Contestation in a World of Liberal Orders

Stacie E. Goddard
Wellesley College, USA

Ronald R. Krebs
University of Minnesota, USA

Christian Kreuder-Sonnen
Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany

AND

Berthold Rittberger
Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, Germany

It is widely acknowledged that the core institutions of the Liberal International Order (LIO) have in recent years been subject to increasingly intense contestation. There is less agreement on the sources of this contestation. This introductory paper to the special forum on “contestation in a world of liberal orders” makes two main contributions. First, the paper develops a theory of endogenous order contestation. It conceptualizes the LIO as a system of different types of suborders, which vary in the extent to which they reflect and promote liberal values and in the extent to which they are legally institutionalized. The paper explains how these different suborders generate their own types of order contestation. More liberally embedded and institutionalized suborders endogenously generate more intense and order-challenging contestation, while less liberal and less institutionalized orders are amenable to more modest and order-consistent contestation. Second, this paper identifies the specific endogenous mechanisms through which contestation shifts from order-consistent to order-challenging in especially these more liberally embedded and institutionalized suborders. It argues that not only liberal resistance to reform gives rise to order-challenging contestation, but even liberal accommodation and responsiveness can ultimately paralyze and ossify LIO institutions, which in turn lose legitimacy, frustrate would-be reformers, and drive them to order-challenging contestation. The different contributions to this special issue examine our core propositions across a range of economic, security, and social–political LIO suborders.

On s’accorde largement sur le fait que les institutions fondamentales de l’ordre libéral international (OLI) ont fait ces dernières années l’objet d’une contestation de plus en plus intense. Cet accord est bien moins évident lorsqu’on s’intéresse aux sources de cette contestation. Cet article introductif au numéro spécial sur la « contestation dans un monde d’ordres libéraux » offre principalement deux contributions. D’abord, l’article développe une théorie de contestation endogène de l’ordre. Il conceptualise l’OLI comme un système regroupant différents types de sous-ordres, qui diffèrent quant à leur degré de réflexion et de promotion de valeurs libérales et leur degré d’institutionnalisation légale. L’article explique comment ces différents sous-ordres génèrent leurs propres types de contestation. Les sous-ordres libéralement plus implantés et institutionnalisés génèrent de façon endogène une contestation plus intense, qui remet en question l’ordre. À l’inverse, les ordres moins libéraux se prêtent davantage à une contestation plus modeste et cohérente avec l’ordre. Ensuite, cet article identifie les mécanismes endogènes spécifiques par lesquels une contestation cohérente avec l’ordre finit par le remettre en question, notamment dans ces sous-ordres libéralement plus implantés et institutionnalisés. Il affirme que la résistance libre de l’ordre de réforme débouche sur une contestation qui remet en question l’ordre, mais aussi que la conciliation et la réactivité peuvent finir par paralyser et ossifier les institutions de l’OLI. Ainsi, elles perdent leur légitimité, frustrant les réformateurs en herbe et les poussant à une contestation plus fondamentale de l’ordre. Les différentes contributions de ce numéro spécial examinent nos principales idées dans un éventail de sous-ordres d’OLI économiques, sécuritaires et sociopolitiques.

Aunque es ampliamente reconocido que las principales instituciones del Orden Liberal Internacional (OLI) han sido objeto de una creciente impugnación en los últimos años, existe un menor consenso sobre las fuentes de esta impugnación. Este artículo introductorio al número especial sobre la impugnación en un mundo de órdenes liberales ofrece dos contribuciones principales. En primer lugar, el artículo desarrolla una teoría endógena de la impugnación del orden. Esta teoría conceptualiza el OLI como un sistema que comprende diferentes tipos de subórdenes, los cuales difieren en la medida en que reflejan y promueven los valores liberales, así como en su grado de institucionalización legal. El artículo explica cómo estos diferentes subórdenes generan sus propios tipos de impugnación de órdenes. Los subórdenes arraigados e institucionalizados de forma liberal generan, de manera endógena, una impugnación más intensa y desafiante para el orden. Por lo contrario, los órdenes menos liberales y menos institucionalizados son más susceptibles a una impugnación más modesta y consistente con el orden. En segundo lugar, el artículo identifica los mecanismos endógenos específicos a través de los cuales la impugnación cambia de consistente con el orden a desafiante con el orden, especialmente en los subórdenes institucionalizados e integrados de forma más liberal. El artículo argumenta que no solo la resistencia liberal a la reforma genera una impugnación desafiante para el orden, sino que incluso la adaptación liberal puede hacer que las instituciones del OLI se paralicen y pierdan su legitimidad. Este proceso, a su vez, frustra a los potenciales reformadores y los conduce hacia una impugnación.


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más fundamental del orden. Las diferentes contribuciones a este número examinan estas ideas en referencia a una gama de subórdenes económicos, de seguridad y sociopolíticos del OLI.

Introduction

The liberal international order (LIO) and the institutions underpinning it are under stress. The last decade in particular has seen contestation intensify, with challengers increasingly taking aim at the LIO’s underlying principles and procedures. This contestation, while pervasive, also varies significantly by domain. Some LIO suborders have become the target of order-challenging contestation: dissatisfied actors reject the domain-specific order as currently constituted, take aim at its underlying principles and normative vision, and seek to undermine, replace, or simply abandon its institutions. For instance, whereas earlier critics of the free trade regime proposed reforms—granting exceptions to poorer nations, incorporating environmental sustainability into regulations, including rising powers in key decision-making bodies—populist nationalists and even more mainstream critics now often seek to subvert the World Trade Organization (WTO) or exit the regime. Likewise, while African states once saw the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a flawed but salvageable institution, many now see the international criminal justice regime as so broken and illegitimate that they have refused to cooperate with the ICC and have lost faith in the underlying vision. In other suborders, however, challengers still seem satisfied pursuing order-consistent reforms.1 For example, despite the climate regime’s significant failures in changing state behavior, and corresponding demands for more ambitious and binding agreements, calls for wholesale revision are rare: this contestation occurs within, not at odds with, the main institutional and ideological tenets of the climate regime.

Explanations abound as to why the LIO and its main characteristics—institutionalized multilateralism, the promotion of individual liberties, the rule of law, and open markets—have become increasingly contested (per the debate among, e.g., Nye 2017; Alcaro 2018; Grewal 2018; Ilkenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Elistrop-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020; Huang 2021; Copelovitch et al. 2020; Lake et al. 2021). Most approaches center on factors arguably exogenous to the LIO, such as global power shifts, notably the rise of China and US hegemonic decline (e.g., Boyle 2016; Stephen and Zürn 2019; Weiss and Wallace 2021), domestic economic shocks and distributional inequalities (Bierce and Jolliff Scott 2019; Bisbee et al. 2020), economic globalization and deglobalization (e.g., Kornprobst and Paul 2021), and a backlash against cultural globalization and progressive norms by older generations (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Some also treat the rise of nationalist populism as the main independent variable to account for the increased delegitimation of the LIO and its component institutions (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Pevehouse 2020; De Vries et al. 2021). While these explanations provide insight into some of the forces that have given rise to order-challenging contestation, they provide less leverage in explaining why the form and intensity of contestation vary, both over time and across the LIO’s suborders.

Recent literature offers a promising path forward: it identifies factors endogenous to the LIO as sources of contestation—that is, it focuses on properties of the order that are potentially self-undermining (see Zürn 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Barnett 2021; Farrell and Newman 2021). Within this literature, one strand focuses on the self-undermining properties of the LIO’s economic order. After its neoliberal turn in the 1980s, the LIO opened the doors to “hyper-globalization” and unfettered trade liberalization, which heightened economic inequality. As a consequence, the “losers” of globalization have mounted opposition to the order (Colgan and Keohane 2017; Rodrik 2018; Broz et al. 2021; Flaherty and Rogowski 2021). Another strand explores the political properties of the LIO and their self-undermining potential (Zürn 2018; Koopmans and Zürn 2019; Börzel and Zürn 2021; Kreuder-Sonnen and Rittberger 2023). The main argument is that the LIO has empowered international organizations (IOs), enabling them to assert intrusive policies, which undermine national sovereignty (see also Ecker-Ehrhardt 2014; Hooghe et al. 2017). Because the effects of international authority are distributed unevenly across states, and because IOs lack sufficient grounds to legitimize their practice, they provoke a backlash—especially of an authoritarian-nationalist bent (Börzel and Zürn 2021; see already Zürn 2004). While this newer literature highlights important building blocks for understanding the LIO’s current crisis, it remains unclear which properties of the LIO produce contestation, why and when that contestation becomes order-challenging rather than remaining order-consistent, or how order-consistent reformist demands transform into order-challenging movements. Critically, it also does not center the puzzle of variation in contestation across LIO suborders.

This special forum begins from the premise that the institutions that make up the LIO are deeply varied: it would be more accurate to speak of liberal “orders” rather than “order.” That variation, however, is, analytically, both a puzzle and an opportunity. By leveraging the differences in LIO suborder configuration and the variation in contestation across suborders, this special forum yields insight into why different LIO suborders experience different types of challenges and how and why contestation evolves over time within LIO suborders. In so doing, this special forum develops a theoretical account of the endogenous processes that produce and intensify contestation and of the conditions under which these processes will be more or less pronounced.

In this article, framing and introducing the special forum, we develop a typology of liberal orders, which vary in the extent to which they are liberal embedded—reflecting and promoting liberal norms and values—and the extent to which they are institutionalized, and hence possess the capacity to enforce those liberal norms and values. We argue that, while all orders generate contestation over resources and principles, specific types of liberal order give rise to specific types of contestation—either order-consistent or order-challenging. The counter-intuitive central claim of this article, and the special forum as a whole, is that the more a suborder lives up to liberal aspirations—in terms of its

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1Our categories of order-consistent and order-challenging contestation largely parallel “opposition” and “dissidence” in Dase and Deitelhoff (2019), but we separate the ends from the means of contestation.
normative embeddedness and institutionalization—the more it is susceptible to order-challenging contestation. We map out how liberal orders’ resistance and reform to initial, order-consistent contestation both intensifies and radicalizes contestation. Ironically, we argue, even liberal efforts to accommodate contestant demands can, unintentionally, undermine the order’s legitimacy. The contributions to this special forum show how this introductory article’s core propositions hold across a range of economic, security, and social–political LIO suborders.

This finding has important normative consequences. Many blame the LIO’s current ills on its imperfections and hypocrisy, and they seek to save the LIO by enacting liberal reforms that would make it more fully and consistently liberal. We cast doubt on the wisdom and efficacy of this plan of action, which, our argument suggests, would exacerbate rather than solve the problem of order contestation.

The remainder of this introductory article is structured as follows. First, we define the LIO and introduce a fourfold typology of its suborders, and present a typology of order contestation. Second, we develop comparative-static expectations that relate the LIO suborders to particular forms of order contestation. Third, we theorize the dynamic processes through which properties of liberal orders endogenously generate order-consistent or order-challenging contestation. Throughout, we draw on material from the other articles in the special forum to support and illustrate our theoretical claims. These articles examine, among other LIO suborders, the regimes focusing on international refugees, human rights, climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and international trade. We conclude with a discussion of the analytical, empirical, and normative implications of this special forum for our understanding of contestation within a world of liberal orders.

The LIO: Liberal Properties and Liberal Suborders

Definitions of the LIO provided in the literature oscillate between minimalist versions focusing on an “open and rules-based international order” (Ikenberry 2011, 56) and maximalist versions advocating the definitional inclusion of liberal social purpose, economic and political rights, and democratic decision-making procedures (Stephen and Skidmore 2019; Lake et al. 2021, 4–8). While the thin, minimalist versions are prone to the question of what is actually liberal about them (e.g., Kundnani 2017), the thick, maximalist versions may be questioned for their descriptive validity (e.g., Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020). After all, today’s international order is ripe with practices and patterns that do not conform to the thick conception of the LIO.

Acknowledging the validity of these conceptual and empirical critiques, this special forum aims for a middle ground that, on the one hand, does not throw the liberal baby out with the bathwater, but, on the other hand, recognizes how rarely liberal ideals are fully realized. What sets the current global order apart from nonliberal alternatives is its embedding in liberal discourses of legitimation that justify international authority (or power) structures with a view to approaching (typically a selection of) elements of an ideal-typical LIO. We, therefore first describe the contours of this ideal-type LIO and then develop a typology of LIO suborders based on the extent to which they actually approximate the ideal-type in terms of liberal embeddedness and institutionalization.

The Ideal-Type LIO

An ideal-typical LIO has unique ideational and institutional properties. First, the ideal LIO rests on ideational properties reflected in the basic principles and norms that define its social purpose and mission. Liberalism is a complex, historically contingent, and essentially contested concept (Freeden and Stears 2013). But it has relatively undisputed “core” features (see, e.g., Barnett and Finnemore 2005). Political liberalism is associated with freedom of the individual, understood first and foremost as freedom from arbitrary rule. It is ensured by legal and institutional constraints on authority as well as by procedures for collective self-determination and thus democratic participation. Economic liberalism implies a commitment to a market economy and free trade, accompanied by economic and social rights to foster individual capacities for freedom (Doyle 2012, 4–5).

At the global level, the LIO seeks to promote core liberal values through cooperative international institutions (Keohane 2012). Its central reference point is the individual endowed with rights, and liberal international institutions aim to reduce the barriers to individuals’ pursuit of their self-interest. State sovereignty thus becomes secondary to the fulfillment of individual rights (Peters 2009). Liberal internationalism prizes cooperation among states as a means of enhancing citizens’ welfare (see also Lake et al. 2021). It presumes that international relations, like interpersonal relations, is not a zero-sum competition, but rather one in which interests are at least partially overlapping. At both the domestic and international levels, liberal internationalism affirms that, through well-designed institutions and precisely formulated rules and laws, human reason can and must curb the exercise of naked power. In an ideal LIO, international and transnational cooperation among political communities civilizes global politics, and politics converge toward the liberal ideal (Bell 2007).

Second, the ideal-typical LIO is characterized by distinct institutional properties informed by liberal values. All orders contain decision rules—that is, procedures through which the interests of the constituent actors are aggregated and institutional outcomes produced. The ideal-typical LIO’s decision rules emphasize equality before the law as well as inclusive, equal, and fair participation (see Zürn 2018, 8; Lake et al. 2021, 5). These norms find expression in multilateral institutions’ formal legalised procedures and adjudicatory bodies, as well as in avenues for inclusive participation through stakeholder forums or supranational parliamentary assemblies. The supranational delegation of authority to politically neutral institutions and agencies—from independent, technocratic bureaucracies to expert bodies—is congruent with liberal decision rules that prioritize fairness and collective welfare over majoritarianism. An order’s institutional properties also include formal membership rules and informal status hierarchies that define who is an insider and who is an outsider of a particular order (Pouliot 2016; Viola 2020; Adler-Nissen and Zararak 2021). In the ideal-typical LIO, membership in international institutions should be maximally inclusive, granted to all who commit to abiding by the institution’s norms and rules: “It follows from the principle of individual equality that the LIO as a political order is ‘open,’ almost by definition” (Lake et al. 2021, 8).

The ideal-type LIO thus consists of inclusive, fair, and legalized multilateral institutions wedded to decidedly liberal social purposes.
A Typology of LIO Suborders

The contemporary global order does not neatly conform to this ideal-type. In some substantive domains, its institutions more closely approach the ideal LIO properties than in others. The articles in this special forum recognize that there is extensive variation across LIO regimes or suborders. As Iain Johnston (2019) rightly reminds us, the LIO is a world of orders, not a monolithic order.

First, LIO suborders can reflect and promote substantive liberal norms and principles to greater or lesser degrees. We call this dimension the order’s liberal embeddedness. Some LIO suborders, such as the international human rights regime or the international free trade regime, are built on core liberal principles and pursue a decidedly liberal social purpose. In others, liberal principles are not key to the order’s legitimation. As Thompson (2024) argues, the international regime to combat climate change, for instance, subordinates liberal ideas of individual freedom to the protection of nature.

Second, LIO suborders vary in the degree to which they operate according to liberal procedures—that is, the extent of their liberal institutionalization. LIO suborders have codified rules with greater or lesser “precision” and “obligation” and have delegated the monitoring and implementation of these rules to third parties with more or less independence (Abbott et al. 2000; Goldstein et al. 2001). The global investment regime, for instance, is highly legalized. Bilateral and plurilateral investment treaties codify precise and binding rules for the protection of investors, and disputes are routinely delegated to binding arbitration. By contrast, the realm of international peacekeeping exhibits much less legalized institutionalization. As Hofmann (2024) shows, uncodified social norms, as well as imprecise and nonbinding aspirational norms such as the “Responsibility to Protect,” constitute the international regime of collective security. LIO suborders also vary in the degree to which their membership rules reflect inclusive liberal values. For instance, the global climate regime is open to all states and additionally allows for comparatively strong stakeholder participation (Thompson 2024). This stands in contrast with the nuclear regime, as Tannenwald (2024) shows, which contains a mix of inclusive, universal bodies whose membership rules are formally codified—via ratification of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—and powerful, exclusive bodies, like the Nuclear Suppliers Group, whose decision and membership rules are merely informal.

These two dimensions combine to form a typology, in which the contributions to this special issue situate real-world LIO suborders (see table 1). Where both liberal embeddedness and institutionalization are high, a strongly institutionalized liberal order (SILO) approaches the LIO ideal-type. According to Heinkelman-Wild et al. (2024), the WTO as the focal institution of the international trade regime, with its heavily legalized dispute settlement process aiming to advance the classic liberal vision of free trade, falls into this category. So does the individual criminal accountability regime, atop which sits the ICC, and which is rooted in the liberal vision of protecting individual liberties through a “duty to prosecute” (Lesch et al. 2024).

In contrast, weakly institutionalized liberal orders (WILOs) are legitimated in the familiar terms of liberal norms but lack formal codification and strong enforcement mechanisms. Lavenex (2024) shows that the contemporary refugee regime, which embodies a liberal vision of individual human rights but does not back this up with legalized obligations, resides in this realm.

Strongly institutionalized yet weakly liberal orders (SIWOs) are grounded in detailed, binding law, but do not further classic liberal aims. As Tannenwald (2024) shows, the nuclear nonproliferation regime, through the legally binding Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), sets out concrete obligations for signatories and delegates monitoring tasks to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, seemingly contrary to liberal principles, it cements an inequitable order that discriminates between nuclear haves and have-nots.

Finally, WWOs score low on both dimensions. The law of armed conflict is not overly constraining, as Hofmann (2024) demonstrates, and it thus also permits uses of military force that are contrary to the spirit of liberalism. Similarly, according to Thompson (2024), the norms of the global climate regime would allow for restrictions on individual autonomy for the sake of the collective good and thus do not always sit comfortably with liberal values. Moreover, with few enforceable commitments, the climate regime is hardly legalized, and it is very flexible by design.

Contestation in the LIO

Elites and citizens around the world are increasingly engaged in contesting core LIO institutions. But the LIO is deeply varied and textured across domains, and the contestation it faces is similarly varied and textured. Sometimes it is intense and fundamental, and the label “crisis” is fitting, but not all LIO suborders are in crisis. To better capture the extent, nature, and drivers of contestation within LIO suborders, we first introduce different strategies of LIO contestation and then advance claims about how LIO suborders and strategies of contestation are linked.

Strategies of Order Contestation

Contestation is “a social practice [that] entails objection to specific issues that matter to people” (Wiener 2014, 3). In this special forum, we focus on contestation by states and distinguish between order-consistent contestation and order-challenging contestation. Order-consistent contestation refers to expressions of discontent regarding either the deficient
realization of the suborder’s principles or their distribu-
tional implications. Instead of criticizing liberal principles, contest-ants “challenge practices [. . . ] from the point of view of liberal principles” (Zürn and Gershewski 2021, 4). The goal is to improve the workings of the suborder, bring-
ing them (back) into line with its liberal norms and prin-
ciples (ideational properties) and broadly within its exist-
ing institutional framework (institutional properties). Order-
challenging contestation rejects both the suborder’s liberal norms and principles as well as its institutional setup. It does not legitimate its demand for change with reference to lib-
eral values, and it seeks to jettison the suborder’s current institutions, replacing them with alternative institutions.

Combining the two dimensions of consistency with lib-
eral norms and consistency with existing institutional prop-
erties, four strategies of contestation emerge (table 2). The more contestation is aligned with liberal norms, and the more it accepts existing institutions, the more such contesta-
tion falls on the order-consistent end of the spectrum: lib-
eral reform (upper-left cell). At the very least, order-consistent contestation is grounded in liberal norms and principles, even if it finds existing institutions so problematic that they require replacement: liberal counter-institutionalization (lower-left cell). Order-challenging contestation rejects lib-
eral norms and principles. It is less overtly order-challenging if it works through existing institutions: illiberal subver-
sion (upper-right cell). It is more obviously order-challenging when it rejects the current institutional framework: illiberal reordering (lower-right cell).

Liberal reform—the upper-left cell of table 2—does not challenge the order’s principles or institutional properties but highlights their inconsistent application or negative un-
tended consequences. It seeks to reforming the existing institutional framework in line with existing liberal norms. For instance, Heinikelmann-Wild et al. (2024) show that the US-led postwar international trade order was initially rather exclusive, built around like-minded Western powers. Over time, the exclusion of non-Western powers bred dissatis-
faction, and those excluded demanded, in line with liberal values, a more inclusive regime. In the realm of interna-
tional refugee policy, transnational activists, and epistemic communities pressed for the regime’s liberal reform in the wake of the Cold War, demanding more rights for and legal-
ized protection of asylum seekers. According to Lavenex (2024), demand for liberal reform resulted in a strengthening of “the primacy of the individual and rule of law stan-
dards vis-à-vis states’ sovereign discretion over the admission of refugees.”

Liberal counter-institutionalization accepts existing liberal norms, but rejects flawed existing institutions. It, there-
fore seeks to overcome existing institutional arrangements by replacing them with more, not less, liberal alterna-
tives. Its proponents ground their calls for fundamental change in the language of liberalism, arguing that their al-
ternative would better serve liberal aspirations. Frustrated by the nuclear powers’ longtime failure under the NPT to take meaningful steps towards nuclear disarmament, Tannenwald (2024) argues that “states squarely within the core of the LIO had launched a new normative and rule-making initiative outside the NPT that resulted . . . in an entirely new legal instrument to pursue disarmament.” The Treaty on the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons—the so-called nuclear-ban treaty—represents an instance of lib-
eral counter-institutionalization. Similarly, frustrated with the liberal hypocrisy of the postwar economic order as en-
shrined in the compromise of embedded liberalism (CEL), proponents of a “redistributive multilateralism” sought to implement a New International Economic Order (NIEO) to counter Western-led institutions. According to Pouliot and Patterson (2024), the NIEO was—in its procedural, if not necessarily substantive, outlook—more, “not less, liberal in spirit than the CEL.”

Contestation that is decidedly nonliberal in its aspira-
tions, but that seeks to attain its goals through existing in-
isitutions, is more order-challenging. Illiberal subver-
sion attempts to further illiberal ends not through open revolt against the LIO’s rules, but by using those rules to advance an antithetical political vision. Under the Bush and Trump administrations, the United States engaged in illiberal sub-
version with respect to climate change. It sought to sabotage the project of international cooperation to combat human-
induced climate change by rejecting two major climate treaties—the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement—but it nevertheless continued to participate in the regime (Thompson 2024). In the international refugee regime, Lavenex (2024) similarly shows how states undermined the regime’s liberal substance and achievements, e.g., by re-
stricting potential claimants’ access to liberal asylum systems and legal recourse, while they refrained from abandoning the regime itself.

Finally, illiberal reordering is fully order-challenging con-
testation: it challenges the suborder’s liberal norms while res-
isting or abandoning its institutions and calling for their wholesale transformation. Lesch et al. (2024) present the African Union’s (AU) deep critique of the international criminal justice system, embodied by the ICC, and its con-
comitant call for member states to withdraw from the court, as an attempt at illiberal reordering. According to Koch (2024), the populist critique of the global liberal economic order as a system that benefits the elites over “the people” has mobilized antisystem sentiment that can also be consid-
ered an example of (an attempt at) illiberal reordering.

### Accounting For Variation in Order Contestation

Which of these four strategies of contestation emerges promi-
iently in any particular suborder, we argue, depends on that suborder’s institutional and ideational properties. They shape contestants’ political opportunity structure, and thus the concrete mode and substantive direction of their contestation (McAdam et al. 2001). In other words, we posit a causal link between the type of LIO suborder and the type of order contestation (see figure 1 for an overview).
**Figure 1. Theoretical expectations.**

- SILOS are most prone to *illiberal re-ordering*. In light of SILOS’ high degree of liberal embeddedness, contestation is more likely to emanate from actors with normative dispositions that are at odds with liberalism than from LIO supporters. Given SILOS’ high degree of institutionalization, contestants will find it difficult, if not impossible, to change the order within existing institutional parameters. Since SILOS are substantively liberal, and since they are procedurally largely insulated from political influence, illiberal contestants’ only viable option is to resist or abandon the order’s institutional setup. African states’ rejection of the ICC is a case in point. As Lesch et al. (2024) record, not only did many African states stop cooperating with the Court, the AU also started negotiations to create a less liberal and less legalized alternative.

- SIWOS are likely to fall prey to *liberal counter-institutionalization*. Because SIWOS are highly institutionalized, but only weakly liberal in their social purpose, contestation is likely to take a decidedly liberal bent. Illiberal actors have little reason to demand change of this weakly liberal suborder in the first place. It is liberal actors who find SIWOS problematic. As in SILOS, however, attaining transformative goals in the highly institutionalized setting of SIWOS is hard. Encrusted institutional structures, are thus likely to frustrate contestant demands, and they therefore invite *liberal counter-institutionalization*. The nuclear nonproliferation regime is a case in point: Tannenwald (2024) argues that, after proponents of nuclear disarmament failed to achieve meaningful progress through the NPT, they mobilized on behalf of the so-called nuclear ban treaty as a direct—but liberal—challenge to the existing suborder. Similarly, Heinkenmann-Wild et al. (2024) interpret the US turn to bi-, mini-, and plurilateral trade institutions as a strategy of liberal counter-institutionalization in response to the WTO’s inclusion of nonliberal powers and the resulting stymied Doha Round of negotiations.

- WILOs may be attacked with two different strategies. First, WILOs are strongly rooted in liberal aspirations, and may thus evince challenges from illiberal actors. But, because WILOs are less institutionalized, they offer contestants ways to achieve their goals within the given setup. By engaging in *illiberal subversion*, challengers may attempt to use the institution to further illiberal goals. Lavenex (2024) shows how, in the international refugee regime, states frequently exploit the regime’s weak rule precision and independent enforcement to eschew its demanding liberal obligations. At the same time, WILOs come under pressure from liberals who believe the order could perform better if its rules were rendered more precise and binding. These critics engage in *liberal reform* that seeks to strengthen the regime’s rules in ways consistent with its liberal principles. Critique of the international trade regime under GATT’s political dispute settlement system resulted in the much more legalized mechanism of the WTO (Zangl 2008).

- WIWOs, finally, are most prone to either *liberal reform* or *illiberal subversion*. On the one hand, given WIWOs’ low degree of liberal embeddedness, dissatisfied actors can push for these regimes’ greater adherence to liberal principles. Since WIWOs are only weakly institutionalized, and thus relatively flexible, pressing for internal reform is more appealing than pursuing counter-institutionalization. Thompson (2024) shows that rising powers’ attempts to commit the climate change WIWO to fairness and equity, for instance, always remained within its institutional structures. On the other hand, that same flexibility allows actors with illiberal inclinations to use ambiguities and loopholes in the existing institutional framework to dodge or pervert normative commitments. Hofmann (2024) demonstrates how, in the collective security WIWO, illiberal states have subverted liberal agendas—e.g., seeking to expand the Responsibility to Protect or advancing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda—by exploiting this suborder’s lack of institutionalization and by taking advantage of its political mechanisms, rejecting resolution drafts at the UN Security Council or mobilizing opposition at the UN General Assembly.

**Dynamics of Contestation: Reactive Sequences**

So far, our analysis has been static. We have explored how particular configurations of LIOS suborders produce different strategies of order contestation. In this section, our analysis becomes dynamic, exploring how the nature of contestation in LIOS suborders can change over time. In particular, we ask how liberal orders react to initial contestation and how this reaction shapes the trajectory of contestation. As in the preceding analysis, the chief causal driver is endogenous to the LIOS. Our main proposition is that liberal modes of managing contestation tend to increase the intensity of contestation, transforming order-consistent contestation into order-challenging contestation.

We focus on what historical institutionalists call negative feedback mechanisms or *reactive sequences*. Early scholarship in the historical institutionalist tradition was predominantly interested in path-dependence, highlighting positive feedback mechanisms—that is, those inducing institutional stability and self-reinforcement (Mahoney 2000; Fioretos 2011; Hanrieder 2015; Rixen and Viola 2016). However, institutional feedback processes can also be negative—that is, undermining existing institutions. Such reactive sequences are “marked by backlash processes that transform and perhaps reverse early events” (Mahoney 2000, 526). These endogenous processes “change the opportunities, beliefs, or desires of the involved actors [. . . ] so that they erode support for the institution.” An institution is thus self-undermining when it produces its own “challengers and challenges” (Hanrieder and Zürn 2017, 100; see also Moschella and Vetterlein 2016; Farrell and Newman 2021).

Building on this scholarship on self-undermining institutional feedback effects, in the following sections, we set out generalizable mechanisms endogenous to the LIOS through which order-consistent contestation becomes order-challenging contestation. We develop our account with reference to the suborder that most closely approaches the LIOS ideal-type: the SILO. Since we argue that it is the liberal properties of global order that themselves tend to exacerbate contestation, SILOs’ liberal social purpose and

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4Importantly, we do not, and cannot, develop a fully specified causal theory explaining why particular forms of contestation arise under particular conditions or articulating the conditions under which full-blown order-challenging contestation takes shape or is interrupted.
liberal institutional features are more prone to trigger reactive sequences than the other variants. Accordingly, while all LIO suborders may produce the reactive sequences theorized here, those that depart more from the LIO ideal-type may also contain elements that counter-act those endogenous negative-feedback processes. The empirical contributions to this special forum support this claim, finding that weaker institutional properties (as in WILOs and WIWOs) and ambiguous ideational commitments (as in SIWOs and WIWOs) dampen the reactive sequences.

In the remainder of this section, we first ask how liberal orders endogenously generate grievances that lead to initial contestation. Second, we explore how the unique liberal aspirations of liberal orders shape how its defenders respond to initial contestation, and how these reactions, in turn, give rise to negative feedback mechanisms that undermine the order. Third, we examine how and via what institutional pathways the order may escape this negative feedback loop and contain contestation.

Reactive Sequence #1: Initial Contestation

Admirers of the LIO sometimes seem baffled by dissatisfaction with and contestation of the order. After all, the order provides public goods—from free trade to investment arbitration to collective security to nuclear nonproliferation—that would otherwise be in short supply. Its relatively open and inclusive decision-making processes and forums invite a wide range of voices into the conversation and mitigate the effects of material power. Membership in its institutions is, in principle, open to all, so no one need be left on the outside looking in. From their standpoint, the order enjoys substantive legitimacy—because it boosts global welfare—and procedural legitimacy—because its institutions and processes are fair and inclusive (e.g., Keohane et al. 2009).

But the LIO gives rise to initial contestation through three distinct pathways—per Figure 2. First, like all orders, the LIO’s institutional properties have distributional effects. Even if the LIO helps facilitate cooperation that would not be achieved in its absence, and thereby moves the world closer to the Pareto frontier, as its defenders maintain, there will still be competition along the Pareto frontier—that is, over how those institutions distribute their burdens and allocate their gains—as Stephen Krasner (1991) argued decades ago. Even if liberal institutions provide benefits to all, they do so in unequal ways and thereby generate dissatisfaction that gives rise to contestation (see also Colgan and Keohane 2017; Rodrik 2018).

The second pathway through which the LIO endogenously produces contestation pertains to frictions over and among liberal principles. “Liberalism” is not an ideological monolith. It is composed of multiple streams that all prize individual freedom but differ in important ways over the status of other values and their relationship to freedom (Freedman and Sear 2013). As a result, contestants can invoke alternative liberal values and norms in contesting LIO institutional policies. For instance, liberal commitments to promote individual human rights can bump up against polities’ claims, equally grounded in the liberal tradition, to self-determination and to respect for local norms. At the level of decision rules, liberalism insists that legitimate decision-making embody participants’ consent, but its more technocratic and economic forms also expressly prize efficiency and effectiveness of governance—which may then require bypassing consensus decision-making. In terms of membership, liberal principles of inclusiveness and universality might be at odds with the aspiration to create a liberal community when inclusion means the integration of antiliberal spoilers; on liberal grounds, therefore, the institution’s protectors may justifiably excluding certain categories of members.

Third, the LIO, like other orders built on legitimation and institutionalization, is vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy (see Finnemore 2009). Liberal orders rest on largely aspirational principles that clash with the concrete political practices of creating and sustaining order. The world is filled with illiberalism, and liberalism itself provides no basis for picking and choosing when to promote values like human rights or to protest against trade barriers. Pragmatic considerations necessarily inform these choices, but they also imply tolerance for the illiberal practices of some, and thus invite allegations of hypocrisy. Liberal decision rules prize fairness and transparency, but institutions that are trying to solve collective action problems and yield tangible benefits for their members often require elements of hierarchy to reach decisions. Liberal membership rules that, despite an institution’s universal aims, prioritize efficiency over democratic inclusion become susceptible to charges that they exclude others and are really just furthering the material interests of the few, rather than the collective good.

In short, the LIO endogenously produces dissatisfaction, and thus contestation. This is not to say that there are not exogenous sources of conflict. Changes in the distribution of power, for example, are likely to heighten conflicts over the distribution of resources. States are more likely to champion those liberal principles that advance their own interests. The point is not that these endogenous processes are the only source of contestation, but rather that the LIO is likely to become subject to strain even in the absence of external pressures.

Reactive Sequence #2: Reactions to Initial Contestation Produce Order-Challenging Contestation

When faced with initial, often order-consistent contestation, an order’s supporters can either undertake reform of the institution’s norms, decision rules, and membership, or they can resist meaningful change. This choice, which is not distinctive to liberal orders, plays out in distinctive ways in the LIO, thanks to its particular liberal aspirations. Conventional accounts have downplayed the ways in which supporters of the status quo can resist contestation. Perhaps even more surprisingly, they do so with the resources available within the LIO itself, drawing from the order’s ideational and institutional properties to block critics’ efforts at reform. Moreover, even when supporters make efforts at reform, the LIO’s ideational and institutional aspirations shape how supporters reform the suborder and, we argue, can trigger reactive sequences that end up making

![Figure 2. Reactive Sequence #1: LIO producing initial contestation.](https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/isagsq/kvae026)
the suborder more rigid and less able to manage subsequent contestation within the regime’s boundaries.

**Liberal Strategies of Resistance**

Proponents of the LIO portray its institutions as flexible and adaptive, but they can be resistant to reform as well. Even when contestation is in line with the institution’s fundamental norms and principles, and when claimants call for only modest changes in decision-making and membership, its supporters may resist these order-consistent demands. The motivations underlying such resistance aside, it is not the fact of resistance that is endogenous to the order, but the mode of that resistance. Our contributors find that LIO leaders resist initial contestation in a peculiarly liberal way.

To begin with, defenders of the LIO can use liberal rhetoric as ammunition to resist order-consistent calls for reform. The most likely route to resistance lies through questioning the merit of the speaker or claim. These various tactics have a common strategy: stigmatization. Liberalism valorizes reasoned deliberation, and to cast another as illegitimate or irrational is to deny that they can engage in such dialogue, to refuse their claim to political agency, and to deprive them of a seat at the table. When faced with challenges to a liberal order’s norms, its supporters can portray reformist voices as deviants, beyond the pale of legitimacy (Adler-Nissen 2014; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). Liberal legitimate, therefore produces illiberal “ontological outliers” who are “deficient for what they are rather than for what they have done” (Clark 2009, 566; Donnelly 2006, 147; see also Jahn 2013, chap. 6).

With the proponents of normative change so stigmatized, offering any concessions to their demands is unnecessary. Indeed, granting any portion of their agenda would seem to put the institution’s fundamental norms and rules in peril. For example, Pouliot and Patterson (2024) show how some actors adopted stigmatizing rhetoric to stave off the NIEO movement of the 1970s. “Reaganists” drew from liberal, or more specifically neoliberal, rhetoric to cast their critics as economically irresponsible, inhibitors of their own development, and thus to blame for any inequities between the Global North and South.

Supporters of the status quo can also draw on institutional resources to resist change. Most importantly, the LIO’s decision rules imply a high degree of legalization and delegation of authority to putatively objective, impartial, and expert judges, arbitrators, and regulators that are explicitly designed to withstand political pressures. Such nonmajoritarian institutions are highly resistant to demands for change that would deviate from their locked-in path. Additionally, they allow status quo supporters to dodge contestation by shifting responsibility to autonomous institutions and hiding behind legal rules (Kreuder-Sonnen and Rittberger 2023). For example, it has been argued that supporters of liberal economic institutions locked their preferred policies into the decision rules of powerful nonmajoritarian international institutions, thereby insulating those policies against political change (Koch 2024).

Moreover, liberals can always justify the encroachment on one liberal norm with the attainment of another, arguably higher-ranking, liberal norm. In response to the claim that decision processes are neither open nor inclusive, for instance, liberals may respond that rendering decision-making more inclusive will undermine the epistemic authority wielded by inter- and transnational institutions, and undercut the institution’s ability to make rational decisions (see Zürn 2018, 52–53). And in response to calls to expand membership, an institution’s supporters can resist these claims by invoking various “not yet” standards. Such claims affirm that while, in principle, the institution’s membership is accessible and universal, some, perhaps many, have not yet achieved the basic conditions needed for full membership (e.g., Kelley 2004).

It is intuitive that sustained LIO resistance to initial contestation is likely to make contestation escalate. As contestants see their initial, often order-consistent efforts frustrated, the only way to achieve their goals seems to lie in more fundamental, order-challenging confrontation. For instance, as Lesch et al. (2024) show, when the ICC ignored African states’ demands to weigh criminal prosecution against peacemaking attempts in the early 2000s, their contestation escalated to target the court’s ideational foundation and turned into an attempt at illiberal reordering. Similarly, per Tannenwald (2024), after liberal attempts at reforming the nuclear nonproliferation regime had been stymied for years, contestants eventually decided to turn away from the regime’s institutional core and pursue a far-reaching treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

**Liberal Strategies of Responsiveness**

More surprisingly, even when supporters respond to initial contestation by accommodating contestant demands, their liberal strategies of responsiveness give rise to further, and more fundamental, contestation. In particular, we argue that their responses are likely to reshape the suborder in ways that make it more rigid and unresponsive. As reformers with liberal aspirations, they can deepen liberal strategies of legalization, seeking procedural answers to dissatisfaction within the suborder. Or they can seek to make the institution more inclusive, moving toward greater openness, pluralism, and transparency in both its ideational and institutional properties. These strategies are not mutually exclusive and can be pursued simultaneously. However, they are worth analyzing separately because they create distinct processes of reactive feedback.

First, in the face of charges of hypocrisy or of contradictions in liberal principles, liberal reformers may double down on legalization. If it is unclear which liberal norms and rules govern the institution, then it makes sense to define them once and for all. If decision rules are ill-defined, or if countries continue to defy them, then it makes sense to formalize them and write them down, to demand official treaty compliance, and to remove any shred of ambiguity and render the law more precise. Equally important is empowering the unelected judges and bureaucrats who interpret and discharge the law and regulations and insulating them from political pressures. If it is unclear who gets to be a member of the order, or if those rules seem to be applied inconsistently, then it is time to specify the terms of membership. From the standpoint of liberalism, such measures not only address criticisms of friction and hypocrisy, but advance the vision of a global realm governed by law, rather than the play of power.

Reform premised on ever-deepening legalization, however, is self-undermining and can produce order-challenging contestation. As the law becomes more precise, as the ambiguities are erased, as the judges, arbitrators, and regulators gain power, so too does it become more difficult to practice politics within liberal institutions (e.g., Hirschl 2004). This is not an error, but by design: liberalism aspires to replace power with reason and, as a corollary, politics with law. But this push toward legalization has unintended consequences. It can, for example, amplify hypocrisy within
a regime. For example, Lavenex (2024) explains how the international refugee regime responded to critics by legalizing asylum norms. In response, states, unable to find exceptions, began to engage in illiberal subversion, adapting their existing institutional practices in a way that contradicts their normative commitments.

Second, reformers can adopt a strategy of institutional inclusion. When critics charge that a regime’s institutions privilege the powerful in various ways, its defenders may embrace reforms that move these institutions closer to the ideal of “principled multilateralism” (Ruggie 1992): deliberation and debate, equality of stakeholders, and open and inclusive agendas. Rather than formalize rules and norms, suborder supporters adopt reforms that increase openness. They pledge to expand the agenda, to ensure that the institution is addressing issues significant to their weakest members. They provide for more inclusive membership rules and they allow for diversity in leadership positions. For example, Heinkelmann-Wild et al. (2024) argue that the United States initially preferred exclusive trade institutions that would give it significant control over the regime. Over time, excluded actors—especially in the Global South—began to contest the trade regime, arguing not only for expanded membership, but an increased presence in leadership positions, most notably the WTO’s Quadrilateral Group. Complaints about the Qua’d’s exclusivity led to the inclusion of Australia, Brazil, and India in informal efforts to break deadlocks at various points during the Doha Round of trade negotiations. Likewise, the WTO welcomed both Russia and China into its ranks.

From the standpoint of liberal ideals, these reformist moves represent valuable, if incremental, progress—a genuine move toward rendering the LIO and its constituent suborders more responsive. But, paradoxically, this increased inclusiveness in response to order-consistent contestation can lead to paralysis via several routes (see also Farrell and Newman 2021). The more decision-makers are at the table, the more difficult it is to accommodate diverse preferences: cooperation is far more likely in small groups, which is precisely why, in the trade arena, smaller groups have often come together to try to iron out agreements that proved impossible in larger forums (Faude 2020). As institutions become more inclusive, and represent a broader range of interests, the coalitions supporting cooperation become more fragile, and the resulting policy compromises become less stable and more provisional. As institutions become less able to perform, even sympathetic challengers become more likely to turn to strategies of counter-institutionalization. And opening up institutions to a wider range of members, some of whom are only borderline liberal, elevates the risk of illiberal subversion. Even if they do not succeed in bending the institution to their illiberal substantive ends, they may be able—through misdirection, endless debates on definitions and policies, grandstanding, and countless other mechanisms—to bog down the institution and reduce it to irrelevance.

The causal pathway from suborder properties to reaction to contestation via either responsiveness or resistance to order-challenging contestation forms the second reactive sequence (see figure 3). Whether rooted in responsiveness or resistance, the suborder’s reaction to initial contestation produces increasing rigidity and paralysis that eventually yield more order-challenging contestation. Paralyzed institutions, which cannot reach critical agreements, no longer produce the substantive returns that underpin states’ commitment to those institutions. The LIO’s liberal tenets enable incumbents to resist order-consistent adaptations by depriving claimants of political agency and of their legitimate standing to offer claims. Paradoxically, then, both LIO responsiveness and resistance work over time to undermine the ability of contestants to achieve substantive reforms that would alleviate their dissatisfaction. Order-consistent contestation thus morphs towards order-challenging contestation. As critics of a suborder see routes to reform blocked, their criticism increasingly casts doubt on its fundamental claim to legitimacy.

**Escape Routes: Containing the Forces of Order Contestation**

The processes leading from order-consistent to order-challenging contestation are by no means deterministic. We acknowledge the possibility that liberal institutions can also contain contestation, halting the march to order-challenging contestation. In particular, some forms of liberal resistance may evade negative feedback effects. While it is particularly LIO defenders’ use of their institutional and structural power as incumbents in the order’s social hierarchy that fosters escalation of contestation to order-challenging forms, the operations of productive power—different forms of meaning-generating social processes—have the potential not only to stifle contestant demands, but also to diffuse the endogenous sources of dissatisfaction that give rise to contestation in the first place (see Barnett and Duvall 2005). Through problem (re-)framing and discursive (re-)construction, defenders of the status quo may change contenders’ perception of the underlying issue that needs to be addressed—e.g., turning it from a distributional problem afflicting the LIO to a question of domestic responsibility (see Pouliot and Patterson 2024)—thus dampening the motivation to criticize the order.

Furthermore, as the theorized reactive sequences are causally rooted in the liberal features of order, we expect to see more containment of contestation in those suborders where these features are less pronounced—that is, in sub-

![Figure 3. Reactive Sequence #2: From Order-Consistent to Order-Challenging Contestation.](https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/4/2/ksae026/7659236)
orders that are less liberally embedded and less liberally institutionalized. In these settings, there is broader scope for politics among putative contestants, which allows for accommodating divergent interests through processes of political deliberation and bargaining. In fact, WIWOs—the suborders that are the least liberally embedded and the least legalized and thus that are the most flexible—display the greatest ability to absorb contestation without giving rise to its more intense, order-challenging variety. As Thompson (2024) argues, the low degree of institutionalization in the climate change regime and its insistence on state sovereignty made that suborder “less susceptible to the pathologies associated with increased legalization.” Moreover, the climate change regime was able absorb a diverse set of members and stakeholders without succumbing to gridlock, because its bottom-up and soft-law approach allowed for “differentiation within a common framework.” Hofmann (2024) shows that the lack of agreed upon definitions and legal ambiguities in the realm of international conflict management produces a “pluralistic political space where several visions of order exist and persist.” While these ambiguities can create opportunities for collective action, they may also thwart them, when agreement on the basic rules and principles governing the collective use of force is wanting.

However, these strategies of containment have their limits, too. On the one hand, seeking to contain contestation by shifting attention to a different target or muting criticism through discursive domination can backfire, increasing dissatisfaction with existing arrangements. Even if resistance is successful in the short run, it can prove counter-productive in the long run, as the mismatch between rhetoric and practice will likely resurface as long as the substantive issues are not addressed. On the other hand, seeking to contain contestation through accommodation may also render containment brittle. Strategies geared towards including previously sidelined voices and interests may lead to a weakening of the suborder’s consensus favoring liberal values and policy solutions. In sum, while order contestation can theoretically be managed or suppressed, containment is a precarious condition.

Conclusion

Much has already been written about the crisis of the LIO. With good reason: its institutions continue to govern our world, and contestation over their underlying normative principles and their particular institutional form will occupy global politics for some time to come. Making sense of that contestation and its dynamics must be critical to any effort to think through the problem of liberal order(s).

This special forum advances scholarship on the endogenous contestation of the LIO. First, its articles demonstrate clearly that the LIO is neither monolithic nor uniform—nor is contestation of the LIO. This special forum shows how variation across LIO suborders’ institutions shapes strategies and outcomes of contestation. This introductory paper’s main contribution is to explain how different liberal orders generate their own types of contestation. More liberally embedded and institutionalized suborders endogenously generate more intense and order-challenging contestation, while those suborders that are less substantively or procedurally/institutionally liberal are more amenable to persistent but limited contestation.

The papers that follow show that taking LIO variation seriously pays rich dividends. There is broad support for the proposition that because of their rigidity, the most institutionalized and principled of liberal orders, SILOs—such as the international trade regime (Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2024) or the international criminal accountability regime (Lesch et al. 2024)—are most likely to lead to the most deeply order-challenging contestation. Conversely, the flexibility of suborders that are less institutionalized and only weakly liberal, WIWOs—such as the climate regime (Thompson 2024) or collective security regime (Hofmann 2024)—are more able to prevent order-consistent contestation from escalating into order-challenging contestation. Hybrid orders that combine strong institutional with weakly liberal ideational features—SIWOs such as the international refugee regime (Lavenex 2024), or vice versa, WILOs such as the nuclear nonproliferation regime (Tannenwald 2024)—exhibit some escalation, but typically escape all-out illiberal reordering.

Second, the special forum identifies the specific endogenous mechanisms through which contestation shifts from order-consistent to order-challenging. In some of our contributions, this shift emerges in response to LIO defenders’ resistance to reform demands. At one level, this is unsurprising: revolution often follows in the wake of frustrated reform. But, at another level, it is quite surprising. The LIO’s staunch scholarly defenders see its institutions as uniquely flexible and responsive because they embody liberal values and institutionalize liberal decision and membership rules. Our papers suggest, however, that liberalism is perfectly compatible with resistance—on liberal grounds and in liberal terms. Liberals stigmatize reformers (Pouliot and Patterson 2024) or wield institutional procedures in an attempt to silence and stave off challengers. “Liberal” certainly does not translate into “adaptable.” But what is perhaps even more surprising is that our authors find evidence that embracing liberal reform can ossify and undermine LIO institutions. Expanding membership, in line with liberal inclusiveness, can paralyze an institution (Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2024). Strengthening institutional rules (Lavenex 2024), eliminating legal loopholes (Tannenwald 2024), and empowering international judicial bodies (Lesch et al. 2024)—all in line with liberal commitments—results in rigidity. We suspect there are likely other endogenous mechanisms connecting the properties of liberal suborders to shifts towards order-challenging contestation.

This special forum points the way toward future research on contestation of liberal orders. First, this special forum is more than a plausibility probe, but less than a comprehensive “test” of our theoretical framework. Its findings suggest that there would be significant value in a larger project that identified the full set of suborders that constitute the LIO, classified their relationship to liberal social purpose and institutionalization at given points in time, and explored the forms of contestation to which they were subject in those historical moments. Second, contestation of LIO suborders deserves a fuller diachronic treatment. Tracing endogenous change requires deeply historical research, yet much literature on LIO contestation offers mere snapshots of contestation as if they were independent cases. But these cases seem plausibly to be linked, as parties and observers learn lessons from those episodes that are then manifest in the goals they pursue and strategies they implement in future bouts of contestation. Third, our analysis has been frankly statist, because the LIO is statist: its suborders generally privilege states as members with standing. But large literatures on societal politicization as well as transnational and local activism demonstrate powerfully how central political parties, transnational social movements, and other types of nonstate organizations are to contestation. Future research should systematically integrate these actors into the theoretical framework presented here.
Finally, the special forum has important normative implications. Most notably, if order-challenging contestation in the LIO is largely endogenous—rather than produced by exogenous factors such as power transitions or shifts toward “neoliberal regimes”—then attempts to restore and reinvigorate the order by redoubling liberal commitments will falter. Our contributions suggest that the most “liberal” strategies to reform the LIO—through increased legalization or more inclusive membership rules—are likely to backfire. The impulse to perfect the LIO by defining its rules or becoming even more democratic may instead exacerbate mechanisms of decline. Instead, WWOs—the least institutionalized and least liberal of suborders—prove most resilient. This finding, perhaps the most paradoxical one of this special forum, holds important practical implications. By underestimating the endogenous sources of order contestation, those advocating liberal reforms to save the LIO may amplify, rather than contain, order contestation.

In a world replete with problems that transcend national boundaries, international cooperation is essential. The world needs ordering institutions. But if perfecting an ever more liberal order is futile and foolhardy, then what should such a cooperative international order look like? On what principles should a successor to the LIO be founded, and what institutional properties should it embed in its suborders? These pressing questions are beyond the scope of this special forum and certainly of this article. But this special forum’s central lesson—cautioning that good liberal intentions and carefully designed, tightly liberal institutions are, in a world of diverse interests and values, often ultimately self-defeating—should inform any discussion of the future of international order.

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