Government Interference in International Organization's Information Production*

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Abstract

A core function of international organizations (IOs) is to provide information to address international cooperation problems. While scholars have theorized and tested the conditions under which information facilitates cooperative outcomes, existing research largely ignores that this information is unlikely to be free from governmental influence. Since governments have strong incentives to shape the information that IOs share with international and domestic audiences, we argue that governments will attempt to interfere with the information production processes in IOs; they do so to protect national interests that would otherwise be harmed should unfiltered information become available. An empirical analysis that draws on governments' review comments data and changes in negotiated texts in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—the United Nation's scientific body on climate change—strongly supports our expectations. These findings have major implications for our understanding of information production in IOs and international cooperation more broadly.

Keywords: international organizations; information provision; government interference; text analysis; IPCC.

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Note by the authors: This is a very preliminary version of the project. We are currently developing our initial argument (which you find only sketched in the introduction of the current version) and exploring how we can use the rich data we have collected to bolster our claim. Any suggestions will be useful and extremely welcome.

Introduction

Information is essential for international cooperation. Often, this information is provided by international organizations (IOs) and their agencies (Keohane, 1984; Milner, 1997; Abbott and Snidal, 1998). The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Office, for example, reports on violations against the UN Convention against Torture, the World Bank informs foreign investors about host countries' business climate, and the World Health Organization tracks the outbreak of diseases, such as Covid-19, cholera, and measles, in its Weekly Epidemiological Reports. In all these cases, so standard international relations scholarship goes, information can facilitate cooperation by constraining governments. Once information about non-compliant or deviant behavior becomes public, political leaders' fear of losing reputation (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Lebovic and Voeten, 2006; Tingley and Tomz, 2021), being punished by markets (Simmons, 2000; Morse, 2019), or taking a hit at the ballot box (Dai, 2005; Fang, 2008; Chaudoin, 2014) increases governments' preparedness for compromise. Information that is provided by IOs, therefore, has the power to shape global governance outcomes because it offers (otherwise unobservable) evidence to other governments, market participants, and voters at home, who—at least under some conditions—can constrain offending governments through naming and shaming, market responses, or elections. In autocracies, greater transparency can even cause mass protests and lead to political instability (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland, 2015, 2018).

However, for information to have this constraining effect on policymakers, much of the existing literature typically assumes that any information that IOs share with international and domestic audiences is free from government influence. Indeed, if national governments could easily meddle with, for instance, IO reports on human rights violations, the contents of infringement proceedings, or the publication of economic performance data, this would considerably limit an IO's capacity to constrain government behavior. The information IOs make public would become endogenous to government influence. Similar to the discussion about whether international treaties constrain or

screen governments (von Stein, 2005; Simmons and Hopkins, 2005), information provided by IOs that has actively been shaped and framed by national governments is unlikely to bind and constrain governments in meaningful ways. Hence, an IO's ability to effectively constrain governments *through information* will depend on the extent to which IOs are able to firewall their information production processes from undue outside influence. Information production within IOs may rely heavily on principal governments' input, either directly, through data, expertise, or finances (Abbott and Snidal, 1998; Nielson and Tierney, 2003), or indirectly through informal governance arrangements and staff preferences (Chwieroth, 2013; Clark and Dolan, 2021)—challenging the assumption of no government involvement in IOs' information production.

In this paper, we therefore study the *politics of information production* inside IOs. We argue that the way in which IOs produce information is a political process itself; this is to say that governments have strong incentives to interfere with information production in IOs exactly because they recognize the constraining effects of information and increased transparency which international institutions generate (Mitchell, 1994; Dai, 2005; Fang, 2008; Chaudoin, 2014). Emphasizing that information supplied by IOs often structures international negotiations (Morrow, 1994), we expect states whose domestic political economy would suffer high cooperation costs when information without any interference would become available to heavily intervene in information production. Our theoretical framework explains government interference in information production in IOs as a function of the distributional effects from international cooperation outcomes which differ depending on what type of information the IO provides.

We test this argument about government interference in information production in the context of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nation's (UN) primary scientific body on climate change (de Pryck and Hulme, 2022). The IPCC regularly publishes the most extensive assessments of what we know about the physics, the impacts, and mitigation options of climate change. These reports are highly influential in shaping the discourse in annual climate talks under the UN as they set the scientific guardrails for agreeing a political response to

the climate crisis. Taking advantage of original data from both governmental review comments on draft text and the line-by-line negotiations of the IPCC's key "Summary for Policymakers" (SPM) report, we show that governments interfere more with the text production in the IPCC when their national economies are heavily reliant on the continued use of carbon emissions. The empirical evidence draws on multiple approaches that combine descriptive statistics, the statistical modeling of government behavior, and word embeddings around key target words across draft, interim, and final versions of IPCC text.

Our paper makes two main contributions. First, it demonstrates that governments will interfere in information production in IOs if the otherwise constraining effects of IO information provision can be harmful to their domestic political economy. This insight is important because it nuances our understanding of the conditions under which information provided by IOs and international institutions more broadly can credibly constrain governments or not. Information provision is only likely to effectively limit government behavior if the institutional rules empower IOs to protect information production processes from government influence, highlighting the importance of institutional design when IOs are created (Abbott and Snidal, 1998; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal, 2001; Johnson and Urpelainen, 2014). An immediate implication of this logic for future research is that the constraining power of IOs may be restricted in highly technical policy areas of international cooperation, including cyber security, terrorist financing, banking regulation, global health, or climate change, in which IOs' information function depends on input by principal governments. Our findings caution against the assumption that information production in IOs is free from politics, but that instead these processes have largely been understudied. Following the growing use of text-as-data approaches in international relations (e.g., Chaudoin, 2022; Thrall, 2023), we rely on recent methodological advances in modeling the use of words (Rodriguez and Spirling, 2022; Rodriguez, Spirling, and Stewart, 2023) to empirically study otherwise difficult-to-observe information production processes in IOs.

Second, our research speaks to the existing literature that puts domestic distributional conflict

at the core of climate politics (Colgan, Green, and Hale, 2021; Aklin and Mildenberger, 2020; Bayer and Genovese, 2020). We similarly build our argument from the same first principles that concerns about costs from ambitious climate policy will structure opposition to and support for international climate cooperation among firms, sectors, and governments (Bechtel, Genovese, and Scheve, 2019; Genovese, 2019; Kennard, 2020; Cory, Lerner, and Osgood, 2021; Gaikwad, Genovese, and Tingley, 2022; Bayer, 2023). However, we extend this logic one step further and show that the same incentives that are rooted in the domestic political economy operate not only at the level of the international negotiations, but also apply to information production processes that *precede* the actual negotiations. From a normative perspective, this is disturbing news as it questions the purity of information that IOs can disseminate and calls for the more systematic study of the politics of information production and science, more broadly.

Determinants of Government Influence in Shaping Information

[Here we plan to expand our argument]

Background on the IPCC

We test our argument in the case of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC was founded in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and United Nations Environment Programme. It is both an IO (with permanent Secretariat in Geneva) and a scientific body which counts 195 member countries. Its goal is to assess and summarize the science, impact, and mitigation options of climate change. Its reports provide crucial policy inputs for governments' international negotiations, such as those happening under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In order to produce such reports, the IPCC does not conduct its own research: instead, it relies on available climate change-related knowledge and draws on peer reviewed, published, and technical literature.

The IPCC is organized in three working groups (WGs) dedicated, respectively, to summarizing available knowledge on: the physical basis of climate change (WGI); impact, adaption, and vulnerability of climate change (WGII); and options to reduce CO2 emissions and mitigate climate change (WGIII). The IPCC operates in "assessment cycles", *i.e.* rounds of five to seven years which end up in the production of an assessment report (AR). At the time of writing, the IPCC just released its sixth Assessment Report[1]. Within each cycle, every WG produces at least three relevant documents: a Longer Report (in IPCC jargon this is often referred to as the "underlying report"), a Technical Summary, and a Summary for Policymakers (SPM). These three documents contribute to the AR that gets produced in a given cycle. IPCC summary reports are usually organized in "headline statements" that synthesize a given set of sub-paragraphs (which we refer to as "sub-headline statements").

We study the production of the SPM in AR6 (that of the current cycle) by WGIII. We focus on WGIII as it deals with mitigation options and greenhouse gas emission reduction, both particularly relevant policy issues in climate negotiations. Among the various text documents produced by the IPCC, we focus on SPMs because of the significant public attention that they tend to receive. Their content is often reported on newspapers and media sources. Moreover, SPMs are reviewed, discussed, and approved line-by-line by government delegates. The process of revision and government approval produces three different versions of a single SPM. First, WG authors produce an initial SPM draft. We refer to this as the "draft" version of the SPM. In the case of the SPM produced by WGIII for AR6, the document was dated November 28, 2021. The draft is then sent to governments, who submit comments in a process of review on this initial version. WG authors receive comments and incorporate them in a second version, which we refer to as the "interim" SPM. In our case, this version is dated March 16, 2022. The interim version is then discussed over multiple days in a plenary session, where government delegates discuss the SPM line-by-line and must reach consensus on raised issues. For WGIII, in assessment cycle 6, plenary sessions started

[1] See: https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/.

on March 21. Although initially scheduled to finish on Friday, April 1, a final approval of the SPM was only achieved on Sunday night, April 3, 2022. The outcome of this stage is a third version of the SPM, which we refer to as the "final" version.

B.2 Net GHG emissions have increased since 2010 across all major sectors globally. ~~For CO2~~ An increasing share of emissions is accounted for by activities in urban areas. Emissions reductions in CO2 from fossil fuels and industry, due to improvements in energy ~~efficiency~~ intensity of GDP and carbon intensity of energy, have ~~not~~ been ~~sufficient to compensate for growing~~ more than offset by increasing global activity levels in industry, energy supply, transport, ~~buildings,~~ agriculture and ~~land-use change, as well as urbanisation~~ buildings. (high confidence) {2.2, 2.4, 6.3, 7.2, 8.3, 9.3, 10.1, 11.2}

(A) Draft *vs* interim version

B.2 Net anthropogenic GHG emissions have increased since 2010 across all major sectors globally. An increasing share of emissions ~~is accounted for by activities in~~ can be attributed to urban areas. Emissions reductions in CO2 from fossil fuels and industrialy processes, due to improvements in energy intensity of GDP and carbon intensity of energy, have been less than ~~more than offset by increasing~~ emission increases from rising global activity levels in industry, energy supply, transport, agriculture and buildings. (high confidence) {2.2, 2.4, 6.3, 7.2, 8.3, 9.3, 10.1, 11.2}

(B) Interim *vs* final version

FIGURE 1: Tracked changes across versions of an IPCC SPM. Headline Statement B.2, Working Group III, assessment cycle 6

This two-stage process of revision can make the final version of an SPM significantly different from the initial one. Figure 1 shows in red insertions and deletions for the single headline statement B.2 of the SPM of WGIII in Assessment Cycle 6, when moving across versions. It exemplifies how the text changed significantly at the end of government approval. The review stage (1a) significantly toned down the extent to which improvements in energy efficiency failed to compensate growing CO2 emissions from fossil fuels and industry. Moreover, it deleted references to changes in land usage. Changes after the plenary session (1b), then, lead to a headline statement which further softened the degree to which growing CO2 emissions have been appropriately reduced.

Textual changes are not limited to this statement. In Figure 2, we describe changes in the whole document across the three versions of WGIII's SPM in AR6 (draft, interim, and final). As unit of analysis, we consider sub-headline statements—individual SPM paragraphs—that were

present across all text versions. The figure plots the distributions of two similarity scores across the three different versions of the same sub-headline statement. First, we calculate Levenshtein similarity[2] across versions of the same sub-headline statement (left-hand panel). The text changed significantly between the draft and final version of the SPM: the average sub-headline statement in the draft version has a similarity score of just 0.39 with its final variant. However, we note that a significant change is already detected after the review stage: the average sub-headline statement has already a low Levenshtein similarity score (0.51) between the draft and the interim version. A similar picture is observed when computing cosine similarity between term frequency–inverse document frequency (TF-IDF), which quantifies the extent to which different versions use a similar vocabulary across versions of the same sub-headline statement (right-hand panel).

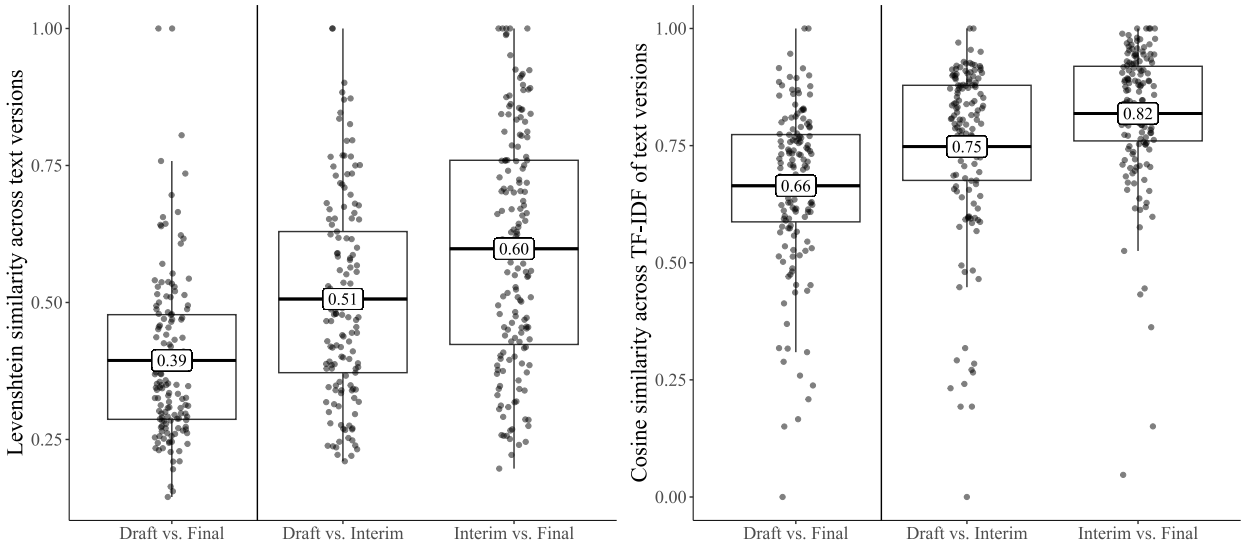

FIGURE 2: Similarity between versions of SPM text sections. Left panel shows the distribution of the Levenshtein similarity. Right panel shows the distribution of the cosine similarity when considering TF-IDF

[2] The measure is based on the Levenshtein distance $D(a, b)$ between string a and string b, defined as the minimum number of changes (insertions or deletions) of characters required to turn a into b (or vice-versa). The Levenshtein similarity $L(a, b)$ is: $L = 1 - \frac{D(a,b)}{max(length(a),length(b))}$, where $length(\cdot)$ returns the number of characters of a string. As such, L is bound between 0 (all characters of a should be changed in order to produce b or viceversa) and 1 (a and b are identical).

Empirics

We can leverage various sources in order to test our argument. At the current, preliminary stage, we concentrate on explaining decisions by governments to intervene on a specific part of the SPM draft. IPCC procedures and data allow us to document otherwise difficult-to-observe attempts by governments to interfere with the information produced by IOs. To this aim, we begin by obtaining data on the three SPM text versions from the IPCC data repository. Excluding the introductory section, the draft SPM produced by WGIII for AR6 contained a total of 135 sub-headline statements, *i.e.* paragraphs numbered in a progressive manner (*e.g.*: B.1, B.1.1, B.1.2, ...). Each sub-headline statement is a self-contained summary of available scientific evidence related to different aspects of mitigation or CO2 emission reduction options.

Next, from the IPCC data repository we obtained the exhaustive list of comments submitted by governments when reviewing the draft SPM. This amounts to a total of 3,092 comments, submitted by 43 governments in all. The table includes information on: the government submitting comments, the exact pages and lines of the draft SPM that each comment refers to, the type of comment (classified as either "figures/tables", "substantive", or "editorial"), and the text of the submitted comment. Cleaning this data source reduced the number of comments that can be used in our analysis. First, we discard comments submitted by the European Union, as we are unable to clearly allocate them to any specific member state. This brings comment sources down to 42 countries. Furthermore, at the current preliminary stage, we only focus on substantive and editorial comments in our analysis. Finally, a number of comments appeared to refer to non-existing pages and lines of the draft SPM. Thanks to the help of our research assistants, we manually retrieve the correct page and line of the draft SPM. We discarded comments that we were unable to attribute to any correct page or line. These selections bring the number of comments down to 2,826 individual text annotations, submitted by 42 countries in all.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the number of comments submitted by each government,

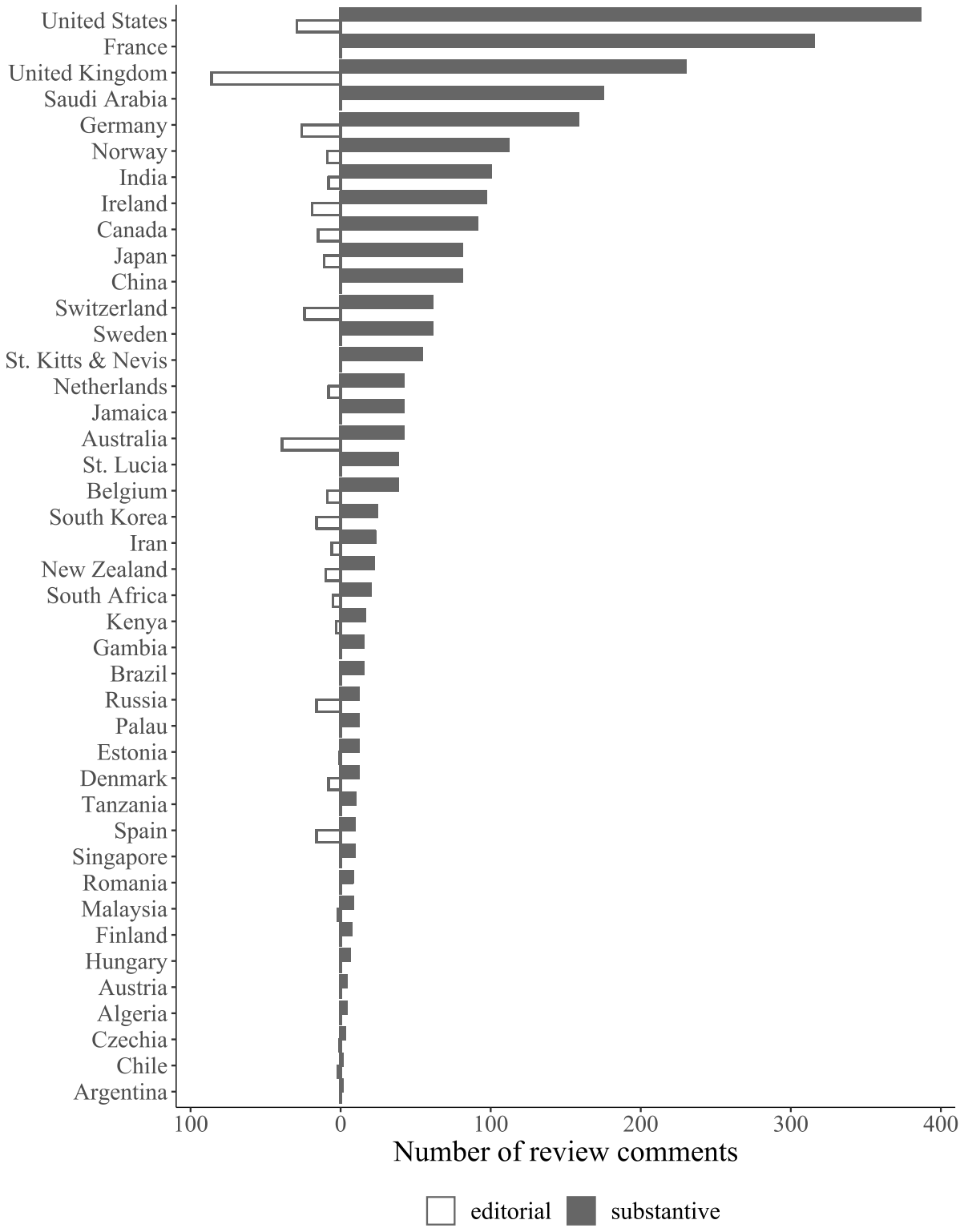

FIGURE 3: Number of review comments submitted by governments for the IPCC SPM produced by WGIII for AR6, draft version

distinguishing between substantive and editorial comments. Consistently with our expectations, the most active countries in submitting attempts to meddle with IO-produced information tend to be countries with significantly high stakes in the fossil fuel production or consumption (*e.g.*, the US, France, the UK, Saudi Arabia, Germany, Norway). According to our explanation, these countries are those that would be most vulnerable to ambitious climate actions. However, the figure also shows that smaller countries, for instance small island states threatened by the most dire consequences of climate change, tend to attempt to intervene frequently in the review process (*e.g.*, St. Kitts & Nevis, Jamaica, St. Lucia…). Similar patterns do not emerge when looking at editorial comments, which suggests that the mechanisms explaining decisions to submit comments related to the content or the form of the text are distinct.

Variables and model specification

In order to explain such attempts by governments to interfere with the information eventually produced by the IPCC, we pair each paragraph from the draft SPM (135 in total) with every country intervening in the review process (42 countries). Our unit of analysis is thus a paragraph-country pair. For each pair, we measure whether the country submitted at least one substantive comment pertaining to the paragraph. We thus obtain a binary variable describing substantive attempts by specific governments to change the content of a given paragraph. We then obtain the same variable related to editorial comments, which we intend as a placebo test. Consistently with evidence shown in Figure 3, the probability that a paragraph-country pair will see a government intervening with at least one substantive comment is rather high, at 0.23. Instead, editorial comments are much rarer (with a probability of 0.05).

To explain our dependent variable, we collect country-level covariates that pertain to our argument. We draw on the World Bank World Development Indicators to measure fossil fuel rents per each country. In particular, we measure oil, coal, and natural gas rents as percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). These variables are our explanatory variables of interest, meant to indicate

the extent to which the economy of a country is vulnerable to ambitious climate action that would significantly cut down on fossil fuel usage.

We also gather data on variables that would likely confound our relationship of interest. First, we measure total CO2 emissions (in Kg of CO2 per constant GDP), to ensure that results do not reflect the role of more polluting economies. Second, we control for the total natural resources rent (as GDP percentage) to rule out that results do not represent a spurious relationship driven by dependency on natural resources. We also control for constant-price GDP and for percentage GDP growth, because richer economies could have better capacity to submit comments and they could also be more dependent on fossil fuels to sustain their economy (or its growth). Finally, we control for whether the country is classified as a Small Island Developing State[3]. All our covariates are computed as country-specific averages over the entire assessment cycle 6 and until the year of the review (that is, from 2015 to 2021).

We explain our dependent variables in linear models estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS). Because our covariates are all defined at the country-level, we completely remove paragraph-level heterogeneity with the inclusion of a paragraph-fixed effect across all our specifications. This is meant to account for all factors that contribute to create variation across paragraphs such as: topic, length, technicality, or imprecisions in the reported content. With the inclusion of this fixed effect, our models explain within-paragraph decisions by countries to intervene as a function of their fossil fuel dependence (and covariates), then averages estimated effects across paragraphs. The key identifying assumption that needs to hold, in order for the sign of our estimates to be reliable, is thus a version of the conditional independence assumption relative to country-level features only. No omitted country-level variable should exist that simultaneously increases (decreases) fossil fuel rents and the likelihood to intervene on an IPCC paragraph. Across our specifications, all standard errors are clustered using two-way clustering over paragraph and country, to account for likely correlation in the review activity at these two levels.

[3] See: https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/list-sids.

Results

Table 1 shows our initial results when estimating the fixed-effect models described above. We introduce control variables step-wise, to avoid suppression effects Lenz and Sahn (2021). As such, in our simplest specification we only include variables related to fossil fuel rents and paragraph fixed effect. Consistently with our argument, we find that the likelihood to submit a substantive comment on a paragraph increases by about 0.01 when oil rents increase by 1 percentage point of GDP. This effect remains significant, and increases in magnitude, when including control variables. For instance, Model 3 estimates an increase in probability by about 0.08, for each percentage point increase in oil rents over GDP. Across specifications, effects are always statistically significant at the 0.05 conventional level.

TABLE 1: Probability that a country submits a substantive comment on a paragraph of the IPCC WGIII SPM

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Oil rents (% of GDP)	0.014*	0.026***	0.077***	0.062***	0.061***
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Coal rents (% of GDP)	0.046	0.273*	0.343**	0.299***	0.311***
	(0.097)	(0.125)	(0.121)	(0.082)	(0.080)
Natural gas rents (% of GDP)	-0.093*	-0.047	0.020	0.020	0.023
	(0.044)	(0.036)	(0.033)	(0.032)	(0.031)
CO2 emissions (kg per 2015 US$ of GDP)		-0.386*	-0.358**	-0.425***	-0.441***
		(0.155)	(0.131)	(0.116)	(0.112)
Total natural resources rents (% of GDP)			-0.054**	-0.035*	-0.034*
			(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.013)
GDP (constant 2015 US$, trillions)				0.036***	0.036***
				(0.005)	(0.005)
GDP growth (annual %)				0.006	0.008
				(0.011)	(0.012)
Small Island Developing State					0.050
					(0.097)
Sub-headline statement FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Num.Obs.	5535	5535	5535	5535	5535
R2	0.087	0.112	0.135	0.219	0.220
R2 Adj.	0.064	0.090	0.113	0.199	0.200

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

An effect consistent with our argument is also detected when looking at other fossil fuel rents. For example, larger coal rents are associated with an increase in the likelihood to intervene on a paragraph. Models 2 to 5 predict that the likelihood to intervene on a paragraph increases by about 0.27 to 0.31 for countries that derive coal rents that are 1 percentage point of GDP larger. The effect is large and significant across these specifications, but in our sparsest model (Model 1). An effect that contradicts our argument is, instead, observed in Model 1, for what concerns natural gas rents. Here, the estimate is negative and statistically significant at a 0.05 conventional level. However, this effect is not robust to the inclusion of control variables.

Next, we offer a placebo test to bolster our results from the previous table. We replicate all models from 1 replacing our binary dependent variable with the analogous version capturing whether a government submitted an editorial comment on a paragraph. If our logic is correct, and countries attempt to intervene on the information produced by an IO in order to shield vulnerable domestic constituencies, our variables of interest should not generate strong effects on this dependent variable. Table 2 reports our findings. We find small to non-significant effects for oil rents, as expected. Instead, we do detect a positive and statistically significant effect for coal and natural gas rents (models 2 to 5). However, these effects appear smaller than previously estimated.

TABLE 2: Probability that a country submits an editorial comment on a paragraph of the IPCC WGIII SPM

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Oil rents (% of GDP)	-0.003*	0.002	0.010	0.007	0.007
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Coal rents (% of GDP)	0.019	0.120*	0.130*	0.121**	0.110*
	(0.032)	(0.048)	(0.051)	(0.045)	(0.047)
Natural gas rents (% of GDP)	0.014	0.035+	0.045*	0.044*	0.041*
	(0.013)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
CO2 emissions (kg per 2015 US$ of GDP)		-0.171*	-0.167*	-0.176*	-0.161*
		(0.066)	(0.070)	(0.070)	(0.070)
Total natural resources rents (% of GDP)			-0.008	-0.005	-0.006
			(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)
GDP (constant 2015 US$, trillions)				0.006*	0.005*
				(0.002)	(0.002)
GDP growth (annual %)				-0.0004	-0.002
				(0.005)	(0.006)
Small Island Developing State					-0.046+
					(0.025)
Sub-headline statement FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Num.Obs.	5535	5535	5535	5535	5535
R2	0.045	0.063	0.064	0.072	0.075
R2 Adj.	0.021	0.039	0.040	0.048	0.051

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

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