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Policy Brief
Why do Countries Walk Away from International Organizations? And What do Current Breakups Mean for Global Politics?

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Global Governance Innovation

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Key insights and recommendations

Main argument and findings:

- State withdrawal from an international organization (IO) is often a last-ditch attempt to negotiate institutional change when internal strategies have not been successful.
- Countries that withdraw from IOs have often become preference outliers compared to other members and frequently are declining in their power compared to others.
- Domestic politics can drive withdrawals. Some politicians find the rhetoric of withdrawal compelling with certain voter groups if they tie IO exit to national interests.
- Threats and other rhetoric to leave IOs are common, but most withdrawal threats have not been realized.
- Withdrawal is costly for the exiting State. It damages their reputation as a reliable partner which can affect market actors' and other countries' perceptions of the country's credibility for keeping its commitments.
- Withdrawal is not usually linked to IO death, but the exit of founding members increases the risk of IO death.

Correcting common misperceptions:

- Populism and nationalism are not systematically linked to IO withdrawals. Further, these are just two of the ways that countries' dissatisfaction with IOs have manifested over time.
- Despite high profile recent events, IO withdrawal is not increasing, especially when situated among the increasing number of IOs in existence.
- While some withdrawals are clustered, it's not the norm to see contagion across countries. Instead, clusters can happen during times of geopolitical turmoil or during domestic changes, prompting one country to leave several IOs.
- Withdrawals are usually temporary rather than terminal; in over half of cases countries have returned to the same IO they had left (after domestic politics change or the IO itself changes).

Recommendations:

- Withdrawal can be disruptive, leading to decreased funding and leadership vacuums. Still, it can leave a more unified set of members who could potentially view the institutional disruption as an opportunity to advance reforms and cooperation.
- IOs should avoid responding to every member request for change ad hoc and instead establish periodic, structured reflections among all Member States to assess emerging grievances and institutional performance – enabling concerns to be addressed in a coordinated and transparent manner.
- When a Member State announces its intention to withdraw, remaining members should not treat the decision as a *fait accompli*. IOs should also remain open to future reengagement, as withdrawing States often return when IOs change, domestic political conditions shift or the costs of exit become clear.

Challenge

Exiting international organizations (IOs) seems to be the strategy *du jour* in international relations. Recent high-profile events underscore this impression: Brexit, the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal from the European Union, was finalized in 2020; and the United States (US) announced withdrawals from IOs like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) during both Trump administrations. More recently, the US announced plans to leave 66 international institutions and bodies.[1]

Lest one think IO withdrawals are just a US or industrialized-country phenomenon, it is important to recall that there have been recent IO exits in the Global South too. Further, it is useful to keep in mind that exits can be voluntary or forced. For example, in the last few years, several States in the Sahel – Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – were suspended from African regional organizations after coup d'etats. In an effort to save face, those States subsequently withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States and formed the Alliance of Sahel States.[2] Further, Russia was suspended from the Council of Baltic Sea States and the United Nations (UN) World Tourism Organization after it invaded Ukraine in 2022.

IO withdrawals are important because they can affect institutional funding, shift cooperative action to different forums, and change the IO's membership makeup – which might have implications for international cooperation more broadly.

So why do countries withdraw from international organizations? Is it indeed an increasingly common strategy in world politics? What can policymakers learn about today's IO departures by studying the past? And what role might withdrawals play in the stability of the global order?

Approach

Our recent book, *Exit from International Organizations: Costly Negotiation for Institutional Change*,[3] tackles these questions. We analysed IO withdrawals historically to push against recency bias; we knew of famous cases from the past – such as Japan, Italy and Germany leaving the League of Nations – and surmised that a longer-term view would be helpful for a more complete understanding of withdrawal. To understand whether recent departures are typical cases of withdrawal, we compiled a comprehensive dataset of IO exits. We collected this information primarily from media sources and supplemented this evidence with IO archives and other secondary sources. Data collection was time-consuming: while all IOs have their own processes for announcing membership changes, they don't necessarily report them to a common repository. Since the news

1 President Donald J. Trump, "Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States", Presidential Memoranda, Washington DC, 7 January 2026. Available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-international-organizations-conventions-and-treaties-that-are-contrary-to-the-interests-of-the-united-states/.

2 Chris Ewokor, "Three military-run states leave West African bloc – what will change?", *BBC News*, 29 January 2025.

3 Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, *Exit from International Organizations: Costly Negotiation for Institutional Change* (Cambridge University Press, 2025). Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/exit-from-international-organizations/46327C33B16CEB-844CA5D419964752D5.

media picks up on membership exits – underscoring their importance – we were able to use a meta search engine (Factiva) to create a database.

We found 488 cases of IO exits that have occurred since 1914 across 198 countries and 534 IOs. This includes both withdrawals and forced suspensions (which sometimes occur when States violate key aspects of IO commitments).[4] By "international organizations", we mean formal, treaty-based institutions with at least three Member States, a secretariat and regular meetings.

In this policy brief, we focus on withdrawals because of their frequency (around 80 per cent of exit cases) and their current salience, but the book provides many similar conclusions about suspensions. Looking at withdrawals with this longer-term lens helps guard against the risk of generalizing from a few recent, prominent cases. We therefore study broad patterns in IO withdrawals across countries, organizations, issue areas and time using both statistical tests as well as qualitative case studies with material from field work, archives and interviews.

Section 1

What are the main drivers of international organization withdrawal?

Countries usually withdraw from IOs as a bargaining tool to negotiate institutional change. When countries first create IOs, they compromise on their design and policies with other members to balance costs and benefits. As national power and preferences shift, and as IOs and the world changes around them, IOs can fall short of different countries' goals. Dissatisfied countries can use internal strategies to push for updates, for example using the power of their vote, funding, leadership or other forms of diplomacy to produce change. But this doesn't always work, and sometimes countries feel the need to take more drastic measures to invoke change. One strategy that countries use is threatening to remove their membership. This can give some countries more leverage to get what they want because remaining countries are faced with the real possibility of having to continue without them. Withdrawal can upend the status quo which might be sufficient to inspire change that could not otherwise be accomplished.

Given this logic (that IO withdrawal is often a last-ditch attempt at negotiating IO change), our book explains that exit is usually driven by factors related to bargaining. Specifically, withdrawal is often driven by countries' dissatisfaction with the IO, their divergence from other members' preferred policies, and their declining power relative to other States. Some common themes emerging from our theoretical argument and empirical analyses are provided below.

Countries' dissatisfaction with IOs can increase over time and result in them desiring institutional change. Their dissatisfaction can include the IO's policy direction, the choice of leaders, their State's share of financial contributions or even their relations with other Member States. When internal mechanisms fail, States may turn to a brinksmanship strategy of threatening to leave. Thought of this way, withdrawal is often an attempt to *improve* IO rules or policies in a State's favour, which is

4 For full list see ibid., pp. 325-349. Also see Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "Credible Commitments? Explaining IGO Suspensions to Sanction Political Backsliding," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 63, No. 1 (2019), pp. 139–152.

different than thinking of withdrawal as completely and terminally walking away from the table.

Countries that become outliers in their preferred policies (as compared to other members) are also more likely to withdraw. This is because as they move away from other countries' preferred policies, they are both more likely to be dissatisfied with current IO policies and less able to successfully negotiate internal solutions. They thus have incentives to adopt more extreme tactics to try to get what they want. Thought of this way, withdrawal is often a type of last-ditch strategy to negotiate change.

Countries that are declining in power are also more likely to withdraw. This is because their bargaining power to negotiate is likely to diminish in the near future. They view their current negotiating potential as being at a relative peak which increases the appeal of using a more drastic tactic like exit. Conversely, rising countries have incentives to wait for renegotiation as they would be in a stronger position in the future.

There are many other factors that reinforce the view that withdrawal is often a tool for negotiation. By some calculations, about 90 per cent of withdrawal threats are not implemented.[5] One example is President Trump's 2018 threat to withdraw from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). President Trump repeatedly claimed that the NATO alliance was obsolete and unfair in its cost allocation. After threatening a US exit from NATO, other countries sped up implementation of the 2014 agreement to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence and launched new initiatives. Ultimately, the US did not withdraw from NATO even if the threat felt palpable and IO exit was headline news. Another example is President Trump's threat to leave the Universal Postal Union (UPU) in 2018. Here, he used withdrawal to successfully negotiate lower costs for the US, particularly in comparison to China, and then rescinded his threat to leave before the mandated withdrawal waiting period expired.

Still, countries don't use withdrawals and withdrawal threats very often, because it is costly and the conditions under which it can lead to change are quite nuanced.[6] Countries don't want to get a reputation for "crying wolf" too often or withdrawal ceases to be a credible threat. This means that withdrawal has remained infrequent over time: there are only 387 cases between 1914 and 2022 (i.e. 3–4 per year) across all countries and IOs. Withdrawal has not increased in recent years but instead has been a "regular" part of State membership patterns over the last century.

So why is exit perceived to be increasing? One reason is that many media reports discussing the possibility of withdrawals are actually providing examples of withdrawal *threats* (versus actual implementation of exits) or withdrawal announcements (which can be rescinded, as in the case of the WHO and UPU during the first Trump administration). The rhetoric of potentially leaving can stir alarm. This is, in fact, often the intent of political leaders: some want it to inspire international action and/or curry favour with some domestic voters.[7] But history shows that most withdrawal threats do not become reality. Conflating threats with actual withdrawals can result in a misleading impression of how often IO ties are actually broken.

5 Ibid, pp. 80–83.

6 Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "When Do Withdrawal Threats Achieve Reform in Intergovernmental Organizations?", *Global Perspectives*, vol. 4, No. 1 (2023), pp. 1–18.

7 Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "Public Support for Withdrawal from International Organizations: Experimental Evidence from the US", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 19 (2024), pp. 809–845.

Section 2

Does populism or nationalism play a role in international organization withdrawals?

Populism and nationalism have not been key drivers of IO withdrawal over time. They are just some of the factors that sometimes influence countries' dissatisfaction with IOs, and our research suggests there are many other factors at play. The logic that connects nationalism to withdrawal is that nationalist States tend to be more isolationist in their foreign policy such that withdrawal may be regarded as helping them unshackle from international commitments and turn inward. Populists also tend to be hostile toward international institutions (at least in their rhetoric) because they view IOs as benefiting elites at the expense of the mass public. But these connections are more powerful in rhetoric than action. Nationalism and populism have thus contributed to *some* IO exits, but they are not consistent drivers across cases and over time. Further, nationalism and populism have been much more widespread than IO withdrawal (and many nationalist/populist governments do not withdraw from IOs). In the same vein, countries are not more likely to leave IOs with tough enforcement mechanisms, so countries are not usually pushing back on ever-encroaching institutions nor using withdrawal as a rebuke. There is no systematic link between more authoritative or institutionalized IOs and withdrawal – and we've rigorously tested this in a number of ways.

None of these large-scale findings about the key drivers of IO withdrawals should downplay their importance for an individual case, but they do create important takeaways for policymakers.

First, as some States become dissatisfied with IO rules and policies over time, policymakers need to pay attention to providing countries ways to release pressure. Such mechanisms – that help States make adjustments temporarily through flexibility mechanisms or compromise internally – can allow for regular incremental institutional changes. This may prevent States from taking drastic measures like withdrawal. There needs to be an ethos among international civil servants (IO staff) that institutional change is not only possible but necessary to keep up with geopolitical shifts. This alters the conversation from criticizing countries for backlash to understanding withdrawal as a last resort strategy driven by various forms of dissatisfaction with IOs (politics, policies, procedures, programmes, etc.) At the same time, this needs to be balanced against the preferences of remaining Member States and the purpose and integrity of the organization. Instead of responding to every member request for change ad hoc, reflections among the full group of club members at some regular interval may help address both outliers and broader developments which can be responded to in a more concerted fashion.

Second, the threat and announcement stages of withdrawal often represent an opportunity for policymakers to prevent membership exit, if that is desirable. Most IOs have a waiting period of six months to a year after a withdrawal announcement. During that time, remaining members should not think of the announcement as a *fait accompli*. Instead, leaders should use the announcement as a shock to (potentially) look at reforms that have been under consideration. While membership exit can be disruptive in many ways, a potential positive outcome is that they can open a new possibility for pushing mutually beneficial changes that are otherwise difficult to accomplish.

Third, and perhaps counterintuitively, remaining members must sometimes recognize the opportunities that a country withdrawing may present. Sometimes the proposed change may benefit an individual country at the expense of most others. On that occasion, reflecting on the tradeoffs between the IO's purpose and having certain countries as members could be useful, and turmoil could be reframed as a potential opportunity for other changes (potentially when the country has left). Since most withdrawers are outliers vis-à-vis remaining members, those countries that stay may be more aligned and unified to continue moving forward on cooperative efforts. As the expression goes: don't let a good crisis go to waste. Moreover, in about half the cases, a withdrawing country does return later, when the IO or domestic politics shift or when the country realizes it has overshot its negotiating potential. Of course, all of this must be balanced with potentially losing funding, leadership or technical know-how.

Last, while the historical analysis shows that recent withdrawals carry many of the same qualities as past exits, policymakers should also pay attention to the ways in which some of the current examples differ. Clusters have typically happened at times of geopolitical turmoil, and the current moment might be typical in that regard.

Section 3

Is withdrawal usually terminal or temporary?

Most withdrawals are temporary rather than terminal. Half of all withdrawing States return to the same IOs. For example, the US announced in 2025 it would be leaving UNESCO (becoming effective on 31 December 2026). It is useful to remember that the US has previously left and returned to the organization – twice. The US left UNESCO in 1983 under President Reagan and returned in 2003 under the Bush administration. The US did so as it acknowledged institutional reforms such as budget cuts and hiring policy overhauls, but the US also saw rejoining as part of a wider strategy to gain international support for the Iraq war and post-9/11 "war on terror." The US left again in 2018 during the first Trump administration, citing anti-Israel bias and other dissatisfactions. It returned in 2023 under President Biden when it recognized improvements in management and finances. Moreover, the US wanted a seat at the UNESCO table to establish global standards, rather than allowing a geopolitical rival (China in this case) to have greater influence in its absence.

As this case shows, sometimes IOs reform after withdrawal, though deep, fundamental changes are rarely triggered by exit alone. And sometimes countries change their minds, as they recognize that having a seat at the table is more beneficial than becoming passive recipients of policies or leaving leadership to other countries. About half of the withdrawing States return. This highlights a nuanced understanding of withdrawal: we should not regard it simply as countries walking away from institutions indefinitely.

Section 4

How can we think about the future engagement of the United States with the United Nations and its agencies?

Recently, the US announced plans to leave 66 international bodies, about half of which are UN bodies and agencies. While such a long list is certainly alarming and without precedent, it is useful to reflect on a few points. In terms of formal intergovernmental organizations, the announced withdrawal plan is limited in scale, potentially indicating strong pushback from the US State Department and other domestic agencies which value cooperation venues where the US has a formal voice and influence. The US is a member of about 90 formal intergovernmental organizations, but only a handful of those are listed on the leaving list. These include the International Tropical Timber Organization; the International Lead and Zinc Study Group; the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property; and the Colombo Plan Council (formerly the Council for Technical Cooperation in South and South-East Asia). Most of the other non-UN institutions listed are fora, coalitions, funds and programmes (lacking either secretariats, States as members or regular plenary sessions).

It is noteworthy that President Trump did not announce withdrawals from some of the largest and most authoritative formal intergovernmental organizations in which the US is a member. This aligns with past patterns. Many of these IOs have become powerful venues for the US to carry out its policies; they align with US national interests often because the US has strong institutional power. For example, the US is not leaving the UN as a whole (which would remove its veto power on the UN Security Council). Nor is it leaving the World Bank (where it holds the largest voting share, hosts the Bank's headquarters and plays an outsized role in selecting the President).

Among the listed UN institutions, some are duplicates in a sense, such as the UN Economic and Social Council commissions for four different regions. And other UN institutions on the leaving list, perhaps more interestingly, are not institutions from which the US can withdraw anyway given it is not currently a Member State (these institutions do not have States as members). This includes the UN University and the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

The 2026 announcement of the US, therefore, signals an *a-la-carte* approach to UN membership in the near-term: the US is planning to leave smaller institutions and bodies in which it has less influence and which do not align with the current administration's foreign policy interests (including international development, environmental protections and gender programmes). This suggests that a future US administration with different foreign policy preferences may re-join some of these institutions. In the absence of the US these institutions also have an opportunity to progress. The very real challenge, however, is establishing funding, leadership and technical know-how to fill the gaps of US withdrawal.

Beyond these reflections, a historical viewpoint underscores several additional takeaways.

First, it is possible that not all these announced withdrawals will actually manifest. Given that most institutions have mandatory waiting periods, US administrative decisions may be revoked (because of successful negotiations or other reasons) before some of the withdrawals go into effect.

Second, even when some of the withdrawals go into effect, it is possible that a future US administration re-joins some of these bodies. While this does not mitigate the disruption that will result in the near-term, history shows that IO membership is quite resilient over time.

Third, States that withdraw are often outliers compared to States that remain. This is no exception with the current Trump administration. The US has been moving away from the world on many issues, including human rights, arms control and climate change policies.[8] This has resulted in the US disrupting some UN agencies and other IOs, for example by delaying or not paying membership dues for the UN and its bodies, or in the case of the World Trade Organization, blocking the appointment of new Appellate Body judges. This undermines operations and risks stagnating institutional progress. Optimistically speaking, the absence of a Member State may open avenues for remaining members (who are more homogeneous in their preferences, or perhaps less obstructionist) to work together in ways that have not been possible before.

Section 5

Does the exit of one State prompt additional exits? And does exit leave room for fresh norm entrepreneurship?

One State exit does not usually prompt additional exits. The vast majority of exits are one-offs in the sense that most withdrawals involve a particular State with a particular dissatisfaction about an individual IO. Sometimes there are clusters of exits but it is more likely that these clusters involve one country withdrawing from several IOs due to the country's foreign policy strategy. For example, after passing an austerity budget in the early 2010s, Canada withdrew from several organizations: the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the International Tropical Timber Organization and the International Exhibitions Bureau. This allowed Canada to reduce its budget deficit by lowering spending on foreign policy-related institutions.

However, three caveats are important. First, the exit of economically or politically powerful States makes it more likely that other States leave as well, potentially leading to contagion.[9] For example, after the United Kingdom withdrew from the UN Industrial Development Organization in 2012, eight States followed suit in a virtual domino effect: Lithuania in 2012, New Zealand in 2013, France and Portugal in 2014, Belgium in 2015, Denmark and Greece in 2016 and Slovakia in 2017.[10] Such an effect may occur if a lead State exit means collective benefits diminish or collective action challenges increase. Alternatively, leadership may be irrelevant and instead the exit of several countries around the same time may signify that several countries share the same underlying dissatisfaction with the IO. For example, changes to whaling quotas at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) led to dissatisfaction among whaling States in 1959 and 1982. As a result, several countries threatened to leave, and some actually left, while a subset returned. When the IWC adjusted whaling policies, the UK and Japan rescinded their threats and remained in the organization, but the Netherlands left in 1959. After IWC reforms, the Netherlands returned in 1962 (and then left again in 1970, returning in 1977). After the IWC agreed a whaling moratorium in 1982, Canada

[8] Eric Voeten, "The world isn't moving away from the U.S. The U.S. is moving away from the world", *Good Authority*, 17 February 2026. Available at https://goodauthority.org/news/the-world-isnt-moving-away-from-the-u-s-the-u-s-is-moving-away-from-the-world/.

[9] Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "Hello, Goodbye: When do States Withdraw from International Organizations?", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 14, No. 2 (2019), pp. 335–366.

[10] Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, *Exit from International Organizations*, pp. 342–343.

left in 1982 with other countries, and Iceland left and returned a few years later (leaving in 1992 and returning in 2002). Japan also left the IWC over the moratorium in 2018, but only after many failed negotiation attempts. This was not because one country was seen as a lead State (or prompting contagion) but because the policy change by the club of IO members caused frustration and ultimately irreconcilable differences for a few Member States, resulting in some exits clustering around the same time.

Second, while withdrawals have been steady but relatively infrequent over time, there are some peaks in occurrences. Most of these clusters have occurred during times of geopolitical upheaval. For example, the first peaks in withdrawals occurred just before and after the Second World War when international cooperation was also in turmoil more generally. The first peak in 1935–1940 was driven mostly by voluntary withdrawals of Axis powers, including some European and Latin American countries leaving the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization. The second peak in 1949–1952 was mainly driven by Eastern European countries (the Soviet Union, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania) who formed their own regional organizations and left global organizations (such as the WHO, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNESCO and the International Criminal Police Organization). Another peak occurred in 1979 when the Iranian Revolution triggered withdrawals from the Central Treaty Organization. In short, a divergence in geopolitical preferences (leading to the Second World War, Cold War etc.) also triggered State exits from IOs.

Third, there is no clear effect of withdrawal on IO survival.[11] The withdrawal of an individual State or even several States is not usually linked to IO collapse. But the type of State that leaves does matter – in nuanced ways. On the one hand, withdrawal by an economically powerful State can facilitate IO survival (for the reasons mentioned above). On the other hand, founding members' departures *can* speed IO death. An IO's fate seems to then (at least partially) depend on whether and when the leaving State returns to the organization, and what remaining member countries do after their withdrawal. If remaining members band together, bridge gaps and potentially reform the organization, IO survival chances are good. Conversely, if they do not band together or adjust the organization and the State does not return, crisis may ensue. States also watch the aftermath of withdrawals to see if the outcomes were chaotic for the exiting State. Costly exits can create a deterrent effect rather than an "inevitable" domino effect.[12]

This holds potentially a silver lining for current global politics. Recently, the US left the WHO. Understanding this as another case of a preference outlier leaving an institution helps make sense of the subsequent Pandemic Treaty. Would it have been possible to design a treaty of such issue scope and binding nature if the US had still been at the negotiating table? Possibly not. In that sense, the US withdrawal may have re-invigorated remaining members and allowed them to reach negotiated solutions previously impossible, even though the geographic scope of the resulting treaty might be smaller and the diminished contributions of the US will likely shrink the knowledge and programming of the WHO.

This may also hold useful insights for the UN80 reform. This fundamental reform effort is – at least partially – triggered by expressions of dissatisfaction about duplication, bureaucracy and inefficiencies in the UN that have been simmering for some time. This dissatisfaction has found expression in funding delays, shortfalls and withdrawal from some agencies. While details are still under debate and reforms will take more time to take shape, the exit threat and announced withdrawal by some members could – in retrospect – be seen as a tool of negotiation used for institutional change. Whether that change is ultimately seen as a useful reform or a painful change of an institution in crisis may depend in no small part both on the secretariat itself and on what remaining Member States are willing to do.

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[11] Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "When do Member State Withdrawals Lead to the Death of International Organizations?" *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 756–786.

[12] Stefanie Walter, "EU-27 public opinion on Brexit", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, No. 3 (2021), pp. 569–588.

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