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The Ambivalent Relationship between South America and the Liberal International Order: Regional Counter-institutionalization in the Fields of Migration and Election Monitoring

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Abstract
Under what conditions do South American states create regional institutions that consolidate or undermine the liberal international order (LIO)? To address this question, we compare two cases of contestation of the LIO through counter-institutionalization in the domains of migration and election monitoring, both of which are closely related to the LIO's core political principles. We argue that the variation in the effects of counter-institutionalization—LIO-consolidating in the case of migration and LIO-undermining in the case of election monitoring—results from the interaction of two explanatory factors: the source of dissatisfaction with the LIO's norms and institutions in a specific domain, and the preferences of the state that exercises regional leadership in support of counter-institutionalization. The article sheds light on the coexistence of liberal and illiberal tendencies in South America's regionalism and contributes to the debate on the determinants and effects of contestations of the LIO in the Global South.

Keywords: Liberal international order; regionalism; South America; contestation; counter-institutionalization

Introduction

In 2006, during the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), and amid debates about the legitimacy of Venezuela's electoral process, the Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs provocatively declared:

> [In this institution] it has been said that a government's democratic origin is not enough and that its democratic practices should be proved. Who is the judge that will decide whether a government's practices are democratic or not? Should it be the people who choose that government? Or should it be an external, foreign mechanism [...]? We are currently developing institutions that will make the people the protagonists [of these judgments] and will control democratic practices through participatory processes. (OAS 2009)

Six years later, South American countries created a regional election monitoring mechanism independent from the OAS that legitimized illiberal electoral practices in a region that had engaged in the protection of democracy since this returned in the 1980s. In 2010, former

Argentine president Cristina Kirchner delivered a powerful speech on migrants' rights during the second summit between the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. In her speech, which made the headlines in both Europe and Latin America, Kirchner affirmed:

> The discriminatory treatment that some countries, especially developed countries, give migrants is extremely worrying to me. They place immigrants as an enemy that should be separated [from the rest of the society] [. . .] I ask all the countries in the world to avoid discriminatory legislation against immigration. (El País 2010)

In the final declaration of the summit, Latin American and EU countries committed to promoting "effective enjoyment and protection of human rights for *all* migrants in both regions" (Council of the European Union 2010) (italics are ours). This was an unprecedented move for EU countries, which have traditionally promoted differentiated access to rights for regular and irregular migrants. It was a small victory for South American countries, yet one that points to their fight to consolidate liberal international norms in the area of migration.

   These quotes and the regional norms and institutions that stemmed from those debates reveal an ambivalent relationship between South America and the political component of the liberal international order (LIO).[1] South America has a long tradition of promoting liberal political principles (Long 2018; Long and Schulz 2022). Despite not being part of the Western core of liberal democracies, South American states actively engaged in the constitution of the United States-led LIO from its early stages,[2] advancing principles such as equal sovereignty, human rights, and international law (Long 2018). At the same time, South American states have contested[3] some features of the LIO. First, they have criticized the organized inequality and hypocrisy of the LIO's institutions, contesting the fact that those have not acted in line with the order's core liberal values (Thornton 2021; Zarakol 2017). Second, they have resisted the intrusiveness of international institutions, balancing their commitment to liberal political principles with considerations of respect for the norms of national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs (Tourinho 2021).

   Regionalism[4] provides a crucial level of analysis for untangling the relationship between South America and the LIO. South American states created regional institutions aimed at protecting human rights and democracy, consolidating liberal international norms at the regional level (Emmons 2022; Heine and Weiffen 2014). However, they have also used regionalism to deflect the intrusiveness of international institutions (Legler 2013; Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012), watering down liberal international norms to preserve national sovereignty. This resulted in an ambivalent relationship between South American regionalism and the LIO's political core. Under what conditions do South American states create regional institutions that consolidate or undermine the LIO?

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[1]The LIO can be defined as a set of rules, norms, and procedures that structure the actions of state and non-state actors with the aim of promoting international cooperation and transnational governance based on liberal values and principles (Ikenberry 2001). These values and principles have four main components: (i) the protection of individual rights and democracy, (ii) free market and economic mobility, (iii) the rule of law, and (iv) rules-based multilateralism (Lake et al. 2021). Far from being a monolithic entity, the LIO is composed of issue-specific suborders characterized by different levels of liberal embeddedness (i.e., to which degree the suborder promotes liberal norms and values) and legalization (i.e., how precise and binding are the suborder's rules) (Goddard et al. 2024).

[2]South American states achieved independence in the first half of the nineteenth century, a status that allowed them to engage with the United States-led LIO as sovereign states (Long 2018; Tourinho 2021).

[3]Following Wiener (2014), we define "contestation" as a social practice that entails the open questioning of specific norms and institutions.

[4]Regionalism can be defined as a state-led project aimed at pursuing cooperation through the creation of formal regional institutions composed of three or more states (Börzel and Risse 2016).

To understand the logic of the ambivalent relationship between South American regionalism and the LIO, we look at two processes of counter-institutionalization[5] in two areas closely related to the LIO's political core, namely, migration and election observation. In the field of migration, South American states created the South American Conference on Migration (SACM) to counter the restrictive, security-driven approach to migration promoted by the United States at the hemispheric level and, more broadly, by Western countries in global negotiations (Feddersen and Freier 2024). The SACM prompted the emergence of a liberal intra-regional migration regime and facilitated the adoption of shared regional positions in support of the liberalization of global migration governance (Feddersen and Freier 2024). In so doing, South American states consolidated liberal international norms in the field of migration, bringing them into line with the LIO's core political principles, the protection of individual rights in particular. In the electoral field, South American states created an incumbent-friendly regional monitoring mechanism, that is, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) Electoral Accompaniment Missions (UEAMs), which overlapped and competed with pre-existing liberal international institutions, the OAS in particular. The UEAMs were deployed in contested elections to which independent observation missions were not invited or refused to participate due to the restrictions imposed by hosting authorities (Planchuelo 2017). In so doing, South American states challenged the authority of the OAS and undermined the norm of international election observation, which is a key tool of the region's democracy protection regime.

Through the comparative analysis of regional institution-building in the two areas, we identify the determinants of counter-institutionalization with opposing effects on the LIO (*consolidating* versus *undermining*). The former refers to the creation of regional institutions that promote norms and policies that are more liberal than those promoted by pre-existing international institutions, contributing to realigning the LIO with its core principles.[6] The latter refers to the creation of regional institutions that promote norms and policies that are less liberal than those promoted by pre-existing international institutions, contributing to the erosion of the LIO's core principles. We argue that such variation results from the interaction of two explanatory factors: the *source of dissatisfaction* with the LIO in a specific domain; and the *preferences of the state that exercises leadership* in support of counter-institutionalization. When the inequality of the LIO's norms and institutions creates dissatisfaction among a group of states that includes a leading state with preferences in line with the LIO's political principles, the outcome will be counter-institutionalization with LIO-consolidating effects. The leading state will promote the creation of a regional institution to counter contested international norms and institutions and push forward more liberal alternatives. On the contrary, when the intrusiveness of the LIO's norms and institutions creates dissatisfaction among a group of states that includes a leading state with preferences opposed to the LIO's political principles, the outcome will be counter-institutionalization with LIO-undermining effects. The illiberal leader will promote the creation of a regional institution to challenge contested norms and institutions and push forward a less liberal alternative.

The article makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it uncovers the determinants of regional counter-institutionalization with opposing effects on the LIO in South America, enabling the coexistence of liberal and illiberal tendencies in regional policymaking. In so doing, the article reveals how South America's contestation of the LIO is selective and has both order-consistent and order-challenging effects.[7] Second, the article contributes to the debate on the determinants and effects of contestation directed at the LIO (Lake et al. 2021; Goddard et al. 2024). In particular, the article sheds light on the variation in the form and goals of contestation by

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[5]Counter-institutionalization is a strategy of contestation that entails the creation of new institutional settings that can compete with and/or replace existing institutions (Zürn 2018; see also Morse and Keohane 2014).

[6]Goddard et al. (2024, 5) use the concept of "liberal counter-institutionalization."

[7]On the concepts of *order-consistent* and *order-challenging* contestation see Goddard et al. (2024, 4–5).

complementing endogenous explanations related to the LIO's contested features with explanations centered on the agency of powerful states at the regional level. The article is structured as follows. The first section identifies the conditions that explain counter-institutionalization with opposing effects on the LIO. These are derived from the literature on the contestation of the LIO and from the scholarship on comparative regionalism. The second section explains the research design, as well as the methodology and data, and the third section presents the empirical findings. The conclusion interprets the findings and summarizes the article's contributions.

Determinants of The Relationship between Regionalism and The LIO in The Global South

Regions have been a key component of the LIO (Lake et al. 2021). However, the relationship between regionalism and liberal international norms and institutions varies significantly depending on the history and power structure of each region as well as on the policy domain in question (Coe and Nash 2023). In some cases, regionalism has functioned as a transmission belt for adopting and adapting a "liberal global script" (Börzel and van Hüllen 2015). In other cases, it has been used as a defensive tool to protect states from interference by external powers (Acharya 2016). The end of the Cold War led to the global expansion of liberal norms and institutions, resulting in the emergence of a *post-national* LIO characterized by more authoritative international institutions that openly engage in the pursuit of a liberal social purpose, placing liberal principles over national sovereignty (Börzel and Zürn 2021). This was accompanied by an intensification of regionalism across the globe (Börzel and Risse 2016). The relationship between regionalism and the post-national LIO became more tense, particularly in the Global South, due to two main trends: the growing intrusiveness of international norms and institutions and their persistent inequality.

Sources of Dissatisfaction with the LIO: Intrusiveness and Inequality

The literature has shown that some of the contemporary challenges faced by the LIO result from endogenous tensions within international norms and institutions, something that exacerbated the LIO's legitimation problems (Goddard et al. 2024; Lake et al. 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020). In the Global South, we can identify two main sources of dissatisfaction with the LIO: supranational intrusiveness and the inequality of international norms and institutions. Since the 1990s, the LIO's institutions have become more intrusive in the promotion of liberal political norms and principles, putting increasing pressure on national sovereignty and triggering a variety of contestation strategies by states. Particularly for illiberal regimes, supranational intrusiveness increased the propensity to contest the LIO (Börzel and Zürn 2021). The predominance of international jurisdiction over domestic orders (Tourinho 2021), together with an increase in the delegation of authority to supranational institutions (Börzel and Zürn 2021), led the LIO to clash with key principles of the Westphalian order: national sovereignty and non-intervention (Lawson and Zarakol 2023). Such tension has been particularly strong in the Global South, where postcolonial states have sought to defend their national sovereignty from external interference, particularly by Western powers (Acharya 2011; Tourinho 2021).

Regions of the Global South have responded to the LIO's intrusiveness in the post-Cold War era in different ways (see Coe 2019). South American states established a variety of regional mechanisms for protecting democracy and human rights (Heine and Weiffen 2014; Emmons 2022), aligning themselves with the global rise in the authority of international institutions engaged in the promotion of liberal principles. At the same time, they balanced their commitment to liberal political principles with strategic foreign policy considerations in relation to the protection of the norm of non-intervention (Closa and Palestini 2018; Feldmann et al. 2019). Since

the early 2000s, this normative tension has been exacerbated by the growing intrusiveness of the OAS institutions, particularly in the field of democracy protection (Coe 2019). Some South American states started to manifest their dissatisfaction with external interference by the OAS and invoked the establishment of alternative (regional) solutions to deal with the protection of democracy in a more autonomous way (Legler 2013). From this discussion, we derive the following condition leading to the contestation of the LIO through regional counter-institutionalization:

C1.1. *The intrusiveness of the LIO's norms and institutions generates discontent among a group of states in a region*

The literature identifies another source of dissatisfaction with the post-national LIO: the inequality of international norms and institutions (Goddard et al. 2024; Mukherjee 2024; Lawson and Zarakol 2023; Zürn 2018). States in the Global South have contested the LIO because they oppose the power asymmetries and double standards of international institutions controlled by Western powers (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). Global South states denounced the hypocrisy of international institutions that promote Western interests and produce institutionalized hierarchies and discriminatory policies that clash with the LIO's principles of universal equality and individual rights (Lavenex 2024; Zarakol 2017). In response to this tension, Global South states have pushed forward reforms aimed at making the LIO's norms and institutions more inclusive, seeking to rebalance the order's internal hierarchies and to hold Western powers accountable for their own promises (Zürn 2018; Goddard et al. 2024). In an effort to level the playing field and prevent the reinforcement of power asymmetries within international institutions, South American states have demanded parity of treatment and fair application of the LIO's principles among both states and individuals (Rodríguez and Thornton 2022). From this, we derive the following condition leading to regional counter-institutionalization:

C1.2. *The inequality of the LIO's norms and institutions generates discontent among a group of states in a region*

The Preferences of Regional Leaders

The literature on contestations of the LIO highlights the relevance of powerful states' preferences[8] in determining contestation strategies (Börzel and Zürn 2021). Based on their preferences vis-à-vis liberal norms and institutions, powerful contestants can pursue a variety of strategies, including *counter-institutionalization* (Zürn 2018). Regions have become a privileged arena for counter-institutionalization, particularly since the 1990s, when the LIO's intrusiveness accelerated (Kahler 2017; Zürn 2018). Powerful states that are dissatisfied with how an issue is being addressed by international institutions can push forward the creation of regional institutions to establish an alternative normative setting that suits their preferences better. Challengers can pursue two main goals through counter-institutionalization: they can try to replace contested institutions with a less liberal and less legalized regional alternative with the aim of undermining the LIO's norms and principles, or they can attempt to replace existing arrangements with more liberal alternatives that can better serve their liberal aspirations while consolidating the LIO in a given domain (Morse and Keohane 2014; Goddard et al. 2024).

Thus, a key determinant of the relationship between regionalism and the LIO is the preferences of the state that exercises leadership in support of counter-institutionalization. Leading states

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[8]State preferences can be defined as "an ordering among underlying substantive outcomes that may result from international political interaction" (Moravcsik 1997, 519).

exploit their material and immaterial (ideational and/or entrepreneurial) capacities in specific policy areas to generate followership in support of the creation of regional institutions that suit their preferences.[9] In so doing, regional leaders can shape the design of regional institutions to make them functional for the pursuit of their domestic and international goals (Pedersen 2002; Flemes and Nolte 2010). From an ideational liberal perspective,[10] regional leaders' international goals are shaped by domestic politics, inasmuch as state leaders seek to create an international environment conducive to realizing domestic interests and values. Scholars showed that illiberal regimes can engage in regional institution-building to secure regime survival and gain legitimacy at home and abroad (Kneuer et al. 2019; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Söderbaum et al. 2021). The literature identifies an emerging populist "script" of regional cooperation based on notions of collective sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and non-interference. By embedding regional cooperation in their political strategies, illiberal powers have been able to challenge the LIO and undermine liberal international norms at the regional level (Söderbaum et al. 2021). From this discussion, we derive the following condition leading to regional counter-institutionalization:

C2.1. *Among dissatisfied states, there is a state with leadership capacities and opposed to the LIO's core political principles*

However, leading states can also engage in counter-institutionalization to challenge the flawed practices of international institutions from the point of view of liberal principles, seeking to overcome existing institutional arrangements in favor of arrangements in line with the LIO's core principles (Goddard et al. 2024). Particularly in the Global South, leading states have fostered regional institution-building to counter the unequal nature and hypocritical policies of global institutions controlled by Western powers (Zürn 2018). South America is no exception. The governments of states like Argentina and Brazil used regionalism to contest power asymmetries within global institutions and unequal access to individual rights in an effort to re-align international norms and institutions with the LIO's political principles in fields such as migration (Acosta and Geddes 2014; Brumat and Freier 2021) and public health (Herrero and Tussie 2015; Riggirozzi 2015). Such foreign policy positions have been shaped by the preferences of domestic groups (state officials and practitioners, in particular) engaged in constructing a more equal international order and promoting a rights-based approach to transnational governance. From this scholarship, we derive the following condition leading to regional counter-institutionalization:

C2.2. *Among dissatisfied states, there is a state with leadership capacities and preferences in line with the LIO's core political principles*

The Causal Mechanism

We argue that the type of regional counter-institutionalization (LIO-consolidating or LIO-undermining) is determined by the interplay between two explanatory factors: the *source of dissatisfaction with the LIO*; and *the preferences of the state that exercises leadership in support of counter-institutionalization* (see Figure 1). When the inequality of the LIO's norms and institutions creates dissatisfaction among a group of states that comprises a state with leadership capacities and liberal preferences, there will be counter-institutionalization with consolidating effects on the LIO. The leading state will mobilize dissatisfaction with pre-existing international norms and institutions in support of the creation of a regional institution that promotes norms

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[9]Regional leaders are not necessarily regional powers; that is, they do not necessarily hold the larger share of a region's capabilities (on the distinction between the concepts of "regional power" and "regional leader" see Nolte and Schenoni 2024). That said, secondary powers can successfully lead regional institution-building only if the regional power (when present) does not oppose their initiative.

[10]Ideational liberalism derives the preferences that states promote internationally from domestic commitments to particular political values and institutions (see Moravcsik 1997).
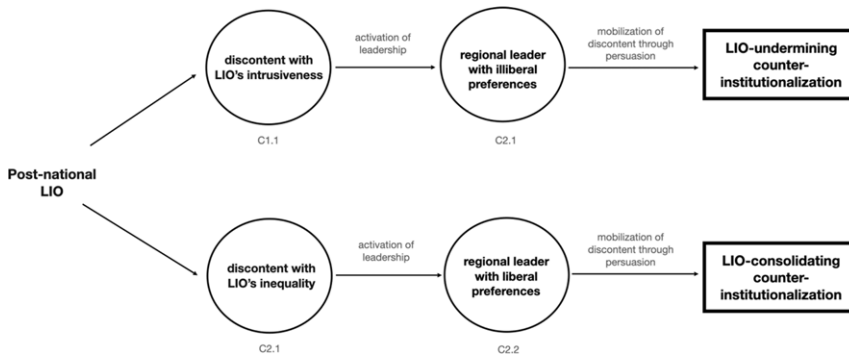
Figure 1. The Causal Mechanism.
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

and policies that are more liberal than those promoted by contested institutions. Conversely, when the intrusiveness of the LIO's norms and institutions creates dissatisfaction among a group of states that comprises a state with leadership capacities and illiberal preferences, there will be counter-institutionalization with undermining effects on the LIO.[11] Illiberal leaders will mobilize the dissatisfaction with pre-existing international norms and institutions in support of the creation of a regional institution that promotes norms and policies that are less liberal than those promoted by contested institutions.

Regional leaders use their material and immaterial (ideational and entrepreneurial) capacities to mobilize other states in support of the establishment of a regional institution that suits their preferences vis-à-vis the LIO in a given domain. To achieve this, regional leaders exercise persuasion, which can be defined as a social process of interaction that involves shaping attitudes about cause and effect and influencing the wants and beliefs of others in the absence of overt coercion (Checkel 2001). Through persuasion, regional leaders generate followership among neighboring states (Malamud 2011), mobilizing their discontent with the LIO to pursue their counter-institutionalization goals.

Research Design, Methodology, and Data

This article conducts a comparative analysis of two cases of contestation of the LIO through regional counter-institutionalization. Through the comparison, we uncover the explanatory conditions that lead to counter-institutionalization with opposing effects on the LIO, identifying the causal mechanism that connects a given configuration of explanatory conditions to the outcome of interest. Our comparative case study is relevant for exploring how South American states use regionalism to pursue two—apparently contradictory—goals in relation to the LIO: (i) expand the reach of liberal international norms and (ii) restrict the intrusiveness of liberal international norms.

Outcomes

We investigate two cases of counter-institutionalization with *consolidating* and *undermining* effects on the LIO, respectively. The former implies that states create a regional institution that

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[11]We focus on these two causal configurations because they yield effects of interest for our analysis of the conditions under which states create regional institutions that consolidate or undermine the LIO. We expect that when the group of states dissatisfied with the LIO's intrusiveness does not comprise a leading state with illiberal preferences, there won't be counter-institutionalization with LIO-undermining effects. Similarly, we expect that when the group of states dissatisfied with the LIO's inequality does not comprise a leading state with liberal preferences, there won't be counter-institutionalization with LIO-consolidating effects. Finally, we expect that the presence of two leading states with contrasting preferences vis-à-vis the LIO's political principles would prevent counter-institutionalization or lead to fragmented counter-institutionalization with limited effects on the LIO.

advances norms and policies that are more liberal than those promoted by contested international institutions. In so doing, states consolidate the LIO's norms and institutions in a given domain, bringing them into line with the order's core liberal principles. The latter implies that states create a regional institution that advances norms and policies that are less liberal than those promoted by contested institutions. In so doing, states undermine the LIO's norms and institutions in a given domain, challenging their authority and restricting their capacity to affect state behavior domestically and/or internationally.

Explanatory Conditions

The first explanatory condition is the *source of dissatisfaction with the LIO*. The literature identifies some endogenous features of the LIO's norms and institutions contested by states from the Global South: their inequality (Zürn 2018) and supranational intrusiveness (Börzel and Zürn 2021). The former refers to international norms and institutions that are riddled with hierarchies and decision-making asymmetries and that promote practices and policies that clash with the LIO's liberal principles (Goddard et al. 2024). This scenario generates discontent due to the violation of the principle of universal equality—between states as well as between individuals— and the impossibility of achieving equitable governance solutions (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Goodman and Pepinsky 2021; Lavenex 2024). The latter refers to international norms and institutions that interfere with domestic affairs to pursue liberal purposes, a situation that leads to discontent among states due to the weakening of the norms of non-interference and national sovereignty (Börzel and Zürn 2021; Tourinho 2021).

The second explanatory condition is the *preferences of regional leaders*. We define regional leaders as states that possess the material and immaterial (ideational and entrepreneurial) capacities to generate followership among neighboring states in support of regional institution-building (Flemes and Nolte 2010). We argue that regional leaders' preferences can be *liberal* or *illiberal* in a given policy area. The former applies to states that pursue goals in line with the LIO's political principles and that challenge pre-existing international norms and institutions from the point of view of liberal principles (Goddard et al. 2024). The latter applies to states that pursue goals that are not in line with or even opposed to the LIO's political principles and that challenge pre-existing international norms and institutions from the point of view of non-liberal purposes (Börzel and Zürn 2021).

Methods and Data

The research protocol (Annex II) provides detailed information about the methodological decisions made in the research design and implementation process. We conduct a comparative case study analysis to establish the causal configuration that explains the outcomes of interest. We identify the causal mechanism that connects our explanatory factors, conforming a causal path leading to a given outcome (Gerring 2016). To generate empirical evidence, we conducted 38 semi-structured interviews with decision-makers and bureaucrats from the justice, interior, and foreign affairs ministries and the electoral bodies of nine South American states, as well as with officers from relevant regional and global institutions. We applied positional criteria to sample interviewees and included only actors who participated in the creation and/or functioning of the institutions under investigation. Fieldwork activities took place between 2015 and 2018 in the cities of Asunción (Paraguay), Bogotá (Colombia), Brasília (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Lima (Peru), Montevideo (Uruguay), Santiago (Chile), and Quito (Ecuador). We obtained voluntary and informed consent from all the interviewees (Annex II provides further details on fieldwork activities). To quote evidence from interviews, we report the number of the interview (e.g., I1, I2) in footnotes. The complete list of interviews is available in Annex I. We triangulated the evidence gathered from primary sources with secondary literature and official documents

issued by global, regional, and national institutions, with the aim of increasing our findings' credibility (Tansey 2007).

Case Selection

We adopt a *diverse case* selection strategy, which aims to maximize variance along both the outcomes and the explanatory factors of interest (Seawright and Gerring 2008). As regards the outcomes, the cases of the SACM and the UEAMs are paradigmatic examples of regional counter-institutionalization with consolidating and undermining effects on the LIO, respectively. As for the explanatory conditions, the two cases allow us to examine the impact of the two most contested features of the post-national LIO, namely, the inequality (migration) and intrusiveness (election monitoring) of its norms and institutions. Additionally, the two cases allow us to explore the impact of regional leaders with preferences that are in line (Argentina) with or opposed (Venezuela) to the LIO's core political principles. We decided to focus on South America—rather than on the broader Latin American region—for two reasons. First, differently from Central America and the Caribbean, South America hosts several states with the capabilities to exercise leadership in support of regional institution-building. Second, the region is more autonomous than Central America and the Caribbean from the main global power behind the LIO, that is the United States. This has given South American states room for contesting the post-national LIO through regionalism.

Before we introduce our empirical cases, a caveat is warranted. We do not claim this research design offers a full test of our theoretical framework. Rather, by illustrating how explanatory conditions interact to produce counter-institutionalization outcomes with opposing effects in the two cases, we confirm the plausibility of our model and identify avenues for future research.

Empirical Findings

In this section, we analyze two cases of contestation of the LIO through regional counter-institutionalization in the areas of migration and election monitoring. Through our comparative case study, we show how the interplay of the source of dissatisfaction with the LIO and regional leaders' preferences led to counter-institutionalization outcomes with opposing effects on the LIO in two areas.

The Emergence of a Rights-based Regional Migration Regime in South America: the SACM

Following World War II, a plurality of international norms aimed at regulating human mobility were adopted. This normative body provided access to different sets of rights depending on the "type" of migration (i.e., voluntary, forced, or labor),[12] deepening social hierarchies and creating different forms of inequality (Cresswell 2010). The result was the lack of a unified global framework for regulating migration[13] and the emergence of a fragmented global migration regime with different degrees of institutionalization (Geddes 2021). States retain considerable control over defining who can enter their territories and then stay and have access to citizen rights (Koser 2010), except for the nonrefoulement principle governing the refugee protection regime.[14] The fragmented character of the global migration regime is largely the result of the

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[12]Examples of this normative fragmentation can be found in the International Labor Organization conventions on labor mobility (Convention no. 97 of 1949 and Convention no. 143 of 1975) and the UN conventions on statelessness (1954 and 1961), as well as in a variety of regional mobility regimes across the world.

[13]The only international organization with an exclusive migration mandate is the International Organization for Migration, which has traditionally been depicted as a "marginal" actor in global governance (Pécoud 2018).

[14]Nonrefoulement represents the "essential foundation for international refugee law," an integral part of human rights protection and a customary international law principle (Goodwin-Gill 2014, 40). It is an obligation accepted by states party to

disproportionate influence of Western immigrant-receiving states in international negotiations. Such states have been reluctant to delegate sovereignty in a sensitive and highly politicized policy area (Kainz and Betts 2021).

The Growing Inequality of Global Migration Governance in the Post-national LIO

Since the end of the Cold War, the inequality of the global migration regime has been exacerbated by the increasingly restrictive policies promoted by Western countries, which at the same time boycotted more encompassing international agreements incorporating the demands of migrant-sending countries (Pécoud 2021; Kainz and Betts 2021). The growing inequality and fragmentation of global migration governance intensified differential access to rights for migrants, fueling discontent in some regions of the Global South, particularly in South America. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and the Members of Their Families (ICRMW) (1991) clearly illustrates the source of this discontent.[15] Migrant-receiving countries (European countries in particular) played a significant role in the negotiation of the ICRMW, calling for differential access to rights for regular and irregular migrants, whereas migrant-sending countries mostly advocated for equal access to rights for all migrants (Cholewinski et al. 2009). The final version of the Convention fully aligned with the preferences of European countries, but very few of them ratified it, which further exacerbated the discontent felt by Global South countries. During this period, Western countries also promoted the adoption of a series of bilateral agreements aimed at "externalizing" border controls to sending countries, providing funds in exchange for more restrictive migration policies (Fassi et al. 2023). This further fed the dissatisfaction of Global South countries, which resented their unequal standing in these negotiations (Oliveira Martins and Strange 2019) and contested the emergence of a "global forced immobility" regime focused on curbing migration flows and keeping people in their place (Pécoud 2021, 4).

   South American states denounced the imposition of Western countries' restrictive preferences in multilateral negotiations and criticized the criminalization of immigration while expressing concern for the rights of their nationals in Europe and the United States (Brumat and Freier 2021; Acosta and Geddes 2014). During the negotiations of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, the Brazilian delegation, together with other Latin American countries, stood against the United States and European proposal of considering migrants who were trafficked into the territory of a state as co-authors of a crime (Teles Barreto 2007). In the framework of several UN negotiations in relation to migrants' rights,[16] Brazil advocated for the respect of migrants' human rights while promoting "reciprocity" domestically, in an effort to boost the legitimacy of its claims vis-à-vis Western countries.[17] Similar positions were adopted by Argentina and Ecuador.[18] The predominance of the restrictive approach to migration adopted by Western countries marked not only global negations but also the regional migration agenda. In 1996, the majority of Central American and Caribbean states joined the United States and Canada in the creation of the Regional Conference on Migration, a regional consultative process (known as the Puebla Process) in the field of migration.[19] The Puebla Process reproduced the inequitable logic of the global

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the 1951 Refugee Convention which prescribes that no person "shall be returned in any manner whatsoever to any country where he or she would be at risk of persecution" (Goodwin-Gill 2014, 39).

[15] For the first time, the ICRMW defined a multilateral legal framework for the rights and duties of migrant workers and their families. It constitutes the most comprehensive binding global norm regulating migration.

[16] Throughout the 2000s, the UN negotiated several international conventions in relation to migrants' rights: two conventions on human trafficking and smuggling (2000); the Convention against Organized Crime (2000); and the Convention on Domestic Workers (2011).

[17] I11, I12.

[18] I3, I4, I26, I35.

[19] https://crmsv.org/en/countries.

migration regime. In line with US preferences, it was centered on security issues and promoted a restrictive approach to migration, differentiating access to rights for different groups of migrants (Ramírez et al. 2019). In 1998, during a meeting with officials from the International Organization for Migration, the US Department of State proposed extending the Puebla Process to South America, with the aim of creating a Pan-American migration governance regime.[20] The Argentine government fiercely opposed the proposal,[21] arguing that South American countries' approach to migration was in stark contrast to the policies advanced by Western powers, which promoted unequal access to citizen rights, criminalized migration, and did not treat all countries as equals.[22]

The Activation of Argentina's Leadership Initiative

The proposal to establish a Pan-American regime that would promote a security-driven and discriminatory approach to migration prompted Argentina to counteract. Historically, Argentina has been the main migrant-receiving country in South America and has developed significant technical and legislative expertise on this issue. Additionally, throughout the 1990s, Argentina developed a strong interest in fostering the harmonization of South American countries' migration policies to create a more predictable regional regime that would reduce the cost of managing intra-regional human mobility.[23] The other South American states perceived Argentina's legislation as the most advanced in the region and considered they could benefit from Argentina's expertise in the field of migration, developing new capacities in a complex policy area characterized by interdependence and externalities.[24]

Argentina responded to the restrictive and inequitable logic of the Puebla Process and, more broadly, of global migration governance, by promoting a regional counter-institutionalization initiative. In 1998, the country convened an informal meeting of South American migration experts and officials in the city of Bariloche. During the meeting, Argentine officials proposed the creation of a regional migration forum—the SACM—in which all countries would be treated as "equals," and whose main aim would be to promote a shared South American position in global governance negotiations.[25] Argentina actively advanced its liberal perspective on the principles and goals that South American states should collectively advance in global negotiations; these included regularization and equal access to rights.[26] Taking advantage of being the host of the first meeting, Argentina mobilized a transgovernmental network of national bureaucrats who shared dissatisfaction with the discriminatory aspects of global migration governance and a preference for developing a more equal regional regime for human mobility.[27]

Argentina was able to shape the institutional design of the SACM according to its preferences for a liberal migration regime that opposed the security-driven, unequal governance model promoted by the United States in the Americas and by Western powers in global negotiations (Pécoud 2021). Argentine officials achieved this by persuading their South American counterparts of the benefits of regional institution-building in the field of migration. First, to engage the Andean countries, which had traditionally adopted a security-focused approach to migration and lacked the institutional capacity of the member countries of MERCOSUR (Mercado Común del Sur, i.e., the Southern Common Market), Argentina organized a conference in Lima (Peru).[28] Second, to increase the likelihood of liberal ideas on migration governance being adopted, Argentina

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[20]I6.
[21]I6, I16.
[22]I2, I4, I5, I6.
[23]I2; I3, I5.
[24]I6; I12; I13; I14; I16; I22; I25; I31; I37.
[25]I6, I16.
[26]I2, I4, I5, I6.
[27]I4, I6, I16.
[28]I6.

invited representatives from the ministries of foreign affairs to attend the Lima conference because those ministries had previously displayed more open (liberal) views on migration.[29] Third, Argentina mobilized the shared dissatisfaction with global migration governance in support of its counter-institutionalization strategy by presenting regionalism as an opportunity to build state capacity through mutual learning, increase migrants' access to rights, and counter the discriminatory practices of global institutions.[30] Argentina's proposal was welcomed by the migration authorities of *all* South American countries, including the regional power Brazil. Brazilian authorities did not consider immigration as a pressing issue[31] since, at the time, Brazil's immigrant population was very small.[32] However, Brazilian authorities supported Argentina's leadership initiative because they recognized the neighboring country's legislative expertise in the area of migration.[33] Furthermore, Brazil shared with Argentina the preference for using regionalism as a platform to counter Western countries' restrictive policies that limited South American migrants' access to rights in those countries.[34]

During the Lima gathering, Argentina proposed turning the conference into a permanent regional institution, which would hold annual meetings (mirroring the format of the Puebla Process).[35] The proposal gained the support of the other South American states (SACM 1999), which agreed to hold the first SACM in Buenos Aires in May 2000. Argentina also persuaded the other South American states of the importance of involving civil society and establishing issue-specific working groups whose aim would be to formulate action plans and policy proposals that the SACM would pursue (SACM 2021, 2022). Building on Argentina's migration law,[36] the SACM adopted two guiding principles: equal access to rights, irrespective of migrants' legal status (SACM 2010); and regularization, which was conceived as the best solution to irregular migration (SACM 2010, 2017a).[37] Finally, Argentina promoted the consolidation of the SACM as the main platform for coordinating shared regional positions on migration (SACM 2012).[38] In line with Argentina's preferences, the SACM became a springboard for South American states to contest the "global forced immobility" regime and favor governance solutions in line with the LIO's core political principles (SACM 2010).[39]

Overall, Argentina pursued its preference for creating a more liberal alternative to the Puebla Process by strategically mobilizing South American states' dislike of Western countries' restrictive policies and their shared interest in consolidating their capacities in the field of migration. The supportive stance towards regional institution-building of the regional power Brazil paved the way for Argentina's counter-institutionalization initiative.

The Consolidating Effects of the SACM on the LIO in the Area of Migration

The case of the SACM is relevant for untangling the relationship between South American regionalism and the LIO. The SACM rapidly became a cornerstone of South America's rights-based migration regime (Feddersen and Freier 2024; Lavenex 2019), facilitating the harmonization of national migration policies and the negotiation of a shared regional position to be promoted at the global level. In so doing, the SACM contributed to the emergence of a distinctive liberal South

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[29]I1, I6, I4.

[30]I2, I5, I6.

[31]I2, I13, I14.

[32]In 2010, the total number of immigrants in Brazil was less than 1 percent of the country's total population (Instituto Social del MERCOSUR 2019, 74).

[33]I13.

[34]I13.

[35]I6, I16. See also SACM (2000).

[36]I4.

[37]I4, I5, I16.

[38]I4, I6.

[39]I4, I16, I24, I35.

American approach to migration, which, in turn, allowed the region to have a greater voice in multilateral negotiations.[40] Over the years, the SACM declarations criticized the unequal and discriminatory aspects of global governance (Brumat and Freier 2021), particularly the securitization of human mobility and differential access to rights (SACM 2010, 2017a, 2017b), calling for more equal and liberal policies.

A key example of the consolidating effects of the SACM on the LIO is the adoption of a South American position in the negotiations leading to the UN Global Compact for Migration[41] (GCM). The SACM was the main forum through which South American countries agreed on an official regional stance vis-à-vis the GCM. During the global negotiations, which took place between 2016 and 2017, South American states cohesively advocated for the non-criminalization and regularization of irregular migrants, the expansion of access to fundamental rights regardless of migrants' legal status, and the removal of hierarchies between countries and individuals (SACM 2017a, 2017b). The final version of the GCM adopted a rights-based approach to migration, which reflected many of South America's demands (UNGA 2018).[42] This represented a major shift in migration governance away from the restrictive and unequal approach to migration that Western powers had traditionally promoted at the global level. Despite being a nonbinding document, the GCM defined—for the first time—a set of common standards for global migration governance. These establish that all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, should have access to basic rights and services in their host countries (Klein et al. 2019).

The SACM has also contributed to consolidating core LIO principles at the regional level. It did so by advocating for the coordinated implementation of a set of liberal migration norms that had been adopted separately by groups of South American countries. In particular, under the leadership of Argentina, the SACM actively pushed for a region-wide implementation of the MERCOSUR Residence Agreement (MRA). The agreement was signed by MERCOSUR member states in 2002 following an Argentine proposal that promoted a strongly liberal approach to intra-regional migration that delinked South American migrants' labor situation from their right to residence.[43] Over the years, all South American states (with the exception of Venezuela) joined the MRA, which became a pillar of South America's regional migration regime. Thus, the SACM has played a crucial role in fostering the convergence of South American states toward a shared liberal approach to migration governance, an approach that has increased access to rights for regional migrants (Acosta 2018).

In sum, the Argentina-led contestation initiative resulted in the creation of a regional institution that consolidated liberal international norms and institutions in the migration domain, both regionally and globally, contributing to realigning the LIO with its core political principles. This does not mean that South American states have consistently upheld liberal principles in their migration policies. Since the second half of the 2010s, as the Venezuelan large-scale displacement crisis intensified, several South American countries adopted restrictive measures and discourses (Gandini and Selee 2023). However, such restrictions have coexisted with the region's liberal migration regime, which is still in place (Brumat 2021). This confirms that South American countries adopt a pragmatic approach to migration governance, combining human rights-centered and restrictive measures, particularly when the number of immigrants rises abruptly (Brumat and Vera Espinoza 2023; Gandini and Selee 2023; Fernández-Rodríguez and Célleri 2024).

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[40]I1, I2, I4, I6, I16, I31, I35.

[41]The GCM is a nonbinding international agreement negotiated in the UN framework that establishes a comprehensive global approach to migration (UNGA 2018).

[42]I16.

[43]I2, I5, I6.

The Emergence of Incumbent-friendly Election Monitoring in South America: the UEAMs

In the early 1960s, the OAS began to make strides in relation to the promotion of democracy through the creation of hemispheric institutions that challenged state sovereignty (Santa Cruz 2005). Among the arsenal of regional institutions that promoted liberal norms, the OAS member states established an election monitoring regime, which dispatched its first mission to Costa Rica in 1962. It could be argued that Latin America developed forms of intrusive regionalism in the electoral field before other regions of the Global South (Coe 2019). However, starting from the mid-1960s, the United States manipulated the OAS to pursue geopolitical goals associated with its Cold War foreign policy toward Latin America (Lowenthal 1991). The OAS tolerated a wave of authoritarian regime changes, which, in some cases, the United States supported. This led to a widespread perception of the OAS as a hegemonic tool of US interventionism, weakening South American states' trust in hemispheric multilateralism as a tool for establishing more symmetric relationships with the United States (Long 2018).

The Growing Intrusiveness of the OAS Observation Missions in the Post-national LIO

The end of the Cold War brought about a rapid rise in international election monitoring, with the emergence of international institutions engaged in increasingly extensive and intrusive monitoring activities across the globe (Kelley 2012). The OAS was fully part of this trend, experiencing a dramatic change in its role in the promotion of democracy in Latin America.[44] The organization's renewed activism included the growing intrusiveness of the regional election monitoring regime (Cooper and Legler 2006).[45] The OAS's "first generation" missions (1960s–1980s) lacked a clear methodology and were limited in time and scope. From the 1990s onward and in line with the LIO's intrusiveness in the electoral field, the OAS's observation missions became more ambitious in terms of size and scope, raising the standards for certifying elections as free and fair and increasing the domestic costs of joining the club of liberal democracies (Perina 2015). In 2001, the OAS adopted the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which defined a series of rights in relation to electoral processes and a set of standards for the deployment of the OAS missions. Between 2006 and 2007, the OAS member states implemented two major institutional changes that increased the bureaucratic and operative capacities of the OAS's Secretariat and equipped the organization with a standardized methodology for observing elections. The former was the creation of the Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation as part of the OAS Secretariat for Political Affairs. The latter was the adoption of the OAS Manual for Electoral Observation Missions. The manual consolidated professional third-party observation based on international standards and equipped the OAS missions with the capacity to scrutinize elections and determine whether they met international standards (OAS 2012).

The institutional consolidation and legalized intrusiveness of the OAS missions proved to be effective in strengthening democracy in the region. However, during the second half of the 2000s, some South American states started to manifest dissatisfaction with what they perceived as excessive interference in domestic affairs by the OAS (Planchuelo 2017).[46] More specifically, the left-wing governments of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia demonstrated a growing rejection of international observation as a consequence of the criticisms expressed by the OAS missions with regard to the

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[44]In 1991, the OAS General Assembly approved the Santiago Commitment to Democracy, a declaration that established member states' commitment to the promotion and protection of democracy. The Santiago Commitment was followed by Resolution 1080, which created a mechanism for reacting to the interruption of democratic processes in a member state, and by the 1992 Protocol of Washington, which provided for the possibility of suspending member states experiencing a democratic breach (Heine and Weiffen 2014).

[45]Perina 2015.

[46]Perina 2015.

quality of elections in these countries.[47] The three governments contested the OAS missions' intrusion, which they considered a political aggression against their national sovereignty, and invoked the deployment of South American electoral missions free from external interference.[48] In so doing, they aimed at deflecting the external pressure exerted by the OAS.[49] Interestingly, the governments of other South American states (including consolidated democracies such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay) shared a disaffection with the external judgment of domestic elections and a preference for gaining autonomy in the electoral field vis-à-vis extra-regional actors (the United States in particular).[50] That did not mean that South American consolidated democracies opposed electoral monitoring in itself, but that their normative commitment to democracy protection was balanced by instrumental foreign policy considerations related to deflecting external interference in domestic and regional affairs (Agostinis and Closa 2022; Feldmann et al. 2019).

The Activation of Venezuela's Leadership Initiative

The OAS missions' growing intrusiveness triggered the response of Venezuela, a state with material and entrepreneurial leadership capacities in the electoral field. Under President Chávez, Venezuela used its oil-based resources to promote an aggressive foreign policy aimed at building political alliances with Latin American states and establishing friendly regional institutions as an alternative to the OAS (Nolte 2018). Venezuela considered regionalism a strategic tool for excluding the United States from regional affairs and contesting core norms and principles of the liberal order (Kneuer et al. 2019; Söderbaum et al. 2021). The exacerbation of democratic backsliding in Venezuela turned the Venezuelan leadership project into a source of contestation of the OAS-centered democracy protection regime. The Venezuelan regime targeted the OAS missions because it objected to their intrusiveness in domestic affairs and the model of liberal representative democracy they promoted. In opposition to this, Venezuela proposed a plebiscitary democratic model focused on popular sovereignty, direct participation, and collective rights (Cameron 2018). In line with its use of regionalism as a tool for contesting the LIO's norms and principles from an illiberal perspective (Kneuer et al. 2019), Venezuela undertook a counter-institutionalization initiative to attack the OAS and its election observation regime.

In October 2009, Venezuela's National Electoral Council (NEC) organized a meeting of South American electoral bodies in Caracas. During the meeting, Venezuela proposed the creation of a new regional institution: the Electoral Council of UNASUR. Such a council would deploy electoral missions—the UEAMs—autonomous from the OAS's observation regime. Venezuela mobilized a pre-existing network of electoral authorities in support of its counter-institutionalization initiative, seeking to shape the UAEMs' institutional design according to its preferences for restricting liberal international monitors from observing national elections (Agostinis and Closa 2022). To achieve this goal, Venezuela employed persuasion within the network of electoral authorities. First, it framed the new institution as an opportunity to increase electoral cooperation and pool expertise and financial resources for regional capacity building.[51] This was welcomed by the electoral authorities of *all* South American countries, including the regional power Brazil, which considered sharing best electoral practices instrumental to improving the quality of national elections in the region.[52] Second, Venezuela mobilized the dissatisfaction of several South American states, including both consolidated democracies and illiberal regimes, with external judgment of elections by independent experts[53] to push forward a non-intrusive design for the

[47]I7; I21; I38.
[48]I10; I18; I20; I21; I27; I28; I29.
[49]I18; I20.
[50]I7; I15; I17; I18; I23; I32; I34; I38.
[51]I18; I19; I21; I32; I38.
[52]I7; I15; I20; I23; I32; I38.
[53]I7; I15; I17; I18; I23; I32; I34.

UNASUR missions.[54] Venezuela proposed that the UEAMs should be composed of member states' experts (rather than independent experts, as in the case of the OAS) and that member governments had to approve the composition of the missions by consensus.[55] In addition, Venezuela's NEC obtained that the mission's final report had to be submitted to the host state's electoral authorities, who could decide whether to make it public.[56] Venezuela's initiative produced convergence among South American states, which valued the creation of regional electoral missions composed of national experts due to the possibility of enhancing mutual learning among the UNASUR member states. Likewise, Venezuela's preference for protecting the autonomy of the host state accommodated the preferences of all South American states, which shared an emphasis on avoiding external interference in domestic affairs (Agostinis and Closa 2022). The fact that the UEAMs were not explicitly designed to replace the OAS missions allowed Venezuela to accommodate South American consolidated democracies' preference for using UNASUR as an additional layer of election monitoring (Agostinis and Closa 2022). Consequently, South American states approved the criteria for deploying the UEAMs in November 2012. The UEAMs lacked a standardized deployment methodology and allowed hosting authorities to finance aspects of the mission.[57] This design limited the UEAMs' capacity to report independently on the quality of elections was limited (Planchuelo 2017), in line with Venezuela's preference for protecting national sovereignty and restricting external interference in domestic politics.[58] Overall, Venezuela pursued its preference for creating a friendlier, non-intrusive alternative to the OAS by strategically mobilizing South American states' dislike of extra-regional interference and shared interest in enhancing regional electoral cooperation. The passive support of the regional power Brazil, which did not have a self-interest in the electoral agenda,[59] paved the way for Venezuela's counter-institutionalization initiative.

The Undermining Effects of the UEAMs on the LIO in the Electoral Field

The case of UNASUR's electoral missions is particularly relevant for unpacking the relationship between South American regionalism and the LIO's norms and institutions. The emergence of the UEAMs created a new competitor for the OAS (and other credible international observers) with regard to the distribution of the limited funds available for electoral observation (Perina 2015). Although the UEAMs were not created to replace the OAS missions, they restricted the OAS's capacity for action and watered down the norm of international election observation in South America (Nolte 2018). Interestingly, UNASUR never signed the 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct for Election Observers, which established a set of best practices and standards adopted by the most credible international observers (including the OAS). UNASUR did not adhere to the agreement because the UEAMs did not meet the standards of independence and transparency in election observation.

Additionally, the establishment of the UEAMs resulted in the legitimization of illiberal practices in a region where states, since the 1990s, have cooperated to protect democracy (Heine and Weiffen 2014; Coe 2019; Emmons 2022). Illiberal regimes could invite the UEAMs to obtain "friendly" external legitimation while eroding the authority of the OAS, which has been a regional institutional pillar of the post-national LIO in the field of democracy protection. A key example of the LIO-undermining effects of the counter-institutionalization initiative led by Venezuela is the

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[54]I7; I17; I27; I38.

[55]I17; I28.

[56]I28; I29.

[57]I21.

[58]I20; I21.

[59]Like the other consolidated democracies in the region, Brazil did not invite international observation missions and considered election monitoring as a tool for consolidating democracy in the other countries of the region (see Agostinis and Closa 2022).

deployment of a UEAM during the 2013 Venezuelan presidential elections. The most credible international observers (including the OAS) were either not invited or refused to observe the elections due to the limitations imposed by the Venezuelan authorities (Planchuelo 2017). Ultimately, UNASUR's mission endorsed the results of an election marked by irregularities (The Carter Center 2013), legitimizing Nicolás Maduro's victory, which, in turn, allowed the Venezuelan regime to strengthen its authoritarian grip on the Venezuelan state (Gamboa 2022).

In sum, Venezuela's leadership effort resulted in the creation of a regional institution that illiberal regimes could use to shield themselves from external criticism while eroding the legitimacy of independent international observers (the OAS, in particular). In so doing, the Venezuela-led contestation initiative undermined a crucial regional component of the LIO, namely international election monitoring.

Conclusion: Interpretation of Findings and Contributions

This article shed light on the relationship between South America and the LIO by analyzing two cases of contestation through regional counter-institutionalization in two policy areas (i.e., migration and election monitoring) closely related to the LIO's political principles. We developed a causal explanation for counter-institutionalization with opposing effects (*consolidating* versus *undermining*) on the LIO. We argue that variation in the effects of counter-institutionalization is determined by the interplay of the source of dissatisfaction with the LIO and the preferences of the state that exercises leadership in support of counter-institutionalization. Through the case of the SACM, we show that the dissatisfaction with the inequalities embedded in the LIO's norms and institutions activated the leadership initiative of Argentina, a state with liberal preferences in the field of migration. Argentina used its leadership capacities, namely the expertise of its bureaucracy and the legitimacy of its domestic legislation (Brumat and Vera Espinoza 2023), to persuade the other South American states to create a regional institution that expanded migrants' rights and strengthened member states' capacity to steer global migration governance toward a more liberal approach. In so doing, South American states consolidated liberal international norms and institutions in the migration domain, both regionally and globally, contributing to realigning the LIO with its core political principles. Through the case of the UEAMs, we show that the dissatisfaction with the intrusiveness of the post-national LIO in the field of election monitoring activated the leadership initiative of Venezuela, a state with illiberal preferences in the area of democracy protection. Venezuela used its leadership capacities, namely its oil-based financial resources and ideology-driven foreign policy activism (Wehner and Thies 2021), to persuade the other South American states to create an incumbent-friendly monitoring mechanism that restricted liberal international observers' capacity for action and allowed illiberal regimes to obtain less costly external legitimation. In so doing, South American states weakened liberal international norms and institutions in the electoral domain, undermining core political principles of the LIO such as political participation and democracy. In both cases, the leadership effort of secondary powers was facilitated by the supportive stance of the regional power Brazil. Despite not having a strong self-interest in the policy areas under analysis, Brazil agreed with some of the reasons behind the contestation of the LIO, aligning itself with the counter-institutionalization initiatives of Argentina and Venezuela.

Our comparative case study analysis provides a set of empirical and theoretical contributions. First, we identify the conditions under which South American states create regional institutions that consolidate or undermine the LIO's norms and institutions, shedding light on the coexistence of liberal and illiberal tendencies in South American regionalism. In so doing, we contribute to the literature on the relationship between Latin America and the LIO (Long 2018; Rodríguez and Thornton 2022). Second, our article contributes to the debate on the contestation(s) of the LIO in the Global South (Lake et al. 2021; Goddard et al. 2024). The literature explored the negative

effects of such contestation on liberal international norms and institutions (Lake et al. 2021; Börzel and Zürn 2021). In particular, scholars revealed how illiberal leaders can use regionalism to weaken the LIO's political principles (Söderbaum et al. 2021; Debre 2022). We show that South America's contestation of the LIO has both order-consistent and order-challenging effects, confirming that states contest the LIO not only to undermine liberal international norms and institutions but also to consolidate them (Goddard et al. 2024). This finding is in line with evidence on the agency of Global South states as norm-makers in the establishment of a more equal LIO, a process through which they urge international institutions to correct those internal contradictions that undermine the LIO's legitimacy (Zürn 2018; Stuenkel 2020). As regards the determinants of contestation strategies, we provide an innovative theoretical framework for explaining variation in the form and goals of contestation, combining endogenous explanations related to the LIO's features with explanations centered on the agency of leading states at the regional level.

More empirical case studies are needed to confirm the plausibility of our causal explanation of counter-institutionalization outcomes with opposing effects on the LIO. To prevent the LIO from collapsing, we need to better understand the logic of the contestations directed at its norms and institutions across different regions and policy domains. This article takes a step toward a theoretical understanding of the contestation of the LIO by focusing on South America, a region that has contributed to the establishment of the LIO in fundamental ways.

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ANNEX I List of Interviews

CODE	POSITION	COUNTRY	DATE	PLACE
I1	UN Committee on the Protection of Migrant Workers	Argentina	18 December 2015	Buenos Aires
I2	Ministry of Justice of Argentina	Argentina	27 July 2017	Buenos Aires
I3	Ministry of Interior	Argentina	6 December 2015	Buenos Aires
I4	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Argentina	Argentina	26 July 2017	Buenos Aires
I5	Ministry of Interior of Argentina	Argentina	12 February 2016	Buenos Aires
I6	IOM Official	Argentina	7 January 2017	Buenos Aires
I7	Argentina's National Electoral Directorate	Argentina	15 March 2017	Skype
I8	Directorate-General for Latin American Politics at Argentina's Foreign Affairs Ministry	Argentina	23 March 2018	Skype
I9	Public Policy and Human Rights Institute MERCOSUR	Argentina	24 July 2017	Buenos Aires
I10	Bolivia's Supreme Electoral Court	Bolivia	15 December 2017	Skype
I11	Ministry of Labour of Brazil	Brazil	11 November 2016	Brasilia
I12	Official of the Brazilian Senate	Brazil	1 August 2017	Brasilia
I13	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil	Brazil	21 November 2015	Brasilia
I14	Ministry of Justice of Brazil	Brazil	22 November 2015	Brasilia
I15	Brazil's Superior Electoral Court	Brazil	15 December 2017	Skype
I16	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile	Chile	22 July 2016	Santiago
I17	Chile's Electoral Service	Chile	15 March 2018	Santiago
I18	Chile's Electoral Service	Chile	6 June 2017	Santiago
I19	Chile's Electoral Qualifying Court	Chile	26 April 2017	Santiago
I20	Sub-Directorate for Multilateral Affairs of Chile's Foreign Affairs Ministry	Chile	14 November 2017	Santiago
I21	Citizen and Security Justice Department of the General Secretariat of UNASUR	Chile	9 May 2017	Quito
I22	Migración Colombia, Special Administrative Unit of Colombia's Foreign Affairs Ministry	Colombia	7 January 2016	Bogotá
I23	Colombia's National Civil Registry	Colombia	18 May 2017	Bogota
I24	Ecuador and UNASUR Official	Ecuador	8 December 2015	Quito
I25	Ministry of Human Mobility of Ecuador	Ecuador	14 January 2016	Quito
I26	Member of Ecuadorian Parliament	Ecuador	2017	Quito
I27	Ecuador's National Electoral Council	Ecuador	29 May 2017	Skype
I28	Ecuador's National Electoral Council	Ecuador	12 May 2017	Quito
I29	Ecuador's National Electoral Council	Ecuador	9 May 2017	Quito
I30	Ministry of Labor of Paraguay	Paraguay	6 August 2015	Asunción
I31	Ministry of Interior of Paraguay	Paraguay	6 August 2015	Asunción
I32	Paraguay's Superior Court of Electoral Justice	Paraguay	16 June 2017	Skype

(*Continued*)

(*Continued*)

CODE	POSITION	COUNTRY	DATE	PLACE
I33	Peru's National Electoral Jury	Peru	4 May 2017	Lima
I34	Former Prime Minister of Peru	Peru	12 September 2018	Lima
I35	Secretariat of the Andean Community	Peru	5 July 2016	Lima
I36	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uruguay	Uruguay	30 March 2018	Skype
I37	Ministry of Labour of Uruguay	Uruguay	19 October 2015	Montevideo
I38	Uruguay's Electoral Court	Uruguay	24 April 2017	Skype

ANNEX II RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION REPORT

Empirical data sources

Our data originate from semi-structured interviews. We triangulated interview-based empirical evidence with official documents issued by national, regional, and global institutions, as well as with secondary literature. Triangulation is particularly important in research that involves elite interviews to test the reliability of interview evidence (Tansey 2007), particularly when the policy areas of interest are politically sensitive (Davis 2001).

Sample selection

Following positional sampling criteria (Tansey 2007), we collected first-hand information from relevant actors who were involved in the creation and/or functioning of the two regional institutions under investigation: the South American Conference on Migration (SACM) and the UNASUR Electoral Accompaniment Missions (UEAMs). More specifically, we interviewed decision-makers and high and mid-ranking state officials from the justice, interior, and foreign affairs ministries and the electoral bodies of nine South American states. Given Venezuelan actors' refusal to be interviewed, we derived evidence on the agency of Venezuelan actors through the statements of interviewees from other countries. Besides state representatives, we interviewed officers from regional and global institutions –such as MERCOSUR, UNASUR, and the IOM– who were involved in the creation and /or functioning of the SACM and the UEAMs.

Fieldwork activities and interviews

We conducted three separate rounds of interviews. As regards the case of migration, interviews were carried out between 2015 and 2016 and between 2017 and 2018. As regards the case of election monitoring, interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2018. Fieldwork activities took place in the cities of Asunción (Paraguay), Bogotá (Colombia), Brasilia (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Lima (Peru), Montevideo (Uruguay), Santiago (Chile), and Quito (Ecuador). When possible, we conducted face-to-face interviews. Whenever these were not possible, we conducted online interviews via Skype and Zoom. The whole set of interviews was transcribed and coded using the ATLAS.ti software. We coded the transcripts deductively, assigning individual claims to codes created before data analysis. Deductive codes were developed as categories based on the explanatory variables and propositions that compose the article's theoretical framework (Bingham and Witkowosky 2022).

We obtained voluntary and informed consent from all 38 interviewees, who gave their permission to use interview evidence in scholarly publications. Some of the interviews were conducted in the framework of a research project that requires the protection of interviewees' identities. We guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality in the consent form we sent to interviewees before the interview. To ensure methodological coherence in the treatment of interviews, we decided to report all of them in a pseudonymized fashion. In Annex I, we report the place where the interview was held and the interviewee's position. We disclose the position of each interviewee because that is analytically relevant for the purposes of our study (see Saunders, Kitzinger, and Kitzinger 2015).

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