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# Future interannual variability of Arctic sea ice in coupled climate models

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## Abstract

The diminishing Arctic sea ice pack has been widely studied, but mostly focused on time-mean changes in sea ice rather than on short-term variations that also have important physical and societal consequences. In this study we test the hypothesis that future interannual Arctic sea ice area variability will increase by utilizing a set of 40 independent simulations from the Community Earth System Model's Large Ensemble (CESM-LE) for the 1920-2100 period, and augment this with simulations from 12 models participating in the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 5 (CMIP5). Both CESM-LE and CMIP5 models project that ice area variability will indeed grow substantially, but not monotonically, in all months, and with a strong seasonal dependence in magnitude and timing that is robust among CESM ensemble members. The variability in every month is inversely correlated with the average ice retreat rate before there is an eventual disappearance in both terms as the ice pack becomes seasonal in summer and autumn by late century. The peak in variability correlates best with the total area of ice between 0.2 m and 0.6 m monthly thickness, indicating that substantial future thinning of the ice pack is required before variability maximizes. Within this range, the most favorable thickness for high areal variability depends on the season, primarily due to whether ice growth or ice retreat processes dominate. Thermodynamic processes are found to be more important than dynamical mechanisms, namely ice export and ridging, in controlling ice area variability.

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## 1. Introduction

Arctic sea ice extent has declined by more than 40% since 1979 during summer (e.g. Stroeve et al. 2012; Serreze and Stroeve 2015; Comiso et al. 2017), primarily as a consequence of greenhouse gas forcing (Notz and Marotzke 2012) but also internal variability (Ding et al. 2017). While this trend is greatest in summer, substantial losses are observed throughout the year (Cavalieri and Parkinson 2012) resulting in an ice season duration that is up to 3 months shorter in some regions (Stammerjohn et al. 2012). Reduced ice area is accompanied by a greater fraction of younger ice (Nghiem et al. 2006; Maslanik et al. 2007a, 2011), which reduces the thickness of the mean basin ice pack (Kwok and Rothrock 2009; Kwok et al. 2009; Lang et al. 2017). As a result, the negative trend in sea ice volume (-27.9% per decade) is about twice as large as the trend in sea ice area (-14.2% per decade; Overland and Wang 2013).

Many climate models suggest that the Arctic sea ice cover will not retreat in a steady manner, but will likely fluctuate more as it diminishes, punctuated by occasional Rapid Ice Loss Events (RILEs; Holland et al. 2006; Döscher and Koenigk 2013). The overall decline in ice cover is expected to continue (Collins et al. 2013), and the Arctic will likely become seasonally ice-free within a few decades, depending on emissions pathway (Stroeve et al. 2007; Wang and Overland 2009; 2012; Massonet et al. 2012; Wang and Overland 2012; Overland and Wang 2013; Jahn et al. 2016; Notz and Stroeve 2016). However, internal variability confounds prediction of this timing (Stocker et al. 2013; Swart et al. 2015; Jahn et al. 2016; Labe et al. 2018), and even the definition of ice-free differs among Arctic stakeholders (Ridley et al. 2016). Nonetheless, navigation through the Arctic has already increased in frequency as a result of this decline (Melia 2016; Eguíluz et al. 2016) with a substantial opening of trade routes associated with the increased ice-free season by the end of the 21st century (Aksenov et al. 2015; Stephenson and Smith 2013).

As sea ice reduces in extent, multi-year ice is being lost and there is consequently a larger proportion of seasonal, thin first-year ice (Maykut 1978; Holland et al. 2006). Increased thin ice may result in an ice pack that exhibits greater inter-annual variability (Maslanik et al. 2007b; Goosse et al. 2009; Notz 2009; Kay et al. 2011; Holland and Stroeve 2011; Döscher and Koenigk 2013), at least partially due to enhanced ice growth and retreat rates (Maykut 1978; Holland et al. 2006; Bathiany et al. 2016a). Decreased ice thickness promotes amplification of a positive ice-albedo feedback, which can magnify sea ice anomalies (Perovich et al. 2007), and thin ice is more vulnerable to anomalous atmospheric forcing and oceanic transport due to the smaller amount of energy required to completely melt the ice (Maslanik et al. 1996, Zhao et al. 2018). For example, pulse-like increases in oceanic heat transport can trigger abrupt ice-loss events in sufficiently thin ice (Woodgate et al. 2012).

The relationship between ice area and its variability has been studied in a limited capacity, likely because it is only beginning to become visible in September in the present day. Both Goosse et al. (2009) and Swart et al. (2015; their Fig. S6) reported that maximum sea ice variability during September occurs once the mean ice extent declines to 3-4 million km$^2$. This increased variability may occur due to increased prevalence of RILEs and periods of rapid recovery during this timeframe (Döscher and Koenigk 2013). The thickness distribution during these periods skews toward thinner ice, which is conducive to both rapid ice loss and rapid recovery

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processes (Tietsche et al. 2011; Döscher and Koenigk 2013). Holland et al. (2008) considered a critical ice thickness that can serve as a precursor to RILEs, but found it more likely that intrinsic variability played the primary role in the particular RILEs that were studied.

Building on these previous studies that have focused primarily on variability at the summer ice minimum, our paper has two novel aspects. First, we analyze variability of sea ice over the course of the year through the 21st century and find very different behavior across seasons. These monthly differences are important, because marine access to the Arctic will likely expand beyond late summer as the ice pack shrinks. Second, we detail how interannual sea ice area variability changes as the ice pack retreats and link enhanced future variability to optimal ice thicknesses as well as the various thermodynamic and dynamic processes that control ice area variability. We analyze a large 40-member ensemble for our study, which has the advantage of allowing us to robustly characterize internal variability. This allows us to test the hypothesis that interannual Arctic sea ice cover variability will increase throughout the year in the future as the ice pack diminishes.

## 2. Data and Methods

Ice thickness, concentration, and area were obtained from simulations of the Community Earth System Model Large Ensemble Project (CESM-LE). Ice concentration refers to the percentage of a given grid cell that is covered by ice, while ice area in this study refers specifically to this percent coverage multiplied by the area of the grid cell yielding a total Arctic ice-covered area. The CESM-LE was designed to enable an assessment of projected change in the climate system while incorporating a wide range of internal climate variability (Kay et al. 2015). It consists of 40 ensemble members simulating the period 1920-2100 under historical and projected (RCP8.5 emissions scenario only) external forcing. The ensemble members are produced by introducing a small, random round-off level difference in the initial air temperature field for each member. This then generates a consequent ensemble spread that is purely due to simulated internal climate variability. A full description of the CESM-LE is given in Kay et al. (2015).

Another data set used in the current study is the model simulations from the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 5 (CMIP5). Although more than 40 models submitted their simulation results to the Program for Climate Model Diagnosis and Intercomparison (PCMDI), only 12 of them simulated the Arctic sea ice extent within 20-percent error when compared with observations (Wang and Overland, 2012, Wang and Overland 2015). Therefore, we used only these 12 models identified by Wang and Overland (2015) in this study; there are 33 ensemble members from these 12 models in the RCP8.5 emissions scenario. Sea ice area, rather than ice extent, is obtained from these 12 CMIP5 models to be consistent with CESM-LE results.

One of our primary analysis datasets is the time series of monthly ice variables. The ensemble mean of all statistics is taken after the statistics are calculated for each ensemble member. 1-year differences in ice area are calculated for each month separately to remove the confounding effect of amplified variability resulting from a downward trend. Finally, a 10-year running standard deviation is applied to the time series of 1-year differences in monthly ice area, centered on a given year. Ten years was chosen to quantify variability over decadal-scale intervals and to

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provide an adequate number of years for a standard deviation calculation. The timing and magnitude of variability is generally insensitive to the standard deviation window, however, and whether the 1-year difference in ice area or its raw time series is used.

# 3. Results

## 3.1 Sea ice area and its variability

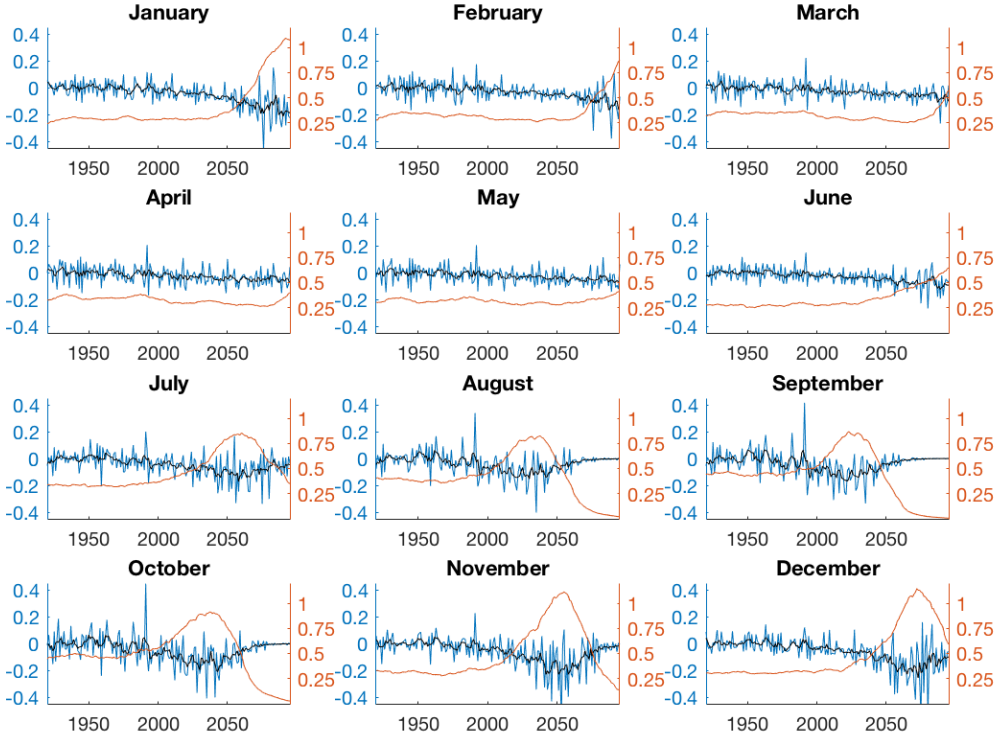


**Figure 1:** The CESM-LE ensemble mean of the 1-year differences in sea ice area (blue; km$^2$ x 10$^6$) with their 5-year running mean overlaid (black) and the running standard deviation of the interannual change in sea ice area (gold; km$^2$ x 10$^6$).

Sea ice area in the CESM-LE is projected to decline in all months in the 21$^{st}$ century, proceeding in three phases: a fairly stable regime of extensive coverage in the 20$^{th}$ century, then a decline, followed by virtually no ice remaining in summer and autumn months (Fig. S1). Sea ice area variability also follows this three-phase progression in months spanning mid-summer to early winter (Fig. 1). For example, in September this includes a period of modest variability during the 20$^{th}$ century, then a distinct variability peak in the late 2020s and 2030s that coincides with the maximum rate of ice retreat, and finally negligible variability in the late 21$^{st}$ century as the Arctic reaches near ice-free conditions (Fig. 1). The first two phases of this progression in

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variability occur for months in late winter to early summer (January-June), and suppressed variability would likely emerge beyond the end of the century, assuming that ice cover in these months would continue to retreat. The maximum rate of ice retreat (negative values of the derivative) occurs at a different time in the 21st century in each month, occurring presently in September but not until the end of the century in spring.

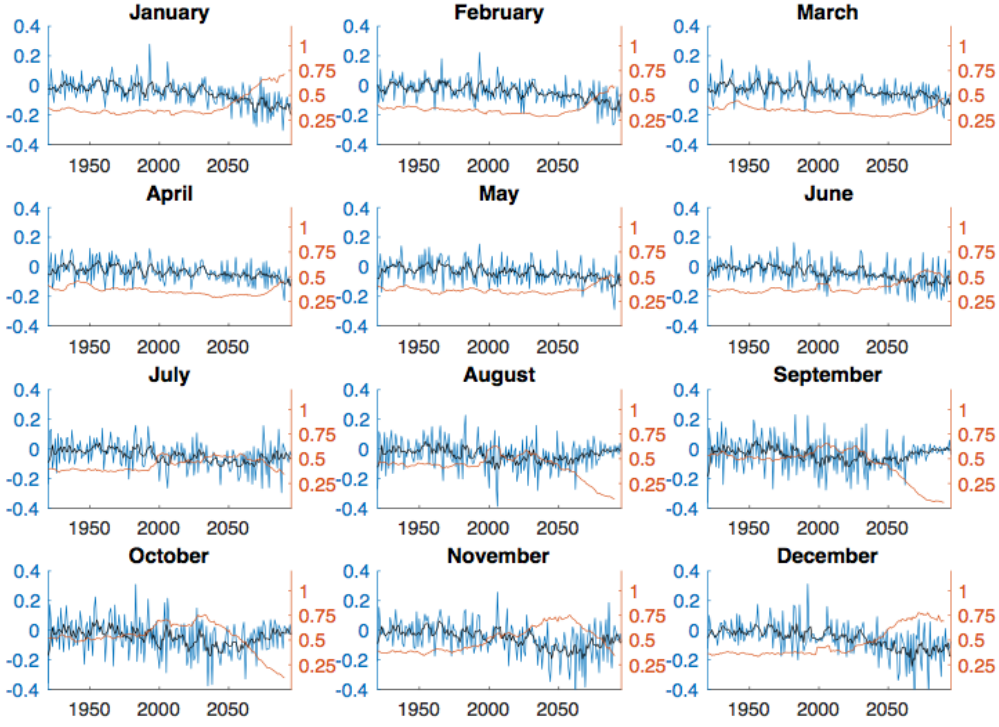


**Figure 2:** As in Fig. 1, but for the ensemble mean from 12 CMIP5 models' sea ice area.

The same inverse relationship between ice area and its variability is maintained across CMIP5 models, though with more noise resulting from the aggregation of many different models rather than ensemble members from a single model (Fig. 2). This is most notable in the sea ice area (1-year difference) time series (Fig. 2, blue), indicating that there is considerable spread in when and how the downward trend proceeds each month as found in Massonnet et al. (2012), but good agreement that variability increases in this timeframe.

The analysis of ice area variability in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 follows that of Goosse et al. (2009) and Swart et al. (2015), but we extend their findings for September to all months and confirm that the variability in ice area is maximized as its total basin area decline is well underway in both CESM-LE ensembles and across CMIP5 models. An inverse relationship between the rate of sea ice retreat and the magnitude of variability is present across all months in CESM-LE and CMIP5: the standard deviation is highest when ice declines the fastest (Figs. 1 and 2). Fur-

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thermore, the magnitude and timing of peak ice area variability in both sets of experiments differs greatly by season. The peak in magnitude in CESM-LE is most pronounced from November-January when the running standard deviation of ice area exceeds 1 x $10^6$ $km^2$, while the lowest magnitudes occur in April and May, when the downward trend in ice area does not peak prior to 2100 (Fig. 1). Near the end of the 21st century, the running standard deviation also shows an increase in the CMIP5 ensembles from December to June (Fig. 2). Part of this increase is associated with decreasing sea ice cover, but the CMIP5 model spread could also be responsible for inflated variance as models diverge in their timing of the downward trend and its rate of decline.

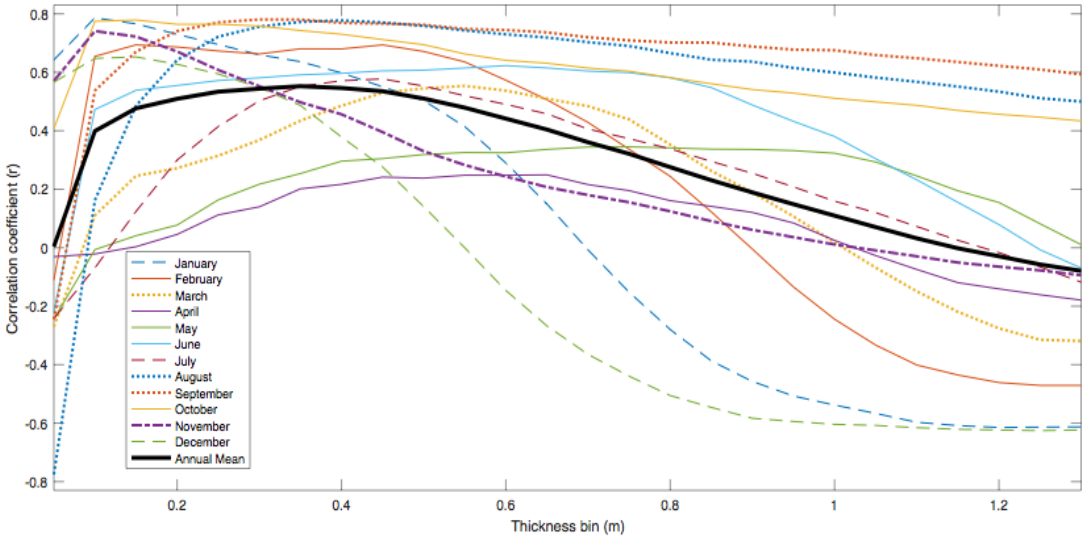


**Figure 3:** Monthly correlation coefficient (r) of the 2000-2100 10-year running standard deviation of 1-year difference in sea ice area with mean grid cell ice thickness binned every 0.05 m of thickness.

## 3.2 Relationship between ice area variability and thickness

Because increasing future concentrations of thin ice are likely a primary factor in increased ice area variability, we next consider the relationship between ice thickness and its variability in CESM-LE. This is done by correlating the standard deviation of basin-wide ice area (Fig. 1) with the total area of grid cells with mean ice thickness within a given range for an aggregation of all years and ensemble members, binned at 0.05 m intervals (Fig. 3). 20th century data are omitted because both variables are largely stationary for this period. There is a large difference in the maximum correlation coefficient across seasons, but in most months it peaks between r = 0.6 and r = 0.8. This peak is associated with the thinnest ice of 0.1 m to 0.2 m from October to January. There is a broad peak in the correlation coefficient between 0.25 m and 0.40 m in August and September, while July peaks near 0.45 m thickness but with a weaker maximum correlation coefficient (r = 0.6). In June, r = 0.6 for most ice thicknesses below 0.8 m, and there is only a weak correlation between these variables in April and May.

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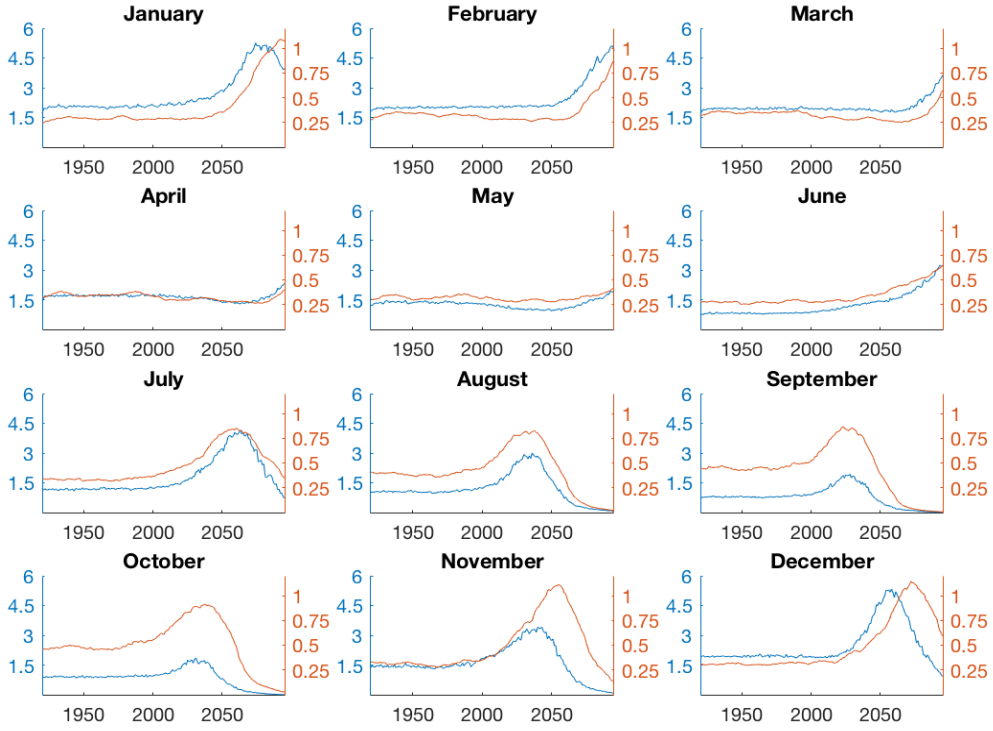


**Figure 4:** The CESM-LE ensemble mean of the 10-year running standard deviation of 1-year difference in sea ice area from Figure 1 (gold; $km^2 \times 10^6$) and the ensemble mean total area of grid cells with mean ice thickness between 0.2 m and 0.6 m (blue; $km^2 \times 10^6$).

The analysis in Fig. 3 allows us to identify a common range of ice thicknesses when ice area variability generally peaks regardless of the month, which we approximate as 0.2 m to 0.6 m. We next track the temporal evolution of this thin ice throughout the basin by calculating the total area of ice that falls within that range. The time-transgressive nature of when the peak in thin ice cover occurs (earliest in September, latest in winter-spring) is consistent with the corresponding timing of the peak future sea ice area variability, suggesting that the emergence of a sufficiently thin and contracted ice pack is a primary factor for enhanced ice cover variability (Fig. 4). Both curves match each other in shape, with a steady state early, increasing to a peak and dropping to zero as the Arctic becomes ice-free. The exception is in the spring and early summer when neither increases until the end of the 21st century, when ice begins to decline more rapidly. The two curves are largely in phase as well, with one preceding the other by no more than 10-20 years in July, August, and November–January. The phase difference is due to the chosen range of ice thicknesses, since the best relationship varies by month (Fig. 3). The two curves are in phase from August-October (Fig. 4) when the 0.2 m to 0.6 m range approximates the best relationship between thickness and variability (Fig. 3). However, ice area variability

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maximizes after the peak in 0.2 m – 0.6 m thickness area in November–January, because variability is more highly correlated with ice slightly thinner than 0.2 m in these months (Fig. 3; Fig. 4).

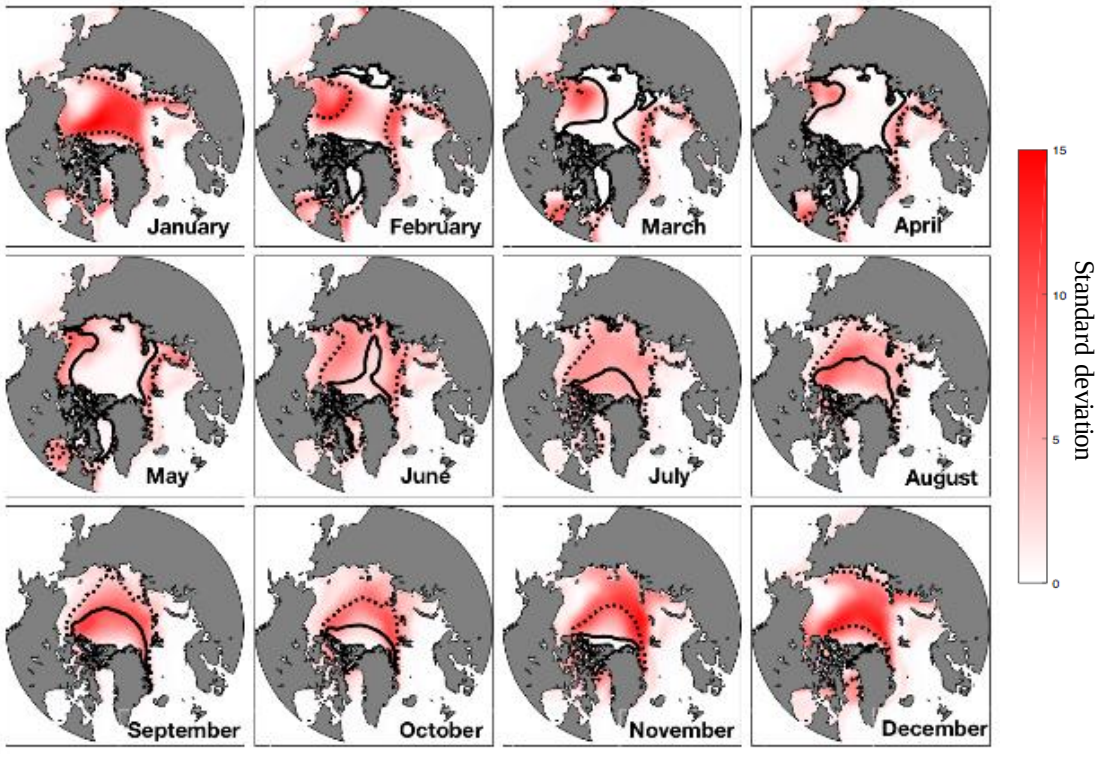


**Figure 5:** Monthly ensemble average of the 10-year running standard deviation of ice concentration (%) in the decade when ice area variability is maximum. Mean 0.2 m and 0.6 m ice thicknesses are indicated by the dotted and solid contours, respectively.

There are also notable seasonal differences in the spatial pattern of variability during the decade when variability in ice concentration peaks in CESM-LE (Fig. 5). The largest fluctuations occur in a horseshoe-shaped pattern across the Arctic Ocean in autumn, but they are restricted to the boundaries of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in late winter and spring. The result is a larger area of high variability in the second half of the year and into January. The mean 0.2 m (dotted) and 0.6 m (solid) ice thickness contours are overlaid for reference (Fig. 5). The contours correspond closely to the boundary of maximum variability in ice coverage in most months, which is consistent with results from Fig. 3 and Fig. 4. This demonstrates the first-order relationship between thin ice and inter-annual ice coverage within a given region.

## 3.3 Ice concentration tendency

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The strong relationship between thin ice coverage and high concentration variability occurs primarily due to the differing underlying mechanisms controlling ice concentration variability at a given time, namely whether ice is growing or retreating. To illustrate this, we chose two months representative of these processes, September and December, to conduct an in-depth analysis of the physical mechanisms involved in the time difference in the two curves in Fig. 4. September is the end of the melt season, and therefore the ice concentration over the entire basin in this month reflects the cumulative impact of melt processes throughout the summer. By contrast, December is a time of ice growth, particularly in the future, and thus the ice concentration in this month is largely regulated by cumulative growth processes during the autumn. Using available model output, we calculate the ice concentration tendency (% $day^{-1}$) from thermodynamics and dynamics in the regions where the decadal standard deviation of ice concentration exceeds 30% within the grid cell (Fig. S2) to evaluate the mean ice budget. These regions of maximum variability in September and December closely match those in Fig. 5, though the magnitude is smaller in Fig. 5 due to a slightly different method of calculating the standard deviation. The daily change in ice concentration is a function of dynamic contributions (ice import/export and ridging), thermodynamic melt processes (top, basal, and lateral), and thermodynamic growth (frazil and congelation). Because antecedent conditions of the icepack can be an important factor for determining ice concentration in the month of interest, we sum these terms over the preceding months (July-September or October-December) and report the net 3-month change in ice concentration resulting from each component.

The most interannually variable ice cover during September occurs primarily in the 2020s and is centered across the central Arctic (Fig. S2a), though this region displays net ice expansion in July-September in the 20th century (Fig. 6a) due to rapid ice growth in September. Thermodynamic processes dominate over dynamics and are of opposing sign during the 20th century, and thermodynamic processes add an average of 20% to the ice concentration of each grid cell in the region by the end of September, compared with a loss of only 10% from dynamical processes (Fig. 6a). Ice growth diminishes and melt processes accelerate in the early-mid 21st century when the melt processes reduce ice concentration by more than 75% and the dynamic processes essentially disappear with less ice to export (Fig. 6a). After 2060, September ice free conditions occur, and the thermodynamic term becomes less negative due to reduced areal coverage of ice in June and hence less ice area to melt over the summer (Fig. 6a).

Because thermodynamic processes dominate in controlling ice concentration in the future, they should also be the first-order forcing explaining future ice concentration variability, particularly given that the magnitude of the dynamic contribution approaches zero by the 2020s when ice cover is rapidly diminishing. As shown in Figure 6b, the peak interannual variability in the thermodynamic term (red curve) is indeed several times larger than peak variability of the dynamic term (blue curve), and the thermodynamic variability maximizes during the late 2020s in phase with the variability of the ice concentration (green curve) when the thermodynamic term is declining most rapidly in Figure 6a. The thermodynamic term variability likely also reflects the influence of the surface albedo feedback in amplifying summer ice area variations as well. There is a secondary rise in the variability of the thermodynamic term after 2060 (Figure 6b), coinciding with its rapid rise toward zero in Figure 6a, but ice coverage by this point is confined to a diminishing area.

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337 Ice growth rather than melt occurs in the October-December period in a similar region of
338 maximum interannual variability as September, except slightly equatorward (Fig. S2b), from the
339 20th century well into the 21st century, and ice export plays a relatively larger role in the regions
340 of interest in December than in September (Fig. 6c). However, the thermodynamic tendency is
341 still the dominant term controlling ice concentration within this region of maximum interannual
342 variability, and this term increases in the early 21st century to a total of nearly 120%, some of
343 which is offset by ice export that contributes to a 40% decrease in mean ice concentration in the
344 20th and early 21st centuries (Fig. 6c). The increased net ice growth occurs at this time primarily
345 because there is more initial open water on which frazil can form.
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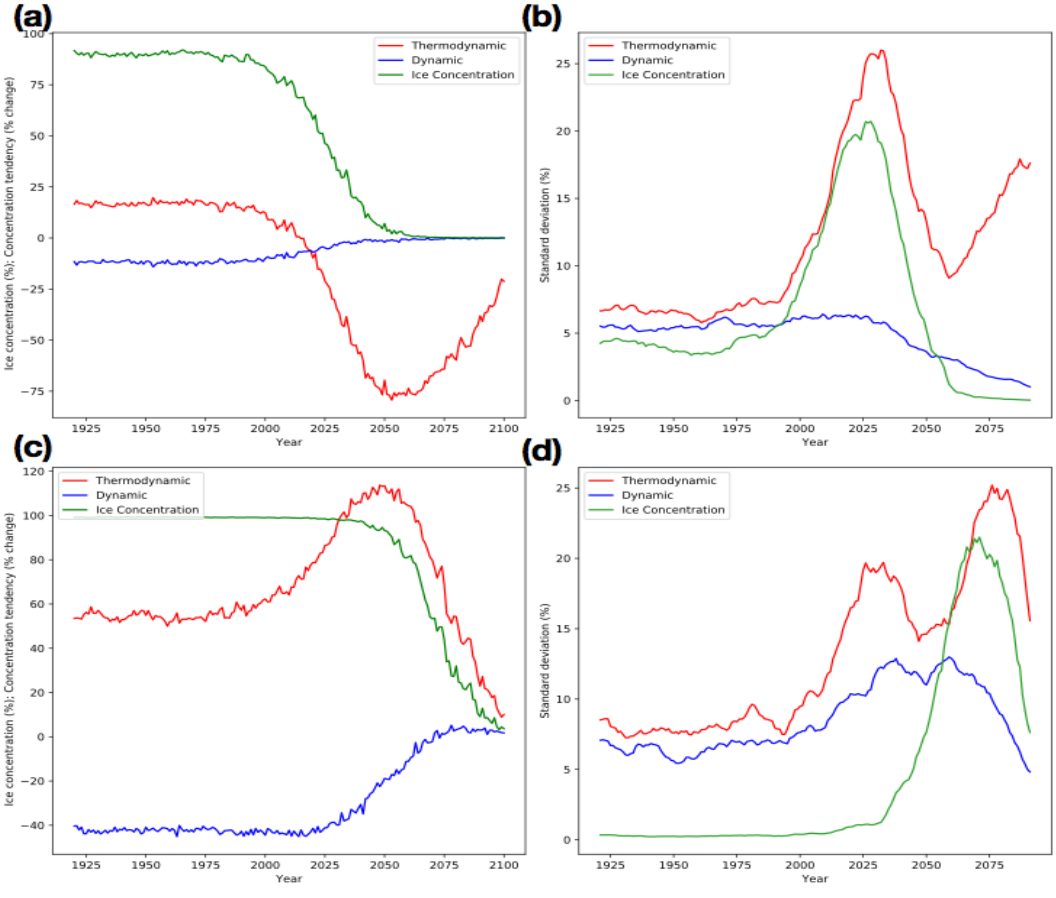


348
349 **Figure 6:** Time series of ensemble-mean a) September ice concentration (%) and July-Septem-
350 ber averaged concentration tendency (% day$^{-1}$) from dynamics and thermodynamics, and b) the
351 10-year running standard deviation of: the inter-annual difference in ice concentration (%), and

July-September ice concentration tendency from dynamics and thermodynamics (% day$^{-1}$). The same information is presented in c) and d) for December concentration and October-December ice concentration tendency terms.

Figure 6d shows that the standard deviation of December ice concentration (green curve) peaks around 2070 and is accompanied by a peak in the variability of the thermodynamic tendency (red curve) of more than double the magnitude of its dynamic tendency (blue curve). A smaller first peak in thermodynamic tendency occurs in the 2020s, when ice growth in this region increases due to increased frazil growth as this region's waters become more open on average in October. This initial peak may be smaller due to the anti-correlation between dynamic and thermodynamic tendency which reduces the effect of the latter. The rapid subsequent decline in ice growth occurs as conditions become too warm for ice growth over much of the October–December period in the 2050s and 2060s (Fig. 6c). This is reflected in the peak in variability of the thermodynamic tendency (red curve) approximately corresponding to the timing of the peak in the ice area variability (green curve) in 2070 (Fig. 6d). The coincidence in their peak variability is similar to that in Figure 6b and underscores the dominance of thermodynamics over dynamics in regulating the variability of ice area.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

1) Inter-annual variability of Arctic sea ice cover increases in all months in the future as sea ice area and thickness decline, but there is a strong seasonal dependence. There is also a strong seasonal dependence of the magnitude of the maximum ice area variability in the future, with the greatest magnitude occurring during autumn and winter and smallest during spring (Fig. 1,2). The future peak in variability emerges soonest in late-summer months and latest during spring months, and the magnitude of this peak is inversely correlated with the rate of ice loss in every month.

It is possible that the seasonal differences in ice area variability are partially a construction of the geography of the Arctic Basin, as evident in Fig. 5: when the ice margin is geographically constrained and unable to expand and contract due to a coastline early in the simulation, there is a smaller area subject to high ice variability. This explanation was offered by Goosse et al. (2009) for the same relationship in summer ice area variability, as well as by Eisenman (2010) to explain retreat rate differences between summer and winter. However, in the future the ice in the central Arctic Ocean becomes thin enough to expand and contract extensively each season, leading to an increase in variability. Therefore, variability could be considered to be limited particularly in the first phase of its time series (Fig. 1) by the inability of ice to spread across a large open area. Furthermore, results from Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 suggest that the amount of thin ice alone can explain the evolution of ice variability in every month, though differences in the optimal ice thickness by month may require a partial geographical explanation in addition to one incorporating the components of the thermodynamic tendency of ice area from Fig. 6.

2) Ice needs to be sufficiently thin before areal variability maximizes, and in CESM-LE the optimal thickness range is generally between 0.2 m to 0.6 m but with some seasonal dependence resulting from the ice melt or ice growth processes that dominate in a given season (Fig. 3-5).

The mean ice thickness in late summer and autumn is close to 0.6 m when ice area variability is highest, but is 0.2 m or less for a grid cell average in the winter.

Increased ice area variability in summer and fall is partly attributable to a higher efficiency of open water formation with the thinning sea ice (Holland et al., 2006) and the fact that smaller heating anomalies are required to completely melt through vast areas of the thin ice pack (Bitz and Roe, 2004). We find that the total area of thin ice between the range 0.2 m to 0.6 m is closely related to how soon and how strongly the peak variability in basin-wide ice area emerges, and this is primarily a function of variability in ice area's thermodynamic tendency. This is consistent with a physical understanding of this relationship, since ice that is too thin tends to be seasonal and melt off every year, whereas thick ice is more likely to survive the melt season. Seasonal forecasting of September sea ice coverage takes advantage of this concept, with the forecast skill improved when initializing ice thickness up to 8 months in advance (Chevallier et al., 2012; Day et al., 2014).

In contrast, ice area variability in November-January arises primarily from inter-annual variability in ice growth (Fig. 6c,d), which is dependent on existing open water conditions and temperature anomalies. The peak in ice area variability also coincides with a slightly lower mean ice thickness of 0.2 m, though it is unclear whether that is due to these ice growth rather than melt processes at work during the winter.

3) Interannual variability in ice concentration is driven primarily by thermodynamic mechanisms, which are primarily comprised of either ice growth or ice melt depending on the season. Despite being opposing processes, they both exceed in magnitude that of dynamic ice processes (Fig. 6).

The thermodynamic tendency in ice concentration is of much greater magnitude than its dynamic counterpart at both the end of the melt season and start of the growth season, and the maximum interannual variability of the thermodynamic term is mostly in phase with that of ice concentration. The inverse relationship between ice area's interannual variability and its interannual rate of change (Figs. 1 and 2) is also found between the thermodynamic tendency and its rate of change (not shown, but inferred from Fig. 6). This is further evidence that ice area variability is primarily driven by thermodynamic processes in the icepack.

The dominance of the thermodynamic tendency is unsurprising and has been established as the relatively more important set of processes controlling sea ice variability, primarily via transport of mid-latitude eddy heat flux anomalies (Kelleher and Screen, 2018), anticyclone passage (Wernli and Lukas, 2018), and increased ocean heat transport (Li et al., 2018). However, the dynamic contribution to changes in ice concentration can likely be substantial in the absence of regional and monthly averaging, and numerous mechanisms have been described that can generate increased ice transport. Recent examples include divergent ice drift events connected to anomalous circulation patterns (Zhao et al., 2018) as well as the collapse of the Beaufort High (Petty, 2018; Moore et al., 2018), both of which may become more common in the future due to preconditioning of the icepack and further intrusion of mid-latitude cyclones into the Arctic.



This study offers a unique contribution by focusing on the predicted evolution of Arctic sea ice variability throughout the year, as characterized by its response to external greenhouse forcing superimposed on short-term internal variability. Increased inter-annual variability in the CESM Large Ensemble as sea ice declines most rapidly is an important result that needs to be accounted for as the ice-free season expands and the timing of maximum variability shifts from September. We also confirm that this relationship is maintained across CMIP5 models, suggesting that the responsible mechanisms reported here are robust. These results have important implications for marine navigation going forward, suggesting that the otherwise auspicious transition to diminished sea ice in every month will be accompanied by a confounding increase in inter-annual variability of the ice cover before the ice disappears completely.

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