

Securitization and Institutional Power in the United Nations

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Abstract

When and why do states securitize issues in international organizations? Is the international political discourse on climate change becoming securitized? What does this imply about power dynamics in the UN and potential policy responses to climate change? To answer these questions, I leverage data on speeches in the General Assembly ([Baturu et al, 2017](#)). I provide the first quantitative test of the securitization of climate politics, using supervised and unsupervised methods to examine variation over time and across states. I advance a theory of securitization in international institutions, in which P5 states securitize to expand the scope of the Security Council and their institutional power, and apply this theory in the case of climate discourse. I statistically test the theory of securitization against alternative explanations including domestic and international politics and geographic vulnerability to the effects of climate change. I find that that the climate discourse is securitizing over time, and the P5 are more likely to securitize. These trends are distinctive of climate politics, as the overall UN discourse is not securitizing, and the P5 do not securitize broadly across topics.

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Discursive shifts in international politics contextualize and recontextualize issues, determining what policy responses are possible and who are the key decision-makers involved. In the United Nations (UN) system, the context of an issue dictates whether it should be addressed by the universally representative General Assembly (UNGA), or by the select and powerful states on the Security Council (UNSC). The way an issue is defined within the UN has direct implications for the nature of the policy response, as well as the set of actors who are the key decision-makers: compared to non-security issues, security issues can be addressed with more resources and a greater variety of tactics, and it is up to the members of the UNSC to decide on the response. For example, the UNSC took up the issue of HIV/AIDs in 2000, and as a result more resources and international attention were subsequently devoted to addressing the problem.

While the UNSC can wield more authority in its decisions, its purview is limited in scope to security matters only. The UNGA, on the other hand, has latitude to address all non-security matters— this institutional rule means that the definition of an issue as security or non-security determines its institutional home. The primary means by which issues are defined is through discourse in these fora. In the UN, discourses are not simply rhetorical exercises, they are means of creating and defining issues and placing them in particular institutional jurisdictions, structuring policy outcomes and the distribution of institutional power. By expanding the set of security issues, discourse can be a tool to expand the scope, and thus the power, of the UNSC relative to the UNGA. States jockey over the institutional home of issues because of the policy implications and the effects on international power dynamics, underscoring the continuing dynamism of international power hierarchies. Thus, examining variation in security discourses in the UN becomes a critical task for explaining policy outcomes.

I argue that the permanent members of the UNSC have an incentive to take advantage of the power of discourse to increase their institutional authority in the UN. One means by which they can do is by securitizing issues, that is, emphasizing their security dimensions. By redefining issues as security problems, members of the UNSC can move them from the agenda of more general UN bodies into their own jurisdiction,

and thus increase their relative power as the key decision-makers. Powerful states care about preserving institutional legitimacy, and therefore I expect securitization to occur within the UNGA itself to signal broad support by the UN membership for a securitizing move. While the permanent members (P5) of the UNSC have the strongest incentives to securitize, other UN members can accept securitization and the according reduction in their power if they believe this tactic is likely to result in increased policy outcomes, as was the case for HIV/AIDS. This theory draws on existing literature in international relations that explores how states engage in international institutions, as well as the relevance of power for institutional design and outcomes (Voeten, 2005; Hurd, 2007; Stone, 2011). I bring this literature into conversation with work on discourse securitization to understand how rhetorical shifts can affect the distribution for state power and the type of policies produced in international institutions (Buzan and Waever, 2003).

I test this theory of securitization in the context of climate politics for several reasons. Climate change is a case in which the broad membership of the UNGA has indicated plausible support for securitization in order to advance policy development in a recent resolution A-RES-63-281. In addition, incentives to address climate change can be explained by a wide variety of possible factors with high levels of variation, allowing for tests of alternative explanations against my theory. Climate politics has been a feature of UN discourse for more than thirty years and has been addressed by nearly every state, providing enough data to observe trends and variation in macro-level shifts in international political discourse. Securitization of climate discourse is a growing area of interest in political science research (Trombetta, 2009; Gemenne et al, 2014; Conca, 2019). Finally, climate change politics is a topic of tremendous substantive import that must be better understood in by international relations scholars (Green and Hale, 2017).

I find that securitization of climate discourse in the UNGA has increased over time, and that the P5 are more likely to securitize the issue than other states. This theory is tested against alternative explanations of domestic and international political incentives, as well as geographic vulnerability to the effects of climate change, which all fail to explain variation in a state's likelihood of securitizing. Previous scholarship has asserted that in

recent years, the securitization of climate politics has indeed taken place. However, such research has not examined UNGA discourse and has also been unable to apply a large-N quantitative approach to discourse analysis. The first contribution of this paper is empirically demonstrating that these claims of securitization in UN climate discourse are correct. I present the first statistical test of climate securitization in a political context, employing a topic model and a supervised analysis on a corpus of speeches given by states at the UNGA General Debate from 1949-2014 (Baturu et al, 2017). I find that the general UN discourse across all topics is not securitizing over time, but rather that this trend is specific to the topic of climate change.

I make a further contribution by explaining the variation in securitization discourse across states. I find that the Permanent 5 members of the UNSC (the United States, China, Russia, France, and Great Britain) are more likely to securitize climate change than other states, controlling for possible confounders. These states securitize the issue by associating climate change with other traditional security matters, including nuclear proliferation and terrorism. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) raise the issue of climate change most frequently, but are more likely to use language focusing on sea level rise and rather than traditional security issues. This is a unique trend in the climate discourse, as the P5 are not more likely to securitize than other states in the UNGA discourse broadly, demonstrating that securitization is a feature of specific issues rather than of rhetorical trends generally. I leverage quantitative tools and a relatively unexplored dataset to examine the rhetoric employed by states in international political discourses and theorize the import of these discursive trends. I derive important insights about the interaction between issue context, institutional structure, and state power in the international policymaking process, and the implications of rhetorical shifts for this process.

Politics, International Organizations, and Securitization

States employ international institutions, including the UN, for a variety of purposes in achieving their goals. Specifically, international organizations can reduce the uncertainty between states in forging agreements, conduct enforcement and monitoring, and

provide avenues for issue bundling and logrolling to enable states to get what they want (Keohane, 1984; Axelrod and Keohane, 1985; Fearon 1998). International organizations such as the UN can also be used as tools for signaling state preferences and communicating intentions to various audiences (Dai, 2005; Fang, 2008; Chapman, 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012).

Variation in the powers and purviews of different UN bodies condition states' abilities to achieve these goals. The locus of an issue in the UN system dictates the means by which it can be addressed, the resources that can be committed, and the priority with which it is afforded in media coverage and state attention. This variation is characteristic of the division of labor between the UNGA and the UNSC. While the UNGA as the plenary body is characterized by universal membership and the ability to entertain a great variety of different issues, the UNSC has a restricted domain and can only take up security matters. UNSC membership is limited, and is characterized as being dominated by the most powerful states in the international system— the P5. Crucially, UNSC decisions are unique in their binding authority, compelling specific actions from member states. The nature of an issue determines whether it falls on the agenda of the UNSC or the UNGA, and which set of institutional rules will delimit the means by which it is addressed.

The relationship between the two bodies is laid out in the UN Charter, which specifically empowers the UNGA to, "discuss any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter and...may make recommendations of members of the United Nations or to the Security Council... The General Assembly may call the attention of the Security Council to situations which are likely to endanger international peace and security." The transfer of issues from the UNGA to the UNSC is a significant step, as once an issue has been transferred under the authority of the UNSC, the UNGA cannot simultaneously act upon it (UN, 1945). Thus, such a move is rare, though it has occurred at various times during the institution's history. For example, in the late 1990s and early 2000s the UNSC began to consider security issues beyond traditional interstate conflict onto its agenda, devoting a high level of attention to issues such as

terrorism and developing new policy tools to address the issue such as the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force. In 2000, the UNSC took up the issue of human health with a resolution on HIV/AIDS. Such issue areas had previously been the unique domain of the UNGA, but to afford more international attention to the topics, member states pressed for UNSC attention. This expansion of the security agenda increased the scope, and therefore the power, of the UNSC relative to the UNGA, by giving it the authority to make decisions over more topic areas.

The key dimensions of power that distinguish these bodies are scope, size, and means. Generally, the UNGA is more powerful in terms of scope, as its mandate permits it to take up any issue whereas the UNSC's agenda is limited to security matters. On the other hand, the UNSC is more powerful in terms of size and means, as a smaller body it faces fewer collective action problems and has the unique authority to implement binding resolutions including the use of force. This gives the UNSC unique weight and authority, making its attention to an issue highly sought after by states seeking to elevate the matter on the international agenda (Hurd, 2007).

When the membership of either the UNSC or UNGA seeks to change the balance of any one dimension relative to its counterpart, the balance of power shifts. Increases in power would be in the interests of that body's members, who would put themselves in a better position to achieve their goals as the relevant decision-makers. For example, P5 members have previously opposed proposed reforms to expand the membership of the UNSC, as this would decrease the relative power of that body on the size dimension. I argue that this logic is generalizable, and P5 members seek to expand the power of the UNSC relative to the UNGA on the scope dimension as well. Specifically, I propose that securitization is a means of achieving this increase in power in scope.

Securitization is defined as a speech act "through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat," (Buzan and Waever, 2003). Securitization theory argues that the decision to securitize is a strategic choice made by the securitizing actor to increase the

probability or efficacy of addressing the issue (Buzan et al, 1998). The rhetorical move of securitizing an issue raises it to the level of high politics, which can place it higher on the agenda and allow for greater resource allocations for its response— essentially the same effect as one may expect from moving an issue from the agenda of the UNGA to that of the UNSC. Securitization implies that an issue has fallen within the domain of the UNSC and is under its legitimate authority. As such, evidence of securitization can be seen in a reframing of a non-traditional security issue as a security issue. This may manifest as using the same types of language to describe the securitized issue as other traditional security issues ("threat", "crime", "disaster", "violation", etc), or to rhetorically associate the new issue together with traditional security issues (such as nuclear proliferation or interstate conflict). Through this re-association, the issue is moved conceptually closer to traditional security issues. In the context of the UN, securitization is a powerful tool, fundamentally influencing policy response and institutional power.

Securitizing an issue moves it from the scope of the UNGA to the UNSC, which has direct policy implications for the way in which the issue can be addressed. The number of states needed to consent for action decreases, and the composition of the coalition also changes. Furthermore, the types of policy responses that are available expand, and the allocation of resources is likely to increase. For example, after the UNSC took up the issue of HIV/AIDS in July 2000, dramatic and rapid increases in global attention and funding occurred. While global health had previously been the purview of the UNGA, securitization shifted the institutional home of the matter. Following this change, global expenditure on AIDS increased from \$893 million in 1999 to \$1.359 billion in 2000 and \$1.623 billion in 2001. Momentum also shifted, resulting in a cascade of attention in other international bodies: a UN special session was initiated, a new global fund was created, and AIDS was placed on the agenda of the Consultative Group to coordinate funding by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (UNAIDS, 2008). This increase in policy output can be directly attributed to the UNSC taking up the issue—the director of UNAIDS at the time observed that the "Security Council debate brought AIDS to the forefront of the global political agenda," (UNAIDS, 2008: 106).

In addition to the direct implications for policy response, securitization shifts power from the UNGA to the UNSC, as the scope of the former is increased relative to the latter. The states that benefit from such a power shift are the P5. In moving the issue to a smaller forum, they increase the likelihood that the final outcome will be closer to their preferences. Non-permanent members of the UNSC may share in such advantages, however because of the temporary nature of these positions, the expected gains of securitizing are much less for these states than for the P5. Neither unanimity of position among the P5 nor a strong preference for expansive policy responses are necessary conditions for securitization to be possible: even when the P5 exhibit variation within their preferences or desire moderate responses, they still are expected to prefer the role of pivotal decision-maker to preempt other decisions. Securitization is therefore expected both when the P5 desire expansive policy outcomes, but also when they desire to limit expansive aims of the UNGA.

However, the P5 are constrained in their ability to securitize topics. Non-UNSC member states are generally disinclined to increase the authority of the UNSC. They are likely to be wary of the potential effects of securitization, which may include UNSC power concentration, lack of accountability to the full membership, precedents set by increasing UNSC mandate scope, undermining of other UN organs, and shifting the locus of power to security experts (Conca, 2019). However, on an issue of high importance to a majority of the membership, the UNGA can be willing to accept securitization of an issue if this would increase the likelihood of a strong institutional response. This was the case in the securitization of HIV/AIDS: many member states, particularly those in the developing world, desired a stronger response from the international community to the growing crisis. By supporting a move of the issue onto the UNSC's docket, these states were able to further this goal, even if the result was a reduction in the scope of their own authority to take action.

Thus, members of the UNSC cannot seek to expand its scope without constraint. When powerful states are able to exert disproportionate control over institutions, they risk eroding their perceived legitimacy (Steinberg, 2002; Stone, 2011). The legitimacy of

the UNSC is an important resource employed by leaders in signaling to their domestic audiences (Voeten, 2001; Drezner, 2003; Voeten, 2005; Chapman, 2007; Thompson, 2009). There is a tradeoff for powerful states between exercising power and maintaining the social legitimacy of the institution. P5 members have an incentive to protect the social legitimacy of the UNSC, therefore, they are likely to favor broad support from the UN membership as a condition for securitization, as was the case in the issue of HIV/AIDS. I expect that rather than pursuing securitization of issues within the UNSC itself, issues are securitized in the UNGA to signal broad support for the move. Only then would the issue be transferred to the UNSC for serious consideration and possible response. Members of the UNSC are likely to engage in this securitization in addition to other member states, but the P5 will do so in the forum of the UNGA. Debates in the UNSC, while suggestive, would not constitute adequate evidence of issue securitization, as they are unable to show broad institutional support from the UNGA membership as well. Thus, for evidence of securitization we must examine discourse in the UNGA directly. To explore the process of securitization outlined above, I apply the theory to the case of climate politics.

Application: Climate Securitization

Climate change is a case where security relevance is increasing over time, although the nexus between climate and security is contested. Some of the important connections include direct territorial threats, impacts on extraterritorial strategic interests, and exacerbation of existing conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1991; Busby, 2008). Securitization of climate change would be likely to increase attention devoted to an issue on the agenda, and to allow for responses with increased speed, urgency, and resources. The power of constraints, norms, and precedents could be eased in favor of more extraordinary measures (Buzan et al, 1998). In the context of the UN system, securitizing the issue would empower the UNSC to address the topic with its greater menu of options (including force) than those available to the UNGA, for example, by imposing economic sanctions on states in violation of international climate treaties. Unlike the UNGA, decisions undertaken by the UNSC are binding on member states, and thus have greater potential to affect rapid change, potentially increasing in higher rates of compliance. On the other hand,

securitization can have problematic implications empowering security communities over experts like climate scientists. Prioritizing response speed can result in a move away from addressing long-term concerns. In the case of climate change, this can result in a shift of resources away from adaptation and mitigation towards emergency response. The potential implications of the securitization of climate change in the UN are clearly broad.

Given this potential import of climate securitization, attention to the matter has been increasing. Scholarship in climate securitization claims that policymakers have increasingly framed climate change as a security issue over time (Ronnfeldt, 1997; Barnett, 2003; Floyd, 2008; Trombetta, 2009; Gemenne et al, 2014). While most of this work places climate change as a distinct case, Detraz and Betstill (2009) contend that it is part of a broader trend beginning in the 1990s of securitizing many areas beyond those of traditional high politics. Research has also noted the particular relevance of the UNSC in climate securitization, exploring normative questions relating to the scope of the UNSC and whether climate change is an appropriate topic for its attention (Sindico, 2007; Detraz and Betsill, 2009; Scott, 2015; Conca, Thwaites, and Lee, 2017; Conca, 2019). These researchers observe that in 2009 the UNGA formally invited a potential relocation of the issue of climate change into the UNSC, calling in A-RES-63-281 for "relevant organs of the United Nations, as appropriate and within their respective mandates, to intensify their efforts in considering and addressing climate change, including its possible security implications," (UN, 2009). This resolution was adopted unanimously by the UNGA, indicating broad acceptance by the membership for this recontextualization. While suggestive evidence, this resolution does not point towards broader conceptual shifts in the characterization of climate change as a security issue by the UNGA membership.

Most previous research on climate securitization in the UN utilizes techniques of in depth discourse analysis. Three special ad-hoc sessions of the UNSC called in 2007, 2011, and 2017 discussing climate change are pointed to as evidence that the issue has been adopted into the security domain. However, this evidence is limited, providing no indication of broader discursive shifts. These exploratory sessions have not had substantial substantive effects on the policy response, as there has been no UNSC resolution adopted

on climate change, nor a move to feature climate change as a regularly occurring agenda item. Following my theory, this lack of impact is easily explained. To elevate the issue to such a position on the UNSC agenda would require more broad acceptance of its security nature by the broader membership, initiated in the UNGA and not in the UNSC alone. Securitization in the UNGA itself has been unexamined. While the discourse analytic approach has brought important themes to light, it is less useful for observing macro-level trends in UN discourse over time. Schafer et al (2016) conduct a large-N analysis on the securitization of climate change in media coverage, but we cannot assume that trends in mass media are matched by those in the political discourse. By leveraging data on speeches given by high-level state representatives in the General Debate of the UNGA, I shed light on macro-level trends in the securitization of climate change in the key locale of the international political discourse, and further examine which states are driving the securitization trend.

Before going further, it is useful to outline the positions of the P5 and other member states on climate change in recent years. Among the P5, France and the United Kingdom are generally supportive of expanding UN efforts to address climate change, while Russia and China are more frequently opposed to such steps, favoring state level responses. The position of the United States has varied by administration, though not necessarily by party. Under the leadership of Barack Obama, the United States was generally favorable towards expanding international efforts to address climate change.¹ Noting this variance in positions among the P5, all members would be expected to support securitizing climate change such that it was recontextualized as an issue in the domain of the UNSC. This move would increase the likelihood of the ultimate institutional response of the UN matching the individual country preference, whether this preference is for a more expansive or limited response because in the UNSC, each P5 member's vote is more likely to be pivotal than in the UNGA. Non-P5 states would be expected to be less likely

¹American support in the Obama era was largely conditional on particular features of the agreed upon instrument (such as the inclusion of Nationally Determined Contributions) to achieve Congressional ratification.

to support securitization, as their ability to impact the outcome would be diminished if climate change moved from the agenda of the UNGA to that of the UNSC. However, the unanimity of the vote for A-RES-63-281 indicates that the general membership is highly concerned about climate change and desires a strong institutional response, and therefore would be willing to accept a reduction in authority in exchange for greater resources and flexibility of response.

My theory predicts that P5 states are more likely to securitize than others, but I consider three possible alternative explanations that might increase a state's propensity to securitize climate change. Each of these alternative explanations draw on the support for A-RES-63-281 to assume that states conceive of securitization as an effective means of advancing the issue of climate change on the international agenda. I further assume that because they lack institutional incentive that motivates P5 states even if their desired outcome is to preempt expansive policies, other states are only more likely to securitize if they prefer to expand international climate policies. The three alternative explanations posit different sources of this variation in state preferences.

Domestic Political Incentives

Leaders may have an interest in obtaining international climate policies because they believe there is an electoral advantage to do so: that is, it is something their constituency desires, and the leader is subject to electoral constraints (Dai, 2005). Globally, 42% of surveyed individuals consider climate change as a threat, though there is substantial variation by region in levels of belief (Capstick et al, 2015). Thus, there may be a case that there is an electoral incentive for leaders to act on their electorate's preferences and push for more international action on climate change. If this explanation holds, I would expect to see more frequent securitization by policymakers from states with high levels of domestic support for international climate policies, and particularly leaders from democracies where electoral constraints are more salient.

Vulnerability to Climate Change Effects

State leaders may have material incentives to address climate change. The potential effects of climate change are dire for many states, particularly in tropical areas and in the

developing world. For some of these states, the effects of climate change, and especially sea-level rise, pose an existential threat. To promote domestic security and prosperity, these leaders have an incentive to develop international policy frameworks to protect their states. If this explanation holds, I would expect policymakers from states with high levels of vulnerability to the effects of climate change to adopt to be more likely to securitize.

International Political Incentives

Previous research on state behavior in international organizations such as the UN has argued that state behavior is determined by international political contexts, in particular a desire to support allies and obtain side benefits. Considerations of foreign aid, alliances, and other measures of affinity between states have found to predict state voting and endorsement behavior (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Voeten, 2000). Discourse in the UNGA may reflect position-taking to publicly align with key allies or supporters in order to demonstrate commitment to the relationship or obtain some other benefit. If this explanation holds, I would expect to see variation in patterns of securitizing discourse across alliances.

UNGA Discourse on Climate

The first question this project addresses is demonstrating whether the climate discourse in international politics has indeed been securitized, as is argued in previous research. I then test my theory of securitization to determine whether P5 states securitize climate politics more than others. While previous research on state preferences in international institutions has relied on data such as voting patterns, I leverage textual data of state speeches given in the UN to directly measure changes in the discourse. Given that the definition of issues in the UN determines the means by which they can be addressed, and that this process is primarily conducted through discourse, speech data is an important and relevant area to explore. In speeches, leaders can communicate preferences and contextualize issues with more nuance than is possible in voting or endorsing resolutions.

General Debate

I utilize the data collected by Baturo, Dasandi, and Mikhal'yov (2017), which

consists of all speeches given by state representatives in the General Debate from 1970-2014. These speeches are good indicators of country preferences and priorities for the work of the UN.² Each year at the opening of the UNGA in September, the General Debate affords the opportunity for each state to speak in a largely unconstrained setting. Because General Debate speeches are not linked to particular resolutions or votes, they are more informative about a country's underlying priorities and positions. The speeches are used to achieve strategic goals by states in changing international perceptions about particular issues. For many smaller countries, the General Debate constitutes one of the only opportunities to be represented on par with the most powerful states, as each country has equal opportunity to speak, affording small states a "rare moment for seizing the spotlight and putting a point of view that might otherwise be ignored," (Nicholas, 1971: 108). The audiences for these speeches include domestic and foreign publics, bureaucrats at the UN, and members of other state delegations.

State speeches in the General Debate are not simply hot air. These speeches can receive high levels of media coverage, which can influence discourse in domestic legislatures and shift public opinion (Kentikelenis and Voeten, unpublished manuscript). Further, simultaneous with the General Debate, the General Committee decides on the agenda of the UNGA for the year from the many provisional agenda items submitted. These decisions may be influenced when large numbers of countries address particular issues in their speeches, affecting the agenda and subsequently the real business of UN activities. Indeed, Smith notes multiple key functions of the General Debate: "It can act as a barometer of international opinion on important issues, even those not on the agenda for that particular session; it helps to identify issues on which a significant degree of consensus may be developing such that they might be ripe to solve; it provides members with a *[sic]* opportunity to blow off steam on contentious issues without causing undue damage," (Smith, 2006: 155-6). As an example of the potential policy influence of the General Debate, Nicholas observes the importance of the demonstration of consensus in

²Informal interviews with officials from state Permanent Missions to the UN inform and support the claims in this section.

the General Debate in furthering UN initiatives on disarmament in the twelfth session (Nicholas, 1971: 108).

One may worry that the speeches delivered in the General Debate are not independent observations, that is, the order in which the speeches are given may have effects on their substantive contents. Strategic coordination and political sources of influence are widespread in state voting records in the UN (Voeten 2000; Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Voeten, 2013), but procedural constraints of the General Debate make this an unlikely concern in this data. Speeches are delivered in the native language of the country speaker and translated into the official languages of the UN and to facilitate this translation, countries are asked to submit their speeches in advance. Speeches are also released in advance to the press and the other delegates of the UNGA. As such, the content in the country speech is determined in advance of the General Debate rather than crafted in response to statements by earlier speakers. This conclusion is further supported by the importance states place on the General Debate speeches. Because this platform is considered highly consequential, many people are involved in the speechwriting process from country missions and governments, and therefore the content is determined well in advance. We can assume that small asides in a country speech will refer to points made earlier in the General Debate; however it is unlikely that substantive content of the speech will be affected by speeches made earlier.

The process in which the order of speakers is determined also weighs against a strategic selection process in which the order of speeches may affect their contents. Per tradition, Brazil and the United States always give the first speeches of the General Debate. Subsequently, the order of countries is determined by the importance of the delegation's speaker, as heads of state are prioritized. Only after these factors are used in ordering are individual country preferences for speaking order and other factors such as geographical balance taken into consideration in setting the speech order. Based on variation in these factors, the order of speakers varies from year to year.

Each year, nearly all countries who are can do so choose to give speeches in the UNGA plenary session. States send high-level representatives to the session, with 44.3%

represented by heads of state or government, 49.3% by vice-presidents, deputy prime ministers, and foreign ministers, and only 6.4% by country representatives to the UN (Baturu et al, 2017). These are strong indications that states take these speeches seriously, and their topical choices are likely to actually reflect their policy priorities. Further, an institutional norm restricts speech-time to 15 minutes. While some countries choose to ignore the limitation on length, speech-length has indeed declined over time. We may thus consider speech-time as a limited resource- countries are simply unable to address every issue in a given speech because of time considerations. Allocating the scarce resource of speech-time to discuss a given issue is a signal that a country considers it to be of high importance.

For all these benefits, the General Debate speeches are increasingly used as a data source in studies of international organizations and state preferences. They have been employed to understand networks and communities of states in the UN (Gurciullo and Mikhaylov, unpublished manuscript; Pomeroy et al, 2018), as well as patterns in state preferences (Chelotti and Dasandi, unpublished manuscript). This is the first application of the General Debate speeches to study securitization and to focus on the issue of climate change.

Measuring Securitization

I examine state speeches from the General Debate 1970-2014 and estimate dynamic topic models on this data. This data comprises 7,897 speeches and 205,913 distinct speech segments, which are analogous to paragraphs. I subsequently filter this full set of documents based on a set of key terms to obtain only the speech segments that discuss climate change. This procedure results in a subset 4,457 segments relevant to climate drawn from 1,987 speeches. In a given Plenary session, almost all members states give a speech, and there are an average of 32 segments per speech.³ The earliest speech on climate change occurs in 1984, so this year is used as the beginning point for the remainder

³A description of the procedure used to segment the speeches, the list of key words used for filtering, and descriptive statistics of the General Debate speech data can be found in the Appendix.

of the analysis.

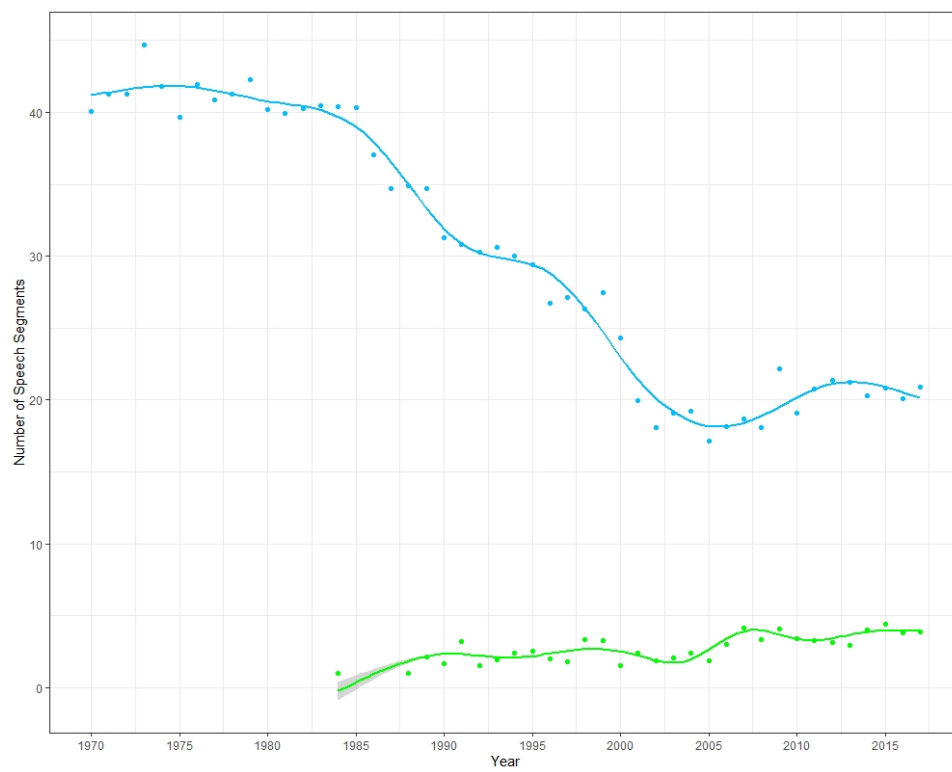
In any speech, the greatest number of segments that specifically discuss climate change is 16 (a speech by Samoa in 2015), while the average is 4. For speeches that discuss climate change at some level, on average 20% of the speech’s paragraphs are about climate change. There is high variation in this proportion, ranging from 1% to 73% of a speech’s paragraphs. In addition to constituting an important topic of a given country’s speech, climate change has been an important topic of the General Debate broadly. Across years, an average of 126 and a maximum of 169 out of 193 countries speak about climate change to some extent, and the share of speeches dedicated to climate change increases over time. While overall speech length declines, the proportion of speeches dedicated to climate change increases, providing evidence that states take this issue seriously, as they allocate an increasingly scarce resource of speech-time towards its discussion, as seen in [Figure 1](#). SIDS discuss climate change at higher rates than other states with more paragraphs about climate change and greater speech proportions on the topic, but they are not necessarily early adopters, picking up the climate discourse at the same time as other states.

Measuring Climate Securitization

To prepare this speech data for text analysis, I conduct additional pre-processing and estimate a topic model with Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), which is a Bayesian generative model of language.⁴ LDA first assumes a vocabulary $\{1, \dots, V\}$ of words, and topics k , which are probability mass functions of words. Some of the topics uncovered can be thought of as frames, that is, different and coherent ways of speaking about the same topic. Because the corpus is already limited to the particular topic of climate change, I specify the topic model with a smaller k than is typical- we can reasonably expect the number of frames employed to discuss a particular topic to be smaller than the number of topics being discussed across a discourse. Ultimately, the procedure of LDA allows me to represent every topic by a unique set of word probabilities, and to

⁴More details on the pre-processing steps and the estimation of the topic model, including tests for robustness, can be found in the appendix.

Figure 1: Over time, length of UNGD speeches declines, while attention to climate increases



Note: Blue dots are total number of speech segments in a given year, green dots are number of speech segments that discuss climate change. Trend lines are Loess smoothed.

subsequently identify the shares of individual documents that fall under a given frame, with each document as a mixture of different topics. I employ a variant of LDA, the structural topic model (STM). STM allows topic proportions and topic prevalence to vary over by covariates of the data, in this case, over time. This is an improvement over the methodology employed by Schafer et al's (2016) study, which uses a dictionary based approach to identify securitization language with a user defined set of key words. A topic modeling approach uses an inductive procedure, and thus the results are not subject to the researcher's prior perception of securitization language, rather identifying the latent relation of securitization language in the data. I validate the results of the topic model by conducting a supervised analysis of the speeches for securitization content and a crowdsourced analysis of the topic labeling to ensure reliability. Details on these procedures can be found in the Appendix.

In examining the results of the topic model, coherent topics cluster around general types of parliamentary and institutional language, oceans, particular institutional language relevant to the UN, greenhouse gases, international treaties (in particular the Kyoto protocol), finance and development, rising sea levels, and general security language. The words most characteristic of each topic can be seen in [Figure 2](#), with the securitization topic identified as Topic 8.

Securitization is quite characteristic of climate discourse in the UNGA. The most frequent rhetorical strategy employed in this area is to associate climate change with other security topics, placing climate change in the realm of security concerns. This is evinced in speeches such as the examples below from P5 and non-P5 member states. It is worth noting that there are some security-related words found in the sea level topic ('vulnerable', 'consequences', 'threat' in Topic 7). While Topic 7 can also be considered to be a security related topic, it is not accurately characterized as *securitizing*. However, the securitization topic is distinctly characterized by words that relate climate change to other more traditional security areas like terrorism and nuclear weapons, as well as more general security words, indicative of the UNSC's responsibilities. This follows more closely with the definition of securitization as described earlier, by which a topic would be

Figure 2: Top 20 Words for Each Topic (beta), Topic 8 is Security Frame

<p>Topic 1: organization, rights, council, cooperation, republic, role, health, reform, system, including, institutions, member, participation, education, government, areas, effective, women, regional, promote</p>
<p>Topic 2: pacific, islands, sids, region, forum, leaders, ocean, oceans, regional, programme, declaration, special, marine, management, risk, issue, solomon, disaster, adopted, resolution</p>
<p>Topic 3: secretary-general, president, leadership, 2030, mr, wish, let, high-level, opportunity, summit, ban, years, thank, ki-moon, together, theme, congratulate, first, debate, commend</p>
<p>Topic 4: per, greenhouse, cent, gas, water, food, reduce, carbon, renewable, gases, growth, reducing, sources, production, million, increase, billion, agriculture, access, forests</p>
<p>Topic 5: protocol, kyoto, parties, held, commitments, binding, forward, negotiations, hope, implementation, december, meeting, ambitious, legally, force, 2015, summit, next, made, towards</p>
<p>Topic 6: developed, common, adaptation, responsibility, measures, financial, copenhagen, mitigation, financing, responsibilities, fund, provide, technology, millennium, green, necessary, ensure, commitments, believe, needs</p>
<p>Topic 7: threat, impact, rise, vulnerable, sea, disasters, consequences, caribbean, impacts, already, level, affected, years, levels, real, adverse, survival, sea-level, rising, caused</p>
<p>Topic 8: crisis, today, terrorism, problems, threats, conflicts, food, crises, face, nuclear, financial, planet, weapons, conflict, facing, rights, live, war, still, together</p>

re-contextualized to be more similar to traditional security issues. This definition specifies securitization via association of the issue with other traditionally defined security threats, which occurs in Topic 8, whereas language in Topic 7 is better characterized as identifying climate change as a major threat. By not creating an association with matters already in the purview of the UNSC, we would not expect high rates of use of Topic 7 to be associated with securitization for the purposes of creating institutional shifts.

"Nobody can protect themselves from climate change unless we protect each other by building a global basis for climate security. That goes to the heart of the United Nations mission, and the United Nations must be at the heart of the solution....Our climate presents us with an ever-growing threat to international security," (United Kingdom, 2006)

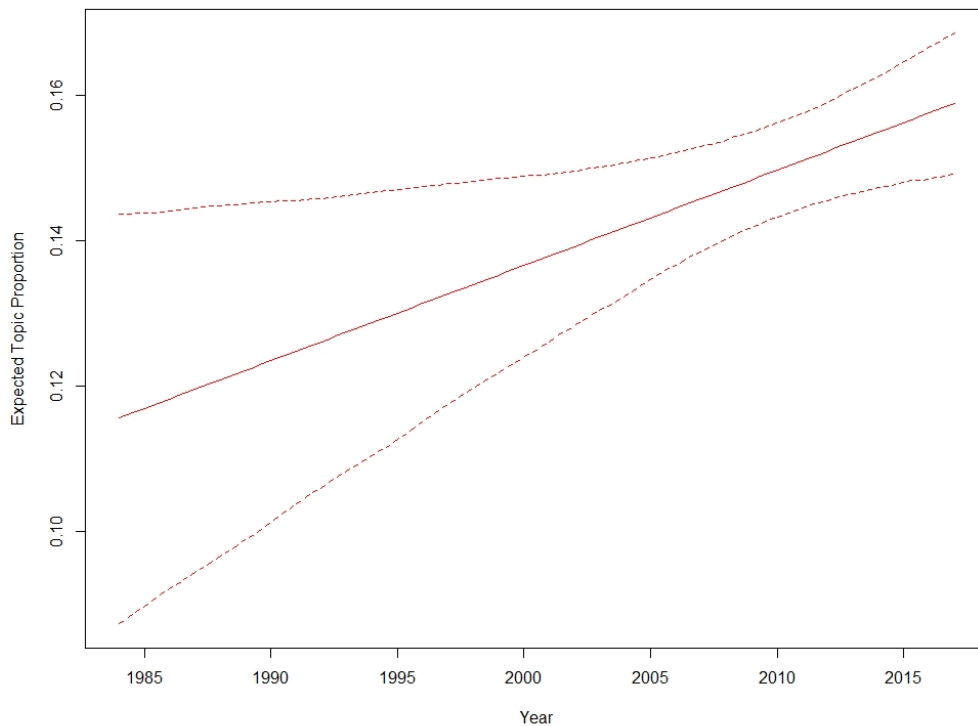
"First, there can be no doubt that while walls between nations have come down and the numbers of victims have diminished, there have emerged new threats to security, such as terrorism, extremism, separatist movements and climate change, that are no less dangerous than previous ones," (Morocco, 2017)

"Today the greatest threats to our security often come not from other functioning sovereign States, but from terrorist organizations, from failing States and from man-made shocks to our environment like climate change, which can exacerbate State failure and breed internal instability," (United Kingdom, 2004)

"Security challenges posed by climate change, conflicts, terrorism, transnational organized crime and other threats continue to undermine our efforts to achieve sustainable development, peace and security for our global community," (Kiribati, 2013)

"Besides the economic crisis the first large-scale crisis of the era of globalization global development as a whole continues to be threatened by regional and local conflicts, terrorism, cross-border crime, food shortages and climate change," (Russia, 2009)

Figure 3: Securitization is increasing over time



Securitization language makes up a substantial portion of the climate discourse as the second most frequently employed type of language in the General Debate. The most frequently used topic is rising sea levels. For a given speech paragraph on climate change, the mean use of the sea levels frame is 16.4% of the total paragraph's language. The securitization topic is the next most prevalent frame, characterizing 15.5% of the climate discourse. The least commonly used topic, the general oceans topic, characterizes 13.0% of the discourse. Notably, the security frame is used more over time, as seen in [Figure 3](#). Other frames, particularly the Kyoto Protocol frame, decrease in their use over time.⁵

⁵Visualizations showing the trends in other frames over time, as well as the proportion of use for each frame can be found in the Appendix.

This finding provides empirical evidence to support the claims made previous scholarship about the securitization of the international climate discourse over time.

Who Securitizes?

After confirming that the climate discourse in the General Debate is securitizing over time, I seek to understand how the rate of securitization varies across states, expecting that P5 states are more likely to securitize. For the dependent measure of securitization, I calculate the proportion of security frame language in a speech paragraph from the topic model. For each speech segment, a proportion is classified as falling under each frame such that across all 8 frames, the total proportions sum to 1, and for each frame, the outcome is a continuous measure that can range 0:1. States who do not make any speeches discussing climate politics during the relevant time period are not included in the analysis. While my theory predicts that P5 states are more likely to securitize than others, I consider domestic politics, physical vulnerability, and international politics as possible alternative explanations that might increase a state's propensity to securitize climate change.

Bivariate analysis shows more support for my theory than any of these three alternative hypotheses, as P5 states are more likely to securitize compared to non-P5 states (and are also significantly less likely to use the oceans or sea-level frames), seen in [Figure 4](#). This result holds across time. All of the P5 members speak on climate change, lead by the United Kingdom with 40 instances, France with 26, China with 18, the United States with 14, and Russia with 11. This leadership by the United Kingdom comports with earlier research on climate securitization in the UN. While this claim has generally rested on the fact that the United Kingdom convened first UNSC debate on climate change in 2007, this evidence provides more broad support. In the US case there is a high degree of variation across administration.

This is not to say that the security frame is absent in speeches given by non-P5, including those given by SIDS (see the example from Kiribati above). Indeed, according to my theory it is important to see securitization in speeches by non-P5 states— if the P5 were the only ones securitizing, the case for moving climate change onto the UNSC

agenda would lack the consensus support needed to succeed. Noting this, the use of security language in SIDS speech is distinctive from the patterns in the P5. SIDS tend to highlight climate change as a *new* security threat rather than associating it with more traditional security threats or particular UN institutional concepts.

I compare this finding to those predicted by the alternative explanations. As a possible domestic political explanation, I leverage variation in regime type, measured with Polity score. Countries with Polity scores greater than 6 are coded as democracies, while countries with Polity scores less than -6 are coded as autocracies. Between these two groups, there are no significant differences in securitization, though democracies are more likely to use the greenhouse gas frame (Figure 5). To examine geographic vulnerability, I compare framing by SIDS and non-SIDS. This test indicates that SIDS are significantly less likely to securitize than non-SIDS, but are much more likely to use the oceans and sea-level frames (Figure 6). In fact, these frames are almost exclusively employed by SIDS. While there are certainly security-related facets to these frames for the situation of SIDS, they do not capture the definition of securitization I laid out previously.⁶

This securitization of climate discourse by the P5 appears to be a specific phenomena rather than an overall discursive trend, as Detraz and Betsill (2009) had contended. To verify that the P5 are not simply securitizing all General Debate discourse, I fit an additional topic model with the same specifications to the full General Debate corpus. This allows me to examine whether the P5 are specifically moving to securitize climate change, or whether their language is characterized by security themes across all issue areas. Comparing the topic models on climate discourse and the full discourse reveals that security matters do comprise a distinct topic in the General Debate, and that this topic particularly focuses on hard security matters such as nuclear weapons, disarmament, and terrorism. However, there is not evidence that the overall discourse is securitizing:

⁶By region, a similar trend is observed to that of SIDS versus non-SIDS: Oceania is more likely to employ the oceans and sea-level frames. This trend is likely driven by the prevalence of SIDS in this region (of the 14 states in the Oceania region, all are SIDS with the exceptions of Australia and New Zealand).

Figure 4: P5 Securitize

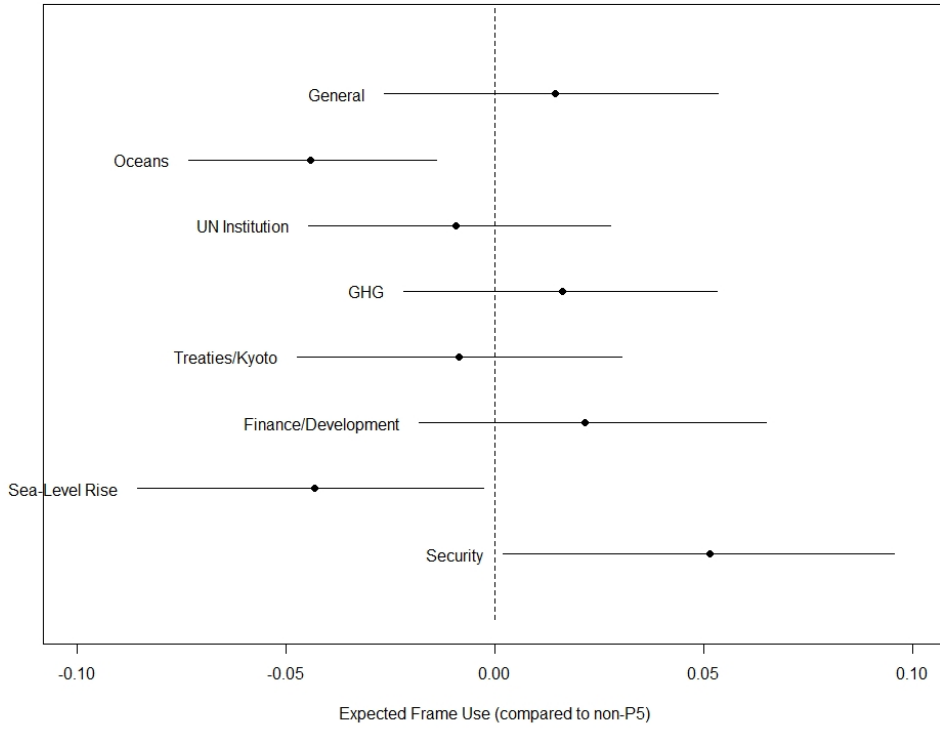


Figure 5: SIDS use ocean and sea-level frames

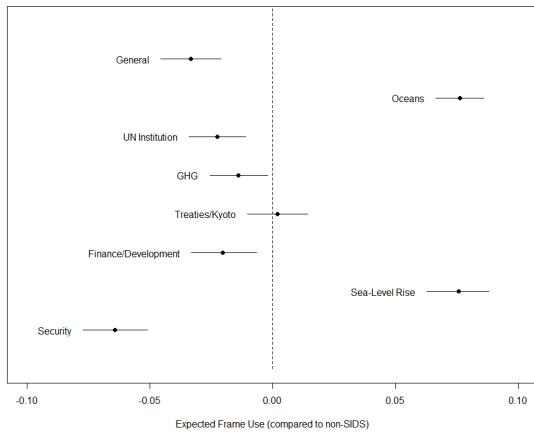
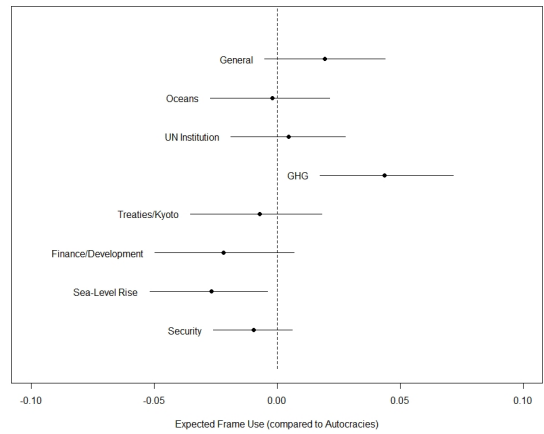


Figure 6: Democracies use GHG frame



the prevalence of this security topic is declining over time, whereas the use of security language in the climate discourse specifically was increasing over time. In the general discourse, the P5 are no more likely to employ security language than other states. These findings support the analysis of climate discourse as a unique case of securitization in UN discourse, and provide further evidence that the P5 are expected to securitize strategically, selecting particular issue areas where there is broad support for securitization across the general membership.⁷

To more carefully test my theory against the alternative explanations, I leverage additional data data to control for other relevant sources of variation in addition to the indicators described above. These features are used to predict securitization at the country-year level, specifically the average paragraph level proportion of the security frame used by a country in a given year.⁸ Because the dependent variable is continuous 0:1, I employ a linear regression framework.

I utilize cross-national public opinion data on climate change to explore the *domestic politics explanation*, which predicts that leaders will be more likely to securitize when it aligns with their constituency's preferences. If climate change is an important issue for domestic publics, we may expect that leaders will have reason to push for securitization to increase the likelihood of a strong UN institutional response. This data comes from a Gallup survey conducted across 106 countries in 2010 that measured understanding of and concern about climate change. The Gallup panel included all of the P5 members except France, as well as 4 SIDS (Singapore, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Comoros, out of 37 total SIDS). Though this is unfortunately a small proportion of SIDS, it provides much better coverage than any other cross-national survey with data on climate change attitudes conducted to date. I use the measure of concern rather than understanding in the model because higher levels of public concern more closely capture the kind of electoral pressure that would be likely to move policymakers to advance the issue of climate change on the global agenda.

To better explain the effects of *geographic vulnerability* to the effects of climate

⁷More details on the findings in the full corpus placebo test can be found in the Appendix.

⁸More details on the independent variables can be found in the Appendix.

change, I incorporate a measure of actual warming as a change in national average air temperature over land since 1960 in degrees Celsius, measured by Berkeley Earth. I also construct a measure of climate disaster occurrences to capture the experienced effects of climate change across states, utilizing data from the International Disaster Database from 1984-2018. I include data on climate-related disasters, including climatological (drought and wildfire), hydrological (flood and landslide), and meteorological (extreme temperature and storm). The disaster database captures the number of deaths, injured, affected, homeless, and costs for many of these events. To maximize data availability and reduce the effects of income-dependence, I follow Roberts and Parks (2007) and use a smoothed measure of total persons affected. Countries with higher warming and higher rates of climate disasters are experiencing the effects of climate change more acutely, and would be expected to be more likely to securitize.

Finally, I use the measure of affinity constructed by Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten (2017) to capture *international political incentives* that might drive securitization. These measures of state preference similarity are constructed using voting records in the UNGA. To determine whether US influence is driving securitization choices in UNGA rhetoric, I include the measure of vote similarity for each country with the US. If relationships supporting the agendas of the ‘important’ state is driving securitization, higher levels of voting affinity would be expected to predict securitization.

In addition to these measures, I also control for general indicators of state power. These factors might reflect a higher level of general state security concerns, which could be associated with a greater propensity to securitize. These these measures include annual measures of country level GDP per capita (logged), population (logged), and military expenditures as a proportion of GDP, all measured by the World Bank. I also include year and a second order polynomial on year to capture time trends in the data. I conduct 5 multiple imputations to address problems of missing data.⁹ This analysis includes 1,987 observations of unique country-years, including every year from 1984-2017 and 194

⁹The results of linear models where missing data was handled with listwise deletion did not deviate substantively from the results obtained via multiple imputation.

distinct countries.

The results of the linear model, shown in [Table 1](#), largely comport with the mean differences examined earlier. Controlling for alternative explanations, P5 status remains a significant predictor of securitization, with P5 states 5 percentage points more likely to securitize than non-P5. SIDS status is a significant predictor in the negative direction, with SIDS expected to securitize nearly 8 percentage points less often than other states. While these predicted effects may seem small, as a shift in framing choices, a small increase in securitization could have substantial effects in terms of agenda setting and influencing frame choice by other states. Furthermore, the mean securitization level by states is 16%, so a 5 percentage point shift represents an allocation change of nearly one-third ([Figure 7](#)). Variables associated with the domestic politics explanation (Public Concern and Democracy) are not significant predictors of securitization, nor is the factor associated with the international politics explanation (UNGA Agreement with US). The variables measuring geographic vulnerability to climate change are of mixed significance: while Warming fails to achieve statistical significance, Climate Disasters is a significant predictor of securitization. However, the predicted effect of Climate Disasters is substantively very small (a 0.4 percentage point influence on predicted securitization) and in the negative direction. This result may be accounted for by the increased incidence of climate disasters in SIDS, which were found to be less likely to securitize. None of the measures of structural power (Population, GDPPC, and Military Expenditure) achieve statistical significance at the level of 0.05, though the substantive predicted effect of Military Expenditure is quite large. Even with this large amount of predictive power, however, the key finding of P5 securitization remains significant.

These findings were robust to several alternative specifications. Military expenditure may capture too broad of a phenomena, as the effects of climate change are likely to be particularly acute to naval forces. As an alternative measure for military expenditure that specifically captures naval powers, I construct an indicator for countries with aircraft carriers. I also specify models where the measure of affinity with the US is replaced for vote similarity with Brazil and with India to determine whether coalitions of develop-

	Estimate	SE	Z	Pr(> Z)
Intercept	0.210	0.052	4.031	0.000
P5	0.051	0.024	2.138	0.033
Pubic Concern	0.015	0.036	0.421	0.673
UNGA Agreement with US	-0.025	0.024	-1.024	0.306
Democracy	0.001	0.008	0.128	0.898
Military Expenditures	0.702	0.384	1.827	0.068
GDPPC (Log)	-0.001	0.005	-0.156	0.876
Population (Log)	-0.003	0.002	-1.503	0.133
SIDS	-0.079	0.012	-6.675	0.000
Climate Disasters	-0.004	0.002	-2.312	0.021
Amt. Warming	-0.013	0.007	-1.764	0.078
Year	0.003	0.002	1.316	0.188
Year Sq	-0.000	0.000	-0.863	0.388

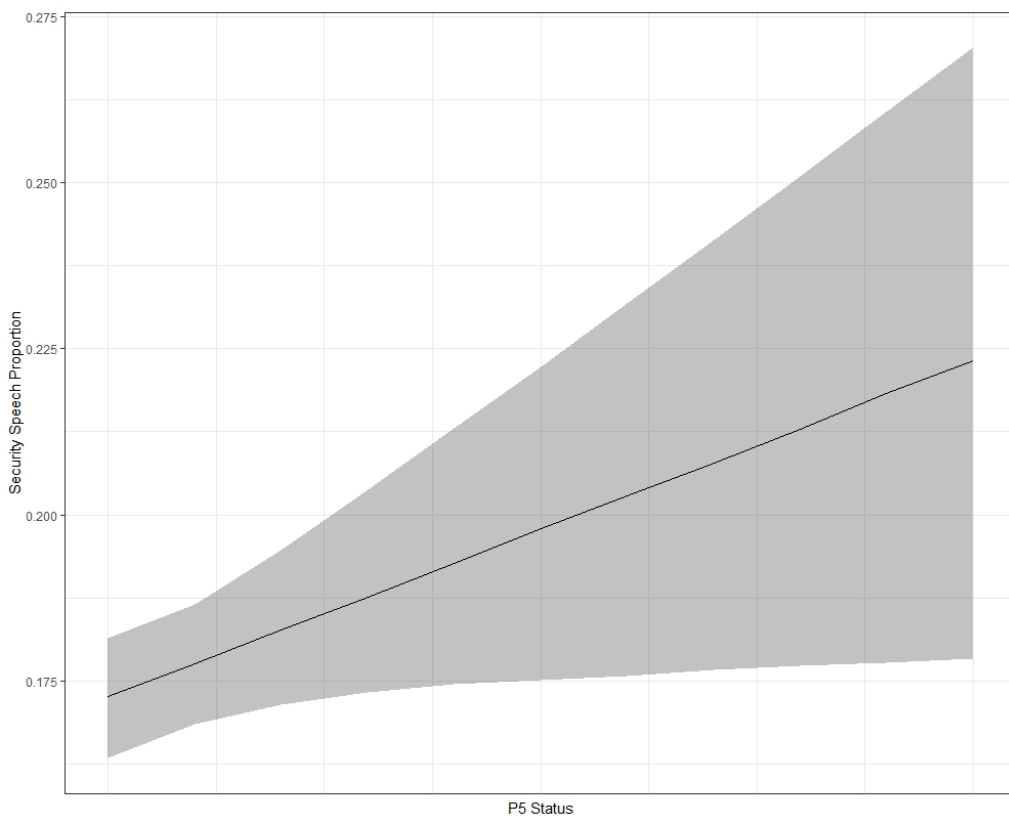
Table 1: Predicting Securitization: P5 states are significantly more likely to securitize, while SIDS are significantly less likely to do so, even controlling for other factors.

ing countries are influential in setting the patterns of securitization discourse. None of these alternative specifications of these variables achieve statistical significance and do not meaningfully change the predicted effects of other variables. A possible rejoinder to the main finding would be that any state on the UNSC would be more likely to use security language, whether or not they are P5. These states could be motivated to maximize their influence during their temporary appointment or to signal their temporary role in security matters. To test this argument, I replace the P5 indicator with an indicator for non-permanent membership in the UNSC. This indicator is 1 for non-P5 countries during the years that they serve on the UNSC. This variable is not a significant predictor of securitization, indicating that the effect only holds for P5 members and not UNSC members more broadly. Overall, these findings support my argument that the P5 have an incentive to securitize the issue of climate change to increase the institutional authority of the UNSC on the issue.

Conclusion

The contributions of this project to research on international organizations and climate communication are potentially manifold. I demonstrate using a large body of speech data that the the international climate discourse is securitizing over time, providing new empirical evidence to support previous qualitative work. I further find evidence for

Figure 7: Predicted Securitization by P5 Status



Note: Simulations show P5 predicted to securitize by 5 percentage points more than other states, SIDS 8 percentage points less.

my theory of securitization: P5 states are more likely to securitize than others, even when controlling for possible confounders. This strategy seeks to bring the issue of climate change under the institutional authority of the UNSC from the UNGA, increasing the relative power of the P5. Re-contextualization of issues and tension between sources of authority within the UN system highlight the continued dynamism of the organization and relevance of institutionalized power hierarchies, even as the global distribution of power and the nature of issues on the global agenda shift. The tendency of the P5 not to securitize across all UNGA discourse indicates a persistent concern for institutional legitimacy, which may be a positive indicator of the continued relevance of the UN for both powerful and non-powerful states. Future work could explore whether such considerations of institutional legitimacy also bear on attempts by the P5 to bolster their institutional power on the other key dimensions of UNSC power, namely, size and means. Given the findings established here, we may expect to find that the P5 actively engage in attempts to expand the set of means that the UNSC can legitimately implement when the broad UN membership desires bold policy action.

Securitization in the UN is important to understand not only as a rhetorical trend or a feature of institutional power struggles, but also for explaining policy outcomes across issues. When issues are securitized, they take on a fundamentally different nature per the rules of the UN Charter. A security issue is addressed differently than a non-security issue. It is afforded different agenda priority, attention, and resources. As in the case of HIV/AIDS, securitization can dramatically change the trajectory of international efforts on an area, resulting in increases in funding and global attention. Securitization of climate change could not only change the way climate change is conceptualized, nor could it simply empower the P5. It could elevate climate change as an institutional priority of the UN and expand the possible range of policy responses that could be deployed. Given the immense scale of the problem of climate change and the relative inability of international regimes to develop effective policy instruments to combat global warming, securitization could provide the only effective means for an international solution. While the UNSC has still not taken up the issue of climate change as a regular agenda item, the

increasing rate of securitization demonstrated here indicates that this may be a future possibility.

Climate politics is a plausible case for the process of securitization to be taking place, given the demonstrated support of such a move by the broader UN membership in A-RES-63-281. Beyond climate change, securitization is an important phenomenon to understand as the nature of security challenges expands and becomes more complex. Future work should examine other topic areas besides climate change where securitization would be likely to take place, and to further seek to understand whether there is a specific subset of issues where the P5 are likely to be securitizing, bearing in mind that the general consensus of the UN membership is a key enabling condition of a securitizing move. If the securitization of climate change proves to be an effective strategy for advancing international policy efforts, we may expect to see the UN membership to pursue such strategies more frequently in the future. While I do not find that securitization is taking place broadly across issue areas, were such a trend to develop, it could have broad implications in expanding the UNSC mandate to other issue areas outside of the traditional security realm, including food security, public health, and cyber matters, potentially encroaching upon the spheres of influence of other international institutions and changing the dynamic relations between the UNGA and the UNSC. This analysis sheds light on the trends in the discourse, which may prepare scholars of international institutions for future shifts (or lack thereof) in the policy space.

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