

Credible Commitments?

Explaining IGO Suspensions to Sanction Political Backsliding

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Abstract: Much research asserts that a key role of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) is tying states' hands to domestic political standards. Yet after joining, many states still politically backslide and very few violator states are punished by having their membership suspended. Why do some political backsliders get suspended from IGOs that espouse democratic commitments whereas many others do not? We argue that geopolitics and institutional rules help explain why IGO member states suspend political backsliders unevenly. Remaining member states insulate geopolitically important states -- particularly those with large endowments of oil resources -- from suspension. Further, institutional factors such as voting rules and the size of the IGO create veto points that reduce suspensions. Using an original global dataset of IGO suspensions and charter commitments for 1980-2010, we find strong support for this argument. We test a key assumption of existing scholarship that claims IGOs serve as credible commitment devices for political reform and democratization. We show that once a state is an IGO member, it can often remain in the IGO even after violating its democratic commitments.

Since World War II, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) have suspended member states 95 times. For example, Mercosur suspended Venezuela in 2017 after Nicolas Maduro delayed elections, jailed opposition activists, and pressed to overhaul the constitution. The number of IGO suspensions, however, pales in comparison to the hundreds of state violations of organizations' mandates. In particular, many states get away with backsliding on their commitments to democracy and human rights even though a large number of IGOs have conditioned membership on these principles. Moreover, IGOs react differently to the same backsliding. For example, the Organization of American States (OAS) has failed to even pass a formal declaration condemning Venezuela's government for its handling of the political crisis.³

These contrasting examples present a puzzle: member states' political backsliding is common (occurring in around 19 states each year) and yet punishment in the form of IGO suspension is exceedingly rare (only 1 in 19 violators are suspended). This is surprising given that international relations scholars argue that IGOs help entrench domestic political standards via (the threat of) suspension. If organizations tie governments' hands via (the threat of) suspension, then why do some political backsliders get suspended from IGOs whereas others do not?

We are the first to systematically examine when and why states are suspended from IGOs and leverage original data on IGO suspensions and democratic charter commitments for 1980-

³ <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-oas/oas-nations-wind-up-empty-handed-on-venezuela-condemnation-idUSKBN19C308>> Accessed 8 November 2017.

2010.⁴ We focus on IGO suspensions due to political backsliding because they represent over half (51%) of IGO suspensions worldwide.⁵ We understand political backsliding as a coup d'état, serious election irregularities, or reversions in human rights or democracy.⁶ By focusing on violations in one particular issue area, we can better focus on common themes in member states' commitments and shortfalls to domestic political norms. In addition to theoretical clarity, our focus provides distinct empirical scope. This also allows us to address sample selection concerns that could arise if we only looked at suspensions that do occur and ignored cases in which suspension might have been considered but was ultimately not used.⁷

We argue that geopolitics and institutional rules often insulate violators from IGO suspension. Specifically, violator countries that are rich in oil resources are less likely to face

⁴ Magliveras 1999 reviews the legal side of suspension. Our dataset is an important contribution to better understanding the politics of how states are sanctioned in IGOs.

⁵ Coding decisions are explained in section 3 and the online appendix. Other violations that have led to IGO suspension include economic concerns/arrears (31%, e.g. Zimbabwe from the IMF in 2003), breaking an alliance (7%), government sponsored violence (5%), multi-faceted reasons (3%), and military intervention (3%, e.g. Russia from the Council of Europe when it annexed Crimea in 2014).

⁶ There are several reasons why IGO suspensions may be more frequent following domestic misbehavior. For example, trade or security violations may be better served by other mechanisms such as interstate mediation, negotiation, or arbitration that aim to keep states *in* the organization. Dispute settlement in the World Trade Organization (WTO) is one example (Rosendorff 2005).

⁷ This approach is similar to Nooruddin's (2002) analysis of sanctions.

punishment.⁸ Further, strict voting rules and membership size can create veto points that protect violators from suspension. Thus, countries protected by their geopolitical influence or institutional rules are more likely to politically backslide without being suspended. In other words, IGOs unevenly suspend countries for political backsliding *after* accession even if they can shape members' domestic political reforms *before* accession.

This paper advances research on credible commitments by testing one of its core assumptions (that violators get suspended), documenting that *ex post* punishment through suspension is uneven, and explaining variation in who gets punished. We focus on variation in the *ex post* costs states face when they “tie their hands” to democracy and human rights through IGOs whereas much of the existing empirical tests of credible commitments focus on *ex ante* costs imposed before accession (such as withholding membership). While we are not the first to qualify the credible commitment literature, we do so for a wide range of IGOs (54)⁹ and for the “ultimate” punishment of losing membership privileges. We provide compelling empirical evidence that IGOs are, at best, *weak* commitment devices. Our findings therefore align with recent work that argues “institutions rarely if ever have the capacity to fully commit all members to all of their commitments, all of the time. Instead, they operate as *weak commitment devices*, leading to enhanced but inconsistent cooperation.”¹⁰

The question of when IGOs suspend states for political backsliding is important for at least four more reasons. First, democratic backsliding, although by no means new, is happening

⁸ We use the term “oil” to refer to both oil and natural gas income.

⁹ Chapman and Chaudoin 2013; Kucik and Pelc 2016.

¹⁰ Martin 2017: 30; italics added.

in many parts of the world today.¹¹ Second, IGO suspensions matter, particularly as evidenced by policymakers' rhetoric. In the Venezuela case above, for example, at least twelve OAS member states argued that suspending Venezuela from the OAS would be an important step in branding Maduro as a pariah in his own region.¹² Third, this research contributes to a recent wave of scholarship that looks beyond IGO membership accession¹³ to also focus on what shapes exit, including IGO death¹⁴ and voluntary withdrawal.¹⁵ Last, we contribute to the scant literature on diplomatic sanctions by introducing IGO suspensions as a form of targeted multilateral diplomatic sanction.¹⁶ On this point, we emphasize that suspension is only one of several tools for rendering political backsliding costlier; we do not evaluate all sanction tools against each other.¹⁷ We focus on IGO suspension because it is a punishment tool that is possible at all IGOs.

¹¹ Bermeo 2016; Foa and Mounk 2016.

¹² < <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/andres-oppenheimer/article110560397.html>> Accessed 9 October 2017.

¹³ Pevehouse 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Poast and Urpelainen 2013, 2015.

¹⁴ Gray 2012.

¹⁵ Davis and Pratt 2016; Lipsky 2017.

¹⁶ Lektzian and Regan 2016; Maller 2011; Morgan, Bapat and Krustev 2014; Nooruddin 2002; von Soest and Wahman 2014.

¹⁷ The EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, for example, imposed enhanced monitoring on Romania and Bulgaria to make progress on judicial reform and corruption.

<<https://ec.europa.eu/info/effective-justice/rule-law/assistance-bulgaria-and-romania-under->

Moreover, the focus on suspensions contributes to theoretical work that examines the benefits and effects of joining an IGO: we examine the conditions under which IGOs (sometimes) take that membership status away. Before detailing our argument, research design, and results, the next section provides background information on IGO suspensions after political backsliding.

1. Theoretical Background

A large amount of research on intergovernmental organizations examines why states become members. Much of this research asserts that states can use IGO membership to credibly commit to domestic political standards like democratization and human rights norms.¹⁸ This happens in two ways, which are muddled in some studies, but as Fearon (1997) notes, are conceptually distinct: sinking costs *ex ante* (taking an action that generates costs before signing an agreement) and tying hands *ex post* (taking an action that increases the costs of later renegeing on an agreement). With regard to international institutions, Martin (2017) clarifies that IGOs act as costly signals by imposing *ex ante* costs on candidate states before accession and that IGOs can serve as commitment devices by generating *ex post* costs on states who tied their hands but then broke their promises after accession.¹⁹

[cvm/cooperation-and-verification-mechanism-bulgaria-and-romania_en](#)> Accessed 15 October 2017.

¹⁸ Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006, 2008; Pevehouse 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Poast and Urpelainen 2013.

¹⁹ Martin 2017: 353-355. For a recent overview of related empirical work, see Pevehouse and von Borzyskowski 2016: 7-8, 19, 26.

Despite the importance of the *ex post* mechanism for credible commitments, much of the empirical quantitative research on IGOs as credible commitment devices has focused on *ex ante* costs such as accession conditionality.²⁰ In practice, IGOs can lay out specific conditions a state must meet in order to be granted membership in the club. If a state fails to reform desired policies, then an IGO may withhold or delay accession. By imposing *ex ante* costs such as pushing behavior change as a condition of membership, the IGO can serve as a costly signal of the state's commitment to domestic political norms. For example, Pevehouse (2005: 37-40) argues that IGOs can serve as a credible signal when accession is costly enough that joining is clearly not cheap talk.

The other – and more long-term – way that states can use IGO membership to credibly commit to domestic political standards is through *ex post* costs: states tie their hands to standards and incur costly punishment if they deviate from these standards later. Pevehouse (2005: 37-40) argues that IGOs can serve as an “external commitment device through which [governments] can bind themselves to political liberalization” since reversing liberalization would generate punishment from the organization *ex post*. Furthermore, “if a regime were to undergo democratic breakdown, the benefits of membership could be suspended, including the state's membership in the organization.”²¹ Snidal and Thompson also emphasize how IGOs can make member states' commitments credible through *ex post* costs: “Formal IOs that have the power to expel or punish a state in response to violations of conditionality are the most effective vehicles for commitment,

²⁰ Kelley 2004; Pevehouse 2002a, 2002b; Schimmelfennig 2007.

²¹ Pevehouse 2005: 38-39.

since violating the commitment comes at a high cost.”²²

We examine the use of IGO suspensions to test the *ex post* logic of the credible commitment literature about hand-tying and punishment in case of deviations. Until now, much of the empirical quantitative research on IGOs as credible commitment devices has assumed the existence of *ex post* costs rather than assessing it. Suspension is the ultimate punishment that an IGO can impose on a state that has violated “fundamental norms of the organization.”²³ Suspension removes some or all of a violator state’s membership benefits including the ability to vote, attend meetings, or otherwise participate in IGO decisions. To be sure, suspension is not the only kind of punishment that IGOs can impose on violator states. As previously mentioned, some IGOs like the EU have a *menu* of punishment possibilities including withholding foreign aid²⁴ or imposing economic sanctions.²⁵ But for most IGOs, a broad menu of alternatives is not available as they have few other enforcement mechanisms at their disposal.²⁶ We therefore focus on suspension because it is available across all IGOs, because it is the opposite of membership accession, and because it is the building block of the credible commitment literature.

The credible commitment literature therefore has several implications for when we should expect to see states backsliding on their IGO commitments to democracy and human

²² Snidal and Thompson 2003: 223.

²³ Johnstone 2010: 235.

²⁴ Swedlund 2017.

²⁵ Donno 2010; Hufbauer and Oegg 2000; Nossal 1989.

²⁶ Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom 1996. See also Karreth and Tir 2012 on the role that an IGO’s institutionalization has on its ability to influence states.

rights, and also when we should see membership suspension from IGOs. First, the possibility of membership suspension should act as a deterrent to violations like political backsliding in the first place.²⁷ In other words, the threat of suspension should increase the *ex post* costs of violating the agreement—which should make violations like *political backsliding infrequent*. Snidal (1985: 938), for example, argues that the “threat of exclusion, if credible, may be an important device for ensuring that states behave cooperatively.... If such exclusion is possible, then states may accept the authority of the international regime rather than face exclusion.” While members may have a lower backsliding rate than non-members (we do not test this),²⁸ we document that myriad cases of political backsliding still occur after countries accede to IGOs, including the European Union²⁹ and NATO.³⁰ On average, about 19 of 187 countries worldwide politically backslide each year.

A related implication of IGO scholarship is that political backsliding *followed by suspension* should be “off the equilibrium path” behavior. Pevehouse (2002b: 522), for instance,

²⁸ Our statistical analysis takes IGO-level factors into account in order to assess the deterrent effect of IGO features (see results section and Appendix Table A3). However, it is beyond the scope of this project to test the deterrence hypothesis directly. Future research could employ a data structure and modeling approach that predicts how much backsliding there would have been without the possibility of suspension (i.e. comparing members and non-members of democratically committed IGOs).

²⁹ Kartal 2014; Sedelmeier 2014.

³⁰ Reiter 2001; Wallander 2002.

asserts that the threat of removal is one way IGOs are able to get states to toe the line: “IOs can apply pressure in a variety of ways ranging from overt de-legitimization of the regime by IO members through diplomatic pressure to direct economic sanctions against the regime or even expulsion³¹ from the organization.” In contrast to this implication, there are several dozen cases of suspension due to political backsliding. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of IGO suspensions due to political backsliding across a wide range of IGOs, including the Council of Europe, the African Union, and the Commonwealth.

Figure 1: IGO Suspensions across IGOs, 1980-2010
(some countries get suspended from multiple IGOs for same violation)

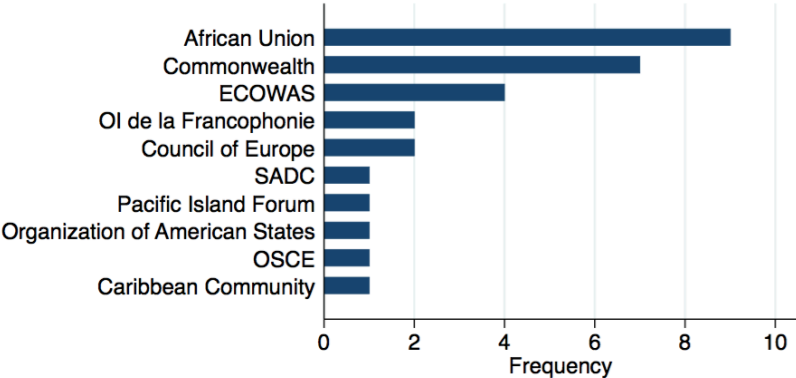


Figure 1 also reveals another important finding: some of the IGOs considered highly committed to democracy based on their charters (e.g. the European Union) have never enforced their democratic commitments by suspending members even though several members have

³¹ We analyze suspensions as a distinct category from expulsion and withdrawal (voluntary unilateral exit). We exclude expulsion because that is theoretically different (intended to be permanent) and has only happened a handful of times since 1945. In contrast, suspension is intended to be temporary and reform state behavior.

backslid.³² On the other hand, organizations often considered less democratically committed (e.g. the African Union or ECOWAS) have regularly enforced their democratic commitments by suspending political backsliders.

Since we are interested in suspensions for political backsliding, we only look at IGOs that are supposed to play a role in upholding domestic political norms (though as the examples above show, there is a range in commitment).³³ That includes IGOs whose constitutive documents reference domestic political standards, such as “democracy,” “human rights,” or “rule of law.”³⁴ For example, IGOs like the Council of Europe (CoE) and Organization of American States (OAS) condition membership upon democracy whereas IGOs like the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization do not. Indeed, every suspension for political backsliding has come from this set of democratically committed IGOs, which further justifies our sample.

Figure 1 also shows that suspensions do not tend to occur in some of the largest IGOs, which might lead some to conclude that suspensions are not important. To the contrary, suspension from moderate-sized organizations can often be especially costly for states because it means losing status in a club – organizations neither too large (i.e. open to virtually everyone,

³² Hungary backslid with serious election irregularities in 1980, 1985, and 1994. (The most recent backsliding in Hungary was after 2010 and is thus not in this dataset). Hungary was a member of the UN and International Labor Organization, among other democratically committed IGOs. Moreover, in 1994 Hungary was part of the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

³³ Pevehouse 2002a.

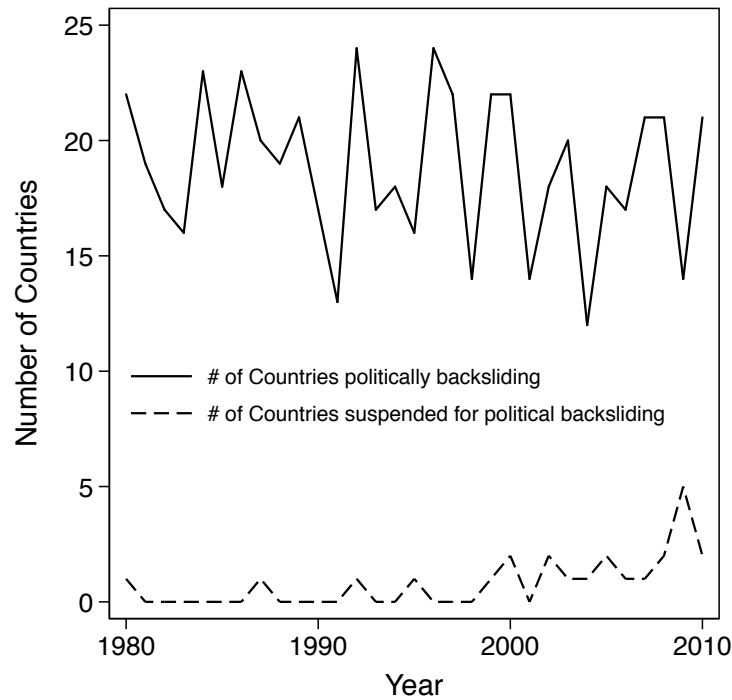
³⁴ For more details on the coding, see the online appendix.

where small countries can get “lost” in large summit meetings) nor too small to matter. Moderate-sized organizations might convey a sense of exclusivity and important opportunities for diplomacy. For example, veterans of the Commonwealth say “the mix of informality and royal glamour is a heady experience for the leaders of small countries who rarely tread the world stage.”³⁵ Thus, being suspended from regular summit meetings among high level officials can deny states both prestige and political access.

Figure 2 documents the rarity of suspensions: on average, only 1 in 19 political backsliders is punished with IGO membership suspension. That is, among countries that are members of at least one democratically-committed IGO, the rate of suspension for backsliding is quite low. This marks a large gap: countries’ political backsliding is widespread and fairly constant over time but IGOs suspend states unevenly. The fact that backsliding is not regularly met with suspension suggests a lack of *ex post* enforcement.

³⁵<<http://www.economist.com/node/10180893>> Accessed 18 November 2015.

Figure 2: Country Backsliding, 1980-2010



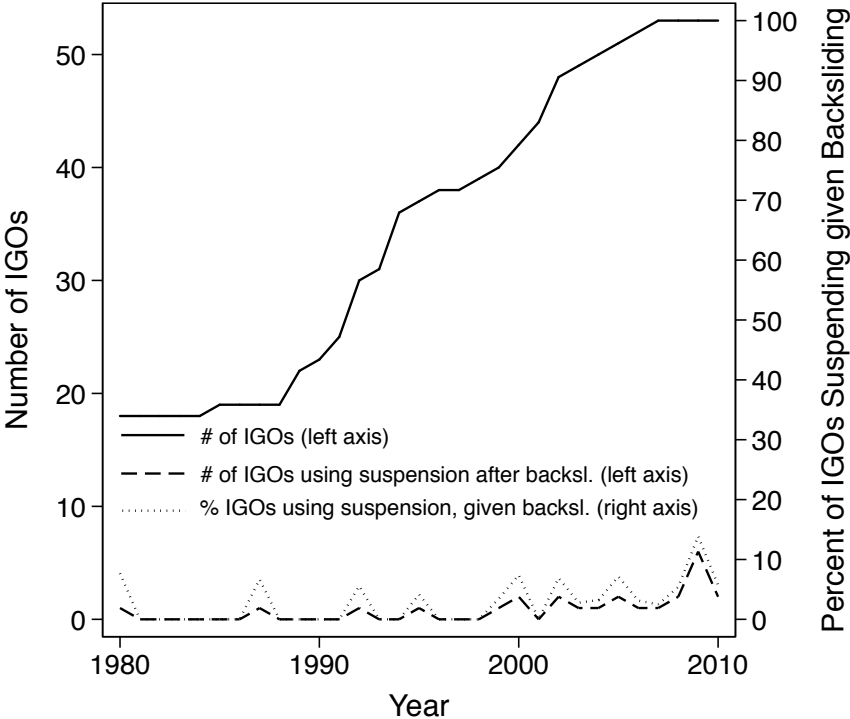
The relative rarity of suspension is also shown in Figure 3. First, note that the number of democratically committed IGOs rose from 18 in 1980 to 54 in 2010, as ever more organizations adopted democracy, human rights, and rule of law clauses in their treaties (solid line in Figure 3).³⁶ With the end of a bipolar international system and the rise of democracy promotion worldwide, new emphasis has been placed on IGOs including and enforcing these standards.³⁷ In line with the increase in committed organizations, IGO suspensions due to political backsliding have increased five-fold since 1990, as indicated by the dashed line in Figure 3 and detailed in

³⁶ This is 18 percent of 308 IGOs in the set of IGOs with active charters/websites in *Correlates of War*: 37 IGO charters refer to *democracy*, 40 to *human rights*, and 28 to *rule of law* (many charters mention more than one aspect).

³⁷ Magliveras and Naldi 2002: 424.

Appendix Table A1.³⁸ Despite this increase over time, the overall number and share of organizations which use suspension in the case of backsliding has remained low. For example, in the year 2010, of the 53 democratically committed organizations (solid line, left axis) only two organizations used suspension (dashed line, left axis). Put in context with backsliding, these were two organizations of the 35 organizations whose members backslid (i.e. about six percent, dotted line, right axis).

Figure 3: IGO Suspensions, 1980-2010



Note that the IGO (and remaining member states) can benefit from suspending violators. Suspension can help the IGO maintain its reputation for upholding standards: an IGO’s track

³⁸ While there are 48 cases of suspension in our dataset, Figure 3 displays the 29 cases that occur in this study’s temporal scope 1980-2010. Two suspensions happened before 1980 and several more after 2010, when data on control variables is not consistently available.

record of enforcing commitments can signal to other leaders who might consider violating IGO rules that renegeing will not be tolerated.³⁹ Further, by showing it will hold member states accountable, IGOs can enhance their legitimacy which is needed to maintain power.⁴⁰ Additionally, suspending a violator can push the violator state to change its behavior if it values its membership benefits. While we argue that IGO suspensions can be beneficial to remaining members, it is also important to acknowledge that remaining members may be reluctant to suspend a violator if it is costly for them because (a) suspension could establish a precedent that might be used against them in the future, (b) suspension requires substantial administrative resources and/or cuts off the mutual benefit of trade and security relations, or (c) suspension might exacerbate the backsliding if it resulted from capacity problems. Our central argument is that remaining member states have incentives to suspend violators only when the benefits outweigh the costs. In our empirical analysis, we account for these costs with measures for violators' economic weight, military ties, and the IO's average democracy level.

Suspension can also be politically and materially costly for the *violator*. For example, the African Union's (AU) suspension of Egypt after President Morsi's ouster in a military coup in 2013, was costly for Egypt. It lost its seat in the AU's Peace and Security Council which it had previously used to influence policy over (South) Sudan and over the Nile waters. Furthermore, it could not be elected into a policy-making position in the AU or participate in the U.S.-Africa summit until constitutional order was restored. As a result of the suspension, "its influence on

³⁹ Drezner 2007: 203-4.

⁴⁰ Barnett and Finnemore 2004.

African affairs [was] greatly reduced.”⁴¹ Hence, suspended members can lose foreign policy influence, reputation, and risk spillover punishment from other international actors.

In other words, suspension can benefit the membership at large by demonstrating that the IGO will *truly* “tie the hands” of its members. Yet, these benefits to IGOs and costs to violators do not always push IGOs to suspend, even after they have invoked other, more lenient punishment mechanisms first. If IGOs enforce their standards unevenly, when are states’ commitments really credible? Are all states tying their hands by joining? And what explains when political backsliding actually leads to IGO suspension? We argue that geopolitical leverage and institutional rules help explain when states’ international commitments to domestic political standards are enforced through suspension. In the next section, we detail this argument.

2. Argument

What explains variation in IGO membership suspension after political backsliding? The IGO decision to suspend a member depends on the consent of remaining member states. This means that individual state preferences and actions heavily influence the final suspension decision and often prevent suspension. This is important to underscore: IGO member states – not bureaucrats – are the key actors who determine whether a violator should be suspended because they control the process of putting suspension motions on the agenda⁴² and announcing suspension decisions.⁴³ For IGO suspension, member states must meet, debate, and vote which

⁴¹ Essa 2013.

⁴² HR Watch 2013.

⁴³ Pareti 2013.

creates a high bar for the suspension decision.

We therefore argue that despite the incentives to punish IGO violators, suspension remains uneven due to two factors: the geopolitical leverage of the violator state and institutional rules. That is, the ease of suspension depends on how many of the remaining member states push for suspension, and whether those states can overcome the voting threshold. While the latter is a *de jure* institutional rule, violator states can lobby other states to influence their stated preference for suspension.

First, geopolitical relationships of the violator state are important in explaining variation in suspensions after political backsliding. A member state may be dismayed by a violator's political backsliding—and recognize the benefits of suspending the violator—but put greater value on keeping the state in the IGO to maintain its alliance relationship and access to resources. This logic aligns with a large body of work on how geopolitical power changes institutional outcomes. Other work has shown how geopolitically powerful states exert informal influence in the World Bank,⁴⁴ the IMF,⁴⁵ and the UN Security Council.⁴⁶ IGO suspension should be added to the list. In addition to this literature on the role of geopolitical power in IGOs, the sanctions literature also emphasizes that the decision to sanction is highly strategic.⁴⁷ When we think of IGO suspensions as multilateral diplomatic sanctioning tools, it stands to reason that this punishment tool is also highly strategic, with geopolitical factors playing a large role in

⁴⁴ Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland 2009; Kilby 2013.

⁴⁵ Dreher and Jensen 2007; Stone 2002, 2011.

⁴⁶ Kuziemko and Werker 2006; Voeten 2001.

⁴⁷ Donno 2010; Peksen and Peterson 2016; von Soest and Wahman 2015.

whether suspension occurs.

Prominent forms of geopolitical power potentially influencing suspension are alliance relationships, high endowments of natural resources such as oil, and economic weight. These military and economic factors are exemplary of the types of geopolitical connections that might insulate a violator state. One way to understand a violator's geopolitical importance is to look at its military alliance relationship with the IGO's regional power. When the violator has a strong regional ally in the IGO, then a sanction like an IGO suspension should be less likely.⁴⁸ The regional power can flex its diplomatic muscles, offer carrots and sticks to other members in place of suspension, and act as a veto player in formal votes (especially when the IGO operates under consensus voting rules). Anecdotally, several cases of IGOs not intervening despite a member state politically backsliding can be explained by the power of regional hegemons.⁴⁹ For example, since late 2015, Poland has increasingly restricted its constitutional court and news media, which undermines democracy and free speech. Yet the European Union (EU) has not suspended Poland for violating these political standards even though its charter outlines this possibility. Poland's NATO alliance with Germany may play a role in protecting its EU membership. This logic could also work in the reverse direction: IGO suspension may be *more* likely when the violator has a *hostile* relationship with the regional power. Indeed, the U.S. strongly pushed for the OAS suspension of Cuba in 1962 at the height of the Cold War.

A second form of geopolitical power is the violator's level of oil resources. When remaining member states value oil imports, imposing sanctions such as IGO suspension on oil

⁴⁸ Drury, James and Peksen 2014 make a similar argument for bilateral economic sanctions.

⁴⁹ Van der Vleuten and Hoffman 2010.

exporters can be potentially costly for senders.⁵⁰ We therefore argue that an abundance of oil might also insulate violators from IGO suspension. This is in line with theories of petro-politics,⁵¹ the resource curse, and the finding that oil rich states are less likely to engage in institutionalized cooperation.⁵² Here, Venezuela's 2017 escape of suspension from the OAS in 2016-17 is instructive. Many Caribbean nations were reluctant to vote against the Maduro government because they have received the benefits of large oil subsidies from the Caracas government for many years.⁵³

A third form of power is the violator's economic strength and standing in the global economy.⁵⁴ IGO members may be reluctant to target richer countries with suspensions because large economies are more geopolitically important and therefore costlier both in terms of potential backlash and costs needed to change behavior. Turkey's economic strength and standing in the global economy, for example, may partly explain why it has not been suspended from NATO despite democratic reversion under Erdogan's increasingly autocratic rule (and its coups in previous decades).⁵⁵ This is despite the fact that academics and practitioners alike

⁵⁰ von Soest and Wahman 2015.

⁵¹ Ross 1999; Colgan 2013.

⁵² Ross and Voeten 2016.

⁵³ <<http://www.dw.com/en/venezuela-pushes-back-against-oas-suspension-warnings/a-38150709>>. Accessed 9 October 2017.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/17/opinion/democracy-loses-in-turkey.html?_r=0>

Accessed 27 April 2017.

emphasize that suspension for political backsliding is a tool that can be used in NATO: “[NATO] membership can be used as a stick to spur democratization: Any new member that reverts to authoritarian rule would be ejected from the alliance.”⁵⁶ In practice, however, it appears that “NATO operates like a soccer team that holds tryouts to select players but then can never cut delinquent ones from the roster if they break training and lose their skills and conditioning.”⁵⁷

Together, this leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: IGO suspension is less likely when the violator is geopolitically important to the regional power or to remaining member states.

In addition to geopolitics, member states’ suspension decisions are likely influenced by institutional rules, such as voting rules and size. A key institutional feature for the voting process are preference aggregation mechanisms within the IGO. Two aggregation mechanisms should make member states more able to suspend: less strict voting rules and a moderate group size. Getting a suspension vote (or any vote for that matter) is easier when voting rules specify lower thresholds to invoke a suspension. Even after states have mobilized, set the agenda, and attended discussion meetings, a formal vote might fail to reach a minimum threshold.⁵⁸ We therefore expect IGOs with majority rules to be better able to suspend violators than those with stricter voting rules, such as consensus minus one. An illustrative case is Caricom’s suspension of Haiti

⁵⁶ Reiter 2001: 52.

⁵⁷ Wallander 2002: 3.

⁵⁸ For more on voting, see Blake and Lockwood-Payton 2014.

following the deposition of democratically elected Aristide in 2004. Caricom's simple majority rule provided a low threshold for collective action. While IGOs that operate by supermajority rules—like the European Union—might be more conservative about admitting members in the first place, there are backsliders in these organizations as well,⁵⁹ so that suspension remains on the table, but is more difficult to impose under stricter voting rules.

Another institutional feature that can hinder group decisions (like suspension) is group size.⁶⁰ In IGOs with more members, more states need to mobilize to follow suspension procedures, so we expect that larger IGOs are less able to suspend violators. In larger IGOs, norms of universal membership often restrict states' abilities to get together and overcome collective action challenges to remove a miscreant. On the other end of the extreme, fairly small organizations (e.g. 3 states) risk dissolution of the IGO when a member is suspended. We thus expect a curvilinear relationship, where moderately sized organizations are more likely to suspend members than either fairly small or fairly large organizations. An example of this occurred in 2009, when all 33 members of the OAS—a moderately sized IGO—voted to suspend Honduras after the coup d'état that ousted President Manuel Zelaya. Honduras was not, however, suspended from other democratically committed IGOs which were smaller (e.g. the eight-member Central American Integration System) or larger IGOs such as the International Labor Organization.

A final institutional feature that might affect IGO suspensions is the presence of a

⁵⁹ Kartal 2014; Sedelmeier 2014.

⁶⁰ Olson 1965.

suspension-related clause in the IGO charter. The rational design literature⁶¹ suggests that IGOs that have included provisions about suspension in their charter are more likely to have had common preferences about how and when suspension should occur. Such a legal clause may make suspension more likely because member states can reference appropriate procedures against violators rather than having to rely on ad-hoc methods.

These considerations about institutional features such as voting rules, IGO size, and suspension clauses lead to the second hypothesis:

H2: IGO suspension after political backsliding is more likely with certain institutional features, such as lower IGO voting thresholds, moderately sized IGOs, or suspension clauses.

3. Research Design

3.1 Universe of Cases, Unit of Analysis, and Dependent Variable

In order to test our hypotheses, we undertake a statistical analysis of original data on IGO suspensions in response to political backsliding from 1980 to 2010 worldwide.⁶² Our unit of analysis is the IGO-member-state-year because we are interested in how the characteristics of IGOs and countries influence suspension. This unit of analysis is in line with other recent research on IGO membership dynamics.⁶³

⁶¹ Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001.

⁶² While we have suspension data back to 1945, the timeframe of our analysis is limited by the availability of covariates.

⁶³ Donno, Metzger, and Russett 2015; Poast and Urpelainen 2013.

Our universe of cases is *democratically committed* IGOs, and all the member years that they comprise. This measure of democratically committed IGOs is time-varying: IGOs⁶⁴ only enter the sample when their charters adopt text articulating that the institution is democratically committed. As mentioned above, this includes organizations whose constitutive documents reference domestic political standards, such as “democracy,” “human rights,” or “rule of law.”⁶⁵ These original data on democratically committed IGOs are an important empirical contribution, allowing further research on the role that IGOs play in pushing domestic political standards. Of course, committed IGOs vary in their *levels* of commitment to democratic standards, and we address this in the robustness section. All of our analyses focus on democratically committed organizations, and the follow-on tests distinguish IGOs whose charters include democratic standards as lip service versus central part of the IGO mission.

The dependent variable is *IGO suspension onset due to political backsliding*, coded 1 if IGO *i* suspended member state *m* in year *t*. We only code onset years as 1 because we are interested in what makes remaining member states suspend violators, not what accounts for the suspension’s duration. We exclude subsequent suspension years after the onset year. In follow-on analyses, we check robustness with two different codings of the DV; these results are highly similar.

To collect these original data on suspensions, we searched a prominent media database

⁶⁴ We source IGO data from the Correlates of War (COW-IGO) dataset, Pevehouse et al. 2004.

⁶⁵ For more details on the coding, see the online appendix.

(Factiva)⁶⁶ for each active IGO in the COW data. We used this database to search historical newspaper articles for key terms such as “suspen”, “exit”, and “eject” that would signal an IGO suspension had occurred. Every instance of IGO suspension was cross-checked by finding the newspaper article outside of Factiva as well as at least one supplementary article from a *different* media source.

We are confident that this procedure makes the resulting suspension dataset both consistent and comprehensive. Note that newspapers and IGOs do not have incentives to wrongly indicate that an IGO suspension occurred. In fact, the opposite holds: if IGOs are using suspensions to punish states, then they have incentives to publicize to enhance enforcement. To further mitigate the risk of media under-reporting suspension due to differences in language or media efforts, we also checked each organization’s website for information about membership suspension over time and followed up via email with each IGO.⁶⁷ We also note that if media are biased against publishing suspensions for small and moderately-sized IGOs because they do not deem the events newsworthy enough for publication, this biases against some of our findings (since we argue that moderately-sized IGOs are more likely to suspend), so that any effects we do find here are conservative estimates. Finally, we cross-checked our original data with state-

⁶⁶ Factiva aggregates content from over 32,000 licensed and free sources including newspapers, journals, magazines, television and radio transcripts from nearly every country worldwide in 28 languages.

⁶⁷ These data quality checks with IGOs did not turn up any other suspensions. Further coding details are provided in the online appendix.

year-IGO membership in the Correlates of War database.⁶⁸ While we did not find any instances of cases that we had missed, the COW dataset systematically underreports membership gaps due to suspension, which may challenge previous papers that rely on these data for IGO membership over time. These extensive coding efforts leave us confident that we have captured the full range of IGO suspensions due to political backsliding.

3.2 Independent Variables

To evaluate our hypothesis that IGO member states differentially suspend political backsliders depending on the violator's geopolitical importance, we include three variables: *allied*, *oil and gas income per capita*, and *GDP*. The variable *allied* is coded 1 when member state *m* had a defense or offense alliance with a regional leader or was itself the regional leader in year *t*, and 0 otherwise. Regional powers include Brazil, South Africa, Germany, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Australia, and the US.⁶⁹ We expect countries with powerful IGO friends to be better able to insulate themselves from suspensions. The same is true for countries which are regional powers themselves: they can rally states to refrain from punishing them by tying

⁶⁸ Pevehouse et al 2004.

⁶⁹ Alliance data is sourced from Leeds 2005 and extended for the years 2003-2010. The US is a cross-regional power. Regional powers are the largest GDP nation in commonly referred-to regions based on UN, Economist, and World Bank data. Note that defining *the one* "best" representative of the regional power is not as important as recognizing that regional power is influential. Results are robust to using alternative alliance data (COW formal alliances); see robustness section.

hegemonic “goodies” to their votes.

As a second measure of geopolitical importance, we include the violating state’s (logged) *oil and gas income per capita* in constant USD.⁷⁰ This proxies for the violator’s potential leverage with membership at large, rather than specifically toward the regional power. Similar to powerful alliance relationships, we expect that countries with large amounts of oil resources can leverage their geopolitical importance to protect themselves from suspension. Other resources besides oil can certainly proxy for geopolitical importance but given oil’s connection to institutionalized cooperation, conflict, and its universal demand, it serves as an excellent proxy for geopolitical leverage.⁷¹

As a third measure of geopolitical importance, we include (logged) *GDP* to proxy for the aggregate economic weight of the county.⁷² Again, we expect that richer countries have more leverage with other states, are more able to shield themselves from pressure, and are thus less likely to be suspended. For all three geopolitical variables we expect negative coefficients when predicting suspension: having geopolitical leverage should lower the risk of punishment.

To examine our second hypothesis that suspension decisions are affected by institutional features, we use three variables. First, the variable *Hard IGO suspension voting rule* accounts for the difficulty of voting thresholds for remaining member states. This variable is the voting rule that is specifically associated with suspension for IGO *i* in year *t*. It is coded 1 for onerous or high voting thresholds, which are consensus minus one; it is coded 0 for relatively easier voting

⁷⁰ Ross 2012.

⁷¹ Colgan 2013; Ross 1999; Ross and Voeten 2016.

⁷² World Bank World Development Indicators 2012.

thresholds, which include simple majority, qualified majority, and two-thirds majority rules.⁷³

We expect that IGOs with harder voting rules are less likely to suspend a political backslider.

As another measure of institutional constraints, we include *IGO size* which indicates the number of member states in each IGO-year, ranging from 3 to 189. As detailed above, we expect a curvilinear effect where large organizations find it more difficult to suspend violators and small organizations are reluctant to suspend members for fear of organizational survival, so that suspension might occur more in moderately sized IGOs. To test this curvilinear effect, we include a quadratic term, *IGO size squared*, alongside the constitutive term (the raw count of *IGO size*). We expect the squared term to be negative, indicating an inverted u-shape relationship between IGO size and the probability of suspension.

We also include a third variable reflecting institutional features, *IGO clause on suspension*. We draw on our original data to construct this binary variable. It is coded 1 when IGO *i* has a charter clause on suspension in the IGO charter in year *t* and 0 otherwise. In the group of “democratically committed” IGOs, 35 percent of organizations (19 of 54) have specific charter clauses mentioning the possibility of suspension. According to the rational design

⁷³ In some IGO charters, no voting rule is specified for suspension. In those cases, we attempted to reduce missing values in two ways. First, we searched IGO Rules of Procedure for voting rules, but this proved unworkable due to the lack of common structure of these documents across IGOs. Second, we filled missing values for suspension rules with general (i.e. not suspension-specific) IGO voting rules (Blake and Payton 2014), since general rules are likely consulted when suspension cases arise. Mirroring the coding of the variable, we code simple (majority and weighted) versus difficult (consensus minus one). Further coding details are in the appendix.

perspective, we expect a positive coefficient on this variable. In sum, except for *suspension clause*, we expect negative coefficients on the other five variables: IGOs with *hard voting rules*, *IGOs size squared*, and countries with geopolitical leverage (*allied*, *oil and gas income per capita*, *GDP*) should all be associated with a lower likelihood of suspension.

3.3 Control variables

We also include two control variables: *Member in more democratic IGO* and *post-Cold War*.⁷⁴ Previous research suggests that politically backsliding states may be more likely to get suspended if they are members in more democratic IGOs rather than less democratic IGOs. This is because IGOs made up of more democratic members should have greater incentives to punish violator states for political backsliding.⁷⁵ When the IGO has a higher concentration of democratic member states, it is also more likely that more members care about compliance with domestic political commitments in the IGO and are therefore more likely to work together to sanction an outlier state. The variable *member in more democratic IGO* captures the highest democratic density among all of a country's IGO memberships. Following prior research,⁷⁶ we average the regime score of each IGO that state *m* is a member of in year *t* (excluding the violator state), and then select the highest IGO score for each member state-year.

⁷⁴ In the robustness section, we include a range of other control variables, including the degree of backsliding to account for the severity of the violation and the level of commitment.

⁷⁵ Mansfield and Pevehouse 2008; Pevehouse 2002a.

⁷⁶ The calculation follows Pevehouse 2002a, 2002b and uses polity2 data (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2011).

We also include a dummy variable, *Post-Cold War*, which captures an increased willingness of IGOs to engage in democracy promotion and punish backsliding after 1990, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. We include a range of other control variables in the robustness checks.

3.4 Model

Just like other sanctions research, research on suspensions must include both instances of suspensions and instances in which suspensions might have been considered but were ultimately not used for strategic or other reasons.⁷⁷ This is a sample selection issue: we want to understand why some politically backsliding states are suspended while others are not. No state has been suspended for backsliding without backsliding happening in the first place. To account for the sample selection, we use sample selection models (Heckman probit).⁷⁸ Not controlling for sample selection would be a potential problem because it could lead to biased inferences. We therefore directly account for the process that “qualifies” a violator to be suspended by first establishing the set of political backsliding cases that might trigger suspension, and then assessing when suspension happens.⁷⁹ These sample selection models estimate the determinants of IGO suspension while accounting for the process that leads to political backsliding in the first

⁷⁷ Nooruddin 2002: 60.

⁷⁸ Heckman 1979; Nooruddin 2002. We use maximum likelihood estimates.

⁷⁹ Heckman 1979.

stage.⁸⁰ In other words, our models address which IGOs are more likely to suspend which states for political backsliding.

In addition to this theoretical justification, the empirical results (below) confirm that a two-stage sample selection model is appropriate. However, before proceeding with our explanation, it is worth noting that our results do not hinge on the Heckman probit model setup. We also use a range of alternative model specifications to test the robustness of the results. Instead of a two-stage model, we run a simple logit model and restrict the sample to those country-years experiencing backsliding; alternatively, we control for the probability of backsliding. We also run rare events logit models to account for the relative scarcity of suspension. Regardless of which model specification is used, the substantive interpretations are similar.

In the first stage of the Heckman model, we build on past research to model the likelihood of member state m in IGO i to politically backslide in year t . The dependent variable, *political backsliding*, is binary and intended to closely map provisions mentioned in democracy, human rights, and rule of law clauses in IGO charters. To capture this phenomenon, we include data on (1) reductions in human rights and (2) non-democratic events in the form of coups d'état, reductions in democracy scores, and serious election irregularities. *Backsliding* is a binary indicator coded 1 if any of the following apply: a 2-point or larger reduction in human rights or

⁸⁰ We do not model who gets into the IGO in the first place because our research question is: *given IGO membership*, what explains who gets suspended for the same kinds of behavior?

polity2 scores compared to the prior year,⁸¹ a successful coup d'état,⁸² or serious election irregularities (unacceptable election quality, major election problems, and government harassment of the opposition).⁸³ We regard a 2+ point reduction in human rights or polity2 indexes as large enough to eliminate measurement errors (which could occur due to one point fluctuations that might reasonably occur on a year-to-year basis) and small enough to capture real world events (where a 2-point drop has been enough to trigger discussions about institutional sanctions). Furthermore, the 2+ point reduction means that we are agnostic about where the country is on the democracy scale; if the country has gained membership to the IGO with certain

⁸¹ PTS data range from 1 to 5 (Gibney, Cornett, Wood, and Hashke 2013); polity2 data ranges from -10 to +10 (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2010).

⁸² Marshall and Marshall 2012, 1.

⁸³ We examine these different types of backsliding separately in the robustness checks. We use data on government harassment of opposition from Hyde and Marinov 2011, and data on unacceptable election quality or major election problems from Kelley 2010, 4-5. In the robustness section, we replicate the analysis with other forms of election manipulation from V-Dem; results are essentially identical. Serious election irregularities might seem like “minor” issues compared to coups or human rights violations but they are sufficient reason for suspension. For example, in Zimbabwe 2002 the government harassed the opposition during the election, and the election had poor quality and major problems. These serious election irregularities were sufficient reason for the Commonwealth to suspend Zimbabwe, as no coup, human rights violation, or polity2 regression took place.

domestic political characteristics, then IGOs should only punish it for falling backwards.⁸⁴ The variable *Backsliding* is coded 1 when one or more political regressions occurred, and zero otherwise. This *Backsliding* variable and its components are illustrated in Appendix Figure A1 which shows that of all country years (n=4,743), about 12 percent of country-years' experience *some* form of backsliding. Specifically, of all country-years, about 10 percent experience severe election irregularities, about 2 percent experience “aggregate” political backsliding, and about 1.5 percent experience human rights backsliding or coups.

To predict political backsliding in the first stage, we use a set of standard covariates identified in prior research:⁸⁵ *democracy* (polity2); *age of democracy* in years and *effective number of parties* (both logged);⁸⁶ member state *oil and gas income per capita* (logged and in constant USD);⁸⁷ *GDP per capita* (logged) and *GDP growth*, as well as *political system*.⁸⁸ All

⁸⁴ For example, the European Union began discussions in 2016 to trigger Article 7 and start suspension talks regarding Poland's retraction on rule of law.⁸⁴ These talks began even though Poland did not start as a 10 on the democracy scale, nor was it marked as an anocracy in Polity2. In other words, IGOs accept countries at different levels of democratization given cultural and historical conditions, but most are concerned about countries not reversing course. This underscores our emphasis on political backsliding rather than autocratization.

⁸⁵ Gasiorowski 1995; Goldstone et al. 2010.

⁸⁶ Keefer 2012.

⁸⁷ Ross 1999.

⁸⁸ Keefer 2012. This indicates presidential system vs. assembly-elected president vs. parliamentary system.

predictor variables are lagged by one year to mitigate endogeneity. Descriptive statistics for all variables are in Appendix Table A2. The robustness tests include a battery of further control variables (explained below), with the main results largely unaffected.

By first identifying countries that have politically backslid, we are then able to estimate the effect of geopolitical importance and institutional design features on the risk of suspension for backsliding countries. Several variables provide identification and satisfy the exclusion restriction in the Heckman probit model. For example, our first stage model includes the country's *political system* which research has shown affects a country's risk of political backsliding. We do not include this variable in the second stage because there is little theoretical reason this variable should also affect IGO suspension. That is, there is no reason to think that a country with a parliamentary versus a presidential system, for example, would be more likely to be suspended for political backsliding.

We also account for time dependence as recommended for binary time-series-cross-section analyses.⁸⁹ All models include cubic polynomials for time since the last suspension in the respective organization. We use robust standard errors clustered by IGO to account for the lack of independence of observations within IGOs.⁹⁰

4. Results

Table 1 presents the results. Columns 1-3 show tests of the geopolitics hypothesis,

⁸⁹ Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1997; Carter and Signorino 2010.

⁹⁰ Results are qualitatively similar if we use Jackknife standard errors instead to guard against influential cases driving the results; see robustness section.

columns 4-6 show tests of the institutional constraints hypothesis, and column 7 is a fully saturated model. Confirming the theoretical reasoning for a sample selection model, Wald tests of the correlation coefficient (i.e. the probability that $\rho=0$) are significant in model 7.⁹¹ This indicates that the error terms of the first and second stage equations are related, so that a two-stage model (as presented here) is needed. Since Wald tests of models 1-6 indicate that logit models are sufficient, the robustness section presents a number of follow-up analyses using “standard” models (logit estimations), yielding highly similar results. Results are also similar when using rare events models and sub-sample analyses as described below.

Overall, Table 1 provides strong empirical support for our argument about the importance of geopolitics and institutional constraints for explaining variation in suspension. The coefficient estimates are all in the hypothesized direction and statistically significant, with the exception of the in-significant *suspension clause*. The baseline probability of suspension given backsliding is low, less than 1 percent (0.5).

⁹¹ While the selection model allows the two equations to be linked, we do not have strong expectations about the sign of ρ . A positive ρ would indicate that unobservables are related positively to both equations. A negative ρ would indicate that unobservables are related positively to one equation but negatively to the other equation.

Table 1: Determinants of IGO Suspensions for Political Backsliding, 1980-2010

	Geopolitics			Institutional Design			Combined
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Stage 2: Suspension							
Allied with regional power	-0.316 (0.180)*						-0.698 (0.473)
Oil and gas income per capita		-0.043 (0.009)***					-0.030 (0.012)**
GDP			-0.139 (0.025)***				-0.032 (0.057)
IGO size				0.074 (0.036)**			0.063 (0.037)*
IGO size squared				-0.001 (0.000)**			-0.001 (0.000)*
Hard IGO voting rule					-0.689 (0.344)**		-0.729 (0.294)**
IGO clause on suspension						0.478 (0.345)	0.155 (0.222)
Post Cold War	0.425 (0.280)	0.455 (0.287)	0.381 (0.285)	0.366 (0.386)	0.719 (0.388)*	0.496 (0.298)*	0.055 (0.613)
More democratic IGO	0.114 (0.030)***	0.189 (0.039)***	0.187 (0.037)***	0.084 (0.044)*	0.108 (0.046)**	0.099 (0.032)***	0.212 (0.055)***
Stage 1: Political Backsliding							
Oil and gas income per capita	0.006 (0.002)***	0.006 (0.002)***	0.006 (0.002)***	0.006 (0.002)***	0.006 (0.003)**	0.006 (0.002)***	0.006 (0.003)**
GDP growth	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
GDP per capita	-0.168 (0.009)***	-0.169 (0.009)***	-0.168 (0.009)***	-0.168 (0.009)***	-0.159 (0.010)***	-0.168 (0.009)***	-0.159 (0.010)***
Democracy	-0.057 (0.002)***	-0.057 (0.002)***	-0.057 (0.002)***	-0.057 (0.002)***	-0.054 (0.003)***	-0.057 (0.002)***	-0.054 (0.003)***
Age of democracy	0.048 (0.006)***	0.049 (0.006)***	0.049 (0.006)***	0.049 (0.006)***	0.054 (0.012)***	0.049 (0.006)***	0.054 (0.012)***
Effective number of parties	0.121 (0.015)***	0.121 (0.015)***	0.121 (0.015)***	0.121 (0.015)***	0.138 (0.018)***	0.121 (0.015)***	0.138 (0.018)***
Political system	0.112 (0.010)***	0.112 (0.010)***	0.112 (0.010)***	0.112 (0.010)***	0.110 (0.016)***	0.112 (0.010)***	0.110 (0.016)***
Cubic polynomial of time	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	38074	38074	38074	38074	37096	38074	37096
AIC	23731.55	23721.60	23726.84	23692.38	19998.56	23723.65	19957.77
BIC	23868.31	23858.36	23863.59	23837.68	20134.90	23860.40	20145.24
Rho	0.258	-0.062	0.176	0.200	-0.133	0.247	-0.390
Pr(rho=0)	0.372	0.811	0.543	0.539	0.534	0.379	0.054

Note: Heckman probit models with robust standard errors clustered on IGO in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

All three geopolitical variables have negative and significant coefficients as hypothesized: having geopolitical clout can help isolate a violator against suspension pressures. The three geopolitical variables are significant individually in models 1-3 and jointly significant in model 7.⁹² Violators with more oil and gas income, more GDP, or alliances to the regional power are less likely to be suspended. Among the three measures, a country's oil and gas income tend to have the most robust effect across models, as it also survives in the "horse race" against other measures in model 7.

To evaluate the substantive effect of the statistically significant factors in Table 1, we calculate the predicted probability of suspension onset.⁹³ We also put the substantive effects in context by comparing the predicted risk to the baseline risk of suspension for backsliding. An increase in oil and gas resources per capita from the observed minimum to the maximum⁹⁴ is

⁹² The coefficients of *alliance* and *GDP* are significant when included individually (models 1-3) but not when included together and with all controls (model 7). To explore whether this is driven by reductions in sample size or changes in controls, we re-estimated Table 1 on the sample of model 7. Results are in Appendix Table A9. The change in the alliance coefficient is a function of sample size while the change in the GDP coefficient is a function of adding controls. Some of the individual significance but joint insignificance is also due to correlation, as GDP and oil correlate at $r=0.56$.

⁹³ We hold all variables constant at their means (continuous variables) or medians (categorical variables) of backsliding country-years. We use the margins command in Stata 14.

⁹⁴ For backsliding country-years, the observed value of (logged) oil and gas income per capita is a minimum of -9.2 (no oil, e.g. Guyana 1980) and a maximum of 9.9 (e.g. Libya 1980).

associated with a 0.24 percentage point reduction in suspension risk. Relative to the baseline risk of suspension in the backsliding sample, this halves the risk of suspension. A minimum-maximum increase in GDP⁹⁵ is associated with a 1.9 percentage point reduction in suspension risk, which is the equivalent of a threefold reduction in the baseline risk of suspension. Being allied with the regional power is associated with a reduction in suspension risk from 0.5 to 0.2, which is a 0.3 percentage point reduction in suspension risk. Relative to the baseline risk of suspension in the backsliding sample, oil and gas income can cut the risk of suspension by more than half. Taken together, this supports the argument that geopolitics influences membership suspension of a violator.

In addition to geopolitics, the IGO's institutional features also matter for the probability of suspension for political backsliding. All three institutional variables have coefficients in the hypothesized direction and are significant, with the exception of *suspension clause* (which is positive as predicted but insignificant). A review of cases confirms this finding: IGOs still suspend states for political backsliding when suspension has *not* been formally documented in the IGO charter. For example, the OSCE and the Pacific Island Forum suspended violator states without having legal suspension provisions in their charters. This contrasts with expectations from the rational design school and instead highlights the importance of informal governance⁹⁶ as well as how IGOs can expand beyond their original mandate.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ For backsliding country-years, the observed value of (logged) GDP is a minimum of 18.5 (e.g. Liberia in 1994) and a maximum of 27.5 (e.g. Russia in 1994).

⁹⁶ Stone 2002, 2011; Vabulas and Snidal 2013.

⁹⁷ Barnett and Finnemore 2004.

As hypothesized, more stringent voting rules create hurdles for suspension. The coefficient on *hard voting rules* is negative and significant. Violators in IGOs with consensus rules (rather than majority rules) have a 0.5 percentage point lower risk of suspension, which is the equivalent of cutting the baseline suspension risk to almost zero.

As another measure of institutional ability, *IGO size* can also pose a powerful impediment to suspension. The coefficient on the squared term is negative and highly significant. Organizations with moderately-sized membership (between 30 and 50 states) are about 2.6 percentage points more likely to suspend violators than very small or very large organizations. This is the equivalent of a fivefold increase from the baseline risk of suspension.

In the final model, we include all six measures to create a “horse race” between them. The results suggest that the most robust and influential variables are *oil*, *hard voting rule*, and *membership size*. Taken together, these results support our argument that both geopolitics and institutional rules help explain variation in suspension.

The control variables also point in the expected direction. Violators in more democratic organizations are significantly more likely to be suspended than violators in less democratic organizations. The positive post-Cold War variable indicates that suspensions have become more frequent since 1990, which is in line with Figure 2. However, this coefficient is not consistently statistically significant.

Table 1 also presents the first stage results of the sample selection – predicting backsliding itself. In line with previous research, we find that countries that are more democratic and more developed are significantly *less* likely to politically backslide whereas countries are *more* likely to regress politically when they strongly rely on oil and gas. We also assess whether certain IGO characteristics deter members from backsliding by replicating Table 1 and adding

five IGO-level characteristics to the first stage predicting backsliding: *IO democratic commitment strength*, *IO history of suspension*, *IO suspension clause*, *number of IO memberships*, and *more democratic IGO*. Results in Appendix Table A3 show that our main results are unaffected and that these organizational features do not deter backsliding. This potentially contrasts with implications of the credible commitment literature. However, note that we do not directly assess the larger deterrence argument of whether *being* a member influences backsliding risk.⁹⁸

5. Robustness

We conduct five sets of robustness checks on our main analyses: (1) re-coding the dependent variable; (2) changing the estimation to (rare event) logit; (3) restricting the sample to backsliding country-years and then to the post-Cold War period; (4) adding further control variables to account for additional alternative explanations; and (5) replacing several key measures with alternative data sources. We discuss these follow-on analyses below and include accompanying tables in the online appendix. The results are largely consistent and robust, with only minor changes in a few models.⁹⁹ The substantive interpretations are qualitatively similar.

First, we recoded the dependent variable to check whether results are driven by coding

⁹⁸ This would require a comparison between members and non-members (a different dataset) as well as taking into account that membership is likely strategic. We leave this to future research.

⁹⁹ The minor changes are mainly about two of the six independent variables which lose statistical significance in some of the models: *allied* (Tables A6, A10) and *voting rule* (Tables A6, A7, A8, A10, A12).

decisions. In the main analysis, all years after the initial imposition of the suspension are coded missing, since a currently suspended member cannot be suspended again. Alternatively, we code subsequent suspension years as 0 which biases against finding support for our hypotheses, as backsliding is ongoing but suspension is coded 0 in years after the imposition of punishment. The results are in Appendix Table A4. In Table A5, we change the dependent variable to include both threats¹⁰⁰ of suspension and actual implementation. This is important because threats might also affect the data generating process by deterring actual suspension. In both re-coding checks, the results are essentially identical.

Second, we take into account that suspensions are infrequent; they occur in less than 1 percent of observations, which raises the potential of biased estimates because influential cases could skew results or because our model is not well suited for rare events. To address these concerns, we replicate the analysis (Table 1) with jackknife estimations, and Appendix Table A6 shows that the main results are robust. We also replicate the analysis with rare events logit models¹⁰¹ and basic logit models for comparison. The (rare event) logit specifications are identical to the second stage in the main analysis (Table 1). We control for the probability of backsliding, using predicted probabilities generated with the identical model specification as in the first stage of Table 1. The results in Appendix Tables A7-A8 are substantively similar to the main results. The logit estimations also offer an alternative to the Heckman estimations as *rho* is small and in-significant in several models of Table 1.

¹⁰⁰ Note that while suspensions are public (and thus easy to document), threats are often implicit or behind closed doors, making data collection more prone to false negatives.

¹⁰¹ King and Zeng 2001.

Third, we re-run the main analysis (Table 1) on sub-samples. We restrict the sample to cases of political backsliding. This omits the first stage, so we switch from the two-stage selection model to logit models (with a much smaller, backsliding-only sample size). Again, the results are qualitatively similar (see Appendix Tables A10-A11).

We also check for heterogeneity across backsliding types (elections, polity, and coups) to account for the fact that suspension might be more likely for a particular kind of backsliding (Appendix Tables A12-A14). Results are again highly similar; however, in the case of coups, geopolitical variables all become in-significant. This may suggest that suspension discussions are malleable for election irregularities and polity regressions but not for coups. These findings support recent research showing that coups are a particularly strong trigger of democratic sanction because they are often blatant signals of democratic and human rights infringements.¹⁰² These results are also important because they show that IGOs punish states for slowly eroding democratic governance—now the typical form of democratic decline¹⁰³—and not just in cases of violent overthrow. Furthermore, we restrict our sample to the post-Cold War period (1990-2010) to see if any of the results are time sensitive. These results (Appendix Table A15) are essentially identical to the main results.

Fourth, we add further controls to the second stage predicting IGO suspensions. These

¹⁰² von Soest and Wahman 2015.

¹⁰³ Dobson 2012.

include the IGO's *strength* of democratic commitment,¹⁰⁴ whether the IGO is regional,¹⁰⁵ whether the IGO has a history of suspension, whether bilateral economic sanctions were imposed,¹⁰⁶ and the backsliding degree (the yearly negative point changes in the polity2 scale).¹⁰⁷ All should heighten the likelihood of suspension. The results (Appendix Table A16) are largely robust to including more control variables.¹⁰⁸ In another robustness check (Table A17), we replicate the main analysis and add indicators for *IGO issue area*,¹⁰⁹ as IGOs with some

¹⁰⁴ We code “weak” IGO commitment as 0 when the IGO’s constitutive documents only mention democracy, human rights, or rule of law as “lip service” in high-level, opening articles. We code “strong” IGO commitment as 1 when the IGO’s constitutive documents mention democracy, human rights, or rule of law as a deeper commitment to domestic political standards in articles beyond the introductory remarks.

¹⁰⁵ Donno 2013; Pevehouse 2005; Pevehouse 2002a. *Regional IGO* is coded 1 when all members of IGO *i* are from the same region, i.e. Africa, Asia, Americas, Europe, or Pacific in year *t*.

¹⁰⁶ Morgan, Bapat, and Kobayashi 2014. We include economic sanctions to account for an important alternative choice on the sanctions “menu.” The results and our reading of cases suggest that suspensions often accompany (and precede) economic sanctions.

¹⁰⁷ Arceneaux and Pion-Berlin 2007 show that IGOs defend democracy selectively based on the severity of the crisis.

¹⁰⁸ The significance on *allied* and *IGO size squared* is reduced but the coefficients still point in the hypothesized direction. The exception is *suspension clause*, whose coefficient becomes negative, probably due to increased multicollinearity.

¹⁰⁹ Data from Westerwinter 2017.

mandates may be more active in enforcing commitments. Results indicate that political organizations (the reference category which includes human rights organizations) are no different than security or “other” organizations (environmental, technical, health, and social affairs), but somewhat less likely to suspend than economic organizations (finance, trade and commerce, and development). More importantly, the main results are largely robust.¹¹⁰

Finally, we replace several key measures with alternative data sources: the *alliance* measure with data from the COW formal alliances project;¹¹¹ the backsliding human rights measure with new data accounting for changing standards of human rights;¹¹² and the backsliding election irregularities measure with V-Dem data on free and fair elections.¹¹³ The results (Appendix Tables A18-A20) are qualitatively similar to main results.¹¹⁴ All summary statistics for variables used in robustness tests are shown in Appendix Table A21.

6. Conclusion

Much research asserts that IGOs are credible commitment devices which help states “tie their hands” to democracy and human rights reforms. The possibility of IGO membership

¹¹⁰ *Oil* loses significance.

¹¹¹ Gibler 2009.

¹¹² Schnakenberg and Fariss 2014. Since yearly 1 or 2-point drops do not exist in these data, we use a yearly standard deviation change in the latent mean (0.15).

¹¹³ Coppedge et al. 2017.

¹¹⁴ *Allied* is not significant in Appendix Table A19. *Voting Rule* and *Size* are not significant in A20.

suspension has therefore been theorized as an important *ex post* cost that should dissuade member states from violating their commitments. We assess this central assumption in the credible commitment literature, looking at when IGOs enforce democratic norms and punish deviators *once states are members*. We examine the conditions under which IGOs suspend countries after political backsliding because this is the most common type of suspension. Contrary to the expectation that IGOs should tie states' hands to domestic political standard through *ex post* costs, we document that member states frequently violate their international commitments and that IGOs unevenly suspend those member states. This empirical record is surprising and presents a puzzle: why are some violators suspended but many others are not?

We argue that IGO suspensions following political backsliding are uneven due to geopolitical leverage and institutional rules that create veto points. Specifically, member states may benefit from suspending states that politically backslide because this can help reinforce norms of the IGO and deter likeminded states from acting similarly. But the individual costs of suspending geopolitically important states often outweigh these benefits. Instead, IGO member states often insulate geopolitically important states—those allied with the regional hegemon, those with large oil endowments or large economies—even when they violate domestic political standards to keep their access and ties in place. These findings are in line with burgeoning research that shows geopolitically important states are treated differently than other states within IGOs.¹¹⁵ In addition, institutional features—such as voting thresholds or institutional size—also affect remaining members' ability to suspend violators. Strong voting rules can create veto points that prevent remaining member states from accumulating sufficient power to act collectively.

¹¹⁵ Stone 2002, 2011.

Large groups may fail to act either due to the universal nature of the organization or the difficulty presented in getting a large, heterogeneous group of states to act.

This study is important because it is the first systematic analysis of IGO suspensions. We advance research on IGOs as credible commitment devices by testing the *ex post* enforcement of rules, while previous work has focused on *ex ante* costs of membership conditionality. We test our argument by using original data on IGO suspensions and IGO charter commitments globally for 1980-2010. We find strong support for our argument and provide compelling evidence that IGOs are, at best, *weak* commitment devices.¹¹⁶ Our findings are thus significant for research on international democracy promotion, targeted multilateral sanctions, IGO design, and IGO practices. To be sure, the possibility of forced exit can generate a credible commitment if suspensions do happen some of the time. But states (or their interest groups with time inconsistency problems) looking at the empirical record may have come to the same conclusion as us: that powerful states in clubs with restrictive voting rules can often get away with political backsliding and retain their IGO membership benefits nonetheless.

Second, we broaden work on democratic enforcement through IGOs to examine the strategies that member states use to punish a state that has veered off course—and when certain states might be protected from these punishments. Third, we expand work on targeted sanctions to include the topic of IGO suspensions as a multilateral diplomatic sanction, which has largely been ignored in prior work. Our study also corroborates extant findings in the sanctions literature emphasizing that strategic calculations underscore the decision to sanction. We add an important aspect: not only do geopolitically important states get added benefits within IGO operations, they can also be protected from punishment for egregious violations of group agreements. These

¹¹⁶ Also see Martin 2017.

findings provide a new nuance to the petropolitics literature and a new interpretation of the “resource curse:” the presence of large oil and gas income can be a curse to citizens of that country as well as the international community that may desire a commitment to democracy and human rights. Fourth, we extend institutional design research beyond the traditional features recognized in the literature to look at how provisions on domestic political standards in charters might affect later behavior.

This paper and the empirical contribution of suspension data open many opportunities for more work on IGO suspensions in the wake of political backsliding. Future research can examine the effectiveness of IGO suspensions after political backsliding which would contribute greatly to existing work on the effectiveness of sanctions.¹¹⁷ For example, scholars could explore whether suspended countries are more likely to change their behavior than countries that are not suspended for similar events. Moreover, future research could evaluate suspensions as part of the larger set of IGO punishment options.

We have shown that it is often difficult for IGOs to act as credible commitment devices to help countries uphold their domestic political standards *after* accession. A country’s geopolitical importance and the IGO’s institutional design can insulate member states from being suspended. These two factors explain how IGOs are weak commitment devices for maintaining domestic political standards.

¹¹⁷ See for example Nooruddin 2002.

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