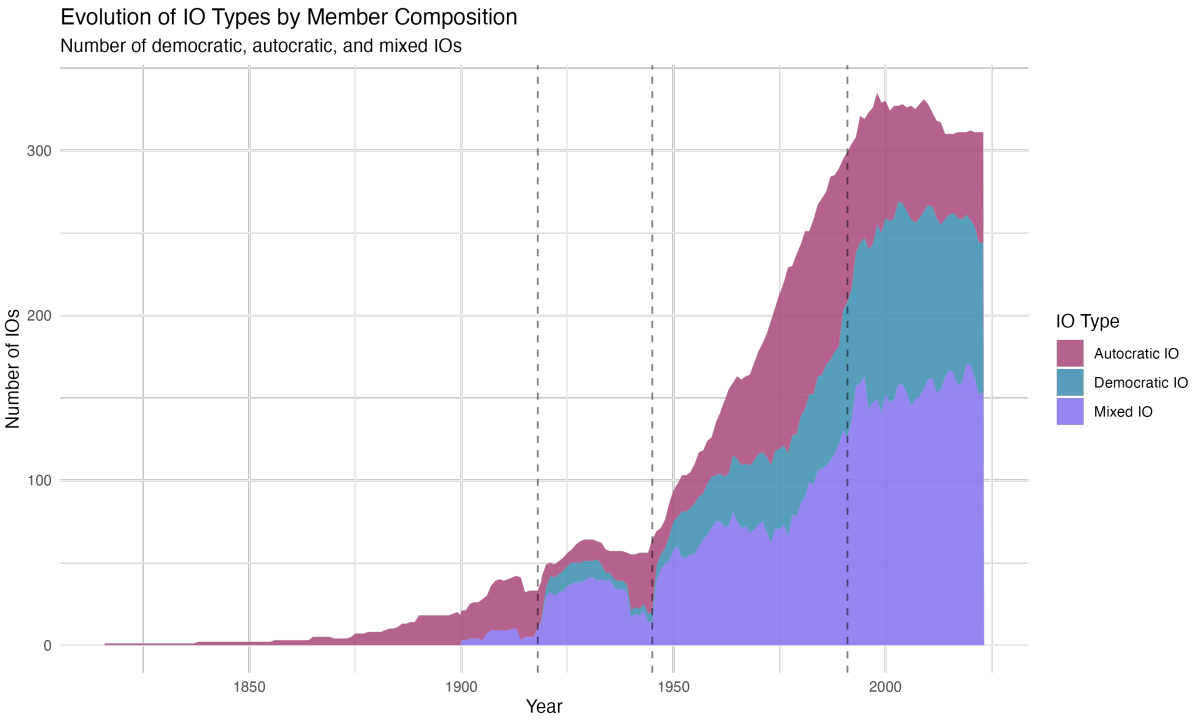

Figure A.3 Growth of different types of IOs over time

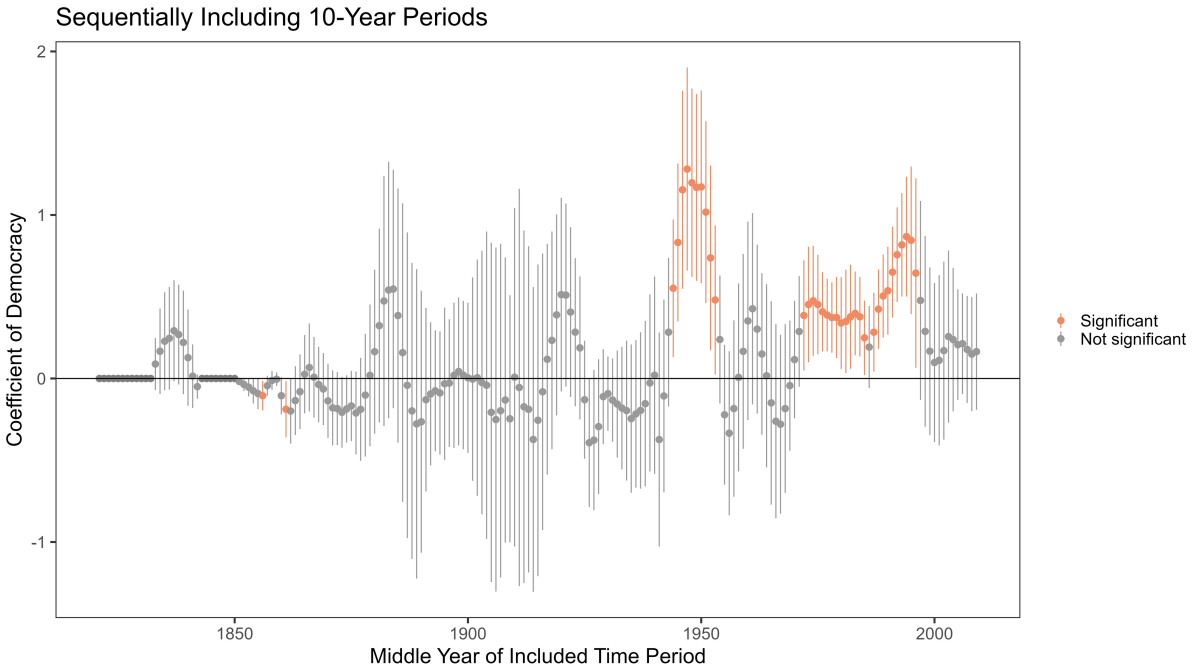

Figure A.4 Democracy and IO membership over time, including control variables.

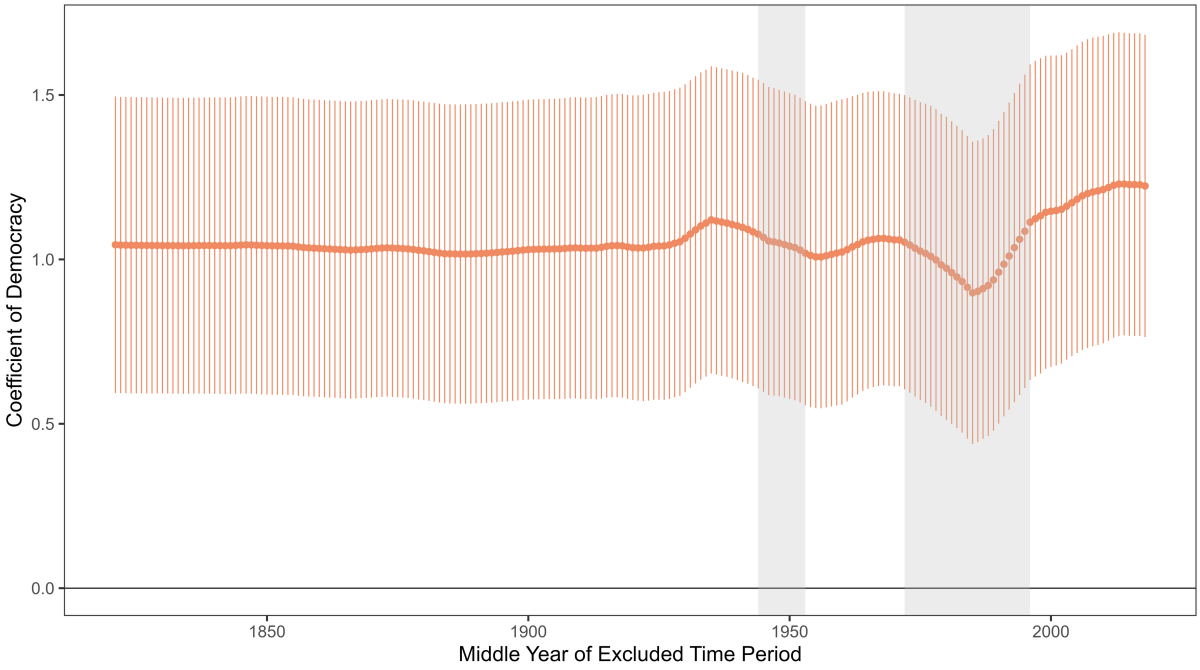

Figure A.5 Dropping time periods from main model. Shaded areas indicate two periods where the relationship between democracy and IO membership was statistically significant (cf. Figure 3).

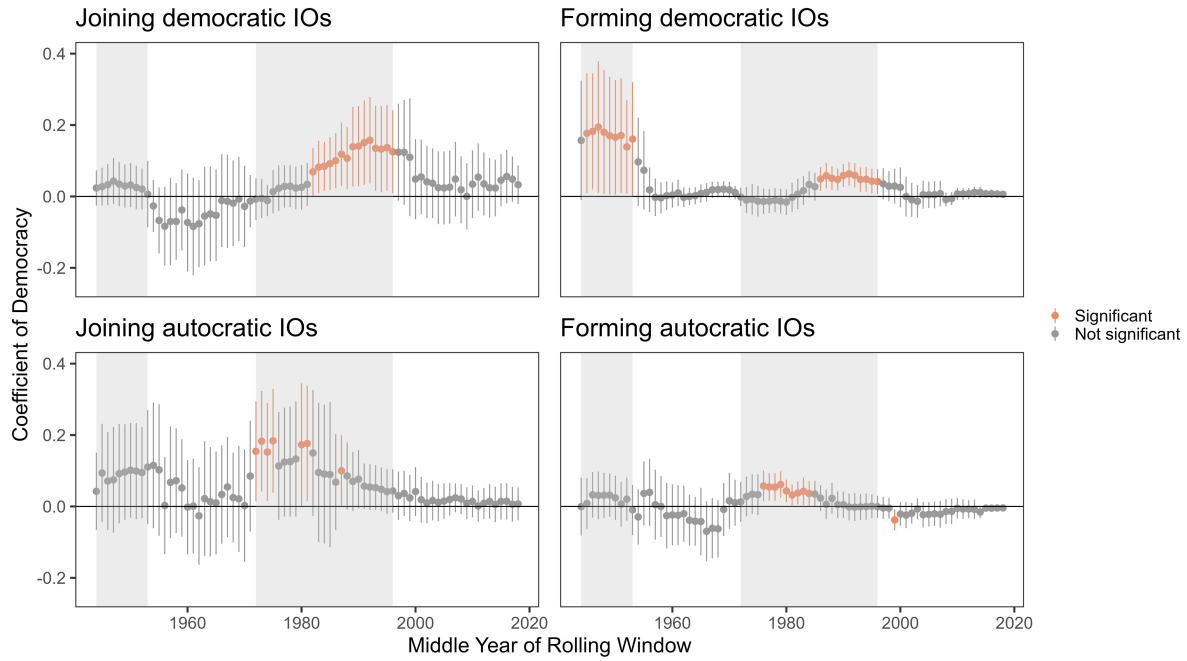

Figure A.6. Democracy and different types of changes to membership in different types of IO over time. Note: Democratic vs autocratic IO is based on whether the average level of

democracy in the IO's membership is above or below 0.5 on V-Dem's polyarchy index. Due to limited variation in the disaggregated dependent variables, these models start in 1939.

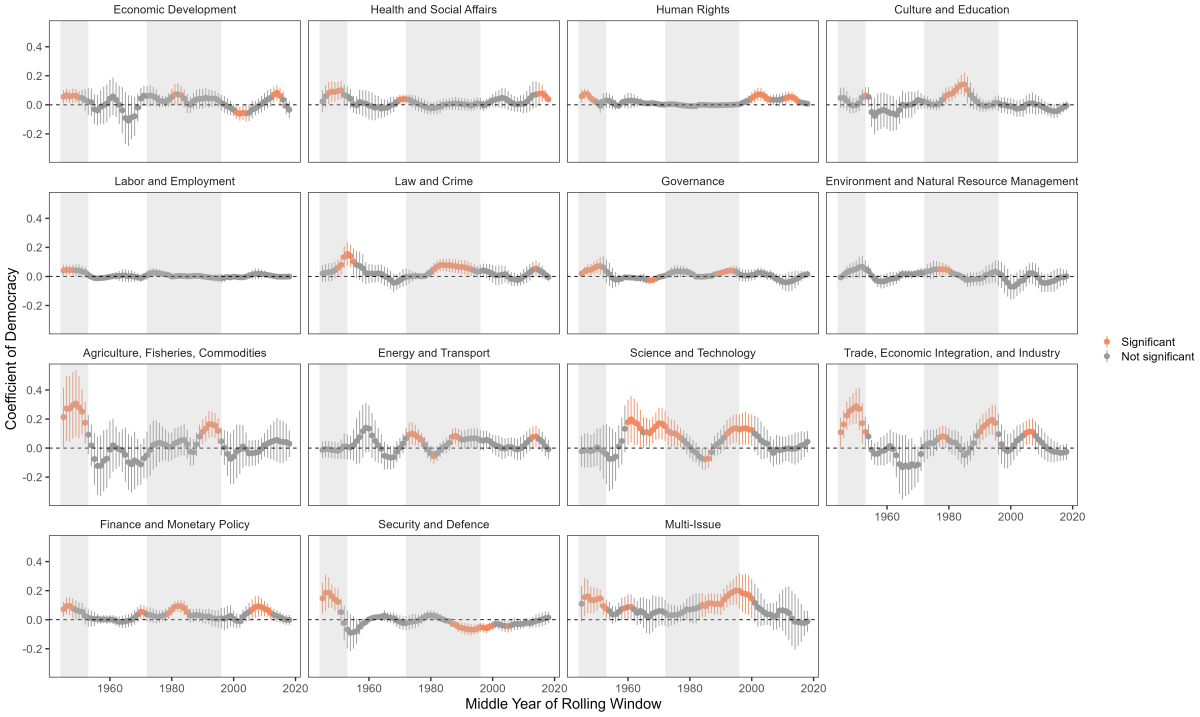

Figure A.7. Democracy and IO membership across issue areas. Due to limited variation in the disaggregated dependent variables, these models start in 1940.

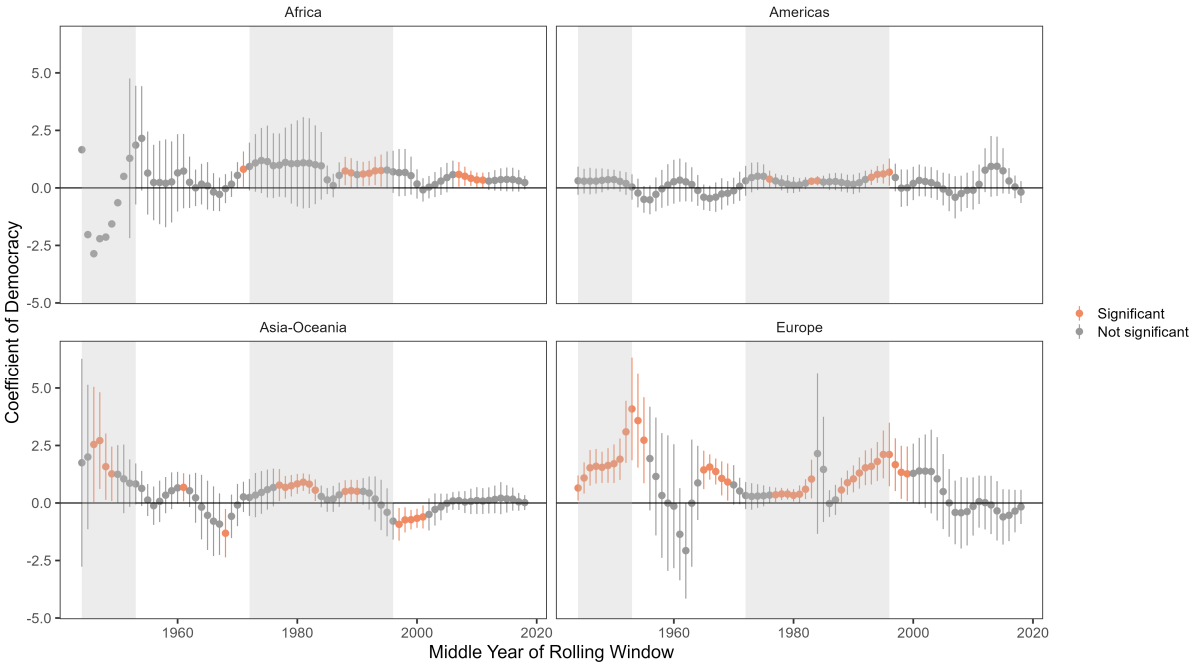

Figure A.8. Democracy and IO membership across regions. Note: To improve interpretability, the range of the y-axis has been restricted. The confidence intervals for Africa are outside this range in early years. Due to limited variation in the disaggregated dependent variables, these models start in 1939.

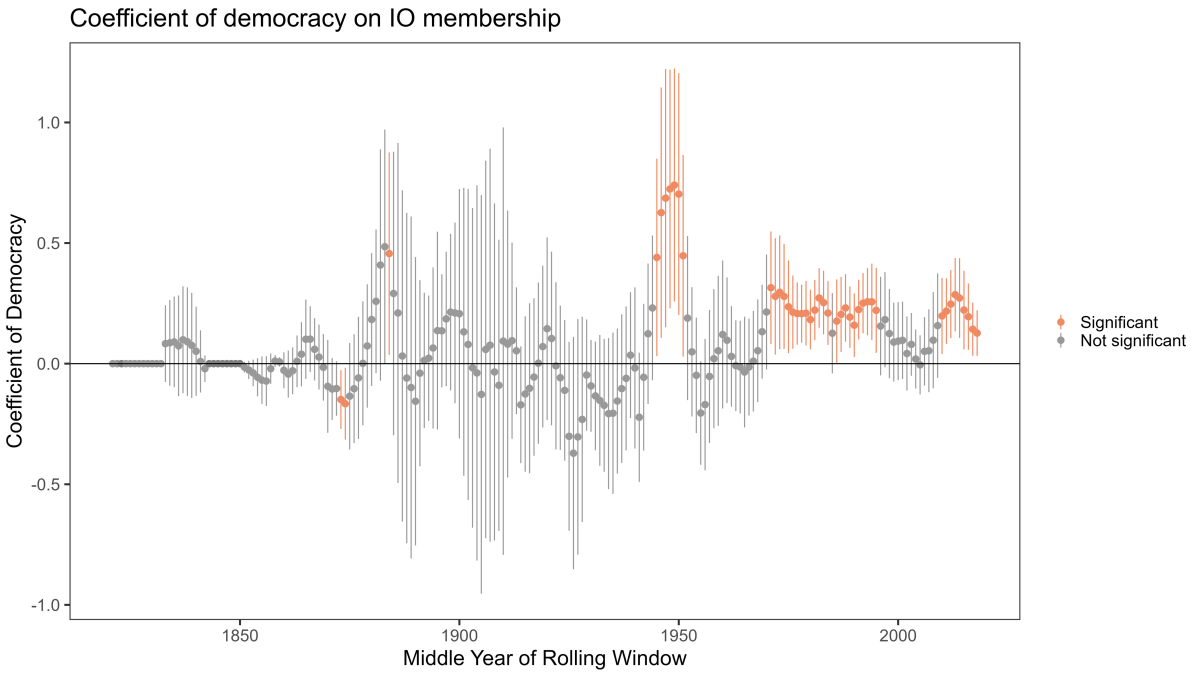

Figure A.9 Democracy and IO membership over time, controlling for membership saturation.

Table A.1 Democracy and IO membership, dropping key time periods.

Democracy	0.616*
	(0.242)
Major Power	2.294
	(1.830)
MIDs	-0.262
	(0.233)
GDP (ln)	0.564
	(1.613)
GDP per capita (ln)	5.077**
	(1.894)
Country Fixed-Effects	X
Region-Year Fixed-Effects	X
Observations	10180

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01. Robust standard errors clustered on countries in parentheses.