

Political Economy, Markets, and Institutions

The Globalization Backlash Revisited: Evidence from the United States

Sienna Nordquist^{1a}, David R. K. Adler², Alexandros Kentikelenis¹

¹ Social and Political Sciences, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy, ² Nuffield College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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Popular backlash against globalization is widely considered a defining challenge to the international order. This article revisits the backlash thesis using a new survey of 1,196 likely voters in the United States and their preferences over globalization. The survey results challenge underlying assumptions of prevailing accounts of the globalization backlash. The findings suggest that, while citizens have indeed become more critical of international organizations, these criticisms do not necessarily translate into a preference for their disintegration. On the contrary, a large majority of voters—many of them critical of the performance of globalization—advocate for the US government to increase engagement with other countries on issues like the environment, the economy, and public health. Against the widespread perception of the United States as both the heartland of backlash and its key exporter to the world, we find little evidence of rising “anti-globalization” sentiment in the survey data; rather, findings point to increasing contest over its terms and conditions. The article thus calls for greater consideration of the depth, complexity, and multidimensionality of voters’ views of globalization, going beyond binary measures like pro/anti and in/out to consider the programmatic preferences that will shape the reconstruction of the international order in years to come.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise of populist parties across advanced democracies has led pundits and policymakers to fear that “globalization is under attack” (Blair 2018). The conventional account points to a growing globalization backlash among voters that has empowered their representatives to challenge core institutions of the liberal world order, including international organizations and multilateral treaties. From this premise, scholars have then debated whether the drivers of the backlash are economic (Autor et al. 2020; Fetzer 2019; Pastor and Veronesi 2018) or cultural (Cramer 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Hooghe and Marks 2009) in nature.

Despite increasing concern about the consequences of a globalization backlash, no study—to our knowledge—has explicitly measured its contemporary prevalence. In some cases, studies are constrained by data that predate the backlash period (Torgler 2008; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Kaya and Walker 2014; Bearce and Jolliff Scott 2019; Walter 2021). Other studies presuppose the existence of a backlash

by forcing respondents to take a position in a hypothetical trade-off—for example, more domestic investment or more international aid—and then coding the data along a spectrum from pro-globalization to anti-globalization (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Bearce and Tuxhorn 2017; Naoi 2020). Still other work examines the pattern of voting for populist candidates such as Donald Trump or polarizing causes such as Brexit, and interprets ballot box decisions as evidence of backlash (Colantone and Stanig 2018; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Across these strands of work, scholars have made important efforts to understand the indirect and second-order consequences of anti-globalization sentiments, but they have been limited in their efforts to determine the extent of a backlash at the level of voter preferences.

This research note looks directly at those preferences. Our aim is to provide a descriptive portrait of prevailing attitudes to globalization from which a more empirically rigorous debate about the backlash can proceed. What do people think about globalization? What is their evaluation of the international organizations (IOs) that govern it? And

a Correspondence: sienna.nordquist@phd.unibocconi.it

what are their preferences over its future direction? To answer these questions, we commissioned a survey of likely voters across the United States in September 2021,¹ with a sample of 1,196 respondents weighted to maximize representation across the electorate.²

The country choice of the United States was made for two reasons. First, the United States offers a “most likely” case of the globalization backlash, where scholars have identified anti-globalization positions among both its left- and right-populist candidates (Stiglitz 2018; Scheve and Slaughter 2018; Frieden 2019). Second, the United States exerts an outsize influence in setting the parameters of globalization in the international community at large (Walter 2021; Giani and Méon 2021). A more holistic account of mass preferences in the United States is thus key to our evaluation of the backlash thesis worldwide.³

We begin by offering a tractable definition of the backlash thesis according to its two constituent claims. First, *people are increasingly discontent with the processes of international integration*. The backlash thesis requires a large and growing proportion of voters in advanced democracies to express anger, resentment, or general dissatisfaction with the globalization status quo. Second, *citizens’ discontent translates into a preference for international disintegration*. The backlash thesis implies that dissatisfaction leads voters to prefer exit from international institutions, violation of their norms, or other forms of unilateral action by their respective national governments.

The survey findings both clarify and challenge the backlash thesis. Our survey respondents indeed report discontent with existing structures of globalization—but their criticism does not translate into a preference for disintegration. Rather, they prefer strong, if reformed, models of international engagement. A majority of respondents not only support the US government dedicating greater attention to international coordination on key issues like health, environment, and the economy; they also report either changing their mind in the past five years to support *more* international coordination, or not changing their mind at all. In other words, neither static nor dynamic descriptions of the backlash find evidence in our survey data, suggesting that citizens themselves are not the primary drivers of the populist turn against the institutions of the liberal international order.

Revising the empirical record on the globalization backlash in this way helps to redefine the concept of “anti-globalization” more broadly. Specifically, the findings of the

survey suggest that the label of anti-globalization may be too broad of a conceptual brush. Rather, the anti-globalization label obscures underlying criticisms that voters hold about the institutions, decision-making processes, and outcomes of global governance. Future research may therefore dive into the nuanced views that citizens hold about globalization to illuminate what voters want, and why their elected representatives might opt for nonrepresentative positions on policies related to globalization.

This research note is structured as follows. First, we focus on preferences over key international institutions such as the United Nations. Next, we focus on preferences over US engagement with other nations on issues such as the environment, the economy, and health. We conclude by outlining areas for future research.

2. INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

To revisit the globalization backlash thesis, we begin by evaluating mass preferences over international organizations. These institutions occupy a large space in the literature on globalization’s prospects, where preferences are frequently operationalized through trust, confidence, and performance assessments of organizations like the United Nations (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2016; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Kaya and Walker 2014). IO membership reflects a country’s willingness and ability to influence international politics, and its commitment to multilateralism (Gygli et al. 2019, 557–58). The aggregate of a country’s IO memberships is also frequently used to measure political globalization (Dreher, Gassebner, and Siemers 2012, 527), while more recent studies on “anti-globalization” have focused on populist leaders’ efforts to turn IOs into political targets (Kiratli and Schlipphak, forthcoming). Estimating public opinion on IOs—as the primary site of multilateralism and as the primary vehicle for international engagement—is thus vital for making sense of the undercurrents in public perspectives on globalization more broadly (Steffek 2015; Higgott 2000).

Existing literature, however, is both constrained by data availability and inconclusive regarding public preferences over IOs. Some studies suggest consistent popular support for international organizations (Torgler 2008; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Kaya and Walker 2014), while others suggest that these attitudes have become less popular over time (Bearce and Jolliff Scott 2019). Across all such studies,

1 Data for Progress employs quota random sampling among registered voters using quotas on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and education. The weights are then applied using voter models from a commercial voter file and third-party turnout modeling with the main weighting variables being age, gender, education, geography, race, and 2020 vote recall. Respondents are recruited via a web panel. The survey received ethics approval from Oxford University’s CUREC office with approval reference #C1A_21_017:C1A_21_023.

2 A total of 1,479 respondents were surveyed, but 301 observations were immediately dropped because their assigned weight was zero by the survey firm, thereby indicating they did not complete the survey or there were other inconsistencies requiring exclusion. More information about dropped responses and the frequency with which respondents answered “don’t know” is provided in online appendix 2. Data for Progress uses raking with regularization to produce sample weights.

3 We present the descriptive statistics of this survey in online appendix 1. Additionally, survey weights provided by Data for Progress were applied in the statistical analyses to improve external validity of the results and their representativeness of the American population more generally.

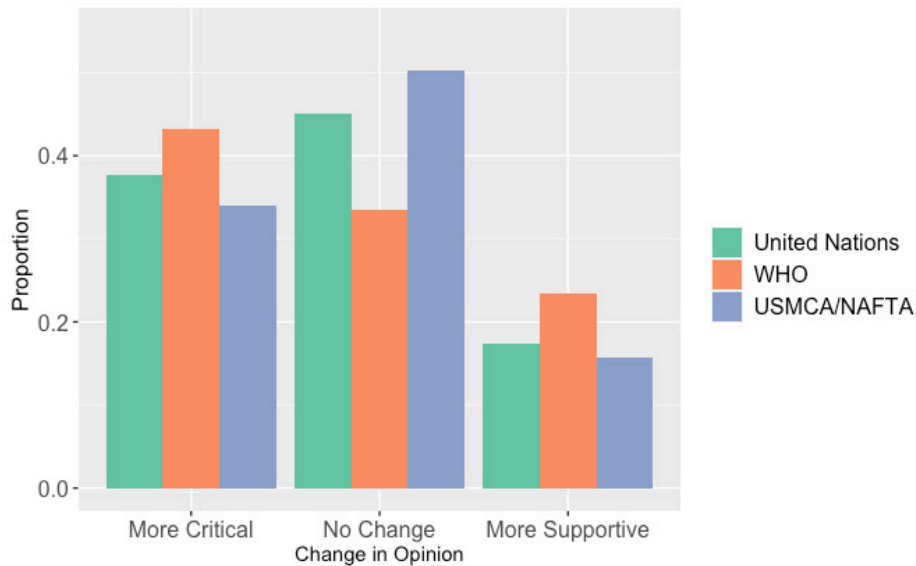


Figure 1. Proportion table on how views have reportedly changed vis-à-vis international institutions

however, the data deployed to measure mass preferences predates the onset of the posited backlash against globalization. Bearce and Jolliff Scott (2019), like Walter (2021), rely on waves of the International Social Survey from 1995, 2003, and 2013, which not only fail to capture the present backlash period but also focus exclusively on respondents' views of IO decision-making processes, rather than preferences for their reform. These data constraints point to the need for more recent evidence to interrogate voter preferences over IOs, as well as to disaggregate the constituent claims of the backlash thesis.

In this section, we thus aim to evaluate these distinct claims with reference to three prominent international institutions and agreements: the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 2018. These were selected to be indicative of wider trends in public opinion on globalization. The UN is a focal point in global governance and one of the most recognized by publics (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015, 453; Brutger and Clark 2022; Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2023); the WHO became one of the most visible and contested IOs in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which these data were collected; and the NAFTA-USMCA is widely considered both the most controversial and the most impactful trade agreement in the lives of Americans and their neighbors (Applebaum 2018; Wayne and Bitar 2022).

In line with prevailing views on the globalization backlash, our survey findings support the argument that electorates are becoming more critical of the institutional manifestations of globalization. As shown in the summary statistics presented in [figure 1](#),⁴ in the past five years, between 34 and 43 percent of survey respondents report becoming more critically predisposed toward the UN, the WHO, and the USMCA. In contrast, fewer than one in four respondents report becoming more supportive of these institutions, with the remainder reporting no change in views.

Our initial findings therefore point to heightened criticism of international institutions.⁵ But this criticism may be linked to different underlying preferences over the appropriate course of action to redress perceived failures in IO performance. The diversity of prescriptive preferences is often lost in prevailing accounts of the backlash. Several studies have seized on in-or-out referenda like Brexit, for example, to examine the origins of the backlash (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018). Others have examined the relationship between preferences for EU exit given the Brexit counterfactual (De Vries 2018; Walter 2021), measuring the contagion effect at both demand and supply sides of mass politics (Bischof and Wagner 2019). Yet the focus on votes to exit—real or hypothetical—can obscure preferences for reform, transformation, or reconstruction of international institutions. We therefore explore the second prong of the backlash thesis by considering re-

⁴ For this question, survey participants indicated whether their views became more critical or more supportive of the UN, WHO, and USMCA/NAFTA, or whether they did not change their mind in the last five years.

⁵ In online appendix 3, we highlight how this criticism relates to key demographic features of the sample. We use OLS regressions to demonstrate that there is a strong correlation with Republican Party affiliation and more critical changes in perception of each IO, while high income status is correlated with greater negative perception of the WHO, and suburban living is negatively correlated with a negative perception of the UN. Despite the importance of party affiliation to baseline perceptions of IOs, the results in this paper overwhelmingly demonstrate that the American public is less critical of globalization than anticipated.

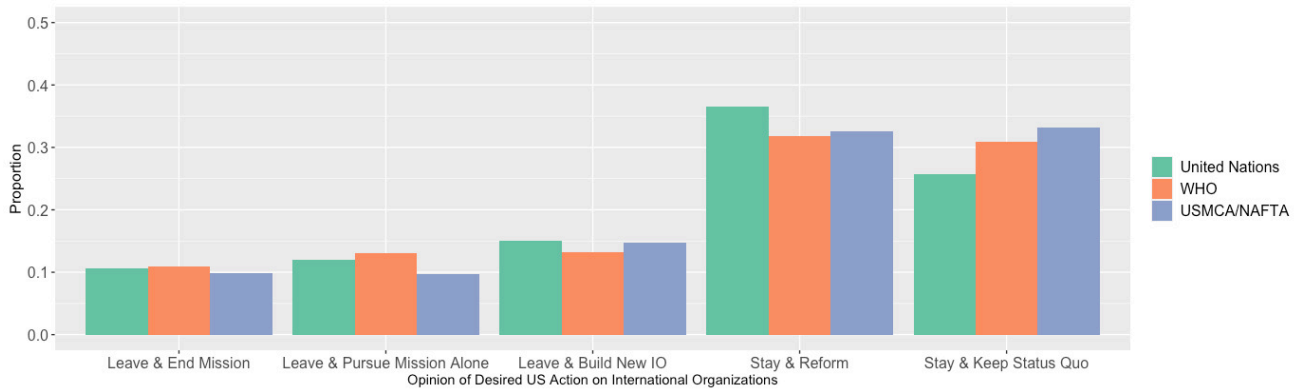


Figure 2. Proportion table on respondents' preferences vis-à-vis international institutions

spondents' preferences over US engagement with IOs and their stated missions.

Our findings challenge the assumption of a mechanical connection between the two constituent parts of the backlash thesis—namely, that critical opinions of IOs translate into calls for their disintegration. Overall, the proportion of US voters who prefer to maintain the IO status quo is not negligible: 26 percent, 31 percent, and 33 percent prefer to stay in the UN, WHO, and USMCA without reforms to their operations, respectively. As shown in [figure 2](#), a closer inspection of the data provides more nuance to our finding that a high proportion of Americans are dissatisfied with international organization membership. Only about 10 percent of respondents can be classified as true “disintegrationists,” preferring the United States to leave institutions like the UN, WHO, and USMCA and abandon their underlying missions. Another 10 to 13 percent preferred purely unilateral approaches, plausibly echoing the anti-multilateralism approach of the Trump administration while still supporting the principle of international cooperation based on ad hoc bilateral “deals.” Remaining respondents favored international engagement, whether through new multilateral structures, through reforming existing ones, or through simply maintaining the status quo. Mass discontent with globalization, we find, is not translating into mass preferences for IO disintegration or US disengagement from their objectives.

3. POLICY AREAS

Preferences over actually existing international organizations are an important indicator for the study of the globalization backlash. But they offer an incomplete picture. Voters rarely engage directly with IOs, granting a high degree of supply-side influence of parties and politicians on the views of their voters (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). To evaluate the prevalence of underlying backlash preferences among voters, then, we must also query their views of US engagement with international partners to address policy areas that affect their everyday lives.

To do so, we look at three areas: environmental issues, infectious diseases, and living standards. We select these three as policy areas with clear global consequence but

strong national competence. The spread of a viral pandemic such as COVID-19 threatens the health of citizens across the world; but national governments were tasked with designing national strategies to confront the virus and to engage with multilateral organizations such as the WHO. The same can be said of the climate crisis and the national plans to adapt to it. And in a highly integrated national economy, citizens' living standards may be interdependent across borders, but national governments—particularly in less policy-constrained northern countries like the United States—bear the ultimate responsibility for a policy agenda to raise them. All three policy areas thus query voters' assessment of whether international engagement is a benefit or a drawback for national policy outcomes.

[Figure 3](#) presents a challenge to the backlash thesis. Against the presumption (e.g., Frieden 2019) that US respondents may prefer to distance their country from the international community, [figure 3](#) shows that US survey participants overwhelmingly want the US to engage *more* with other countries on these three key issues. Even if, as reported in the previous section, a third of respondents call for the United States to leave key IOs, nearly 80 percent of respondents still want the United States to have the same or more multilateral engagement with other countries. When survey results are pooled across the different areas of engagement, an average of 22.3 percent of respondents want the current level of attention, a mean of 24.5 percent desire slightly more attention, and an average of 34.5 percent want far more attention on multilateral engagement, for a total of 81.3 percent.

Interestingly, support for more attention on US engagement with other countries was weakest when respondents were provided with an abstract (rather than issue-specific) frame to the question. Only 15.6 percent of respondents wanted “far more attention” on engagement overall, while 40.8 percent, 46.3 percent, and 35.4 percent wanted this same level of attention applied to engagement on environmental issues, infectious diseases, and living standards, respectively. This finding suggests that globalization preferences cannot be accurately captured by surface-level questions—and may account for why previous studies overstate the extent of the globalization backlash. When respondents were prompted to go deeper than surface level to

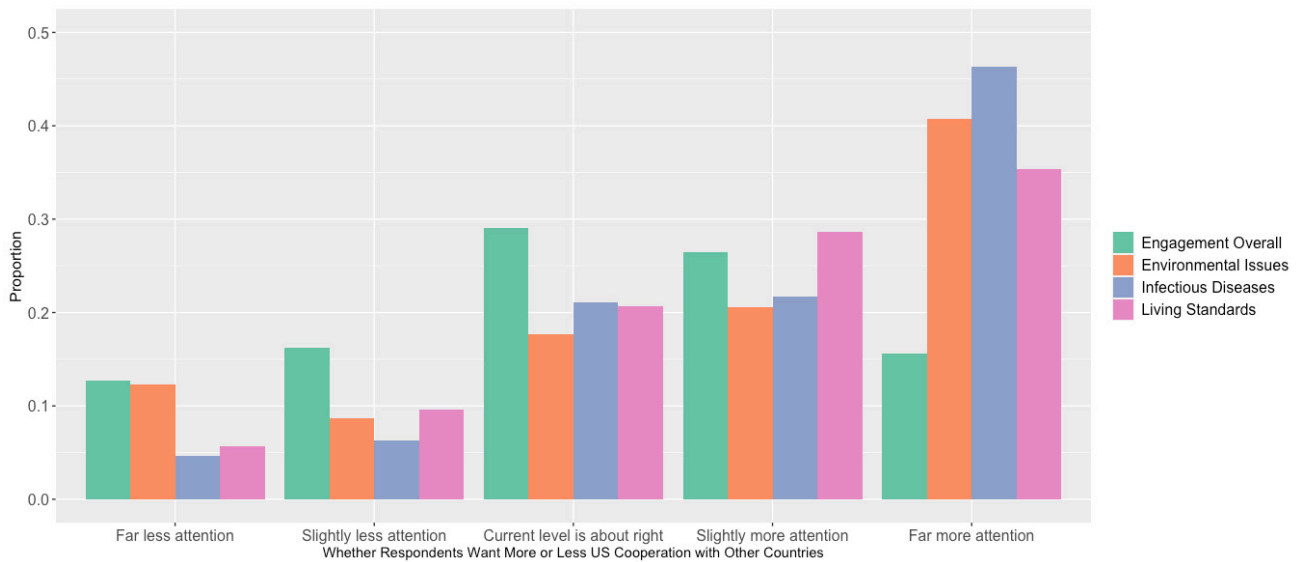


Figure 3. “Should the US devote more attention or less attention to working with other countries, or is the current level about right?”

account for specific issues such as health, environment, and the economy, they were much more supportive of international engagement.

The survey reports of respondents’ evolving preferences are more expository. We asked respondents to report whether they have changed their mind in the past five years to prefer that the United States dedicate more or less attention to working with other countries. As [figure 4](#) shows, contrary to the expectations of the backlash thesis, few respondents report changing their mind to want *less* attention on these areas of engagement. Rather, a majority of respondents report no change in perspective on the key issues of global governance, and a large share (28–43 percent) supported providing more attention to engagement on all the issues of interest. Against increasingly loud calls for the United States to reverse the process of international integration, then, most US voters either kept stable views on the favorability of engagement with other countries or began to demand *more* attention on multilateral engagement on critical issues.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This article revisits the “globalization backlash” thesis with original data collected from survey respondents in the United States. By providing a descriptive portrait of the attitudes, assessments, and prescriptions for globalization, the survey aimed to interrogate the underlying assumptions of the backlash literature that primarily relies on binary variables such as referenda and runoff electoral outcomes. In this way, the article aimed to set the long-standing backlash debate on firmer conceptual and empirical ground.

The findings help to clarify the backlash thesis. Against the conventional wisdom that a large and increasing proportion of voters are “anti-globalization,” survey findings suggest high levels of support for international engagement

on key issues like health, living standards, and environmental protection. A significant proportion of voters may report increasing criticisms of international organizations such as the United Nations or the World Health Organization, but these criticisms are not evident signs of a “backlash”; even critical voters prefer reform or refoundation of existing international organizations over abandoning their stated mission.

The backlash literature frequently overlooks the role that programmatic preferences play in the development and expression of citizens’ demands on globalization and its institutions. The evidence presented in this article suggests that even in a country like the United States—the focus of the majority of backlash studies—voters are not neatly divided between pro- and anti-globalization positions. On the contrary, by documenting both the broad commitment to multilateralism and the diverse criticisms of its configuration, the survey data suggest that mass preferences in the United States are somewhere in the middle: they call not to abandon international institutions but rather to reform, reshape, and reimagine them.

The question remains, then, how these preferences are processed by political systems both inside the United States and across the countries caught in the crosshairs of the globalization backlash. Future research can thus move in two directions. The first can continue to explore the demand-side story of the globalization backlash. Research can return to US respondents to examine the evolution of their attitudes across successive administrations and expand this analysis to account for additional countries that appear to have experienced a similar reaction to the impact of globalization. The second direction can turn to the supply-side one, examining how mass preferences travel from voters’ minds into the engines of party-political organization (De Vries 2018). If voters alone cannot be blamed for the rise of anti-globalization politics, then future research can uncover under which conditions political entrepreneurs

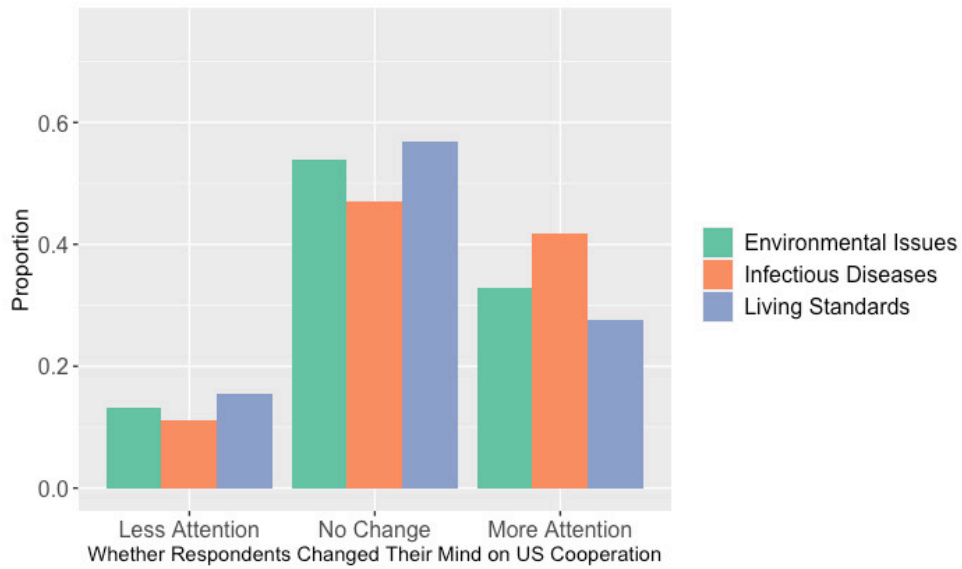


Figure 4. Proportion tables of whether respondents report changing their mind to want more or less attention on US engagement with other countries

succeed in pushing this politics against the preferences of their electorate, and under which conditions that electorate pushes back (De Vries and Hobolt 2020).

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Online appendices are available here: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/nordquist-adler-kentikelenis>.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

A replication file is available at the Harvard Dataverse for public accessibility. <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/nordquist-adler-kentikelenis>.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Sienna Nordquist is a third-year PhD student in social and political science at Bocconi University in Milan, Italy.

David R. K. Adler is a doctoral candidate at Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

Alexandros Kentikelenis is an associate professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of Bocconi University in Milan. He has coauthored two books and published over fifty articles in leading social science journals on topics related to globalization and global governance.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Online appendices

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