Autocratic and Democratic Clubs:

Regime Sorting in International Cooperation

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Abstract: Recent events in world politics suggest that international cooperation is becoming increasingly polarized between democracies and autocracies. Yet, so far, research offers little insight into the extent of this phenomenon and the factors that might be driving it. This paper provides the first comprehensive and systematic analysis of regime-based clustering in international organizations (IOs). Theoretically, we develop a novel argument of regime sorting, explaining why states seek cooperation with others of the same regime type. Empirically, we map and explain regime-based clustering in the full population of IOs between 1925 and 2010. We find that clustering among democracies and autocracies has expanded over time, and that states joining IOs with like regimes is a key factor driving these patterns, also when controlling for economic interdependence, geopolitical alignment, and geographical proximity. The paper suggests that international relations theory has underestimated the importance of regime type for how states organize in world politics.

Whether, how, and why states cluster in international cooperation is a topic of powerful assumptions in international relations (IR) theory. According to one leading account, patterns of cooperation in international organizations (IOs) reflect economic interdependence, as states join forces with commercial partners to ensure efficient exchange (Keohane and Nye 2001; Mansfield and Milner 2015; Lupu 2016). According to another influential argument, patterns in IO memberships are driven by geopolitical alignment, as states choose collaborators based on pre-existing security ties (Gowa 1994; Davis and Pratt 2021; Davis 2023). Following a third line of reasoning, states are particularly likely to cluster along geographical divides, as states form IOs based on regional affinities in interests and identities (Moravcsik 1998; Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 2012; Börzel and Risse 2016).

Yet recent events in world politics suggest that patterns of collaboration may reflect other considerations, centered on affinities in domestic political regimes, independent from economic interdependence, geopolitical alignment, and geographical proximity. Consider former US President Joe Biden's Summit for Democracy, organized among more than 100 democratic countries worldwide to tackle "the greatest threats faced by democracies today through collective action" (US Department of State 2024). Or consider the regular meetings between China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin, outlining their plans for a new world order based on autocratic values of state sovereignty and non-interference (New York Times 2023). And few events illustrate the global divide between democracies and autocracies better than the split between countries over how states and IOs should respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Financial Times 2023).

Inspired by such observations, this paper offers the first comprehensive and systematic analysis of regime-based clustering in IOs.[1] To what extent are states clustered in international cooperation based on the nature of their domestic political systems? Is regime-based clustering

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[1] But see Lai and Reiter (2000) on regime-based clustering in international alliances, 1816-1992.

becoming more or less common? Are democracies and autocracies equally prone to such clustering? Does the degree of clustering vary across different types of IOs? And what are the drivers of clustering among democracies and autocracies in world politics? Understanding the patterns and drivers of regime-based clustering in IOs allows us to get traction on critical questions, such as the forces shaping state behavior in world politics, the organization of global governance, and the prospects for international cooperation in a world of autocratization.

We present our argument in three steps. We begin by mapping regime-based clustering in the full population of IOs between 1925 and 2010.[2] Our analyses cover an unprecedented breadth of IOs, combining data on state memberships in formal as well as informal IOs. This strategy allows us to avoid any potential selection bias arising from democracies or autocracies preferring varyingly formalized cooperation. We demonstrate that regime-based clustering is a consistent pattern among both democracies and autocracies, and that it has become increasingly common over time, especially among democracies. Disaggregating the population of IOs, we also show that clustering in informal IOs primarily occurs among democracies, whereas clustering in formal IOs is equally common among democracies and autocracies.

As a second step, we offer a novel theory of why states of the same regime type cluster in IOs. We argue that regime-based clustering in IOs reflects a sorting process where democracies and autocracies actively seek cooperation with others of the same regime type, independent of other similarities. We theorize that cooperation with states of the same regime type could be driven by three considerations: the institutional attraction of cooperating with other states sharing similar domestic constraints; the political attraction of cooperating with like states on defending and spreading a state's chosen regime type; and the normative attraction of cooperating with states that share the same basic principles and identities. Based on this logic, we hypothesize that regime sorting leads states to join IOs with a regime composition that is

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[2] In a later version of this paper, we intend to extend the time frame to 2023.

more congruent with their own regime, and to leave IOs with a regime composition that is less congruent with their own regime. We also formulate two conditional hypotheses about the impact of regime sorting in different time periods and in different types of IOs.

In a third step, we test these expectations, estimating whether states engage in active regime sorting. For these purposes, we construct a dataset at the IO-state-year level covering all IOs and states during the time period of 1925-2010, which allows us to gauge a state's relation with a certain IO in a particular year. Based on a set of regression analyses, which also control for affinities in economics, security, and geography, we can establish that the observed patterns of clustering indeed reflect a process of regime sorting. Independent of other considerations, states select into cooperation with each other based on similarities in regime type. The impact of regime sorting on states' decision to join IOs is comparable in size to that of geopolitical concerns. Consistent with our conditional expectations, we also find that regime sorting was more prominent during the Cold War than other time periods and is more pronounced in formal IOs than informal IOs. Furthermore, we find that sorting primarily operates through states joining IOs whose existing members share the same regime type, rather than through states leaving IOs whose regime composition is different from their own regime type.

Our findings have several broader implications. First, they suggest that IR theory has underestimated the importance of regime type for how states organize in international cooperation. While previous research has attributed state clustering in IOs to economic interdependence, geopolitical alignment, and regional affinity (Keohane and Nye 2001; Börzel and Risse 2016; Davis 2023), we demonstrate that regime-based clustering is an increasingly common pattern in world politics, explained by states actively sorting themselves into autocratic and democratic clubs. Second, our findings indicate that existing scholarship on regime type in international cooperation may have been regrettably unbalanced in its extensive

focus on collaboration among democracies (Mansfield et al. 2002; Pevehouse 2005). We find that both autocracies and democracies are likely to let their cooperative relationships be governed by regime type considerations. Third, and by implication, our results point to likely consequences of current processes of democratic backsliding and autocratization around the world. As more countries develop in an authoritarian direction, we are likely to see a further expansion of cooperation within autocratic clubs, as states select collaboration with like regimes (Debre 2022; Cottiero and Haggard 2023).

Regime-Based Clustering in IOs

To what extent are states clustered in international cooperation based on the nature of their domestic political systems? As a first step, we map regime-based clustering in the population of IOs that were in existence at some point between 1925 and 2010. To capture the full range of IOs, we combine data on formal IOs (FIGOs) from the Correlates of War Intergovernmental Organizations dataset (COW-IGO) (Pevehouse et al. 2020) with data on membership in informal IOs (IIGOs) (Roger and Rowan 2023). The core difference between FIGOs and IIGOs is their degree of formality, as indicated by their foundational agreement. Whereas FIGOs are established in binding instruments, IIGOs are established in non-binding agreements (Roger and Rowan 2023, 1253).

Combining formal and informal IOs offers a key advantage over previous research on IO membership. If democracies and autocracies prefer different types of IOs, focusing on only formal or informal IOs may lead to selection bias. For example, if autocracies prefer informal IOs over formal ones, focusing only on formal IOs would underestimate the extent of regime-based clustering in world politics. By including both types of IOs, we cover a wide range of international cooperation.

To gauge the occurrence of regime-based clustering, we calculate the proportion of an IO's member states that are electoral or liberal democracies, as opposed to electoral or closed autocracies, on the Regimes of the World indicator from V-Dem (Lührmann et al. 2018). The variable thus ranges from 0, when all member states are autocracies, to 1, when all member states are democracies.[3] While research suggests that democracies and autocracies come in multiple forms (Geddes 1999; Coppedge et al. 2020), a simplified regime dichotomy is helpful when seeking to capture patterns of clustering.

Figure 1 plots the distribution of IOs' regime composition over time. It reveals two interesting patterns. First, regime-based clustering is a notable phenomenon. A fair share of IOs constitute democratic or autocratic clubs, where all members share the same regime type. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) only had democratic members in 2010, whereas the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was exclusively autocratic in its composition. Second, regime-based clustering has become increasingly common over time. In the pre-Cold War period 1925-1945, IOs were relatively evenly distributed across the spectrum from fully democratic to fully autocratic memberships, but then began to separate into two clusters at the end poles of the spectrum during the Cold War period 1946-1989. This development remained in the post-Cold War period, 1990-2010, but then with a shift toward more democratic, rather than autocratic, clustering.

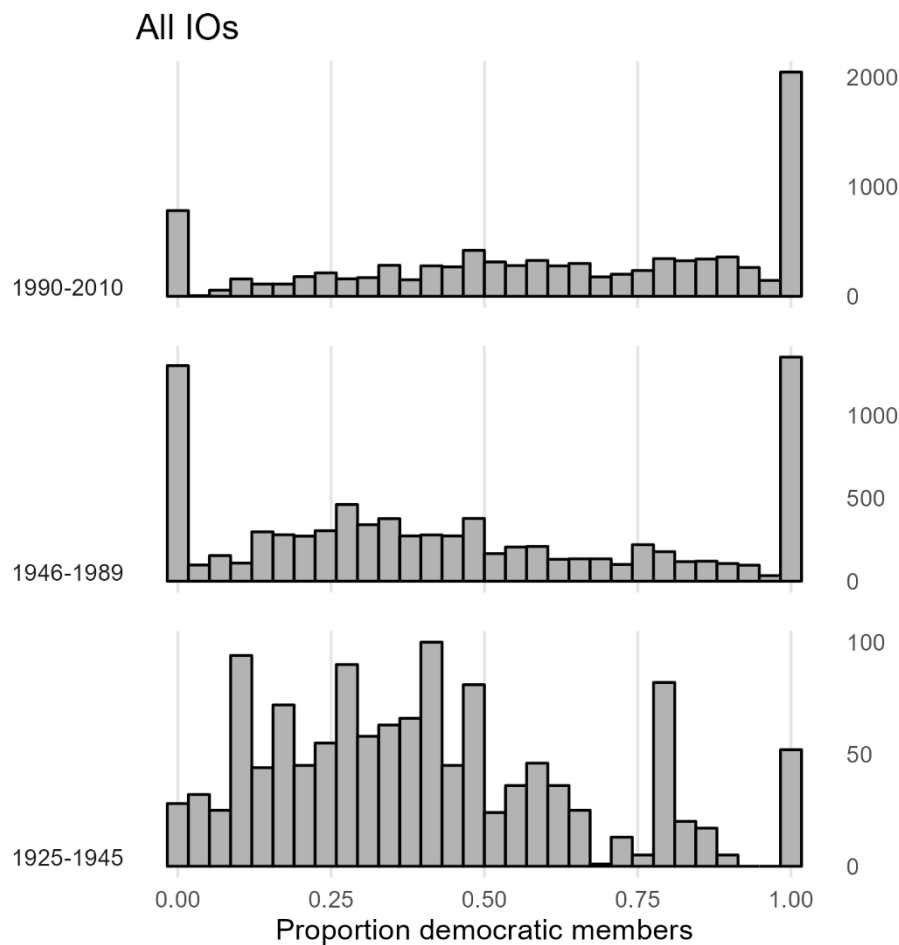[3] We source democracy indicators from v. 13 of the V-Dem dataset.

All IOs

Figure 1. Regime-based clustering in IOs. Note: Panels display relative frequencies within each time period.

Disaggregating the population of IOs, we observe distinct patterns of clustering in FIGOs and IIGOs. Figure 2 suggests that FIGOs have witnessed developments similar to the aggregate pattern, whereas IIGOs primarily have displayed democratic clustering. While 53 out of 214 informal IOs active in 2010 had exclusively democratic member states, only nine informal IOs had the opposite regime composition. The predominance of democratic clustering in IIGOs is exemplified by IOs such as the Group of Ten (G10) and the Group for Aeronautical Research and Technology in Europe (GARTEUR), where all member states were democratic. Interestingly, this pattern runs counter to the common expectation that autocratic states would seek less binding commitments and more flexibility in international cooperation (Carlson and

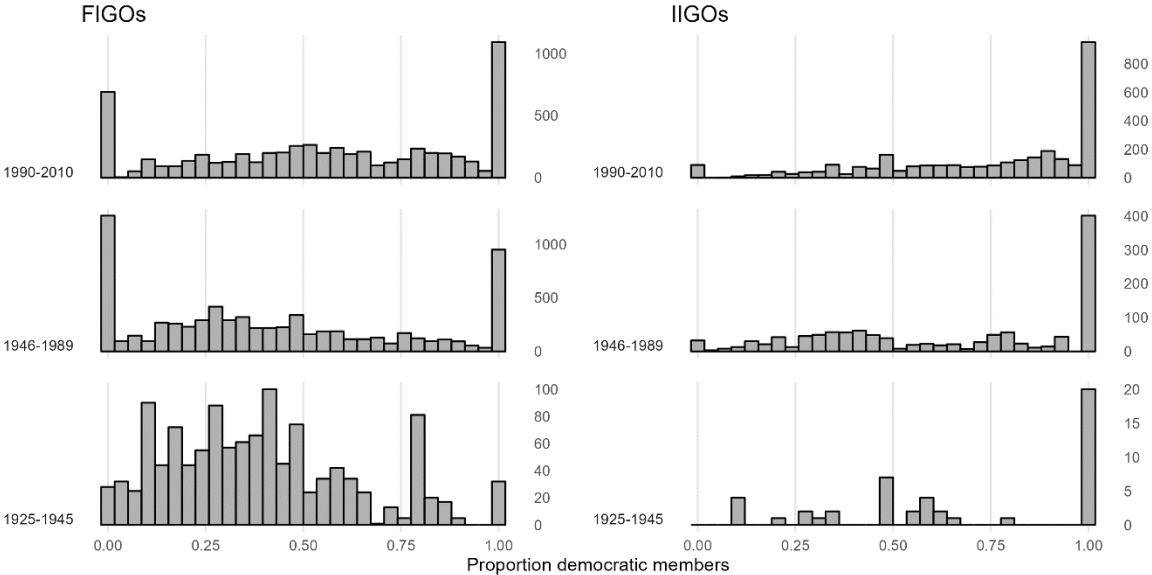Koremenos 2021; Ginsburg 2021) and instead suggests that IIGOs often take the form of democratic clubs.

Figure 2. Regime-based clustering in formal and informal IOs. Note: Panels display relative frequencies within each time period.

There are also prominent differences between regional and multi-regional IOs in terms of the degree of regime-based clustering (Figure 3). We operationalize regional IOs as IOs where more than 80 percent of the member states are from the same world region (Africa; Americas; Asia-Pacific; Europe), and multi-regional IOs as IOs that do not meet this threshold of member state concentration. Overall, we observe a larger proportion of multi-regional IOs with a somewhat even combination of democratic and autocratic members than we do for regional IOs. This pattern is likely driven by IOs with a near-universal membership, for which the regime composition tends to reflect the global regime composition. Yet, in both regional and multi-regional IOs, we also see clear patterns of clustering at both ends of the spectrum, although with a shift toward primarily democratic clustering in regional IOs over recent decades.
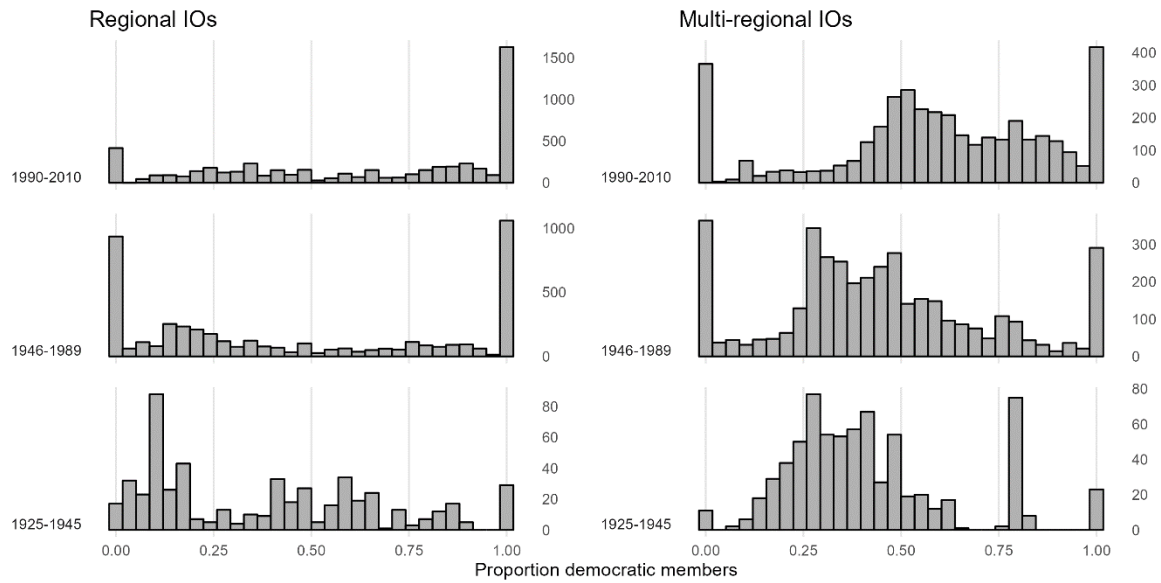
Figure 3. Regime-based clustering in regional and multi-regional IOs. Note: Panels display relative frequencies within each time period.

These descriptive patterns indicate that democracies and autocracies cluster in different IOs, and that this tendency has become increasingly prominent over time, especially among democracies. In the following section, we theorize the likely drivers of these patterns.

Argument: Regime Sorting in IOs

How can we explain clustering by regime type in IOs? What is the attraction of cooperating with other states that share the same political system? In this section, we develop a theory of regime sorting, which advances a novel argument for why states choose IO partners based on regime type. We argue that regime-based clustering is not the accidental outcome of other similarities that happen to be shared by democracies or autocracies, such as security, economics, or geography, but a pattern driven by its own particular dynamic, related to the special attractions of partners with like political systems. These attractions are three-fold – institutional,

political, and normative – and relevant to cooperation among democracies as well as autocracies.

First, states have incentives to cooperate with other states that share the same *domestic institutional constraints*. This argument builds on a large literature on domestic constraints in democracies and autocracies (e.g., Fearon 1994; Schultz and Weingast 2003; Weeks 2014; Hyde and Saunders 2020). While domestic constraints may be partly malleable, democratic leaders tend to be more constrained by domestic political institutions than autocratic leaders (Hyde and Saunders 2020). Multi-party systems, elections, rule of law, and divisions of power all impose constraints on democratic leaders that are not present in autocratic regimes, even if autocratic leaders may experience constraints from elite selectorates and fears of public protest (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Geddes et al. 2018).

For democracies, commonalities in domestic constraints present them with special incentives to cooperate with one another. Because they are more constrained domestically, democratic leaders can make more credible international commitments and are therefore more valued as cooperative partners. Consistent with this logic, some studies identify the constraints imposed on leaders from democratic institutions and public opinion as key factors for why democracies tend to stay out of war with each other (Russett 1993; Fearon 1994; Reiter 2012). Other scholarship highlights how electoral control prompts democratic leaders to be more cooperative in international trade, resulting in pairs of democracies being particularly likely to conclude preferential trade agreements (Mansfield et al. 2002). Still other research argues that democracies are more likely to enter into military alliances with one another, since the constraints of democratic political institutions give leaders reason to trust each other (Gaubatz 1996; Lai and Reiter 2000).

For autocracies, the reasons for seeking each other's cooperation on institutional grounds may be less obvious. Indeed, much of previous research claims that autocracies face difficulties

committing credibly, making them poor cooperative partners. However, difficulties to commit can have their special attraction in the eyes of fellow autocrats. Leeds (1999) argues that autocratic states, just like democratic states, seek each other's cooperation as a result of similarities in domestic institutional structures. Since autocratic leaders face lower levels of domestic constraint, they can maintain higher policymaking flexibility and adjust more easily to changes in the international environment. These characteristics make autocratic states willing to enter into agreements that democracies would avoid, resulting in higher levels of cooperation in autocratic dyads than in mixed dyads. Other studies reach the same conclusion, but through a focus on the specific institutional constraints of sub-types of autocratic regimes (Peceny et al. 2002; Mattes and Rodríguez 2014). According to this argument, single-party, military, and personalistic autocratic regimes recognize each other's particular institutional constraints and are therefore especially likely to engage in cooperation with one another.

Second, states have incentives to cooperate with other states of the same regime type to safeguard and spread their *chosen political systems*. This argument builds on the notion that international cooperation may have implications for domestic political regimes, including processes of democratization and autocratization (Pevehouse 2005; Keohane et al. 2009; Poast and Urpelainen 2015; Cottiero and Haggard 2023). Specifically, international cooperation with like states presents opportunities for both democracies and autocracies to pursue policies that allow them to defend and promote their respective political systems, domestically and internationally.

For democracies, international cooperation provides a way to safeguard democracy back home and to spread democracy to other countries. Collaboration in democratic IOs can enhance the quality of national democratic systems by restricting the power of special interests, protecting individual and minority rights, and improving democratic deliberation (Keohane et al. 2009). In addition, democracies cooperate to spread their preferred political system to other

countries by way of democracy promotion, using tools such as election monitoring, democracy aid, and naming and shaming (Pevehouse 2005; Donno 2013; Kelley 2013).

In a similar way, autocracies have incentives to cooperate to consolidate authoritarian rule against democratic challengers, both at home and abroad. Banding together in autocratic clubs allows authoritarian countries to develop policies that support regime survival and resist democratic contagion (Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Debre 2022; Cottiero and Haggard 2023). Moreover, autocratic states collaborate to promote autocracy around the world through measures that help to undermine popular mobilization and strengthen autocratic regimes in other countries (Tansey 2016; Kästner 2019; Cottiero and Schneider 2024).

Third, states are attracted to cooperation with other states sharing the same regime type as a reflection of *collective identities*. This argument builds on constructivist theorizing about the role of collective identities in the formation of security communities (Wendt 1999; Adler and Barnett 1998; Risse-Kappen 1995). Collective identities borne out of normative commitments to shared governance norms lead states to form communities with other states of the same regime type. However, collective identities do not only strengthen the bonds among states within a given community, but also produce alienation toward states outside of this community, resulting in dynamics of "us" versus "them" between democracies and autocracies.

For democracies, collective identities lead to the formation of democratic communities based on shared normative commitments to democratic values and principles. According to Risse-Kappen (1995: 505), "[t]he democratic character of one's domestic structures…leads to a collective identification process among actors of democratic states defining the 'in-group.'" Such collective identities among democracies have been presented as a key explanation of the democratic peace (Doyle 1986; Russett 1993). Frequently invoked examples of democratic communities based on shared commitments to liberal ideals are the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). But the

formation of these democratic in-groups also produces autocratic out-groups, which typically are attributed more aggressive motives based on their weaker commitments to liberal ideals (Risse-Kappen 1995).

For autocracies, a similar process of collective identification leads to the formation of autocratic communities. While a more diverse group than democracies, autocracies recognize that they share basic governance principles centered around power concentration, political stability, and regime survival – next to a rejection of democracy, rights, and pluralism (Geddes et al. 2018). These shared values and principles set them apart from democracies and provide a normative foundation for cooperation on terms mutually acceptable to autocracies. Often mentioned examples of autocratic communities based on shared illiberal ideals are the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Gulf Cooperation Council, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Obydenkova and Libman 2019). Autocracies are also known to share collective identities with other autocracies having the same specific type of authoritarian rule. For instance, Peceny et al. (2002) argue that single-party regimes, sharing similar socialist values, regard themselves as part of the same community and are therefore less likely to fight each other.

In sum, there are institutional, political, and normative attractions for democracies and autocracies to choose cooperation with other states sharing the same regime type. Our theory integrates these considerations into a general expectation that states choose to take part in IOs with memberships more congruent with their own political regime. Since states' choices about IO memberships involve decisions both about joining organizations (Pevehouse et al. 2020) and about leaving organizations (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019), this general expectation translates into two testable hypotheses:

H1. States are more likely to join IOs with a regime composition that is more congruent with their own regime.

H2. States are more likely to leave IOs with a regime composition that is less congruent with their own regime.

Next to these general hypotheses, we also formulate two conditional hypotheses about the likelihood of observing regime sorting in different time periods and types of IOs. To start with, we expect the composition of the international system at different points in time to shape the likelihood of states choosing cooperation with other states of the same regime type. The key factors are the power distribution in the international system and the regime orientation of the major powers. When the international system is bipolar and the two major powers represent competing regime types, as was the case during the Cold War, the conditions for regime sorting are especially favorable. The two poles are likely to present competing alternatives for cooperation among states. In such a setting, the attractions of cooperating with like states are particularly strong, as are the disincentives for cooperating with states of the competing regime type (Risse-Kappen 1995).

In comparison, a unipolar system, such as the period shortly after the end of the Cold War (Ikenberry et al. 2011), and a multipolar system, such as the contemporary period, present less conducive conditions for regime sorting. The incentives to cooperate exclusively with states of the same regime type are likely weakest in a unipolar system. In such a setting, world politics is characterized less by dynamics of us versus them. For states sharing the same regime type as the hegemonic power, the question of cooperating with like or non-like states is no longer existential. For states of a different regime type than the hegemonic power, there may be few other alternatives than joining IOs dominated by states of the competing regime type. Dynamics

of us versus them are also likely to be weaker in a multipolar system characterized by several major powers of different regime type. At the same time, a multipolar system offers greater opportunities than a unipolar system for states to form multiple clusters of cooperation with variation in regime composition.

In addition, we expect the likelihood of states choosing IO cooperation with like regimes to be conditioned by an IO's level of formalization. We anticipate that regime sorting is particularly common in formal IOs compared to informal IOs. We derive this expectation from research theorizing constitutive differences between formal and informal IOs (Abbott and Snidal 2000; Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Pevehouse et al. 2020; Roger 2020). The main factor of interest is the hardness of commitments in formal IOs compared to informal IOs. Formal IOs are based on treaties through which states make binding commitments to cooperation. Usually, they also involve some level of delegation or centralization, allowing IOs to monitor states' compliance with their commitments. By contrast, informal IOs are non-binding in nature and do not provide for centralized monitoring of commitments.

We expect these differences to condition the prevalence of regime sorting in IOs. When commitments are harder, as in formal IOs, more is at stake. The attractions of cooperating with like states therefore become stronger. There is more to gain from cooperating with states with similar domestic institutional constraints. IOs will offer better mechanisms for defending and spreading states' preferred political systems. And IOs provide a more institutionalized environment for cultivating collective identities. In comparison, when commitments are softer, as in informal IOs, there is less to gain from cooperation with like states, resulting in weaker incentives for regime sorting.

These expectations translate into two additional hypotheses:

H3. The relationship hypothesized in H1 and H2 is stronger in time periods characterized by bipolarity compared to time periods characterized by unipolarity or multipolarity.

H4. The relationship hypothesized in H1 and H2 is stronger in formal IOs compared to informal IOs.

Research Design

We now proceed to evaluate whether regime-based clustering reflects an active process of sorting, or if it is a by-product of other similarities that happen to be shared by democracies or autocracies, such as security, economics, or geography.

To this end, we construct a dataset at the IO-state-year level using the combined COW-IGO and IIGO data for the time period 1925-2010. In contrast to the aggregate membership patterns we relied on to map the extent of regime-based clustering, this data structure allows us to gauge a state's relation with a particular IO in a particular year through a set of regression analyses. The data thereby enable us to establish whether active sorting explains states' clustering in IOs with states sharing the same regime type, or if the relationship is spurious.

We operate with two different dependent variables: *joining* and *leaving* an IO. *Joining* takes the value 1 in the year when a state joins a given IO, and the value 0 otherwise. The sample for analyses of states joining IOs includes all years when a state is not a member of a given IO, and the first year in which a state is a member of this IO. *Leaving* takes the value 1 in the year when a state leaves a given IO, and the value 0 otherwise. The sample for analyses of states leaving IOs includes all years when a state is a member of a given IO, and the first year in which a state is not a member of this IO.

Our sample of IO-state dyads varies between analyses of IO *joining* and IO *leaving*. The sample for IO *joining* is restricted to "relevant" IO-state dyads, i.e., those IO-state dyads in

which the state could realistically join the IO in question (cf. Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006, 154; Davis and Pratt 2023). We achieve this by only including IO-state dyads where the IO is a regional IO[4] and the state is located in the same region. For example, this means that the EU-Belarus dyad is included, but the African Union (AU)-Belarus dyad is not. By restricting the sample to relevant dyads, we avoid artificially low coefficients in our analyses. For IO *leaving*, we operate with the full sample of IO-member state dyads.

Our main estimate of interest is an interaction effect between two independent variables: the regime type of individual states and the regime composition in an IO's membership. Both variables are based on the Regimes of the World variable (Lührmann et al. 2018), and we give democracies (electoral or liberal) a value of 1 and autocracies (electoral or closed) a value of 0. The regime composition of an IO is then calculated as the share of an IO's membership that consists of democracies. In line with H1, we consider sorting to occur in *joining* when the coefficient on this interaction is positive, which indicates that the association between democratic (autocratic) membership and joining an IO is stronger for democracies (autocracies). Similarly, and in line with H2, we consider sorting to occur in *leaving* when the coefficient on the interaction is negative, which indicates that the association between democratic (autocratic) membership and leaving an IO is weaker for democracies (autocracies).

Our models also include a set of variables that control for potential time-varying confounders. First, we control for geopolitical alignment by including a variable measuring the share of IO members with which a state shares a defense alliance (Gibler 2009). Geopolitical alignment has been found to increase the probability that states are members of the same IO (Donno et al. 2015; Davis and Pratt 2023). Second, we control for trade dependence by including a measure of the share of a state's exports that go to members of a given IO (Barbieri

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[4] The operationalization of a regional IO is slightly different from in the descriptive analysis. In the regression analyses, a regional IO is an IO for which, *at any point during the studied time period*, more than 80 percent of the member states are located in one particular world region (Africa; Americas; Asia-Pacific; Europe). This is to avoid a situation in which a state's joining or leaving an IO causes the IO to enter or drop out of the sample.

et al. 2009). Trade relationships have been shown to increase states' shared IO memberships (Davis and Pratt 2023). Third, we follow Voeten (2021, 98-99) and control for regional patterns of IO membership by considering the proportion of an IO's members that are from the same region as the state in question.[5]

Our main models that take the following form:

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta_1 D_{it-1} + \beta_2 R_{jt-1} + \beta_3 D_{it-1} * R_{jt-1} + \beta_k \boldsymbol{X_{ijt-1}} + \gamma_{ij} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}$$

Where Y is a binary variable taking the value 1 if state i has joined (or left, depending on the model) IO j in year t, and 0 otherwise; D_{it-1} captures a state's status as a democracy in year t-1; R_{jt-1} captures the regime composition of IO j in year t-1; X_{ijt-1} is a vector of time-varying control variables; and γ_{ij} and δ_t represent IO-state and year fixed effects, respectively. By including these fixed effects, we control for all time-invariant confounding factors that are particular to a given IO-state combination, as well as all factors that are particular to a given year, for example, changes in the overall geopolitical landscape. The inclusion of IO-state fixed effects is a conservative estimation strategy, which implies that we capture the relationship between regime congruence and the decision to join or leave an IO *within* specific combinations of states and IOs over time. We cluster standard errors at the level of states, given the panel structure of our data (Cameron and Miller 2015).

We estimate our regressions as linear probability models (LPM), rather than using a logit estimation. The main reason for this decision is that the logit model would require the difference between IO-state dyads to be zero, whereas the linear model only requires that it is constant (Lechner 2011). A positive side-effect of estimating an LPM is that the coefficients are readily

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[5] Controls for alliances (v. 4.1) and trade relations (v. 4.0) are added using the *peacesciencer* package (Miller 2022).

interpretable as changes in the probability of joining or leaving an IO, which is a particularly

attractive feature considering the difficulty of interpreting interaction effects in non-linear

models (Ai and Norton 2003).

Results

Does an active sorting process explain regime-based clustering in IOs? Table 1 reports the

results of our regression models for states joining and leaving IOs.

Table 1 OLS regression of states joining and leaving IOs

	Joining				Leaving			
	Pooled OLS	FE, no controls	FE, controls only	FE, full model	Pooled OLS	FE, no controls	FE, controls only	FE, full model
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(Intercept)	0.0053**				0.0038**			
	(0.0009)				(0.0005)			
Democracy	-0.0022**	-0.0034**		-0.0034**	-0.0002	-0.0012		-0.0011
	(0.0008)	(0.0010)		(0.0010)	(0.0006)	(0.0008)		(0.0007)
Democratic membership	-0.0009	-0.0095**		-0.0102**	0.0024*	0.0048**		0.0047**
	(0.0008)	(0.0017)		(0.0017)	(0.0011)	(0.0017)		(0.0017)
Share of IO members with defense alliance	0.0025**		0.0109**	0.0101**	0.0000		-0.0002	0.0000
	(0.0009)		(0.0029)	(0.0026)	(0.0004)		(0.0013)	(0.0013)
Share of exports to IO members	0.0010		0.0003	0.0003	-0.0001		-0.0001	-0.0001
	(0.0006)		(0.0003)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)		(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Share of IO members from region	-0.0002		-0.0333**	-0.0364**	-0.0019**		0.0100**	0.0074**
	(0.0008)		(0.0091)	(0.0093)	(0.0004)		(0.0031)	(0.0024)
Democracy*Democratic membership	0.0099**	0.0120**		0.0115**	-0.0024	0.0003		0.0002
	(0.0017)	(0.0017)		(0.0016)	(0.0013)	(0.0018)		(0.0018)
Observations	240433	240433	240479	240433	489966	489966	506935	489966

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. FE indicates use of IO-state and year fixed effects. Models estimated in R using the *fixest* package (Bergé 2018), version 0.11.2.

The results support the hypothesis that states are more likely to join IOs with a regime composition that is more congruent with their own regime (*H1*). The coefficient for *Democracy*Democratic membership* is positive and significant at the 99 percent level (models 1, 2, and 4), which indicates that the association between democracy and joining an IO is stronger for IOs with a higher proportion of democratic members – or, conversely, that the association between autocracy and joining an IO is stronger for IOs with a higher proportion of autocratic members. This result stays almost equally strong after the introduction of control variables that capture key alternative explanations for why states join IOs (model 4).

The only alternative explanation that is significant and points in the expected direction in our main models is geopolitical alignment, which captures the presence of defense alliances between a state and IO members. In terms of substantive effects, the impacts of geopolitical alignment and regime sorting are comparable. A 0.1 increase in the proportion of IO members

with which a state shares an alliance is associated with a 0.1 percentage point increase in the probability that the state joins that IO. A 0.1 increase in the proportion of democratic members strengthens the relationship between democracy and joining an IO by a similar magnitude.

By contrast, we find no significant relationship between trade dependence and a state's decision to join an IO,[6] and a negative relationship between the share of IO members from the same region as the state in question and its decision to join an IO. However, the coefficient on the regional variable should not be interpreted as a full-fledged test of geographical clustering. Since our modelling strategy leads us to only focus on geographically relevant IO-state dyads, we already presume some level of geographic clustering in IO membership, and the regional variable in the regressions is intended to capture any remaining geographic effects. The negative coefficient on the regional variable therefore does not run counter to geographic clustering, as such. Instead, it is most likely the outcome of ceiling effects in the measure, as the variable cannot rise above 1 even if, e.g., additional states join an already regionally homogenous IO. Indeed, when we remove such fully homogenous IOs from the sample, the coefficient is positive, but not statistically significant.

The results do not support the hypothesis that states are more likely to *leave* IOs with a regime composition that is less congruent with their own regime (*H2*). The coefficient for *Democracy*Democratic membership* is not statistically significant in the models for *leaving*, which indicates that the association between the regime composition of an IO and a state's decision to leave that IO does not differ between democracies and autocracies. A potential explanation of the absence of such an association is that states select into IOs that they do not envisage leaving in the first place. We therefore observe fewer IO-state dyads that include states which would have a high propensity to leave an IO. This process is likely to attenuate the effect of regime composition, compared to a hypothetical situation in which states' initial membership

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[6] We will explore this further using alternative measures of trade dependence, as we suspect this finding to be driven in part by inaccuracies in the reporting of total exports and trade flows.

in IOs is randomly assigned. Our results thus suggest that states do not sort out of IOs based on the regime composition of the IO.

Figure 4 brings further nuance to the results in Table 1 by plotting the marginal effect of *democracy* across different levels of *democratic membership*. The left-hand panel shows that regime sorting into IOs is particularly prominent in IOs with a high proportion of democratic members. This situation is exemplified by Romania's 1993 membership in the Council of Europe and Guatemala's 2000 membership in the Rio Group, which both took place in the immediate wake of domestic democratic improvements in the countries. More precisely, our models suggest that a transition from autocracy to democracy is associated with a 0.8 percentage point increase in the probability that a state will join an IO in which all members are democracies. While this is a small increase in absolute terms, it is substantial compared to the impact of alternative explanations. For example, the proportion of IO members with which a state shares a defense alliance would have to increase by 73 percentage points to achieve a similar increase in the probability of joining this IO.

While regime sorting into IOs is more extensive in organizations with a high proportion of democratic members, it also occurs in IOs with a high proportion of autocracies (Figure 4, left-hand panel). Concretely, our results indicate that a transition from democracy to autocracy is associated with a 0.3 percentage point increase in the probability that a state will join an IO in which all members are autocracies. Whereas it is less common for a state to join a predominantly autocratic IO in the immediate wake of autocratization, this situation does occur, for example, when the Philippines joined the Association of Natural Rubber Producing Countries in 2009 after a period of democratic retrenchment. Furthermore, we note several instances where long-running autocratic regimes joined IOs with predominantly autocratic members, such as Tajikistan's membership in the Central Asian Economic Community in 1998 and Libya's membership in the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa in 2005.

The right-hand panel in Figure 4 reiterates the point that states do not sort out of IOs based on regime type. The marginal effect of democratization on states leaving IOs is negative and practically identical across IOs with different regime compositions.
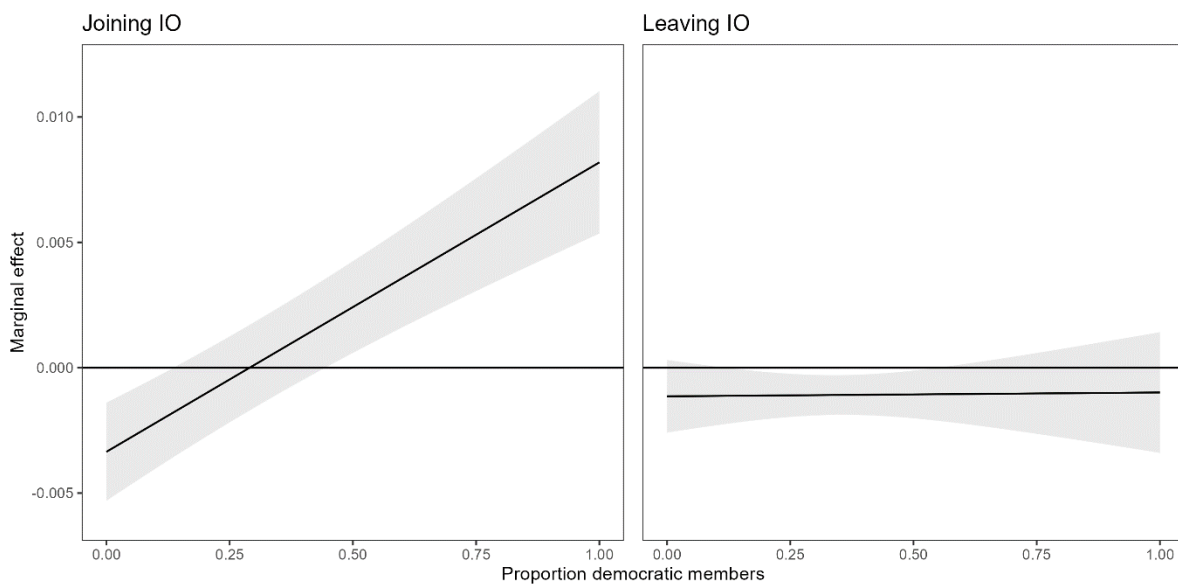

Figure 4. Marginal effect of a shift from autocracy to democracy on the probability of joining or leaving an IO, conditional on the IO's regime composition.

To explore the temporal patterns of sorting, Figure 5 distinguishes between the Cold War period and the post-Cold War period. We exclude the pre-Cold War period from the figure given the small amount of observations for that time span.[7] Beginning with *joining,* we observe regime sorting in both time periods, but note distinct differences between them. In line with our expectation, sorting was particularly prominent during the Cold War, as indicated by the steeper slope of the line for that period, whereas the post-Cold War period has witnessed less sorting.

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[7] See Table A1 and Figure A1 for results including the pre-Cold War period.

A transition from autocracy to democracy during the Cold War was associated with a 1.9 percentage point increase in the probability that a state would join an IO in which all members were democracies. For comparison, a similar transition after the Cold War was associated with a 0.8 percentage point increase in the probability that a state would join an all-democratic IO. This pattern is reflected among autocracies, too. An autocratic transition during the Cold War was associated with a 0.9 percentage point increase in the probability that a state would join an IO where all members were autocracies, while the corresponding number after the Cold War was 0.3 percentage points. These patterns suggest that states engaged in more regime sorting during the Cold War, when the international system was divided between two major powers with distinct regime types, whereas sorting has been more subdued in the post-Cold War period, when the international system has been characterized by unipolarity transitioning into multipolarity. In line with the results in our main models, there are no indications of regime sorting in states *leaving* IOs during either of the two time periods.
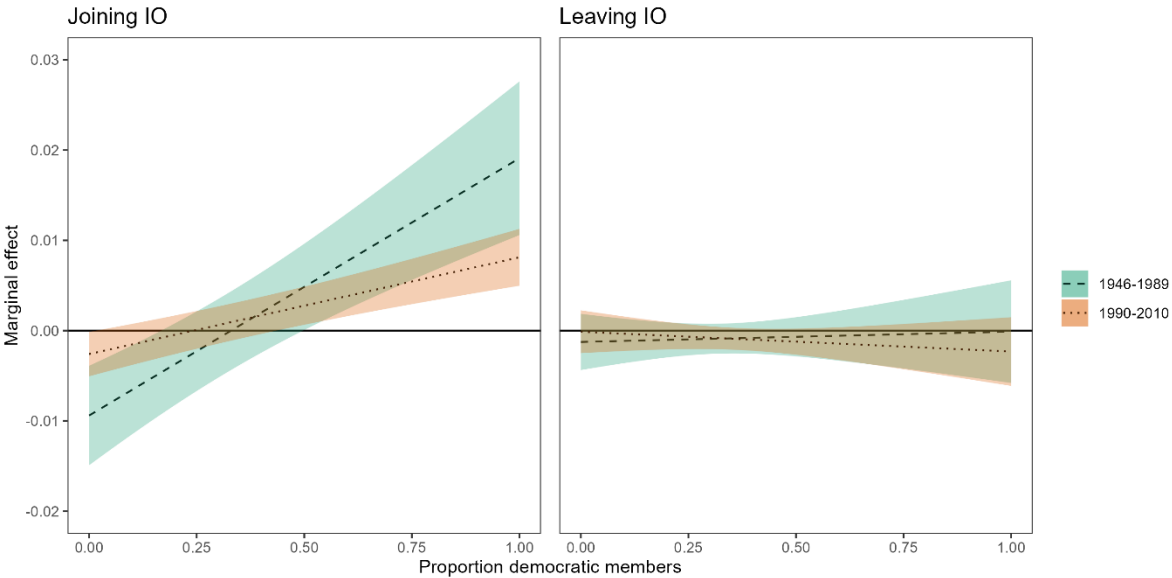

Figure 5. Marginal effect of a shift from autocracy to democracy on the probability of joining or leaving an IO, conditional on IO regime composition and across time periods.

Figure 6 disaggregates the patterns in our main models by distinguishing between sorting in formal and informal IOs.[8] For *joining*, the results suggest that regime sorting occurs in both types of IOs, but to a slightly greater extent in formal IOs, in line with our expectation. While the marginal effect of democratization on joining an IO is larger for informal IOs than formal IOs, irrespective of the IO's regime composition, the slope of the marginal effects line is steeper for formal IOs. This indicates that states are more sensitive to the regime composition of formal IOs than informal IOs when deciding whether to join the IO. Together, these findings indicate that sorting is particularly pronounced in formal IOs, although the same tendency can also be observed in informal IOs. For *leaving*, our results indicate, in line with our main models, that states appear not to sort out of IOs based on regime type.
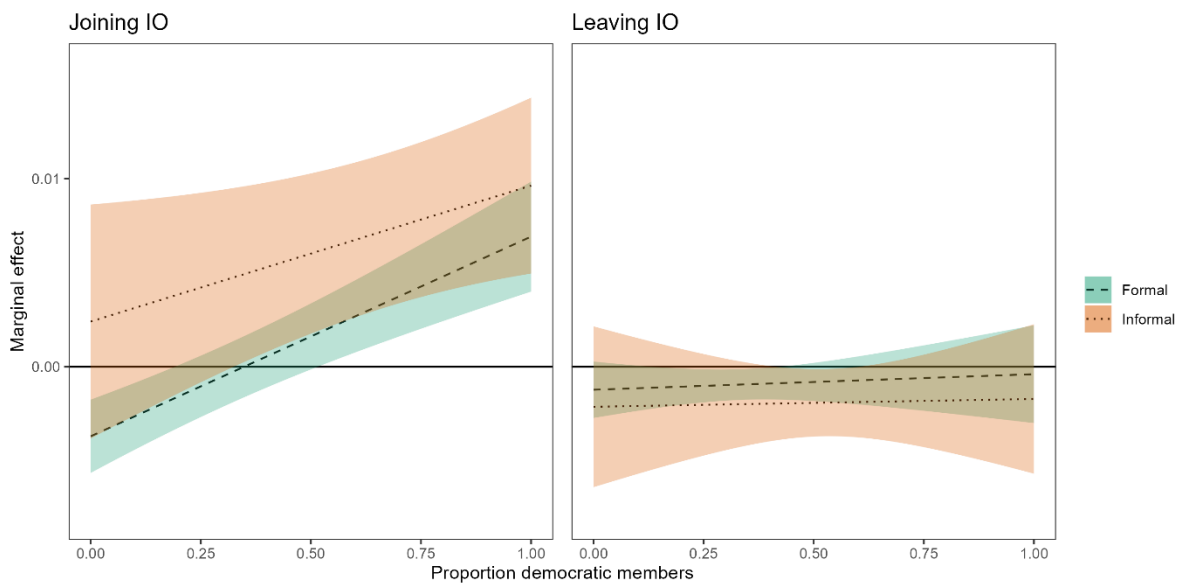

Figure 6. Marginal effect of a shift from autocracy to democracy on the probability of joining or leaving an IO, conditional on the IO's regime composition and across different types of IOs.

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[8] See Table A2 for the full models.

In sum, our regression analyses generate three principal results. First, states sort into IOs whose memberships share the same regime type. By contrast, states do not appear to sort out of IOs whose memberships are less congruent with their own regime type. This finding suggests that "clubs of autocrats" (cf. Debre 2022) and clubs of democrats are primarily the product of similar states joining the same IOs, rather than dissimilar states leaving those IOs. Second, regime sorting was particularly pronounced during the Cold War, suggesting that states are more likely to sort into regime clubs when the international system is characterized by two distinct poles representing two competing regime types. Third, sorting is more extensive in formal IOs than in informal IOs. While this difference is small, it suggests that states are more careful in selecting cooperation partners when cooperation requires deeper commitments.

Robustness checks

We estimate a set of alternative models to assess the robustness of the findings in our main model (Table A1). First, we test our decision to use an LPM by re-estimating our models using logit regression.[9] Our results remain robust to this change in estimation strategy. Second, we test our decision to model regime sorting with an interaction effect by instead calculating the absolute difference between states' regime type and IOs' regime composition. Our results remain robust to this change – the higher the similarity between the regime type of the state and the regime composition of the IO, the higher the probability that the state joins the IO. Furthermore, and in line with our main model, the results for leaving the IO are not statistically significant. Third, we test our decision to operate with a dichotomous indicator for regime type by re-estimating our models using V-Dem's electoral democracy index (Teorell et al. 2019) for both states' democracy level and the average level of democracy in an IO's membership. Our results are robust to this change in the operationalization of our key independent variables.

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[9] Due to convergence issues, the logistic regression for IO joining was estimated with a quadratic polynomial of year, instead of year fixed effects.

Furthermore, the marginal effects (Figure A1) of changes to a states' democracy level, conditional on the average democracy level in an IO's membership, reflect the patterns we see when using a dichotomous measure of democracy.

These robustness checks strengthen confidence in our main results. The finding that states sort into IOs whose regime composition is similar to that of the state in question remains robust when using both alternative modeling strategies and alternative operationalizations of the main independent variables.

Conclusions

To what extent do democracies and autocracies cluster in different IOs in world politics, and how can we explain such dynamics? This paper has offered the first comprehensive and systematic analysis of regime-based clustering in international cooperation. Combining data of unprecedented scope and novel theorizing on the attractions of cooperation among like states, we have sought to map and explain regime-based clustering in the full population of IOs between 1925 and 2010.

Our principal findings are two-fold. First, democracies and autocracies indeed tend to cluster in different IOs, but the extent of such clustering varies by regime type, over time, and across types of organizations. Regime-based clustering has become increasingly common with time, especially among democracies. Moreover, democracies more often cluster in informal IOs than autocratic states, which appear to prefer cooperation in formal IOs, contrary to common expectations. Unsurprisingly, clustering is also more pronounced in regional IOs than in organizations with broader geographical scope and sometimes universal membership.

Second, regime sorting appears to be a key driver of this pattern. Irrespective of other commonalities, such as geopolitical alignment, economic interdependence, or geographical proximity, states actively select into IOs whose existing membership shares their own regime

type. The strength of this explanation varies over time and across IO: regime sorting was more pronounced during the Cold War compared to the post-Cold War period and is more prominent in formal IOs than informal IOs. Moreover, results show that sorting mainly works through states joining IOs with like memberships, instead of states leaving IOs with non-like memberships.

This paper makes several broader contributions. First, it suggests that regime type is a more powerful explanation of state behavior and IO composition than previously recognized. While earlier research on clustering in international cooperation emphasizes economic interdependence, geopolitical alignment, and geographical proximity as explanations (Lupu 2016; Davis 2023; Börzel and Risse 2016), this paper instead shows how similarities in political systems matter. It thereby further expands the explanatory scope of regime-type accounts beyond known domains of application (for a recent overview, see Hyde and Saunders 2020).

Second, this paper suggests that research on regime type should pay just as much attention to cooperation among autocracies as it does to collaboration among democracies. Indeed, our results show that similarities in regime type constitute a powerful determinant of cooperation not just among democracies, but also among autocracies. Yet, as noted by several studies (Mattes and Rodríguez 2014; Debre 2022; Cottiero and Haggard 2023), research in this area has traditionally focused primarily on cooperation among democracies.

Third, this paper can help us understand the likely consequences of recent autocratization for the future of international cooperation. The past fifteen years have witnessed a significant expansion in the number of autocratizing countries in the world and a corresponding decline in the number of democratizing states (V-Dem Institute 2024). This development has had the direct effect of making IO memberships less democratic (Debre and Sommerer 2023). However, our findings suggest that these developments will also have dynamic effects on international

cooperation, as more autocratic IOs will tend to attract additional authoritarian members, further reinforcing the autocratic orientation of these organizations.

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Appendix

Table A1. Distinguishing between time periods

	Join			Leave		
	Pre-Cold War	**Cold War**	**Post-Cold War**	**Pre-Cold War**	**Cold War**	**Post-Cold War**
Democracy	-0.0219	-0.0094**	-0.0026*	-0.0067	-0.0013	-0.0001
	(0.0228)	(0.0028)	(0.0012)	(0.0043)	(0.0016)	(0.0012)
Democratic membership	-0.0402	-0.0019	-0.0103**	0.0140	0.0112*	0.0058
	(0.0300)	(0.0048)	(0.0021)	(0.0118)	(0.0045)	(0.0031)
Share of IO members with defense alliance	0.0425	0.0074	0.0186**	0.0033	-0.0034	0.0006
	(0.0356)	(0.0041)	(0.0057)	(0.0071)	(0.0034)	(0.0027)
Share of exports to IO members	-0.0016	0.0002**	0.0258**	-0.0009	-0.0001	-0.0004**
	(0.0041)	(0.0001)	(0.0065)	(0.0013)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)
Share of IO members from region	0.0935	-0.0211*	-0.0523**	0.0146	0.0129*	-0.0043
	(0.0752)	(0.0101)	(0.0184)	(0.0132)	(0.0052)	(0.0058)
Democracy*Democratic membership	0.0143	0.0285**	0.0107**	0.0121	0.0011	-0.0022
	(0.0265)	(0.0054)	(0.0019)	(0.0098)	(0.0041)	(0.0029)
Observations	4848	91112	144473	25331	205708	258927

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. Models estimated in R using the *fixest* package (Bergé 2018), version 0.11.2. All models include IO-state and year fixed effects.

Table A2. Distinguishing between formal and informal IOs

	Joining		Leaving	
	Formal IO	**Informal IO**	**Formal IO**	**Informal IO**
Democracy	-0.0037**	0.0024	-0.0012	-0.0021
	(0.0010)	(0.0032)	(0.0008)	(0.0022)
Democratic membership	-0.0101**	-0.0102**	0.0062**	-0.0034
	(0.0018)	(0.0034)	(0.0020)	(0.0033)
Share of IO members with defense alliance	0.0078**	0.0259**	-0.0001	-0.0014
	(0.0022)	(0.0063)	(0.0015)	(0.0045)
Share of exports to IO members	0.0002	0.0006	-0.0001	-0.0001
	(0.0002)	(0.0005)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Share of IO members from region	-0.0323**	-0.0586**	0.0082**	-0.0011
	(0.0098)	(0.0153)	(0.0027)	(0.0061)
Democracy*Democratic membership	0.0106**	0.0072*	0.0008	0.0004
	(0.0018)	(0.0035)	(0.0019)	(0.0038)
Observations	182324	58109	418398	71568

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. Models estimated in R using the *fixest* package (Bergé 2018), version 0.11.2. All models include IO-state and year fixed effects.

Table A3. Robustness checks.

	Logit		Regime difference		Continuous democracy	
	Join	Leave	Join	Leave	Join	Leave
Democracy (binary)	-2.0859*	-0.3022				
	(0.8523)	(0.4494)				
Democratic membership (proportion)	-4.6347**	2.4168**				
	(1.1696)	(0.7444)				
Share of IO members with defense alliance	2.1786*	0.3928	0.0100**	0.0004	0.0097**	0.0001
	(1.0445)	(0.5589)	(0.0026)	(0.0013)	(0.0023)	(0.0013)
Share of exports to IO members	0.1146**	-0.0195	0.0003	-0.0001	0.0003	-0.0001
	(0.0225)	(0.0132)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Share of IO members from region	0.4132	1.5323	-0.0353**	0.0076**	-0.0374**	0.0070**
	(4.2980)	(0.7958)	(0.0092)	(0.0025)	(0.0092)	(0.0024)
Year	-23.7162**					
	(4.2667)					
Year^2	0.0061**					
	(0.0011)					
Democratic membership (proportion)*Democracy (binary)	4.0651**	-0.2884				
	(1.1826)	(0.9413)				
Regime type difference			-0.0066**	-0.0003		
			(0.0010)	(0.0008)		
Democracy (continuous)					-0.0088**	-0.0075**
					(0.0031)	(0.0021)
Democratic membership (average)					-0.0322**	0.0054
					(0.0045)	(0.0033)
Democratic membership (average)* Democracy (continuous)					0.0340**	0.0101
					(0.0048)	(0.0052)
Observations	19959	33567	240433	489966	240433	489966

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. Models estimated in R using the *fixest* package (Bergé 2018), version 0.11.2. The "Logit, join" model includes IO-state fixed effects. All other models include IO-state and year fixed effects.
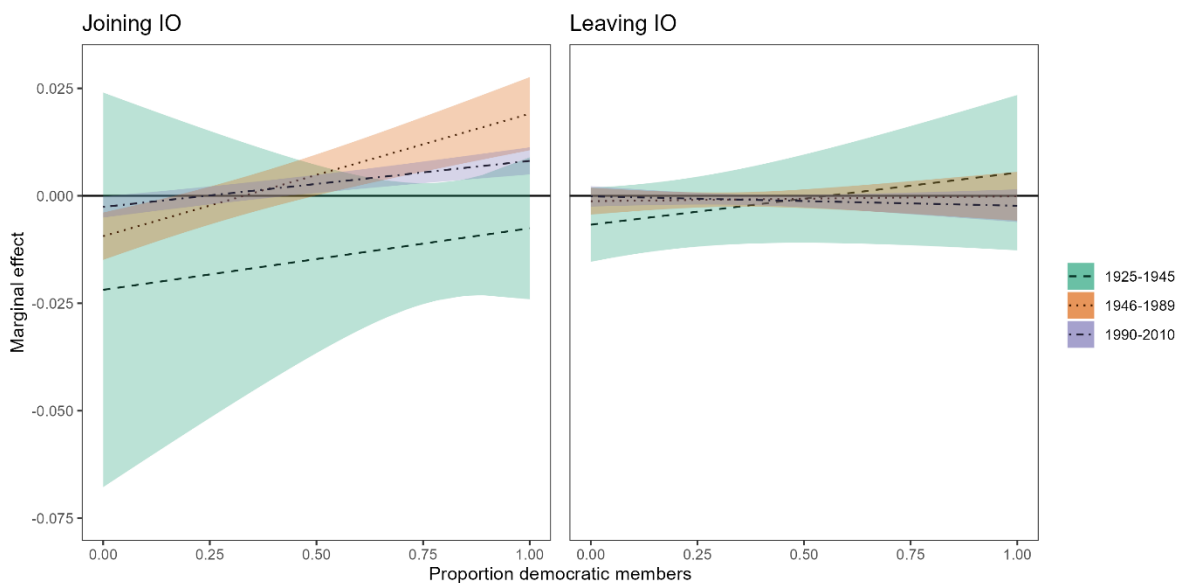

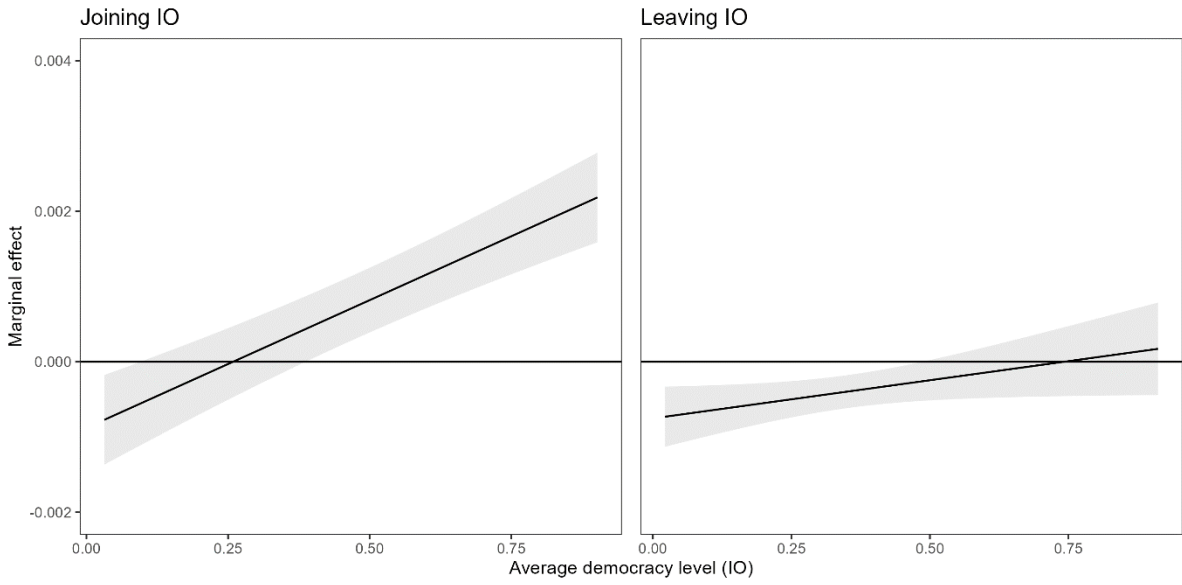*Figure A1. Replicates Figure 5 including all time periods.*

Figure A2. Marginal effect on the probability of joining or leaving an IO of a 0.1 increase in electoral democracy, conditional on the average level of democracy in IO membership.