Can intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) promote democracy within their members, and prevent them from backsliding into authoritarianism? This is the overarching question that guided my independent study research for my senior honors thesis. Coming at this question with a strong background in European Union (EU) studies, I was familiar with the current challenge to the EU posed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s government, whose constitutional amendments, although pursued through regular constitutional processes, have undermined democratic checks and balances and judicial independence, thus violating the EU’s democratic norms. In part because of the ambiguous nature of this violation, the Union has struggled to respond forcefully to the undermining of Hungarian democracy. As I looked into other regions, I found that the EU is not the only IGO to struggle with ambiguous attacks on democracy, which led to my more general research question: under what conditions do IGOs act to enforce democratic norms in their member states when they are violated in an ambiguous manner?

In order to answer this question, I sought out and drew upon a number of different sources, beginning with secondary scholarly sources, and then proceeding to primary official sources, legal documents, and news accounts in English and Spanish, most of which were accessed through the library’s databases. I first mapped out the causal chain to my theory, linking potential independent variables to the dependent variable, IGO intervention. I hypothesized about five characteristics of IGOs that may influence whether and how they will respond to ambiguous violations of democratic norms, and decided to conduct a preliminary test of these hypotheses, comparing cases from the Organization of American States (OAS) – which has a two-decade long history of confronting challenges to democracy among its members – and the EU. I searched Diamond for relevant books and used databases, such as JSTOR, WorldCat, and Worldwide Political Science Abstracts to acquire secondary literature based on keyword phrases. These keyword searches gave me a sense of the relevant scholarship on my independent variables: democratic density, democratic norms development and legalization, IGO intervention strategies, and the roles and processes of various IGO institutions.

Once I collected relevant secondary literature, I evaluated which sources were most reliable according to the scholars’ academic background and expertise and the academic rigor and reputation of the publisher. I determined how important the source might be according to the frequency with which the work was cited by others and whether it spoke to a larger debate in the discipline. I identified scholars such as Kim Lane Scheppele, who specializes in Hungarian law; Jon Pevehouse, who has written extensively on the democratization power of IGOs; Martha Finnemore, a leader in norm literature; as well as some regional experts such as Andrew Moravcsik (EU) and Maxwell Cameron (Latin America). I reviewed some of these scholars’ non-academic writing on these topics to gauge personal biases. For instance, Scheppele’s work on Hungary has been featured in many blogs as the crisis continues to develop. While usually skeptical of such sources, because of her reputation in academia, I found her evaluations to be central to the larger debate about what the EU should do. While this approach provided insight for my theoretical premises and hypotheses, I needed primary resources to build my cases.

Because of the nature of my question, I knew at the start of my project that a pattern matching, comparative case study research design would be needed. These cases would be based on textual analysis of official statements, legal documents, and media sources. I first analyzed the binding treaties and law governing the IGOs, searching for references to democratic norms. While the EU has its treaty law available online, the OAS’s records, particularly a decision taken in the 1950s, were more difficult to locate. Using library archives, I found a collection of the
OAS’s decisions and meeting minutes available through ILLiad. Because I did not need the entire multi-volume set, I spoke with a librarian about ways to determine the relevant volumes. In the end, I was able to find the source online in Spanish, the OAS’s other official language.

The last of my research consisted of gathering news sources to acquire domestic interpretations of the IGOs’ responses to the crises. I utilized the LexisNexis Academic database using time-parametered searches for “OAS AND Peru AND autogolpe” or “EU AND Hungary AND constitution.” The language barrier was more pervasive when I focused on the Hungarian case. Because my language skills are limited to English and Spanish, I rectified the problem by reviewing a variety of newspapers and confirming facts in one source with another. The media coverage highlights some contentions between different government officials that I used to provide well-rounded analysis of the events.

My topic lies at the intersection of democratization theories, IGO institutions literature, and regional specialties, making it a valuable contribution to multiple areas in international relations. In order to fully investigate my research question, I relied heavily on the Temple Libraries’ resources, many of which were novel to me. I now have a strong set of research skills to locate and evaluate an array of sources – primary and secondary, print and electronic – which I will utilize as I continue to graduate school.