



Christina L. Davis. 2023. *Discriminatory Clubs: The Geopolitics of International Organizations*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

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Discriminatory Clubs is historically rich, econometrically sophisticated and wide-ranging in scope. It is a challenging and important book that demands a careful reading by scholars of international relations and is destined to be read by many of their students. The fundamental argument is that membership in international organizations (IOs) is not a formal design choice, but rather an outcome of informal politics. Membership is influenced by formal institutional features such as voting and accession procedures, which can be constraining to varying degrees; but formal features always leave substantial room for discretion, which can be manipulated by powerful states and used to discriminate among applicants. Indeed, IO accession procedures are generally left deliberately vague because the founding members value this discretion. Discretion is useful because membership in an IO confers *relationship benefits* such as recognition and legitimacy as well as functional benefits such as market access and regulatory harmonization, and the relationship value of belonging to the club depends upon the identity of the other members. The book argues that the prevailing view of IO membership is overly narrow because it focuses on issue-specific functionalist logic and neglects the broader social context that makes belonging to an IO meaningful.

A key corollary of this argument is that IOs discriminate on the basis of security interests. The idea recalls Karl Deutsch's (1957) concept of "pluralistic security communities," where confidence that force will not be used makes deep cooperation possible. In Davis' argument, the potential for cooperation created by security ties is reinforced because leading states discriminate in favor of their allies to distribute economic resources to friendly states, and members select into IOs with like-minded countries in order to signal their alignment. Quantitative analyses show strong correlations between accession to IOs and alliances with

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current members or with the leading member country (with the greatest GDP), and the results hold for the population of intergovernmental organizations, for a subset of regional economic organizations, and for a subset of purportedly universal-membership organizations. Since the evidence suggests that IO membership is endogenous to security alignment, Davis argues, it may be time to revisit the conclusions of studies that find that joint IO memberships reduce international conflict.

The book effectively demonstrates the relationship value of IO membership through a series of historical examples. Japan joined the Universal Postal Union in 1877 as part of its effort to establish legal standing as a sovereign country and throw off unequal trade treaties, and it joined the League of Nations in 1920 not because its leaders thought the existence of the organization was beneficial, but because it gave Japan a place at the table. Mexico and Korea sought to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) not in order to liberalize their capital markets, but because it was a prestigious club and membership was expected to lower the interest rates on their foreign debt. Taiwan and apartheid South Africa tried to hold on to membership in every technical organization they could for the sake of legal sovereignty and international legitimacy, respectively. Finally expelled from the Universal Postal Union in the 1980s, South African leaders consoled themselves that the mail was still delivered in Taiwan, although it too was no longer a member. The Palestinian Authority has leveraged its membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to gain standing in the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

One of the most intriguing arguments of the book is that the accession process can get out of control, leading to a demand for new, narrower organizations. “Vague rules allow entry by some states that are not high compliers, and the lack of membership conditionality to expel for noncompliance means that they can stay. Together this dynamic generates momentum toward overexpansion” (p. 396). The expansion of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to 164 members by 2023 is a signature accomplishment of globalization, but the resulting deadlock in the Doha round has moved the center of gravity of trade bargaining to preferential trade agreements. In addition, new geopolitical rivalries create new incentives. “With the shift to rivalry with China, moving trade activity into other arenas offers more potential to build on a security coalition” (p. 396). Similarly, Davis reflects on Brexit from the perspective of the eastern expansion of European Union membership:

The UK was at the forefront of advocating for this inclusive approach. Nevertheless, economic competition from low-cost labor and production in the new members raised problems for the UK, and its government also lost influence over policies within the unwieldy decision-making of the large group of heterogeneous countries. Indeed, the challenge of collective decisions among such an expanded group lay at the center of the push to increase the policies subject to majority voting, with more pooling of sovereignty. The resulting backlash led to disintegration. Would the UK have stayed part of a smaller and more homogenous European Community in the absence of broadening and deepening? (p. 300)

This is an intriguing question. More generally, from the point of view of an IO member, admitting another country sets in motion a dynamic process that is only foreseeable to a limited degree, and which may undermine one's own commitment to the organization. An alternative to exit may be to create a new club with a narrower membership, so that the progressive broadening of IO membership creates demand for new discriminatory clubs.

The book opens up a wide range of interesting questions that it is unable to fully resolve, so graduate students should have no fear that all of the space for research on IO membership has been occupied.

Hierarchy vs. anarchy The econometric specifications that use alliances with the leading state rather than with the average member perform about equally well to predict IO memberships, and the examples about informal politics in organizations in which the United States is a member almost always revolve around US decisions (e.g., US sponsorship of Japan's membership in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the OECD). Indeed, alignment with or against the United States was crucial even in organizations where the United States was not a member. Davis points out that France blocked UK membership in the European Economic Community in the 1960s mainly because of UK alignment with the United States, and alignment vis-à-vis the United States played a key role in membership choices in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Still, Davis shies away from taking a position on whether security issues operate in terms of hierarchy or of anarchy. At times it sounds like clubs that include the United States are US clubs, and at others it sounds like the members of a club are functionally equal. Is it true that the informal politics of IO membership generally reflects the structural power of leading states (Stone, 2011), or is it more important to emphasize that the formal rules of some IOs allow weak countries to extract rents (Schneider, 2009)?

Security vs. ideology The book uses ideal points derived from United Nations General Assembly voting interchangeably with alliance portfolios to measure the relationship value of membership in an IO, and both perform well in predicting membership. Indeed, both outperform regime type, which appears to predict joining some IOs and not others. On one hand, the robustness to alternative measures of relationship value is reassuring for a theory about discrimination in international clubs. On the other hand, however, this raises the question of whether the relationship that is at stake is really security or something else that is correlated with security alliances, such as cultural affinity, mixed-economy capitalism, humanitarian values, or ideology (Voeten, 2021). The book acknowledges that alliances are endogenous and is careful in discussing the identification issue that makes it problematic to make causal claims. Security is an important interpretive frame for the book, however, and this is a question that is full of policy implications. We might expect the integration of China into global institutions to offer less insulation against major conflict if IO memberships are fundamentally about security than if they are mainly driven by shared values or functional demand for cooperation in particular issue areas.

Self-selection vs. screening The book argues that two selection mechanisms are at work to generate the correlation between alliances and IO memberships: countries self-select into like-minded clubs and clubs screen for like-minded partners. In the analysis on WTO membership, Davis and chapter co-author Meredith Wilf are able to use application dates and accession dates to separately estimate application and admission processes, and they find that alliance affinity predicts both. For the other organizations we have partial observability: we observe when a country joins an organization, but in the other cases we do not observe whether the country has applied. It seems likely that self-selection and screening operate differently in different institutional contexts, and it would be interesting to investigate this further. In addition, it seems likely that the country's decision to apply is strategically related to the IO's decision to admit, which suggests that using structural estimation could uncover new relationships (Bas & Stone, 2014). For example, alliances might affect countries' propensity to apply to join the WTO only because countries that are aligned against the United States expect their applications to the WTO to be rejected.

It is safe to predict that *Discriminatory Clubs* will generate a substantial debate and find a prominent place in course syllabi. It rejects the functionalist logic that underlies most research on IO membership, arguing that IOs have significance far beyond the issue areas that they nominally govern. It proposes a parsimonious alternative theory of membership: countries join clubs with countries that share their security interests.

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