

The Cooptation Dilemma: Explaining US Contestation of the Liberal Trade Order

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While the United States (US) acted as a liberal hegemon in setting up the Liberal International Order (LIO), it is increasingly contesting the inclusive legacy institutions underpinning the LIO and is instead moving towards alternative, more exclusive institutions. Why is the US contesting the institutions it once set up to stabilize the LIO? We argue that hegemonic contestation is the result of a reactive sequence that is endogenous to cooptation-based orders where hegemons face a trade-off between inclusion and control. This Cooptation Dilemma is particularly pronounced in strongly institutionalized liberal (sub-)orders, such as the international trade regime. It unfolds in three stages: Privileging control, the liberal hegemon first creates exclusive institutions, which are likely to breed contestation by excluded states. To tame their contestation, the hegemon secondly includes previously excluded states into the order, making the previously exclusive institutions more and more inclusive. To compensate for the related control loss, the hegemon finally promotes alternative, more exclusive institutions, successively turning away from the inclusive legacy institutions. We demonstrate this reactive sequence by tracing the process that led to the US contestation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Our findings suggest that cooptation-based orders in general and strongly institutionalized liberal orders in particular are prone to dynamic instability.

Bien que les États-Unis (USA) aient agi telle une puissance hégémonique libérale dans l'instauration de l'ordre libéral international (OLI), ils remettent de plus en plus en question les institutions historiques et inclusives qui le sous-tendent. Ils préfèrent se diriger vers des institutions alternatives et plus exclusives. Pourquoi les USA remettent-ils en question les institutions qu'ils ont autrefois instaurées pour stabiliser l'OLI ? Nous affirmons que la contestation hégémonique fait suite à la séquence de réactions endogène aux ordres fondés sur la cooptation, où les puissances hégémoniques doivent échanger l'inclusion en faveur du contrôle. Ce dilemme de cooptation est particulièrement marqué dans les (sous-)ordres libéraux fortement institutionnalisés, comme le régime commercial international. Il apparaît en trois étapes : privilégiant le contrôle, la puissance hégémonique libérale crée d'abord des institutions exclusives, qui favoriseront probablement la contestation des États exclus. Pour juguler leur contestation, cette puissance hégémonique inclut ensuite les États autrefois exclus dans l'ordre, rendant ainsi de plus en plus inclusives les institutions jusqu'ici exclusives. Pour compenser la perte de contrôle relative qui en découle, la puissance hégémonique finit par promouvoir d'autres institutions plus exclusives, et donc se détourne progressivement des institutions inclusives historiques. Nous démontrons cette séquence de réactions en retraçant le processus qui a débouché sur la contestation américaine de l'Organisation mondiale du commerce (OMC). Nos résultats indiquent que les ordres fondés sur la cooptation de façon générale, et les ordres libéraux fortement institutionnalisés en particulier, sont sujets à l'instabilité dynamique.

A pesar de que Estados Unidos (EE. UU.) actuó como un hegemon liberal en la creación del Orden Internacional Liberal (LIO, por sus siglas en inglés), EE. UU. está impugnando, cada vez con mayor frecuencia, aquellas instituciones inclusivas tradicionales que sustentan el LIO y, por el contrario, se está dirigiendo hacia otras instituciones, alternativas y más exclusivas. ¿Por qué impugnan los EE. UU. aquellas instituciones que establecieron, hace tiempo, con el fin de estabilizar el LIO? Argumentamos que la impugnación hegemónica es el resultado de una secuencia reactiva que es endógena a los órdenes basados en la cooptación donde los hegemones se enfrentan a una disyuntiva entre inclusión y control. Este dilema de cooptación es particularmente notable en (sub)órdenes liberales fuertemente institucionalizados, como el régimen del comercio internacional. Se desarrolla en tres etapas: En primer lugar, con el fin de privilegiar el control, el hegemon liberal crea instituciones exclusivas, que cuentan con muchas probabilidades de generar impugnación por parte de los Estados excluidos. Posteriormente, y con el fin de controlar esta impugnación, el hegemon incluye en segundo lugar a los Estados previamente excluidos en el orden, lo que hace que las instituciones anteriormente exclusivas se vuelvan cada vez más inclusivas. Para compensar esta pérdida de control derivada, el hegemon finalmente promueve instituciones alternativas y más exclusivas, alejándose sucesivamente de las instituciones tradicionales inclusivas. Demostramos esta secuencia reactiva esbozando el proceso que llevó a la impugnación por parte estadounidense de la Organización Mundial del Comercio (OMC). Nuestras conclusiones sugieren que los órdenes basados en la cooptación en general y los órdenes liberales fuertemente institucionalizados en particular son propensos a la inestabilidad dinámica.

Introduction

The Liberal International Order (LIO) is in crisis, and the crisis stems from its core: The United States (US) increasingly engages in the contestation of major international institutions that it had once constructed to underpin 'its' LIO.¹ Presidents from George W. Bush to Joe Biden

and high-ranking members of their administrations have at times attacked elements of the LIO, including international institutions at the heart of this very order, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the

¹We define contestation as state behavior that challenges an international institution's authority (see Zürn 2018, 17). While contestation can take various

forms, including mere public criticism, the subversion of an institution from within, or the withdrawal from it, we consider counter-institutionalization to be a particularly challenging mode of contestation.

International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank.² The US has disengaged from many of these mostly inclusive legacy institutions and instead shifted towards smaller, exclusive clubs. For instance, at the expense of the WTO, the US increasingly pursues bi- and plurilateral trade agreements. Before involving the IMF, nowadays the US regularly seeks agreement in the Group of Seven (G7) or the Group of Twenty (G20). Furthermore, rather than seeking broad support in universal institutions such as the UN, the US promotes the idea of ‘clubs of democracies.’ While this contestation of international institutions was most extreme under the Trump Administration, it had begun well before and has continued thereafter,³ indicating a more fundamental shift in US relations towards major international institutions of the LIO. But why does the US contest the institutional architecture of the LIO to the point of engaging in counter-institutionalization that circumvents core institutions of the order?

The turn away from international legacy institutions the US had once devised to underpin the LIO poses a puzzle for *Power Transition Theory* (PTT). In both its realist (Organski 1968; Krasner 1976; Gilpin 1981; Modelski 1987; Organski and Kugler 1991; Layne 2018) and institutionalist variants (Ikenberry, 2001, 2012; Fioretos 2018; Mastanduno 2019), PTT suggests that while the LIO might be challenged by rising powers such as China, the incumbent hegemon will try to defend it. After all, the LIO and its underpinning institutions disproportionately reflect its builder’s ideas and interests. Thus, US retreat from this very order does not make sense from a PTT perspective and PTT is of little help in capturing order-challenging hegemonic contestation.

Moreover, the US turn away from international institutions is also puzzling for *domestic politics theories* that seek to explain the contestation of international institutions. One strand of this literature claims that due to the increasing authority of international institutions and their concomitant politicization, communitarian politicians are gaining domestic support, thereby forcing their governments to turn away from international institutions (Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012; Zürn 2018; Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019; Kreuder-Sonnen and Zangl 2020; Rauh and Zürn 2020; Börzel and Zürn 2021; Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021; Kreuder-Sonnen and Rittberger 2023). Another strand of this literature points to the domestic ‘losers’ of economic globalization who are considered particularly susceptible to communitarian ideologies that disapprove of international institutions with authority (see also Rodrik 2018; Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Musgrave 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Alter and Zürn 2020; Bisbee et al. 2020; Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Flaherty and Rogowski 2021; Walter 2021). These theories can account for cases where mostly communitarian politicians in the US are contesting international institutions with independent author-

ity. Yet, it remains puzzling why US contestation is targeting both, international institutions with and without independent authority, and why it is driven by both, communitarian and cosmopolitan politicians.

As opposed to these theories, we argue that US contestation of the LIO is endogenously driven by a crucial, but so far poorly understood property of the order: the LIO is a cooptation-based order. Instead of building an imperialist order as the one created and maintained by the UK, the US acted as a liberal hegemon after the Second World War and promoted a multilateral order based on international institutions such as the UN that gave each member state a say.⁴ To gain the support needed to create and maintain its order, the US included powerful and like-minded states as co-rulers.⁵ However, the cooptation of powerful states into the LIO triggered what we call the *Cooptation Dilemma*. As we argue in Section 2, this dilemma is inherent to cooptation-based orders. While the inclusion of powerful states into the institutions underpinning the order increased their support for the LIO in the short run, in the long run, it came at the expense of US control over the order, prompting it to contest the very same institutions it once created to stabilize the LIO (see Viola 2020b). We argue that the Cooptation Dilemma drives a reactive sequence comprising three stages: First, the liberal hegemon creates exclusive institutions, which ensure control but breed contestation by excluded states. Second, to tame their contestation, the hegemon sacrifices control in favor of including more and more previously excluded states into the order. Third, to regain control, the hegemon turns away from the increasingly inclusive legacy institutions to promote alternative, more exclusive institutions. In Section 3, we then assess this reactive sequence by tracing the process that led to US contestation of the international trade order based on the WTO and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Section 4 summarizes our findings and puts our theory against alternative approaches based on either economic power or domestic politics. Rather than offering truly alternative explanations, we hold that they are compatible with, and can even be considered parts of, our own explanation.

Our Cooptation Dilemma account aligns with the framework paper to this special forum and its central claim that properties of the LIO itself contain the seed of its very contestation by provoking reactive sequences. Our distinct contribution to the special forum is to highlight that the LIO’s character as a cooptation-based order is a particularly important feature that triggers US contestation through a reactive sequence that is driven by what we call the Cooptation Dilemma. The reactive sequence also indicates how attempts to stabilize the order in the short run can destabilize the order in the long run (see Goddard et al. 2023). While we assume the Cooptation Dilemma between inclusion and control to apply to cooptation-based orders in general, we acknowledge that its intensity—and thus the strength of the resulting reactive sequence—will vary across different types of orders. While variances of the Cooptation Dilemma are outside the scope of this paper, we agree with the assumption shared by the contributions to this special forum that

²We do not conceive of the LIO as a single monolithic order but distinguish between different sub-orders, which can vary in their degree of liberalism (Goddard et al. 2023).

³For example, under George W. Bush’s administration, the US refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and pursued a policy of active non-cooperation with the International Criminal Court (ICC); it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; and it terminated its membership in several smaller multilateral organizations and treaties. While President Biden had announced that under his administration the US would re-engage with international institutions that Trump had abandoned, the Biden Administration has continued to block the appointment of judges to the WTO’s Appellate Body; it has failed to return to several multilateral treaties such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT); it has not (fully) delivered financial contributions to fight climate change pledged under the Paris Agreement; and, importantly, it has repeatedly promoted the idea of exclusive ‘clubs of democracies.’

⁴We define hegemons as states that are both willing to provide international order and able to do so due to their predominance in power resources as compared to other states (Keohane 1984). Liberal hegemons claim their orders—both domestic and international—to follow liberal principles (Goddard et al. 2023).

⁵For instance, during the San Francisco and the Bretton Woods Conferences, which led to the creation of the UN as well as the creation of the IMF and the World Bank, the US first consulted its wartime allies (especially the UK), before negotiating with the more than 40 states attending the respective conferences.

reactive sequences are particularly pronounced in strongly institutionalized liberal orders, in which both substantive liberal policies and liberal procedures are strongly institutionalized (Goddard et al. 2023).

Theory: The Cooptation Dilemma

In general terms, cooptation entails the inclusion of social actors—especially powerful actors—into a political order by rulers seeking support for the order they dominate. Cooptation brings, through their inclusion, cooptees closer to the institutional leadership of the order (Selznick 1949; Dickson 2000; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Abbott et al. 2019; Kruck and Zangl 2019). Inclusion can imply that coopted actors become fully integrated into the institutional core leadership of the order, but it can also imply that their integration, while progressing, remains confined to the margins of the order's institutional leadership. Moreover, inclusion can be staggered when some cooptees become fully integrated into the institutional core leadership of the order, while the integration of others remains partial.

In any case, when engaging in cooptation, rulers make other actors through their inclusion co-rulers in order to give them a stake in supporting the order that underpins their own rule (Gerschewski 2013, 22). Democratic states that grant, in exchange for support, privileged representation to ethnic minorities or consultation rights to labor unions or employer associations provide examples of cooptation, as do autocratic states that give, in return for support, seats in parliament to opposition parties or ministerial posts to rebel leaders (Lehmbruch 1987; Dickson 2000; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Reuter and Robertson 2015). Further examples include colonial powers that grant, in return for support, local chiefs considerable discretion in how they govern their territories (Trotha 1994) or hegemonic powers that give, in return for support, other states a say in major international institutions (Lake 2009; Kruck and Zangl 2019; Frankenbach, Kruck, and Zangl 2021). In each of these cases, rulers engage in cooptation: they trade the inclusion of powerful actors into the leadership ranks of key institutions of the order for the latter's support of the order and its underpinning institutions (Selznick 1949, 135–36).

However, when trading institutional inclusion of powerful actors for their support, rulers typically face what we call the *Cooptation Dilemma*. Including powerful actors in the order by making them co-rulers may well help rulers win over support for the order to contain its contestation (Gerschewski 2013, 22), but their inclusion also gives these powerful actors access to and a say in key institutions of the order and thus impairs the control rulers otherwise may wield within the order (Abbott et al. 2020; Viola 2020b). This trade-off between inclusion and control forces rulers that engage in cooptation to walk a fine line between the inclusion of powerful actors into the order and their own control of the order. On the one hand, if they include too few actors, they may keep control but might risk contestation from those excluded. They run the risk of controlling an order that lacks support and is contested by those who are excluded from its management. On the other hand, if they include too many actors, they may gain the support needed and contain contestation from (previously) excluded actors but might lose control. They run the risk of gaining support for an order they cannot control. The ruler cannot ignore either of the two imperatives of inclusiveness and control, but their simultaneous pursuit remains elusive. As a consequence, cooptation may well help rulers to stabilize their political orders in

the short run, but it often breeds institutional instability in the long run (Kruck and Zangl 2019).

While this Cooptation Dilemma holds for all sorts of rulers that draw on cooptation to build orders, we argue that it is particularly pressing for liberal hegemons engaged in building international liberal orders. In a world that is populated not only by liberal democracies, liberal hegemons face a particularly strong tension between liberal policies and liberal procedures. The more states (including illiberal ones) they integrate into their order, the more liberal the procedures of the order become, but the less able they are to ensure liberal policies. Strongly institutionalized liberal orders, which are characterized by a strong commitment to substantive liberal policies and aspire to realize genuinely liberal procedures (Goddard et al. 2023), are therefore highly prone to endogenous instability. This endogenous instability typically unfolds over time in a reactive sequence comprising the following three stages: order building, order maintenance, and counter-institutionalization.

Order Building Cooptation: Committing Partners

When engaging in cooptation to build a political order, rulers need to balance the inclusion of political actors into the order on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the control they themselves may wield over the order. They want the order to be inclusive because rulers usually need support from other actors in their order-building efforts (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). They are hardly ever in a position to create an order just by themselves (Abbott et al. 2020). Just think of US order-building efforts after World War II, when the US organized international conferences that gave a relatively large number of participating states a say in the institution-building process. For instance, the San Francisco Conference, which led to the creation of the UN, was attended by 46 states, and the Bretton Woods Conference, which led to the establishment of the IMF and the World Bank, by 44 states. To win over the support needed, rulers include other actors into the order thereby making them co-rulers (Selznick 1949, 135–36). They trade inclusion—i.e., institutional leadership privileges—for support. In return for giving cooptees a say in the order, rulers either seek ideational or material support or both. While ideational support typically helps rulers strengthen their order's legitimacy, material support is typically needed to make the order more effective (Kruck and Zangl 2019).

However, rulers hardly ever include all actors into their order that might be able to provide material or ideational support to their order-building efforts. After all, the more inclusive the institutions of the order, the less rulers are able to control them. Therefore, rulers limit the number of actors that are fully included in the order (Viola 2020b). They might include a larger number of actors at the margins, but they will seek to limit the number of actors that are fully included into the institutional core leadership. Take again the Bretton Woods Conference as an example: While the 44 attending states had *de jure* equal say, the conference was *de facto* dominated by the US, which acted together with the UK as the champion of a new liberal order (Ikenberry 1992). Moreover, rulers seeking support usually coopt not just any actor but mostly systemically relevant, i.e., powerful actors. As they are the actors most capable of stabilizing the order while at the same time being the actors most capable of destabilizing it, it is particularly important for rulers to gain, by means of inclusion, systemically relevant actors' material and ideational support (Schmitter 1985; Dickson 2000; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Kruck and Zangl 2019;

Viola 2020a). Just as importantly, rulers prefer co-rulers with converging rather than diverging interests. To be sure, for the stabilization of the order, it might be even more advantageous to include actors with diverging interests. After all, they are the ones who are more inclined to contest the existing order than actors with converging interests. However, to limit the control loss rulers incur by the inclusion of other actors, it is more attractive for them to enlist actors that have converging interest and are thus willing to stabilize the existing order rather than overthrow it (Johnson 2016; Kruck and Zangl 2019; Abbott et al. 2020). Rulers seek to commit (powerful) partners rather than tame potential challengers. While this does not mean there is no control loss, the loss of control is much less threatening when co-rulers have converging interests (Hawkins 2006). For instance, in its order-building efforts after World War II, the US first and foremost included the UK (Heimann, Paikowsky, and Kedem 2021). Accordingly, the Bretton Woods conference is typically portrayed as a negotiation process between the US, represented by Harry Dexter White, and the UK, represented by John Maynard Keynes (Ikenberry 1992). Balancing the inclusion of political actors into the order to gain their support against the control rulers themselves may wield over the order, rulers build largely exclusive institutions by coopting few powerful actors with converging interests (Viola 2020b; Heimann, Paikowsky, and Kedem 2021). However, as they (partially) exclude actors with less power or diverging interests, these exclusive institutions are endogenously prone to being contested. They thus contain the seeds for their own contestation (and for the contestation of the broader order they underpin) by actors that are not fully included into the institutional leadership or even remain excluded. These actors will criticize the exclusive institutions as discriminatory and will be required to be included into institutional leadership. By asking the rulers to open up these institutions and give them a better say in the institutions, excluded actors will engage in order-consistent contestation, i.e., they will ask for an adaptation of institutional procedures to bring them (more) in line with the liberal principle of inclusiveness (Goddard et al. 2023). More precisely, challengers' contestation of the order can (often) be characterized as 'semi-liberal' since their efforts, on the one hand, aim at more liberal procedures (i.e., inclusiveness), whereas, on the other hand, they may, frequently, seek to dilute liberal policies.⁶ Overall, we expect that rulers engage in cooptation to build exclusive institutions, which, in turn, breeds contestation by excluded actors.

While this expectation holds for all rulers—be they national or international, liberal or non-liberal—we argue that it is particularly pressing for liberal hegemons. On the one hand, liberal hegemons are, for liberal reasons, more prone to include other states into 'their' order as they find it more difficult to justify the exclusion of other actors (Goddard et al. 2023). After all, it is a liberal core principle that those actors who are subject to an order should also have a say in it. This drive towards inclusion is further reinforced by two features that differentiate international orders from their domestic counterparts. Hegemons' power preponderance rarely reaches levels at which they are willing and able to unilaterally carry the costs of order provision. Moreover, the Westphalian institution of sovereignty also suggests that the states in the international system should be treated equally (Krasner 2019). On the other hand, liberal hegemons, again for liberal reasons, may also need to keep more control over

'their' international orders. After all, giving up control by making other states co-rulers implies that their own people become subject to foreign states that they cannot hold to the account—violating the liberal core principle of rulers' accountability (Grant and Keohane 2005). To cope with this particularly steep trade-off between inclusion and control, liberal hegemons are typically inclined to engage in organized hypocrisy, i.e., the decoupling of (liberal) talk and (illiberal) action (Krasner 1999; Brunsson 2015; Goddard et al. 2023). While they will rhetorically underline the inclusiveness of 'their' order, they will in reality keep the inclusion of other states into institutional leadership minimal. They will build institutions in which almost all states are included with *de jure* equal rights, often including veto rights, but *de facto* limit institutional leadership to an exclusive club of like-minded states. This hypocritical stance in turn drives particularly tense contestation by excluded states, which will criticize the order as inclusive in appearance, but imperialist in reality (Galtung 1971). In any case, the first implication of the Cooptation Dilemma can be hypothesized as follows:

Proposition 1: *Rulers engage in cooptation to build exclusive institutions which include merely a few powerful partners and therefore breed contestation by excluded actors.*

Order Maintaining Cooptation: Taming Challengers

As rulers include only some powerful actors with aligned interests to mobilize their support in stabilizing the order but exclude many others to keep the order under their own control, cooptation-based orders breed their own contestation by actors that are excluded from institutional power centers. For example, due to their dissatisfaction with their *de facto* exclusion from the LIO, many non-Western states demanded a New International Economic Order in the 1970s (Fioretos 2020), challenging the predominance of the IMF, the World Bank, and the GATT and calling for a strengthening of more inclusive institutions, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). To be sure, almost all orders are almost always contested to some extent, and the contestation of a cooptation-based order by those who are not included in the order and its leadership is not necessarily destabilizing (Wiener 2014; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020). Orders *can* be stable even when they are contested. However, every time the stability of the order is under threat—be it for endogenous or exogenous reasons—the rulers face an incentive to re-stabilize the order by including additional actors in return for their support. By granting access to the leadership of previously exclusive institutions to more and more previously excluded actors, rulers will try to tame their contestation. As previously excluded actors obtain, in return for their institutional support, a say in these institutions, their stakes in the order and its underpinning institutions increase, which in turn stabilizes the order and thus the rulers' reign (Dickson 2000; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Gerschewski 2013; Hale 2014; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Kruck and Zangl 2019; Frankenbach, Kruck, and Zangl 2021).

Thus, to the extent that cooptation-based orders face challenges to their stability, rulers are driven towards coopting more and more actors into the order and its underpinning institutions. For example, to accommodate non-Western powers' contestation, the G7 of Western liberal powers was complemented by the G20, which comprised a number of non-Western and also non-liberal powers. With each crisis of stability, rulers will engage in successive rounds of including previously excluded actors in return for their

⁶Their contestation thus oscillates between 'liberal reform' and 'illiberal subversion' in the terms of Goddard et al. (2023).

support. With each round of including additional actors, the rulers' control loss becomes more painful. After all, they not only have to accept that more and more previously excluded actors get a voice, but they also must accept the inclusion of actors whose interests are less and less aligned with their own. As more and more actors with less and less aligned interests are included in the order's institutional leadership, the rulers' ability to control the order is in decline. The rulers certainly lose the power to achieve desired outcomes (*Gestaltungsmacht*), i.e., the power to push through the policies they want. For example, the increasing say of non-Western powers in international development organizations, such as the World Bank, has prevented the ambitious sustainability conditions demanded by Western liberal powers for the Bank's lending programs. But sometimes rulers may even lose the power to prevent undesired outcomes (*Verhinderungsmacht*), i.e., the power to veto unwanted policies that are pushed by others (Daßler, Heinkelmann-Wild, and Kruck 2022). In the first instance, the order and its institutions may become bogged down in institutional paralysis (Goddard et al. 2023), whereas in the second instance the order and its institutions are likely to drift away from the rulers' liking (i.e., institutional slippage). For instance, as non-Western non-liberal powers have been included into (the leadership of) core human rights institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, the US has lost its power to prevent resolutions directed against its close ally Israel. Overall, we expect that the contestation of exclusive institutions drives the inclusion of more and more excluded actors by the rulers, who, in turn, lose more and more control.

While this expectation again applies to rulers of all sorts, it is particularly pertinent for liberal hegemonies. The stability of a hegemon's international order is typically more prone to threats than their domestic counterparts. After all, hegemon's power preponderance is rarely sufficient to absorb threats to the order unilaterally, not least because Westphalian sovereignty gives many states the power to veto hegemonic attempts to cope with these threats (Hale et al. 2013). International orders are thus more likely to face fundamental challenges that might require the hegemon to include additional actors to gain sufficient order support. For liberal reasons, liberal hegemonies are also more prone to include previously excluded states into institutional leadership and to include those states with unaligned interests. Due to the liberal principle of representation, it is particularly difficult for them to ignore excluded actors' demand for inclusion. Moreover, excluded states can back up their demands by—justifiably—accusing liberal hegemonies of hypocrisy (Goddard et al. 2023) when they are preaching liberal inclusiveness while in reality, they are practicing exclusive imperialist control. Finally, because of liberal principles of equality and non-discrimination, liberal hegemonies have a harder time to (justify to) only include those states that are powerful and like-minded while excluding those states that have unaligned interests (or fewer power). When facing a threat to the stability of their order, liberal hegemonies are thus more susceptible to inclusion demands also by states whose interests may diverge from their own (Fioretos 2020). In consequence, liberal hegemonies tend to suffer a particularly big loss of control when including more and more states into their order. In any case, the second implication of the Cooptation Dilemma reads as follows:

Proposition 2: *The contestation of exclusive institutions incentivizes rulers to include more and more excluded actors which in turn leads to a loss of control for the ruler.*

Counter-Institutionalization: Regaining Control

Due to the successive inclusion of more and more actors with less and less aligned interests, the rulers suffer from a loss of control over their order's core institutions. To be sure, the rulers' sensitivity to the loss of control certainly varies across rulers, across orders, and over time. But at some point, the control loss will drive any ruler's estrangement from 'their' order. Suffering from the loss of power to achieve desired outcomes—institutional paralysis—or the loss of power to prevent undesired outcomes—institutional slippage—rulers will be alienated from an order that they no longer consider 'their' own (Zürn 2018; Viola 2020b; Goddard et al. 2023). As numerous increasingly heterogeneous actors are included that may act as veto players or even steer the institution in undesired directions, rulers are likely to consider the very same institutions that once helped them gain the support needed to make the order work as an obstacle to their reign—and turn against them. For example, frustrated with gridlocked institutions of the LIO, not only Republican administrations (such as the Bush Jr. and Trump Administrations), but also Democratic administrations (such as the Obama and Biden Administrations) have retreated from their support of these institutions by withdrawing from them and/or withholding financial or political support (Fehl 2012; Stephen and Zürn 2019; Heinkelmann-Wild, Kruck, and Daßler 2021; Heinkelmann-Wild 2023; see also note 3 above). Thus, the rulers will not only be less and less inclined to defend the order against other actors' contestation, but they will also become a source of contestation themselves. Unable to control the order anymore, the rulers themselves will contest the order in general, and in particular those institutions in which powerful actors with diverging interests have gained either the power to prevent outcomes desired by the rulers or the power to push through outcomes disliked by the rulers (or both). Frustrated either by institutional paralysis in inclusive institutions or frustrated by their slippage into unwanted directions, the rulers will seek to regain control (Zürn 2018).

However, reasserting control over inclusive institutions is difficult. Precisely for the fact that rulers have included previously excluded actors into these institutions, rulers cannot simply exclude them again to regain control (Pierson 2004; Fioretos 2011). As cooptees have gained, through their inclusion in institutional power, their ability to prevent their own exclusion has also improved. Thus, regaining control by simply excluding previously included actors will hardly ever be a viable option for the rulers. Unable to turn back the clock, rulers will find it attractive to circumvent existing inclusive institutions and draw on more exclusive institutions, which they can keep under their own sway. They will shift away from inclusive institutions towards (the creation of) more exclusive institutional settings (Streck and Thelen 2005; Viola 2020b). This is what US President Joe Biden has pursued with his plans to increasingly rely, for example, in human rights and security policy, on 'clubs of democracies' rather than inclusive institutions of liberal and non-liberal states. These exclusive institutions may serve to directly steer the order, or they may be used as a coalition-building device for (re-)creating leverage over the more inclusive institutions that rulers can no longer control by themselves (Fioretos 2020; Viola 2020c). In other words, rulers will engage in counter-institutionalization that usually increases the institutional complexity of the extant order (Morse and Keohane 2014). After all, with the shift towards more exclusive institutions, the original, more inclusive institutions will usually not cease to exist. As institutions are in

general easier to create than to change or abolish, the inclusive legacy institutions will continue to co-exist in parallel to the newly created exclusive institutions the rulers have shifted to (Fioretos 2011; Viola 2020c). Overall, we expect that the control loss in inclusive institutions alienates rulers from ‘their’ order and thereby breeds their contestation by means of counter-institutionalization, i.e., the shift towards alternative, exclusive institutions, thereby propelling institutional complexity (Goddard et al. 2023).

Again, we hold that this expectation applies to all sorts of rulers but is particularly pertinent for liberal hegemons. The threshold for the impetus to reassert control over international institutions is particularly low for liberal hegemons. When including states with divergent interests into ‘their’ order, leaders of liberal hegemons—who (must) strongly care about control (see above)—are particularly sensitive to selling out national interests or liberal values (see Dickson 2000; Bolliger and Zürcher 2004). At the same time, for liberal principles of representation and equality, liberal hegemons also find it particularly difficult to reassert control over institutions by again excluding actors that were previously included. Incentives to build alternative, more exclusive institutions instead of reforming existing ones is further reinforced by two features that differentiate international orders from their domestic counterparts: states tend to enjoy at least *de jure* inclusion that allows them to veto their own exclusion while hegemons’ power preponderance is often not sufficient to simply overrule them within the institution (Tsebelis 2002). In consequence, liberal hegemons are also more likely to engage in the counter-institutionalization of exclusive institutions, driving institutional complexity within the order, instead of excluding actors from inclusive institutions (Goddard et al. 2023). More precisely, the hegemon’s contestation can be considered ‘semi-liberal’ since it may often seek to advance substantively liberal policies but, at the same time, defy the liberal principle of procedural inclusiveness.⁷ In any case, the third implication of the Cooptation Dilemma leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3: *The control loss in inclusive institutions alienates rulers from ‘their’ order and breeds their contestation through the counter-institutionalization of exclusive institutions, which in turn propels institutional complexity.*

Overall, the three propositions and their underlying mechanisms taken together describe a reactive sequence (see Rixen, Viola, and Zürn 2016; Hanrieder and Zürn 2017; Goddard et al. 2023): As rulers typically include, for control reasons, merely a minimal set of actors into the order they are creating, this breeds order contestation by excluded actors. To stabilize ‘their’ orders, rulers have an incentive to include these previously excluded actors, which then translates into a control loss. This control loss alienates rulers from their own order, thus breeding the contestation of the order by the rulers themselves (see Figure 1). This reactive sequence thus constitutes an instance of how attempts to stabilize the order by its defenders can eventually destabilize the order (see Goddard et al. 2023).⁸

⁷In the words of Goddard et al. (2023), it thus oscillates between ‘liberal counter-institutionalization’ and ‘illiberal re-ordering.’

⁸To be sure, various endogenous and exogenous forces may lead to variations at different stages of the reactive sequence. For instance, positive feedback effects of the order (see Ikenberry 2001) and rulers’ domestic politics (Musgrave 2019) might affect the Cooptation Dilemma in different types of orders or for different types of rulers in different ways. However, in this paper, we do not seek to explain variation across a general trend but focus on explaining general trends that characterize cooptation-based orders.

Cooptation and Contestation in the International Trade Order

To assess the theorized reactive sequence empirically, we analyze how the Cooptation Dilemma has led to US contestation of the international trade order based on the GATT/WTO. We selected this case because the trade order is a strongly institutionalized liberal sub-order (Goddard et al. 2023).⁹ The Cooptation Dilemma should thus be particularly severe as compared to weakly institutionalized liberal sub-orders of the LIO, such as the contemporary refugee regime (Lavenex 2023), strongly institutionalized but weakly liberal sub-orders, such as the nuclear non-proliferation regime (Tannenwald 2023), or sub-orders that are both weakly institutionalized and weakly liberal, such as the global climate regime (Thompson 2023). We thus consider the international trade order a typical case that allows us to probe whether the Cooptation Dilemma drives—through a three-stage mechanism—the theorized reactive sequence. To assess our theory in the case of the GATT/WTO, we engage in a congruence analysis of the three propositions as well as the mechanisms that underlie them (Gerring 2006). We are confident about the analytical value of our Cooptation Dilemma theory if we find evidence that the US was elusively trying to balance the opposing imperatives of inclusiveness and control in its trade order in a historical sequence that conforms to the process summarized in Figure 1. By contrast, we would consider our theory falsified if (a) the process that we observe empirically in the GATT/WTO case deviates from the theorized reactive sequence; or (b) one of the propositions or one of their underlying mechanisms defining this reactive sequence cannot be observed empirically.

Committing few Partners to Keep Control

Not only the current contestation of the international trade order, but already its creation was shaped by the Cooptation Dilemma. The US, as a liberal hegemon, promised its post-war trade order to not only advance substantive liberal principles of progressive trade liberalization and non-discrimination but also to adhere to procedural liberal principles of inclusive, rules-based multilateralism. In the Atlantic Charter, it pledged “to further the enjoyment by *all states* [...] of access, on *equal terms*, to the trade and to the raw materials of the world that are needed for their economic prosperity” and “to bring about *collaboration between all nations* in the economic field” (NATO 2018; emphasis added). This imperative to include partners in order-building indeed became evident in initial US attempts to create an International Trade Organization (ITO). Ensuing negotiations at Havana included 60 countries both from the developed Global North and the developing Global South (Drache 2000; Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013). Yet, the US soon realized that it could not tolerate the control loss implied by inclusive negotiations, abandoned the ITO, and instead shifted towards an alternative venue: the GATT (Diebold 1952; Sen 2003; Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013; Kaya 2015).

The negotiations leading to the GATT, as compared to the ITO negotiations, were rather exclusive, as the US at first only engaged with the UK and, at times, Canada. In return for supporting US-led order-building efforts, the UK gained the privilege of being consulted before other pow-

⁹While both GATT and WTO served the decisively liberal purpose of free trade, institutionalization increased significantly with the creation of the WTO.

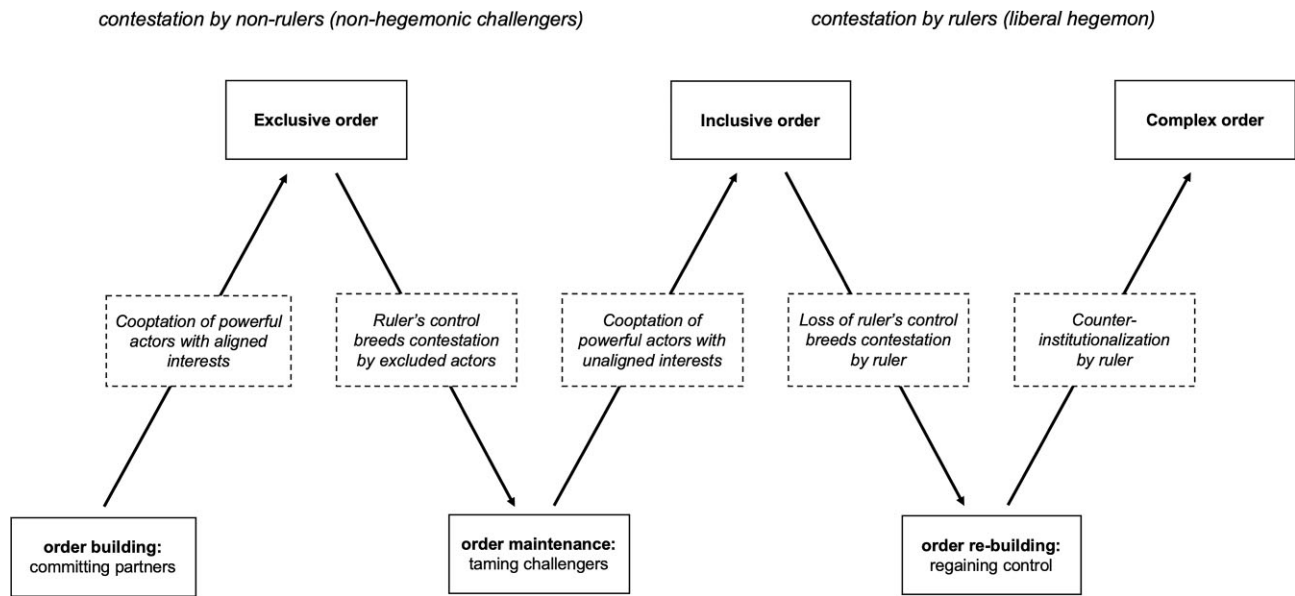


Figure 1. The Cooptation Dilemma.

ers were confronted with a US blueprint for a global order. The US then adopted together with seven Western partners the “Protocol of Provisional Application of the GATT” and thereby presented non-Western developing states with a *fait accompli*, which left them with few options but to join (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013, 68). While the newly created post-war international trade order *de jure* granted all states an equal say and a veto right, it *de facto* remained under hegemonic control and mainly benefited the US and a small group of like-minded Western states (Steinberg 2002; Gowa and Kim 2005). For example, while the GATT’s most favored nation (MFN) principle seemed to constrain the US ability to bilaterally shape trade relations, the US retained effective control through the inclusion of the principal supplier rules (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013; Goldstein and Gulotty 2014).

The post-war international trade order was quite exclusive and hardly legalized (Goddard et al. 2023), and its character did not change in the following decades when the US only included other like-minded Western powers in subsequent cooptation rounds. To enlist the support of systemically relevant and like-minded actors, institutional leadership in the GATT was first extended from the UK and Canada to other European powers and then eventually Japan. From the 1980s, the US prepared new trade rules within a core negotiation group called ‘Quad’ together with the European Economic Community, Canada, and Japan to a point where the other members could merely reject or accept it (Zangl et al. 2016). The US kept acting together with like-minded Western partners when it strived to replace the GATT by the WTO. They presented excluded states with the choice between joining the WTO at their terms—or being excluded from the trade order (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013, 89–94). After the creation of the WTO, the US continued to limit institutional leadership to like-minded Western powers. Just as under the GATT, the US restricted institutional leadership to the EU, Canada, and Japan within the ‘Quad’ (Zangl et al. 2016).

While limiting inclusion to like-minded Western powers helped the US limit its control loss, it bred contestation by excluded states with diverging interests. Developing coun-

tries highlighted the hypocritical decoupling of inclusive aspirations and exclusive practices in the ‘liberal’ international trade order to justify demands for its reform. From the 1960s onwards, many developing countries denounced the GATT for primarily serving the interests of Western developed countries (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013; Fioretos 2020). They called for more voice in the GATT and even a shift away from the US-controlled institution towards the more inclusive UNCTAD (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013, 82–84). Contestation cumulated in the thrust for a “New International Economic Order”, which would ensure “the active, full and equal participation of the developing countries in the formulation and application of all decisions that concern the international community” (UNGA 1974; emphasis added).¹⁰ Contestation by excluded non-Western states continued and even increased when the GATT was replaced by the WTO. Especially the agreements on trade-related aspects of international property rights (TRIPs) and trade-related aspects of investment measures (TRIMs) that the US and its Western partners had forced onto non-Western states through the creation of the WTO spurred criticism (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013, 89–94). Brazil and India, and later also China, became the Global South’s most important voices to contest the WTO and demand reform. By highlighting the gap between US liberal aspirations of inclusion and *de facto* exclusive negotiation practices, they challenged the WTO (Hopewell 2015; Zangl et al. 2016).¹¹

Overall, when building the post-war international trade order, the US, in line with Proposition 1, limited inclusion

¹⁰Faced with hypocrisy charges, the US in the 1970s also coopted the Global South into ‘its’ international trade order by means of informal inclusion of the most like-minded non-Western states, the unbinding promise of privileges via preferential treatment, as well as the recognition of UNCTAD as a voice for developing countries at the margins of the order (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013; Fioretos 2020). As the included states were weak and UNCTAD was a weak institution, this cooptation round did not entail a loss of hegemonic control.

¹¹The US again engaged in weak cooptation of excluded states by granting non-Western powers, such as Russia and China, membership in the WTO. While denying membership to them would have made the US vulnerable to hypocrisy charges, the expected control loss was considered bearable at that time as inclusion was only *de jure*, and the US, as it turned out, erroneously, considered China as rather like-minded due to its huge benefits from the trade order.

to like-minded Western powers. This exclusive order based on GATT/WTO in turn bred contestation by excluded non-Western states, which highlighted the gap between liberal aspirations and *de facto* hegemonic control, while demanding liberal reforms.

Taming Challengers but Losing Control

To tame the surging contestation of 'its' exclusive trade order, the US increasingly tried to include previously excluded non-Western powers into the WTO. To overcome the resistance by non-Western powers in the WTO's Doha Round and to pacify reform demands by Brazil and India, the US coopted them into its institutional leadership. Together with the EU, the US reformed the WTO's 'Quad' where they had before shared power only with Canada and Japan. With the inclusion of Brazil and India into the *de facto* power center of the WTO, the US hoped to gain their support for the trade order (Hopewell 2015; Zangl et al. 2016). In particular, the subsequent inclusion of China into the 'Quad' was based on the expectation that the rising trade power would help Western powers to foster free trade and overcome India's and Brazil's obstructive tactics in the Doha Round negotiations (Hopewell 2015; Kruck and Zangl 2019).

As the US successively included non-Western powers into 'its' exclusive international trade order, it increasingly lost hegemonic control over it. Independent of the economic rise of these non-Western powers, the US lost control, because now it had to share institutional leadership within the WTO with states that did not agree with its substantive, mostly liberal interests.¹² The inclusion of non-Western powers undermined US power to achieve desired outcomes. The inclusion of Brazil, China, and India contributed to—rather than solved—the impasse of the Doha Round negotiations since it became impossible for the US to ignore their interests by excluding them from (informal) key negotiations. With the increasing number and heterogeneity of actors included in the WTO's leadership, the US had to compromise on its policy goals. The cooptation of non-Western powers thereby gave rise to institutional paralysis in the mid-2000s as the US became unable to achieve desired policies (Hopewell 2016).

Independent of their rising economic power, the inclusion of non-Western powers into 'its' trade order also contributed to the incremental loss of US power to prevent undesired outcomes within the strongly institutionalized liberal trade order. The newly included non-Western powers frequently made use of the WTO's dispute settlement procedures to pursue their divergent policy goals and attack US trade policies by legal means (Zaccaria 2022). The US was increasingly losing cases against non-Western powers, which were—and could—no longer be prevented from making use of the dispute settlement system to enforce their divergent interests. As the WTO's rule-making branch got bogged down in institutional paralysis through the inclusion of non-Western powers and its judicative branch engaged in slippage from US interests driven by non-Western powers' complaints, the US suffered a harmful loss of control over 'its' trade order.

Overall, the US tried, in line with Proposition 2, to maintain the increasingly contested international trade order by

¹²To be sure, the US not only always pursued the liberalization of trade across all issues but also used its hegemonic control to push for illiberal protectionism when this was in its interest, for instance in the area of agriculture. At the same time, the challengers of the international trade order were not always against liberal trade policies, as they were in the case of intellectual property rules, but sometimes also pushed for liberalization, as in the case of agriculture.

including more and more previously excluded non-Western powers into the WTO, which, in turn, fell into paralysis and even slipped out of hegemonic control.

Regaining Control through Counter-Institutionalization

The loss of hegemonic control over the international trade order increasingly alienated the US from 'its' order. More and more elites in the US considered the inclusion of non-Western powers in the WTO's leadership as "useless" (Hopewell 2016, 183) for overcoming institutional paralysis of the Doha Round. For instance, the Obama Administration complained that it is "increasingly difficult" to expand trade rules because of the "emerging economies that have been unwilling to date to assume enhanced responsibilities commensurate with their increased role in the global economy."¹³ Already the Bush Administration had criticized non-Western powers' blockade of WTO negotiations as "certain countries [in the organization] are blocking an opportunity to expand trade" and "large economies like Brazil and India should not stand in the way of progress."¹⁴ President Obama underlined that "it's not enough to enforce the existing rules; as our global economy evolves, we have to ensure America plays a leading role in setting the highest standards for the rest of the world to follow," while implying that the US was struggling to do so in the WTO. Similarly, the Trump Administration bemoaned that "those [trade] institutions didn't work in the interest of the U.S. for the last 25 years"¹⁵ and the Biden Administration claimed that "less and less will be accomplished through negotiations [...] and that is certainly something we have seen over the past couple of decades."¹⁶ The Biden Administration voiced US frustration with the inclusion of ever more non-Western, non-liberal powers in the WTO very explicitly: "Much of the international economic policy of the last few decades had relied upon the premise [...] that bringing countries into the rules-based order would incentivize them to adhere to its rules. It didn't turn out that way."¹⁷ This led the Biden Administration to conclude: "We can't wait for WTO reform."¹⁸ The accounts from different administrations indicate that US alienation from the WTO was specifically driven by the loss of institutional control within the WTO (Hopewell 2021a).

As its control loss alienated the US from the strongly institutionalized liberal trade order, the US engaged in order-challenging contestation to regain control. To be clear, at least most of the time, the US grounded its attacks on liberal substantive principles of free trade. For instance, the Biden Administration emphasized that the US was "still committed to the WTO and the shared values upon which it is based."¹⁹ Yet, to realize these values, already the Obama Administration noted that the "route forward is a new form

¹³Michael Froman, President Obama's Trade Representative, cited in Hopewell 2016, 183.

¹⁴Toni Fratto, President George W. Bush's Deputy Press Secretary, cited in Reuters, August 9, 2007.

¹⁵Robert Lighthizer, President Trump's Trade Representative, cited in Baden, May 25, 2023.

¹⁶Katherine Tai, President Biden's Trade Representative, cited in Baden, May 25, 2023.

¹⁷Jake Sullivan, President Biden's National Security Adviser, White House 2023.

¹⁸Jake Sullivan, President Biden's National Security Adviser, cited in Baden, May 25, 2023.

¹⁹Jake Sullivan, President Biden's National Security Adviser, cited in Baden, May 25, 2023.

of pragmatic multilateralism.”²⁰ The “route forward” thus aims at the abandonment of existing institutional properties of inclusive multilateralism, embodied in the WTO, in favor of procedural illiberalism in bi-, mini-, and plurilateral settings. To be sure, US attacks against the WTO were most vociferous during—but not limited to—the Presidency of Donald Trump (Kruck et al. 2022). Trump called the WTO the “worst trade deal ever” and “a disaster for this country. It has been great for China and terrible for the United States”²¹ while opining that “bilateral deals are far more efficient, profitable and better for our workers” (Trump 2018). But already under administrations prior to Trump, the US began to undermine the WTO by blocking the appointment of appellate court judges, engaging in systematic non-compliance, and cutting its budgetary contributions (Hopewell 2021b; Zaccaria 2022).

The US increasingly neglected the WTO as a venue to set trade rules and instead shifted its focus to exclusive bi-, mini-, and plurilateral institutions that allowed for the exclusion of non-liberal powers (Faude 2020). The resulting counter-institutionalization efforts comprised regional trade initiatives under the Obama Administration, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and US-EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) (Hopewell 2016). When it proved difficult to ensure hegemonic control over these agreements, and thereby pacify domestic opposition, the US turned to even more exclusive agreements. Under the Trump Administration, the US focused on closing bilateral deals, such as the Korea–US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), the US-China phase-one deal, the US-Japan trade agreement (USJTA), as well as the trilateral US-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) Trade Agreement (Tran 2020). The US shift to exclusive trade institutions continued under the Presidency of Joe Biden, who is trying to build plurilateral trade alliances with like-minded powers against China as “we need to be aligned with the other democracies [...] so that we can set the rules of the road instead of having China and others dictate outcomes.”²² Importantly, rather than abandoning the international trade order for good, the US frequently strived to ‘multilateralize’ the unilateral deals it had struck in exclusive clubs by presenting the WTO with *faits accomplis*. For instance, after the US had agreed on a plurilateral Trade in Services Agreement with a group of ‘Really Good Friends of Services,’ it pushed for an according revision of WTO rules (Viola 2020c).

Thus, the US engaged in the contestation of the WTO by means of semi-liberal counter-institutionalization (Goddard et al. 2023), which aims at “moving towards a new economic order.”²³ The US shifted towards institutions with less liberal, i.e., more exclusive, procedures while professing its commitment to the liberal principles and policies of free trade. It thereby increased the institutional complexity of the international trade order, which now entails “a tangled web of hundreds, or even thousands, of different mini-institutions governing transnational flows of trade, capital, and labor” (Eagleton-Pierce 2013, 201). New exclusive institutions divide the “world trading system into numerous trading zones with different overlapping memberships” (Tran 2020). These institutions, which may be liberal in their purpose but illiberal in their procedures, coexist and sometimes

compete with the now relatively inclusive and strongly institutionalized WTO.

Overall, in line with Proposition 3, the US attempted to regain control over the paralyzed trade order by shifting, through counter-institutionalization, its focus from the increasingly inclusive WTO towards exclusive institutions, thereby propelling institutional complexity.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the liberal international trade order lends support to our claim that the Cooptation Dilemma is one of the drivers of US contestation of the LIO. The Cooptation Dilemma provides a comprehensive explanation for the full sequence of order-building, order-maintenance, and, eventually, order contestation through hegemonic counter-institutionalization. Our case study highlights an endogenous, contestation-generating reactive sequence (Goddard et al. 2023) that stems from a crucial but so far overlooked property of the LIO, i.e., its cooptation-based character. The fact that potential alternative explanations can only partially account for US contestation of the international trade order strengthens our confidence in the Cooptation Dilemma theory:

- (1) An *economic power-based explanation* may point to the relative decline of the US economy compared to those of non-Western economies—especially those of China, India, and Brazil—as the main reason why the US successively turned against its own trading order. In this explanation, it is the shift of economic power that prompted the US to turn away from the WTO—and not the institutional control loss implied by the inclusion of these emerging powers into the leadership ranks of the WTO. We certainly acknowledge that this economic power shift contributed to the US control loss in the WTO (and thus to US contestation). Yet, we hold that the economic rise of emerging economies is—at least partially—endogenous to their inclusion into the WTO and its core leadership. After all, the inclusion of these powers into the WTO was not just reflective but also contributed to their economic rise. To be sure, without the economic power shift towards non-Western economies, the US control loss implied by their inclusion would have been less severe. Yet, without the inclusion of rising economies into the WTO leadership, the control loss implied by the shift in economic power would also have been less severe. Hence, while economic power shifts have certainly contributed to the US control loss, the latter cannot be reduced to them. Rather, the inclusion of rising powers into the WTO’s leadership had an independent effect on the US control loss, and thus US contestation, *and* additionally catalyzed the economic power shift. In this view, the economic power explanation is more a part of our explanation than an alternative explanation, which contradicts our own Cooptation Dilemma theory.
- (2) A *domestic politics-based explanation* may highlight that, due to the increasing authority and politicization of international institutions, the grievances of domestic losers of economic globalization, and surging populist nationalism, domestic support in the US for the institutions of the global political economy has been going down for decades, thus explaining why US foreign policy is becoming less and less supportive of institutions such as the WTO and even turning

²⁰Michael Froman, President Obama’s Trade Representative, December 13, 2015.

²¹President Trump, cited in Isidore, March 2, 2018.

²²President Biden, cited in Lawder, November 17, 2020.

²³Katherine Tai, President Biden’s Trade Representative, cited in Baden, May 25, 2023.

against these institutions. We certainly acknowledge that domestic politics matters and that this domestic backlash against international economic institutions has contributed to the US turning against the WTO. But at the same time, we hold that this backlash against the WTO and similar institutions is—at least partially—endogenous to, and thus a result of, the inclusion of non-Western powers into the WTO core leadership. To be sure, the inclusion of non-Western powers in the WTO leadership and the concomitant control loss of the US in the WTO may not entirely explain the domestic backlash against the WTO, but it certainly contributes to its explanation. In this view, the domestic politics explanation is more part of our own explanation than an alternative explanation, which conflicts with our Cooptation Dilemma theory. Moreover, in contrast to domestic politics accounts, the Cooptation Dilemma can explain why the US contestation is driven not only by communitarian but also cosmopolitan politicians.

While explanations based on economic power or domestic politics are thus complementary to, if not even part of, our explanation, they constitute snapshot views of the US contestation of the WTO, while an explanation offered by the Cooptation Dilemma can account for the observed dynamics over time. This further increases our confidence in our theory. While our case study of the post-war international trade order may not constitute a strict test of the Cooptation Dilemma theory, it enhances our confidence in its analytical value and highlights that future research along these lines is promising.

Future research could assess whether our Cooptation Dilemma theory travels to other (sub-)orders beyond international trade, including substantively and/or procedurally less liberal orders, and to other liberal hegemony beyond the US. For instance, future research could systematically assess how the Cooptation Dilemma shaped US order building, order maintenance, and institutional contestation in different sub-orders of the LIO, such as in the cases of the Bretton Woods institutions, the UN Security Council or the UN Human Rights Council. This would help investigate to what extent the intensity of the cooptation dilemma varies across institutional (sub-)orders of the LIO and whether this potential variation is associated with differential contestation practices. Future research could also study other cooptation-based orders, such as the nineteenth-century UK-led international economic order (which was arguably less inclusive than later US rule, just as one would expect with the UK being less liberal at the time) or the inter-war order of the League of Nations (which may have failed in part due to an abundance of inclusiveness and a lack of hegemonic control). Again, this would facilitate inferences on whether variation in liberalism entails a varying intensity of the Cooptation Dilemma and, accordingly, variance in the reactive sequence it drives.

Our findings also yield important implications for the future of the LIO. While our objective in this paper was to explain the drivers of US contestation of 'its' international trade order, our theory suggests that the exclusive clubs to which the US has shifted now are prone to the Cooptation Dilemma as well. Future research should therefore study whether and under which conditions these newly created institutions become more inclusive over time—and thus more and more alike those legacy institutions from which the US has moved away. Will these new institutions vanish when the US loses control (also) within them? Will the US reorient its activities back to the legacy institutions then?

Will we see new attempts of counter-institutionalization, further driving institutional complexity? In either case, as long as the LIO is a cooptation-based order, it will be prone to dynamic instability.

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