



Contestation of International Organizations: Patterns, Sources, and Consequences

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Motivation

- International organizations appear to be increasingly contested. This has given rise to a burgeoning literature.
- **Contestation** = any dispute of issues of public interest that involves mobilization and calls for change
- Purpose of this paper: Take stock of progress by reviewing key findings and identifying critical areas for future inquiry.
 - What do we know about the contestation of IOs?
 - What are critical lacunae requiring greater attention?

The New York Times

Philippines Officially Leaves the International Criminal Court



Protesting extrajudicial killings in Manila in August. The International Criminal Court has been investigating whether President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines committed crimes against humanity in his drug crackdown.

by Jason Gutierrez

March 17, 2019



Trump triggers process to renegotiate NAFTA

U.S. TRADE Representative Robert Lighthizer, shown right in the drawing, is steering to renegotiate NAFTA, and Trump's administration is "seriously" considering the dangerous impact of a possible trade deal.

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Patterns of Contestation

Typology of IO contestation

Actors engaging in contestation:

- **State contestation:**
 - Political leaders and bureaucratic elites who represent the government of a state
- **Societal contestation:**
 - Broad variety of agents, from NGOs and social movements to private businesses, political parties, and ordinary citizens

Demands expressed through contestation:

- **Reform:** How should existing IOs be modified to meet concerns?
- **Replacement:** How should existing IOs be supplanted by new arrangements?
- **Rejection:** How should international cooperation as such be surrendered?

	Reform	Replace	Reject
State actors	<i>Criticism of institutional arrangements</i> <i>Criticism of substantive policies</i>	<i>Creation of competing multilateral organizations</i> <i>Shift to <u>minilateral</u> and bilateral options</i>	<i>Retreat to unilateral solutions</i> <i>Support for different world orders</i>
Societal actors	<i>Criticism of institutional arrangements</i> <i>Criticism of substantive policies</i>	<i>Demands for new international organizations</i> <i>Creation of private governance forms</i>	<i>Principled rejection of international cooperation</i> <i>Support for different world orders</i>

Contestation Over Time

Common narrative:

Contestation of IOs in its different forms is on the rise.

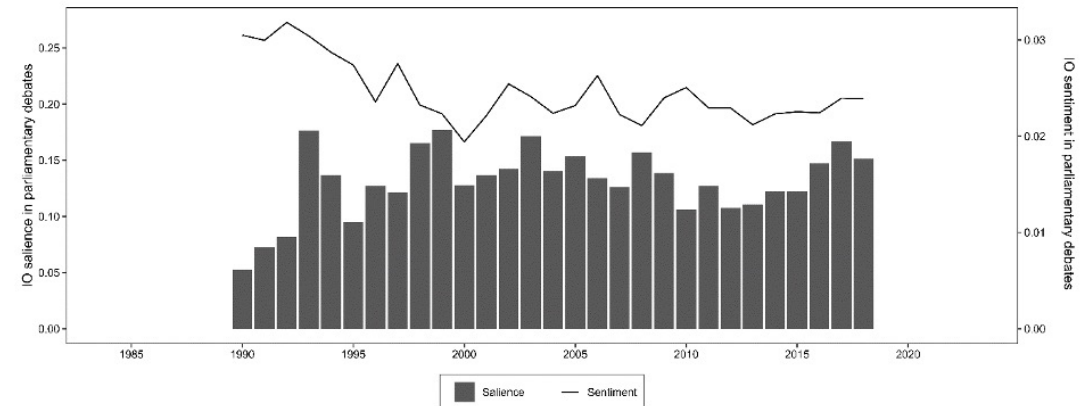
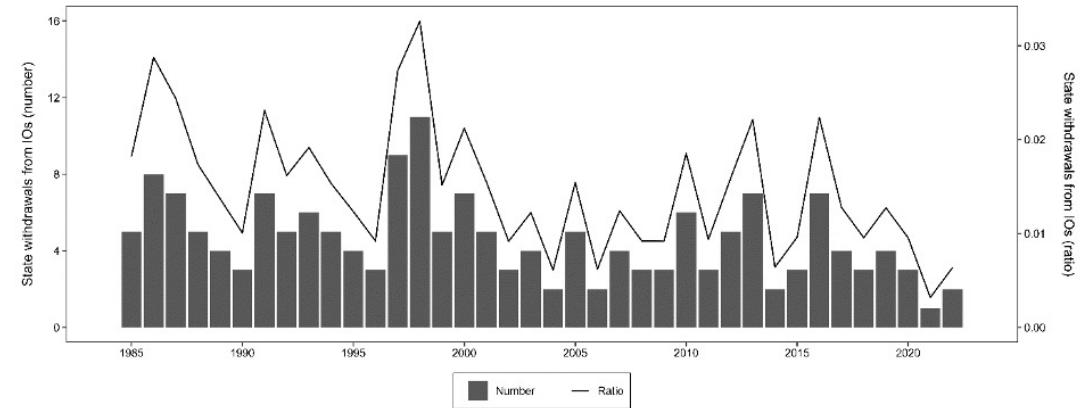
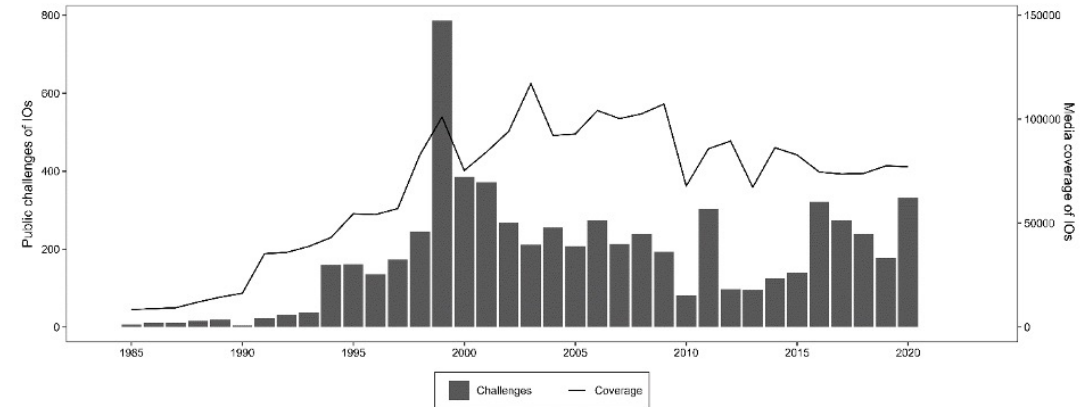
Empirical data:

Not really: Pattern is fairly stable over time

Three indicators:

- Public challenges as recorded by media (Sommerer et al. 2022)
- State withdrawals (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas forthcoming)
- Party discourse on IOs in parliament (Hunter and Walter 2024)

➤ Expectations Gap!





Drivers of Contestation

Systemic Drivers of IO Contestation

IO Authority

- Ineffectiveness and low problem-solving capacity of low-authority IOs leads to criticism
- High-authority IOs are contested by states and groups on the losing end of IOs' exercise of authority

Global power shifts

- By governments and societal actors in rising powers (reform or replacement demands) and resistance by those in established powers.
- But power shifts do not always lead to contestation (e.g. end of Cold War)

Structural transformations

- By promoting economic, political, and social globalization, IOs generate dynamics that can endogenously increase the contestation they face.

Domestic Drivers of IO Contestation

Democratization and Autocratization

- Democracy is on decline worldwide
- Growing contestation of IOs and liberal norms by autocratic and autocratizing countries, as well as societal actors supporting illiberal ideas

Political entrepreneurs opposed to IOs

- Rise of “second dimension politics” has led to rise of political entrepreneurs who contest global governance.
- Increasingly negative tone of societal debates about the merits and demerits of multilateral governance.

Norm and value conflicts

- Tensions and trade-offs between
 - universal principles and national perspectives/norms/values
 - sovereignty and substantial value concerns

Puzzle

Several of the drivers of contestation have strengthened in recent years, yet contestation does not appear to have experienced systematic growth.

➤ **Explanatory Gap!**





Consequences of Contestation



Short-term: IO Responses to Contestation

Communicative responses

- Self-legitimation and communication from supportive elites

Policy changes

- Change in substantive IO policies to better align with the preferences of state and societal constituencies.

Institutional reforms

- E.g. more access to NGOs, better transparency, creation of IPIs, voting reforms

Long-term: Outcomes of IO Contestation

For IOs themselves

- ▶ So far, no long-term decline in general societal support/ popular legitimacy for most IOs.
- ▶ Several cases where IO's centrality in its governance domain significantly decreased
- ▶ Overall, a high degree of stability in IO's legal powers and ability to act– but growth trajectory has stopped

For domestic politics

IO responses have

- ▶ Feedback effects on societal contestation: Strengthening or weakening of societal actors and political entrepreneurs that thrive on IO contestation.
- ▶ Effects of IO responses on democratic backsliding and autocratization.

For global governance

- ▶ Risk of institutional stagnation in global governance/IO development
- ▶ Especially problematic given that the number and severity of global problems grow.
- ▶ Growing ineffectiveness may, in turn, fuel further discontent and contestation if existing international institutions are seen as unfit to solve the world's pressing problems.

➤ **Knowledge gap** about the long-term consequences of IO contestation.

Conclusion

Patterns:

Contestation occurs through state and societal actors calling for reform, replacement, or rejection of IOs. Contrary to common assumptions, contestation does not appear to show a general rise over time.

- ▶ **Expectations Gap:** Why do expectations and findings diverge?

Drivers:

Contestation originates from multiple causes at both systemic and domestic levels. Most of these drivers have become more powerful over time.

- ▶ **Explanatory Gap:** How can we explain the absence of systematic growth in IO contestation?

Consequences:

Contestation leads to short-term responses in communication, policy, and institutions. But long-term effects remain understudied.

- **Knowledge Gap:** What are the long-term consequences for IOs, global governance, and domestic politics?



Elephant in the room:
What happens when the hegemon
contests the IOs it helped build?