

Legal Precision and Legislative Networks in the UNGA and UNSC

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Abstract

How and why do bodies of law develop in international organizations (IOs)? Do the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) address issues on an ad hoc basis or “legalize” issues by establishing a precise, stable, and durable body of law? Does this process vary over time and by issue? To address these questions, we begin by developing a theory of legal precision in IOs. We identify two subcomponents of precision – consistency and precedent – and argue that states employ legal precision at least partly to provide political cover for controversial decisions. We then describe a machine learning-based approach designed to measure consistency and precedent, which we apply to a novel dataset of all UN resolutions passed from 1946-2018. We find that the UNGA and UNSC have developed distinct bodies of law over time, and that resolutions on more controversial topics—particularly security matters—are more precise.

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Introduction

As backlash to globalization and the structures of the international system mounts, and this selfsame system marks 75 years of operation, how can we assess the accomplishments of international institutions? International organizations (IOs) offer states fora to develop coherent set of rules. Consistent and precise legal rules are simpler and easier for states to follow, and govern a broader set of state behaviors. By examining the degree to which rules have been precisely codified, we can understand how successful states—and the IOs they create—have been in developing a system that effectively facilitates international cooperation.

To understand the prevalence of legalization in IOs, we begin by decomposing one existing conceptualization of legalization – precision – into two of its constituent dimensions: precedent and consistency (Abbott et al. 2000). We develop expectations about how and when each of these dimensions should be deployed in IO policy outputs as well as theoretical understandings of the functional roles that IOs serve in advancing state interests. In doing so, we bring together largely separate research projects from the fields of international law and the politics of IOs. While scholars of international law have examined variation in the content and form of legal instruments, much work on IOs relies on voting patterns to understand the effectiveness of institutions. For example, landmark studies on politics and influence in the UN employ power, alliances, and side payments to explain which resolutions are adopted and who votes in favor (e.g. Keohane 1967; Kim & Russett 1996; Alesina & Dollar 2000; Voeten 2000). But, because of practical limitations, previous work does not examine how the *content* of legislation may be related to voting outcomes or downstream policy effectiveness. We leverage machine learning and natural language processing tools to address this gap, and to understand the language and policy decisions contained within UN policy outputs.

As a case study, we study patterns of legalization in a novel dataset consisting of all resolutions passed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and Security Council (UNSC) since 1946. The relative stability of the UN’s institutional rules allows us to hold institutional context constant over an extensive period of time, and to examine

variation among sub-institutional bodies and in legislative responses across topic areas. We find that the legislative products of the UNGA and UNSC represent distinct bodies of law that rarely engage cross-chamber. Members of both chambers use precedent and consistency to provide political cover to states on contentious issues of international security, particularly in the UNSC. The more narrowly defined agenda in the UNSC facilitates the development of a body of law. In the UNGA, however, where delegates are faced with a greater number of topics to address, these tools are more difficult to employ, and legal precision is less prevalent.

By examining legalization and legislative output of the principal organs of the UN, we work to advance an understanding of the role this body has played in developing international law over time, adding nuance to previous research of the role of IOs in international politics. Advancing scholarly understanding of legislative activities in the UN, and particularly *when* and *why* legalization has taken place, can help provide insight as to where the UN might be able to make contributions to international politics in the *next 75 years*.

Legalization, International Law, and International Politics

To understand the changing nature of international law and its influence on state behavior, scholars of international law have examined variation in the content and form of the law itself. International law is far from uniform. For example, some international agreements are codified in informal, ad hoc documents, while others are represented in formalized resolutions or treaties (Abbott & Snidal 1998). This variation both reflects important differences in international negotiations and has important implications for the downstream success of international agreements (Goldstein et al. 2000; Koremenos 2016). A useful way to understand this variation in formalization is through the notion of *legalization*. Legalization is “a particular form of institutionalization, represent[ing] the decision in different issue-areas to impose international legal constraints on government,” (Goldstein et al. 2000, 386). Legalization is characterized by three components: obligation, precision, and delegation (Abbott et al. 2000, 401). Obligation binds states

by a rule or commitment. Delegation grants implementation authority to third parties to apply the rules. Precision unambiguously defines the conduct that rules require.

Legalization has important implications for the behavior of states. Institutions that are more legalized along these three dimensions can be expected to increase compliance with international law, and to change the nature of domestic and international politics via the internalization of norms (Goldstein et al. 2000). Legalization provides additional information to international and domestic actors, which can change state interests and demands as well as mobilize domestic groups (Goldstein & Martin 2000, 603-605). Legalization can occur in bilateral treaty negotiation between states, but can also occur within IOs, which help solve coordination problems by enabling states to make credible commitments (Keohane 1984; Axelrod & Keohane 1985; Fearon 1998; Simmons & Daner 2010). Formal IOs in particular can facilitate cooperation by minimizing transaction costs (Abbott & Snidal 1998).¹ Membership in IOs can also communicate state intentions and credibility to domestic and international audiences (Fang 2008; Gray 2009). Previous work on IOs has turned to examining state voting patterns on resolutions to understand institutional activity and state influence over the international policy agenda (e.g. Keohane 1967; Kim & Russett 1996; Alesina & Dollar 2000; Voeten 2000; for a review, see Voeten 2013).

Research on IOs has produced a robust understanding of the role that IOs serve for states as negotiation fora and as signaling devices, but less attention has been paid to the *content* of the policy outputs that IOs produce. Similarly, while the legalization project investigates the *effects* of legalization on state behavior, the *drivers* of legalization remain largely unexamined (but see Jo & Namgung 2012; Koremenos 2016). We bring existing research on legalization into the context of IOs. By understanding both the prevalence of legalization and its drivers, we can provide a new way to understand *when* and *how* states use IOs to develop standards and rules, as well as the downstream consequences of these patterns.

¹Formal IOs, as opposed to international regimes or conventions, are defined as bureaucratic organizations deliberately set up and designed by states, characterized by explicit rules and assignment of rules (Keohane 1989, 3-4).

Previous work has applied this theoretical framework to examine patterns of legalization and its three principal indicators—delegation, obligation, and precision—in individual legal instruments in a variety of policy contexts, including human rights (e.g. [Hawkins 2004](#)), monetary policy (e.g. [Simmons 2000](#)) and the environment (e.g. [Von Stein 2008](#)). [Koremenos \(2016\)](#) studies precision in treaties across four separate issue areas using a subjectively coded measure. Because of their relevance and availability, a large proportion of this research examines Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) and Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs). For example, [Allee & Peinhardt \(2010\)](#) examine variation in the amount delegation across BITs, [Manger & Peinhardt \(2017\)](#) look at precision, and several works investigate delegation ([Allee & Peinhardt 2010](#); [Allee & Elsig 2016](#); [Hofmann et al. 2019](#)). [Jo & Namgung \(2012\)](#) focus on dispute settlement mechanisms in PTAs, contending that such instruments simultaneously reflect delegation, precision, and obligation. Other relevant work on treaty design examines the inclusion of specific instruments and their implications for legalization. This research has found that the inclusion of escape clauses reduces state obligations and institutional conditionality ([Rosendorff & Milner 2001](#); [Caraway et al. 2012](#)), while fair and equitable treatment provisions ([Waibel 2019](#)) increase obligations.

Two other patterns in international law have received substantial attention: namely, *citation* and *recycling*. Citations to preexisting legal texts represent a signalling device that indicates the decisions that have influenced the contemporary decision-making process, indicating underlying legal ideology at work ([Voeten 2010](#); [Charlotin 2017](#), 284). These references can facilitate agreement among heterogeneous actors by highlighting previously agreed upon principles, making negotiations more efficient. Demonstrating that a piece of law builds on past decisions can increase its legitimacy and influence, and can importantly provide political cover for controversial decisions ([Cronin & Hurd 2008](#); [Lupu & Voeten 2012](#)). Citation networks have provided fruitful insight into the development of investment awards and decisions by the World Trade Organization ([Charlotin 2017](#)), the courts of the European Union ([Lupu & Voeten 2012](#); [Derlén & Lindholm 2015](#)), the International Court of Justice ([Alschner & Charlotin 2018](#)) and in the US domestic context

(Fowler et al. 2007).

Recycling language from a previous legal text serves a similar – though distinct – purpose. Like citations, re-using previously negotiated text can facilitate agreements in contested areas, create efficiencies for legislators and resource-limited states, and create consistency across legal instruments (Allee & Elsig 2019). However, because recycling text involves re-using institutional arrangements and policy decisions in addition to arguments, reusing language involves sharper tradeoffs than does citation. On the one hand, recycled policy arrangements are low-cost to produce and provide greater consistency across instruments (Allee et al. 2017b, 338). On the other, recycled language is not specifically tailored to the situation at hand. Thus, recycling of legislative language can be considered a rational response by legislators and negotiators to conduct agreements, and represents a tradeoff between efficiency and detail. For these reasons, reuse of text across international agreements and domestic law occurs frequently (Allee & Elsig 2019). Recycling of text across agreements has been examined in the context of PTAs (Allee & Elsig 2019; Allee et al. 2017a), as well as in American law (Wilkerson et al. 2015; Linder et al. 2020).

While the legalization project has provided scholars of international law with a unifying framework for considering legal design and its implications, empirical research on these questions has remained scattered. Progress has been made in examining elements of treaty design, citation networks, and text recycling, but these advances have not produced an integrated understanding of legalization in IOs. We argue that this limitation is a result of conceptual discrepancies: network and recycling approaches are in fact capturing different dimensions of legal precision rather than employing different methodologies to measure the same conceptual quantity. We develop a theory of legal precision that provides a conceptual framework for bringing together these diverse empirical strategies to develop more coherent insights about trends in international law, and can examine this directly in an institutional setting with a broad topical mandate. We further argue that theories of state participation in IOs can be used to derive expectations about variation in legal precision across different topical areas and over time.

Citation and Recycling as Legal Precision

The concept of precision in legal institutions is a complex one.² We begin by defining two dimensions of precision—precedent and consistency—to allow for more accurate measurement of legal precision. We then describe the circumstances under which legal precision is likely to develop within IOs, and develop specific expectations for patterns of legalization in the UN.

Conceptualizing Precision

As international law becomes more precise, it becomes clearer. The scope for interpretation becomes narrower as rules become more detailed, and a clear framework emerges that can be subsequently applied to new cases (Abbott et al. 2000, 412-413). These sets of rules can be contained in one highly elaborated instrument (such as the Treaty of Rome), or across a body of related law. In other words, precise international law creates clear expectations across a variety of circumstances. As new situations arise, the law can be readily applied “off the shelf.” In contrast, international law that lacks precision does not provide clear guidance as to how to handle new situations when they emerge, and states must develop *ad hoc* solutions. The development of precision is observable along two dimensions: *precedent* and *consistency*.

We define precedent as a prior legal document that serves as an example or guide to be considered in subsequent similar circumstances. Appeals to precedent necessarily involve an explicit textual reference to an earlier document. Previous legal principles create the “framework for case-by-case interpretation” and a set of expectations in diverse expectations, which is linked to and explained by the same set of clear legal concepts. The development of precedent in a body of law is an indication of legal precision. The amount of precedent, and thus the degree of legalization, varies in different institutional domains and across issue areas. For example, Derlén & Lindholm (2015) find that the Court of Justice of the European Union has developed much stronger precedent in dominant

²Recalling that precision is defined as unambiguous definition of the conduct that rules require (Abbott et al. 2000, 412-413).

position than in agriculture, with decisions in the former topic area comprising a greater set of case law (Derlén & Lindholm 2015, 2087). In a context with a highly developed set of precedent, the application of previous rules to current scenarios is unambiguous. Alternatively, when there is a lack of precedent, the same legal principles do not guide decisions in future cases, and each case is decided individually, the rules are ambiguous, and expectations for state behavior are unclear.

We define consistency as the use of the same language in a legal document as that employed in earlier legal documents. By reusing the same language as previous, the framework for interpretation remains consistent. States can draw on their understanding of the prior legal document, easing the burden of implementation. Like precedent, consistency is also expected to vary across institutions and topical domains. Allee & Elsig (2019), for example, find that within PTAs, rates of text recycling are greater in more established areas such as antidumping, and less in newer areas like the environment (Allee & Elsig 2019, 609).

Precedent and consistency further many of the same goals in the development of international law: both develop a framework of law that facilitates interpretation and reduces uncertainty about the applicability of legal concepts to new situations. In many cases, one would expect the development of consistency and precedent to be highly correlated. However, precedent and consistency are distinct concepts, and may not necessarily move together. Recycling provides a higher efficiency gain than does precedent, but also entails a greater cost in specificity in addressing a new situation.

Precision in the United Nations

The UN provides an useful test case for legalization for several reasons. First, the UN is a robust data source, documenting resolutions over the course of seventy-five years. Second, the UN is the most representative of any IO, with the longest serving membership. States engage in repeated interaction year after year in the same institutional environment, creating opportunities for developing legal practices and protocols. Thus, the UN is an institutional environment where there is a high likelihood of detecting precedent and consistency. Third, the matters that the UN addresses in its resolutions are of substantive

importance. The UNSC is unique among IOs in its ability to compel state action through hard law, and to authorize the use of force. The UNSC develops international law through its declarative, interpretive, promotive, and enforcement functions (von Einsiedel et al. 2015; Malone 2004). While resolutions adopted by the General Assembly (UNGA) do not constitute hard law, they too are of substantive import, recognizing international norms, calling for the development of legally binding treaties, allocating development aid, and setting institutional priorities, and performing these functions across a great variety of topics. States, therefore, have substantial incentives to invest time and political capital in negotiating these agreements and to legalize the negotiated outcomes. Fourth, and most importantly, the UN is a multi-issue forum. While previous work on legalization has extensively examined its development in particular issue areas, the UN provides an opportunity to examine variation in legalization across issue areas while holding the larger institutional environment constant.

Resolutions produced in the UN are fundamentally the products of negotiations between states. To understand variation in legal precision, then, we must understand when countries would seek to utilize precedent or consistency. We argue that citation to previous precedent can provide political cover for controversial decisions. In this way, the UN serves a “laundering” function, shifting potentially negative consequences of domestic fallout away from member states. Abbott & Snidal observe that IOs serve a laundering function for states “seeking to avoid domestic and international controversies,” by legitimizing controversial actions: “activities that might be unacceptable in their original state-to-state form become acceptable when run through an independent, or seemingly independent, IO,” (Abbott & Snidal 1998, 18). Member states can thus avoid potential blame from domestic publics for the positions they adopt in the institution. Furthermore, precedent can signal institutional endorsement, which in certain contexts can also work towards obtaining public support for policies (Chapman & Reiter 2004; Thompson 2006; Chapman 2007, 2009). By reducing possible blame and increasing domestic public support, references to precedent make it easier for states to endorse controversial measures, increasing the likelihood of obtaining consensus for laws. In the context of the UNSC,

such moves are anecdotally observed to occur frequently: “Member states routinely make arguments in legal terms (especially to the law of the Charter) in front of the Council, not only as a way of defending their national interests in terms of higher principles but also to influence those states that may be open to deciding their positions based on such principled arguments,” (Malone 2004, 593). Cronin & Hurd (2008) further explore this phenomenon in the context of the UNSC, arguing that the Council employs “political” rather than “legal” precedent. They contend that

[the] Council draws from past decision to determine current courses of action and justify expanding the scope of their activities [...] following precedent legitimizes a political action by demonstrating that like cases are judged alike and that judgements are not just predilections or random events. When the Security Council initiatives and action that states may view as overstepping its authority, the existence of even a single precedent is enough to challenge the argument that a particular course of action cannot be taken, inasmuch as it already has been" (Cronin & Hurd 2008, 203).

Arguably, the most famous example of this phenomenon is the case of UNSC activity on Iraq. Broad consensus among the P5 enabled the UNSC to take an active role in the region in the 1980s and early 1990s, which Malone (2004) describes in great detail. A chain of UNSC resolutions on the matter constructed a body of legal precedent, beginning during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. Early resolutions on Iraq (S-RES-479, S-RE-598) called for a ceasefire in the conflict, and later for troop withdrawals, verification, and supervision of the cease-fire. These early precedents developed a formula that was called upon again in 1990 with S-RES-660, which declared the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to be a breach of international peace and security and demanded Iraqi troop withdrawal. Follow-up included economic sanctions (S-RES-661), an arms embargo (S-RES-665), and finally an authorization for military action (S-RES-678), all to implement S-RES-660 (Malone 2007, 11, 37-69). Following the deployment of troops in Operation Desert Storm, S-RES-687 set the terms for peace, obliging Iraq to destroy chemical weapons and comply with a UN inspections regime, while S-RES-688 condemned Iraqi repression of the Kurdish minority and identified the resulting refugee flows a threat to international peace and security (Malone 2007, 75-87).

By 1998, consensus between the P5 members began to break down, but this body of legal precedent provided cover to smooth over political disagreements. Activist members of the Council (the United States, United Kingdom, and France) sought to engage directly to stop targeting of the Kurds, using the precedent set out in S-RES-688 to justify troop deployments, as well as the establishment of safe zones and no-fly zones (Malone 2007, 94-100). For less supportive members (Russia and China), S-RES-688 provided cover to acquiesce to these steps: these states did not need to explicitly support the activities of Operation Provide Comfort and contradict their national preferences, but rather could lean on mandates established in earlier resolutions. These resolutions provided precedential cover even for S-RES-1441 in 2002, offering Iraq a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations. Directly citing more than ten of the previous resolutions on Iraq, S-RES-1441 provided a path forward between a strongly divided P5. Rather than conducting extensive and potentially divisive debates on the matter, Council members were able to refer to previously authorizing resolutions, citing these resolutions directly. This illustrative example of UNSC precedent can serve to “launder” responsibility away from member states to provide political cover, facilitating consensus in controversial situations.

Hypotheses

As in the case of Iraq, we expect that precedent is more likely to be employed when issues are controversial, which is particularly likely in matters of international conflict. Conflict matters are likely to be more controversial than other topics on the UN’s agenda (such as human rights and development) for many reasons, including the allocation of greater institutional resources and political capital, as well as the high stakes of the potential outcomes. On such matters, public opinion is likely to be more highly activated (Arumi & Bittle 2005; pew 2018), and thus member states have a strong desire for political cover before taking a potentially dangerous position (Voeten 2005; Fang 2008).

H_1 : Use of precedent is higher on conflict issues than in other issue areas.

As noted above, the UNSC and UNGA have distinct issue mandates set out by the UN Charter. The UNSC is expressly designated to address issues of global security, while the UNGA has the broad purview to address any issue that is not being concurrently worked on by the UNSC. We expect that this differentiation in purposes should lead to the development of distinct bodies of law in the two institutions, with little cross-over between the two. We expect networks of citation and text reuse to develop more robustly within each legislative body than across them.

H_{2a} : Use of precedent is higher within chamber than across chambers.

H_{2b} : Consistency is higher within chamber than across chambers.

On conflict matters and other controversial issues, negotiations are subject to high levels of attention by member state governments, publics, and other outside observers. In these cases, UN representatives possess strong incentives to justify their actions by leaning on the legitimacy provided by precedent, as we lay out in [Hypothesis 1](#). Because conflict matters are more likely to be taken up by the Security Council, we should expect to see greater use of precedent in the Security Council than in the GA.

H_{3a} : Use of precedent is higher in the UNSC than the UNGA.

Compared with the UNSC, the UNGA generally handles a more diverse set of policy problems, ranging from human rights to economic development to internal budgeting and administration of the UN. Because the attention of the UNGA is more thinly spread, delegates are less likely to possess experience or staffing resources necessary to address the issues raised by a given resolution in detail. For example, [Panke \(2013\)](#) observes the extensive workload for representatives in the UNGA, and that delegations of small states in particular may struggle to keep up with the demanding pace. In such a scenario, relying on previously negotiated language can be a tool of efficiency and resource maximization ([Allee & Elsig 2019](#)). By contrast, because the UNSC focuses narrowly on security matters, UNSC representatives are more likely to be experts in the topics raised by a given

resolution, and thus lack the same need for efficiency shortcuts. While representatives on the UNSC may need political cover, they are less likely to rely on preexisting legislative language to support their work.

H_{3b} : Consistency is higher in the UNGA than the UNSC.

Our final expectations center on the development of international law over time. Bodies of law develop over time: as more legal text is developed by an institution, opportunities for recycling and referring to past precedent necessarily increase. We therefore expect that both the use of citation and the consistency of legal language increase with the age of an issue area. We conceive of issue area age simply as the year in which the topic was first addressed on the UN's agenda: the first year a resolution on the matter was adopted in either chamber. The UN's agenda is characterized by a high degree of inertia, and when topics are introduced, they are rarely removed (Hurd 2008).

H_{4a} : Use of precedent is higher for older issue areas.

H_{4b} : Consistency is higher for older issue areas.

Data and Estimation

The quantitative analysis of treaty design in previous work has primarily relied on manual hand-coding. Though studies based on hand-coding have produced valuable insights, hand-coding methods are labor-intensive. Relying on manual coding limits the number of international agreements that can be examined by researchers, or forces the researcher to simplify their measure to one that can be more objectively and quickly evaluated. Further, focusing on a specific subset of international law (BITs, for example) does not allow for consideration of variation in legalization across different topical areas. The development of text-as-data methodologies and their increasing popularity in political science applications presents an opportunity to broaden the horizon of quantitative analysis of international legal instruments (Alschner 2019). These tools have begun to be

deployed in examining legal networks and legal recycling, in both international law and in domestic contexts (e.g. Allee & Elsig 2019). We apply these methodologies to examine variation in legalization in a large scale at the UN.

Data Collection

To study variation in legalization of international agreements, we constructed an original dataset consisting of all UNGA and UNSC resolutions passed since the establishment of the UN. Our data collection work proceeded as follows. First, we scraped all UNGA and UNSC resolutions posted on their respective official websites.³ These resolutions—one of the key legislative outputs of the UN—are negotiated principally by state representatives at the UN, in consultation with officials in state capitals and the UN Secretariat (Smith 2006). Second, since older resolutions are posted as scanned images, we then used optical character recognition (OCR) software to convert each document into a plain-text format.⁴ This process yielded a dataset consisting of 14,490 UNGA resolutions and 2,331 UNSC resolutions, spanning the time period from 1946-2018.

As shown in Figure 1, resolution formats changed substantially over time, ranging from single-column formats with one document per page, to multi-column formats with multiple documents per page, to multi-column formats with parallel French/English text. To address this challenge, we used a series of period-specific regular expressions to remove extraneous text and isolate the actual resolution from the image on each page.⁵

Feature Extraction

To study patterns of legalization in this dataset, we extracted three types of features from each document. First, we extracted all *citations* to other UNGA and UNSC resolutions from each text.⁶ As we describe in earlier sections, citations to precedent

³See the [UNGA](#) and [UNSC](#) indices for details.

⁴ABBYY FineReader v. 15.

⁵For example, translation notes, headers and footers, parallel translation text, procedural language, or trailing language from other resolutions or documents.

⁶A small number of citations refer to other UN bodies such as ECOSOC, which we exclude from the analysis.

Figure 1: Examples of changing resolution formats in the UNGA.

Resolutions adopted on the reports of the Fourth Committee 75

tories and at the creation by the administering Powers of military bases and installations in contravention of the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly.

Deploing the refusal of some administering Powers to allow visiting missions of the United Nations to visit these Territories.

Conscious that these situations require the continued attention and the assistance of the United Nations in the achievement by the peoples of these Territories of their objectives, as embodied in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples,

Aware of the special circumstances of geographical location and economic conditions concerning some of these Territories,

1. *Approves* the chapters of the report of the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples relating to these Territories;
2. *Reaffirms* the inalienable right of the peoples of these Territories to self-determination and independence;
3. *Calls upon* the administering Powers to implement without delay the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly;
4. *Reiterates* its declaration that any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of colonial Territories and the establishment of military bases and installations in these Territories is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV);
5. *Urges* the administering Powers to allow United Nations visiting missions to visit the Territories, and to extend to them full co-operation and assistance;
6. *Decides* that the United Nations should render all help to the peoples of these Territories in their efforts freely to decide their future status;
7. *Requests* the Special Committee to continue to pay special attention to these Territories and to report on the implementation of the present resolution to the General Assembly at its twenty-second session;
8. *Requests* the Secretary-General to continue to provide all possible assistance in the implementation of the present resolution.

*1500th plenary meeting,
20 December 1966.*

2233 (XXI). Information from Non-Self-Governing Territories transmitted under Article 73 e of the Charter of the United Nations

The General Assembly,

Recalling its resolution 1970 (XVIII) of 16 December 1963, in which it requested the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples to study the information transmitted to the Secretary-General in accordance with Article 73 e of the Charter of the United Nations and to take it fully into account in examining the situation with regard to the implementation of the Declaration,

Recalling also its resolution 2109 (XX) of 21 December 1965, in which it approved the procedures adopted by the Special Committee for the discharge of the func-

tions entrusted to it under resolution 1970 (XVIII)⁴¹ and requested the Committee to continue to discharge those functions in accordance with the said procedures,

Having studied the chapter of the report of the Special Committee dealing with the transmittal of information under Article 73 e of the Charter and the action taken by it in respect of that information,⁴²

Having also examined the report of the Secretary-General on this information,⁴³

1. *Approves* the chapter of the report of the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples relating to the information from Non-Self-Governing Territories transmitted under Article 73 e of the Charter of the United Nations;
2. *Expresses its profound regret* that, despite the repeated recommendations of the General Assembly, including the most recent recommendation contained in resolution 2109 (XX), some Member States having responsibilities for the administration of Non-Self-Governing Territories have not seen fit to transmit information under Article 73 e of the Charter or have done so insufficiently or too late;
3. *Once again urges* all Member States which have or which assume responsibilities for the administration of Territories whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-government to transmit, or continue to transmit, to the Secretary-General the information prescribed in Article 73 e of the Charter, as well as the fullest possible information on political and constitutional developments;
4. *Requests* the Special Committee to continue to discharge the functions entrusted to it under General Assembly resolution 1970 (XVIII) in accordance with the procedures referred to above.

*1500th plenary meeting,
20 December 1966.*

2234 (XXI). Offers by Member States of study and training facilities for inhabitants of Non-Self-Governing Territories

The General Assembly,


Recalling its resolution 2110 (XX) of 21 December 1965,

Having examined the report of the Secretary-General on offers by Member States of study and training facilities for inhabitants of Non-Self-Governing Territories under General Assembly resolution 845 (IX) of 22 November 1954,⁴⁴

1. *Takes note* of the report of the Secretary-General;
2. *Urges* Member States to continue to offer scholarships to the inhabitants of the Non-Self-Governing Territories;
3. *Requests* Member States to facilitate the travel of students from Non-Self-Governing Territories seeking to avail themselves of the educational opportunities which are offered to them;
4. *Requests* the Member States offering scholarships to take into account the necessity of furnishing com-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Nineteenth Session, Annexes, annex No. 8 (part I) (A/580/Rev.1), chapter II, appendix I.
⁴² *Ibid.*, Twenty-first Session, Annexes, addendum to agenda item 23 (A/6300/Rev.1), chapter XXIII.
⁴³ *Ibid.*, agenda items 64 and 71, document A/6455.
⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, document A/6503.

United Nations A/RES/59/127

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*[on the report of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee
(Fourth Committee) (A/59/474)]*

59/127. Information from Non-Self-Governing Territories transmitted under Article 73 e of the Charter of the United Nations

The General Assembly,

Recalling its resolution 1970 (XVIII) of 16 December 1963, in which it requested the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples to study the information transmitted to the Secretary-General in accordance with Article 73 e of the Charter of the United Nations and to take such information fully into account in examining the situation with regard to the implementation of the Declaration, contained in General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960,

Recalling also its resolution 58/102 of 9 December 2003, in which it requested the Special Committee to continue to discharge the functions entrusted to it under resolution 1970 (XVIII),

Stressing the importance of timely transmission by the administering Powers of adequate information under Article 73 e of the Charter, in particular in relation to the preparation by the Secretariat of the working papers on the Territories concerned,

Having examined the report of the Secretary-General,¹

1. *Reaffirms* that, in the absence of a decision by the General Assembly itself that a Non-Self-Governing Territory has attained a full measure of self-government in terms of Chapter XI of the Charter of the United Nations, the administering Power concerned should continue to transmit information under Article 73 e of the Charter with respect to that Territory;

2. *Requests* the administering Powers concerned to transmit or continue to transmit to the Secretary-General the information prescribed in Article 73 e of the Charter, as well as the fullest possible information on political and constitutional

¹ A/59/71.

Sample resolutions from the UNGA, from 1966 and 2005. Aightments are highlighted in yellow, while citations are highlighted in blue.

represent both a key indicator of legalization and observable evidence of relationships and patterns of influence among the documents that comprise our corpus. Like other elements of document style, resolution formats and citation patterns changed substantially over the time period covered by our corpus (for example, see Figure 1). As a result, we again used a series of period-specific regular expressions to extract citations from each text. We then cross-referenced this list of extracted citations against a master database of resolutions for each point in time, and eliminated all false positive results. We also removed all self-citations. This process left us with a database of 145,205 citations from the UNGA, and 18,212 citations from the UNSC. The number of citations for each topic and each chamber can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. In the subsequent analysis, we normalize the number of citations in each topic area by the number of resolutions in the topic area to better capture the *rate* of citation within resolutions.

Second, using a structural topic model (Roberts et al. 2014), we extracted *topic proportion vectors* for each document in our corpus. Unfortunately, the UN does not provide consistent content labels for UNGA or UNSC resolutions across time. As a result, we fit a topic model to the combined UNGA/UNSC resolution corpus to summarize the broad themes present in our dataset.⁷ To label the topics produced by our model, we read the top ten highest-probability words and the top twenty documents with the largest proportion of their content assigned to that topic and inductively constructed topic labels. We then extracted the topic label associated with the highest-probability topic for each document, which we used as the primary content label for each document in our corpus. Encouragingly, for 92.5% of citation pairs in our dataset, the topic label of the resolution matched the modal topic label for the resolutions cited by that document. Since these citations were not part of the input data for the topic model we fit, this results suggests that the topic model we estimate is identifying similar topics to those identified by the citations we extract.

Finally, we identified instances of *text re-use* in our corpus. As we describe in earlier

⁷After testing several specifications to maximize semantic coherence and exclusivity, as well as manually evaluating the performance of the different models, we select a specification with 50 topics. We employ a spectral initialization and a 10 iteration burn-in period. Prevalence and content of topics are allowed to vary nonlinearly over time.

sections, recycling existing language in legislation is a significant indicator of legalization, which demonstrates the presence of established institutional patterns and legal norms in a particular policy domain. To identify instances of text re-use, we broadly follow the strategy employed by [Linder et al. \(2020\)](#). First, using the topic proportion vectors we extracted previously, we calculated pairwise Hellinger similarity values between the topic proportion vectors for each unique pair of documents. For each document, we identified the documents with the top 500 similarity values, and extracted maximally-aligned sequences of text – and corresponding alignment scores – using the Smith-Waterman alignment (SWAlign) algorithm.⁸ SWAlign is a sequence alignment algorithm that allows users to identify sequences of shared elements in an ordered list, with user-defined tolerances for gaps or mismatches.⁹ Finally, we calculate an adjusted alignment score by weighting each alignment score by the distinctiveness of the tokens contained in each alignment, in order to downweight common, “boilerplate” re-use (as outlined in [Wilkerson et al. 2015](#)). Alignment scores by topic and each chamber can be seen in [Tables 1 and 2](#) respectively.

Results

Citation and Re-Use by Topic Area

[Table 1](#) shows the number of resolutions, citations, alignment, topic proportion, and age of each topic, and [Figure 2](#) and shows the rate of citation and re-use grouped by the topic area of the more recent resolution. As this plot suggests, rates of citation and re-use vary substantially by topic area, with only a loose relationship to one another. This finding hints at the utility of our citation and recycling measures: patterns in legalization may be obscured by examination of resolutions alone, which are passed with roughly

⁸SWAlign differs from standard plagiarism detection approaches in two respects. First, SWAlign is more scalable than standard plagiarism detection approaches, which is important for larger corpora. Second, due to the scoring mechanism used by the algorithm, SWAlign allows for adaptively-sized gaps and editing differences between texts.

⁹Specifically, we find the optimal local alignment for each document, with alignment parameter set to 2 and mismatch/gap parameters set to -1.

Table 1: Key Findings by Topic

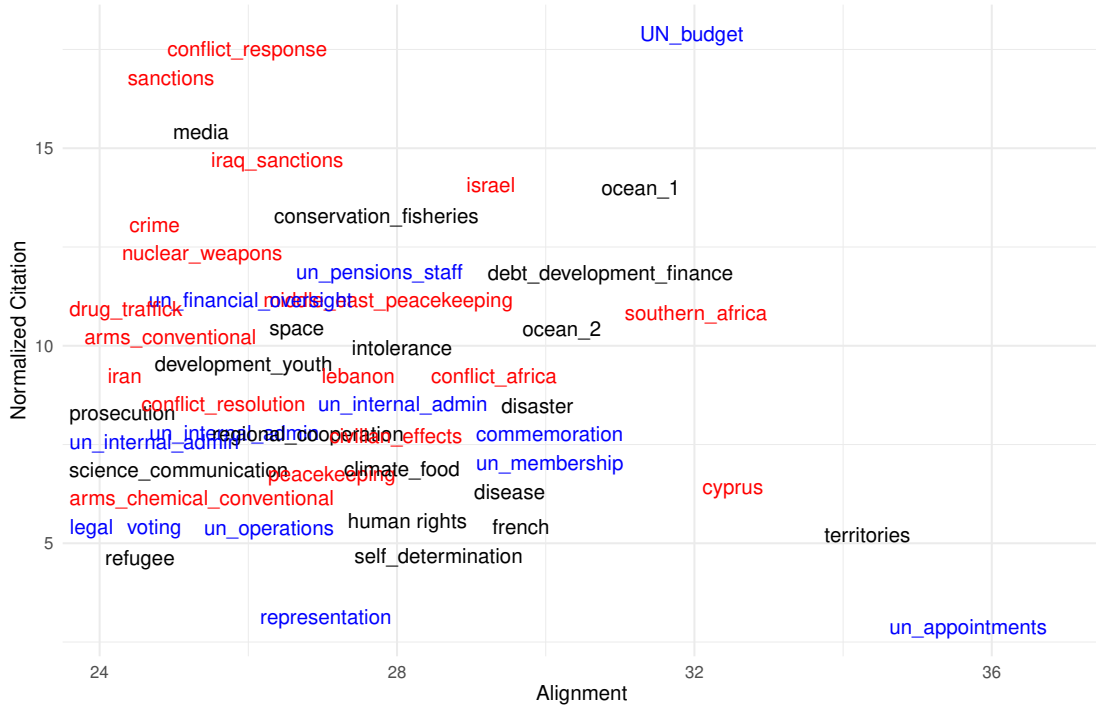
	Number Resolutions	Number Citations	Alignment (97.5 Percentile)	Topic Proportion	Age
un_membership	146	1061	28.74	0.016	1949
intolerance	526	4257	27.48	0.027	1949
un_pensions_staff	528	5722	24.58	0.027	1949
un_internal_admin	667	3871	26.59	0.050	1946
middle_east_peacekeeping	286	2573	27.12	0.020	1946
un_internal_admin	667	3871	27.82	0.050	1946
science_communication	307	2034	26.09	0.018	1949
un_appointments	282	760	36.83	0.024	1946
disease	297	1896	28.29	0.016	1949
legal	384	2158	24.60	0.022	1949
peacekeeping	332	2304	26.32	0.022	1950
iraq_sanctions	323	4545	26.70	0.018	1948
french	334	1670	29.35	0.019	1946
media	268	4090	25.84	0.018	1946
regional_cooperation	214	1687	27.65	0.016	1949
human rights	431	3073	27.17	0.023	1949
un_financial_oversight	315	3057	26.14	0.017	1949
nuclear_weapons	684	7827	25.01	0.036	1949
development_youth	404	3656	25.69	0.020	1948
crime	280	3509	25.05	0.017	1949
un_internal_admin	667	3871	26.06	0.050	1946
un_operations	230	1446	26.28	0.016	1949
prosecution	395	3362	24.14	0.021	1946
refugee	433	2084	24.87	0.022	1949
civilian_effects	371	2596	28.06	0.020	1946
space	158	1524	26.16	0.009	1958
ocean_1	222	2931	30.98	0.011	1949
conflict_resolution	457	3987	25.36	0.028	1947
representation	176	445	27.35	0.020	1946
sanctions	163	2745	25.26	0.011	1957
drug_traffick	237	2633	24.33	0.013	1953
voting	153	871	26.10	0.009	1946
conservation_fisheries	105	1364	28.03	0.006	1963
disaster	418	3213	28.59	0.021	1949
conflict_response	281	5008	26.31	0.018	1946
arms_chemical_conventional	246	1568	25.93	0.015	1951
territories	861	4781	34.63	0.043	1949
debt_development_finance	423	4655	29.09	0.024	1950
conflict_africa	195	1672	28.33	0.012	1980
ocean_2	264	2805	29.66	0.015	1950
UN_budget	698	12088	31.67	0.039	1947
southern_africa	190	2097	32.32	0.012	1949
israel	489	6569	28.96	0.026	1948
arms_conventional	247	2402	24.26	0.016	1949
climate_food	419	2937	27.80	0.023	1949
lebanon	192	1607	26.73	0.016	1949
iran	323	2734	25.07	0.018	1946
commemoration	244	1801	28.63	0.019	1950
cyprus	279	1664	32.22	0.020	1949
self_determination	47	232	28.86	0.004	1989

constant frequency across different issue areas over time.¹⁰ For descriptive purposes, we can roughly divide our topics into three groups. First, topics with high alignment/high citation – such as “UN Budget”, “debt/development/finance”, and the two “ocean” topics – are relatively formulaic with repeated references to earlier discussion. Resolutions in these topics are frequently procedural in nature, or reference long-standing matters of UN jurisdiction such as the Law of the Sea. Procedural topics also frequently fall in our second category, which is the high alignment/low-citation group. Resolutions in this category – such as “territories” and “un_appointments” – are thematically dissimilar but follow a common template, which allows authors to borrow large blocks of text with relatively sparse attribution.

By contrast, substantive topics are most common in our third category, which is the high citation/low alignment group. Resolutions in this category contain repeated references to a particular theme or legal canon, but are sufficiently diverse to prevent resolution authors from borrowing large blocks of text with regularity. Resolutions of this type can be thought of as novel developments in a well-established area. All of these topic areas are frequent sources of discussion for the UN with a well-developed legal canon, but few consistent issues that might allow for regular re-use of legal language. Topics concerning conflict-related matters dominate this group: examples of this type include the “crime”, “drug_trafficking“, “conflict_response”, and “sanctions” topics, as predicted by [Hypothesis 1](#), which expects that the use of legal precedent should be highest for controversial topics, in particular, those dealing with conflict situations. Of the ten topic areas with the highest rates of normalized citation, six are conflict topics (“conflict_response”, “sanctions”, “iraq_sanctions”, “israel”, “crime”, and “nuclear_weapons”). These issue areas also have the largest clusters of resolutions, another indication of a large body of law. Only two of these topics (“nuclear_weapons” and “israel”) have resolution counts that rank in the top ten, again indicating that numbers of resolutions alone does not fully inform the rate of legalization.

¹⁰Trends in the number of resolutions over time are explored in the appendix.

Figure 2: Recycling and citation by topic area



Topics indicated in red address conflict-related issues, while those indicated in blue are procedural matters.

Chamber Differences

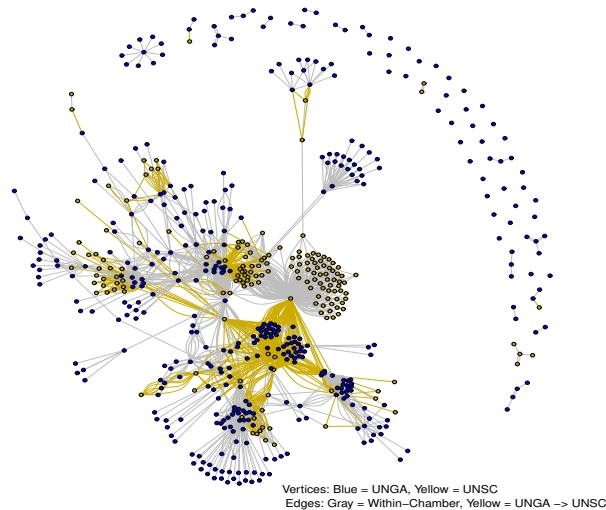
Table 2: Key Findings by Chamber

	Number Resolutions	Number Citations	Alignment (97.5 Percentile)
Overall	16821	163417	—
UNGA	14490	145205	28.65
UNSC	2331	18212	36.87

In examining differences between the two chambers, we find that the UNSC and UNGA are, for the most part, highly siloed institutions, as predicted in Hypotheses 2a and 2b. Per Hypothesis 2a, we find that almost all citation occurs within chamber. We calculate a ratio of in-chamber to out-chamber citation, where 1 represents exclusive in-chamber citation and -1 represents exclusive out-chamber citation. For the UNGA, the citation ratio is 0.88, and for the UNSC is 0.97. On average, 95% of a resolution’s citations are within-chamber. Both chambers are also more likely to re-use text from same-chamber resolutions than cross-chamber resolutions (Hypothesis 2b). Following

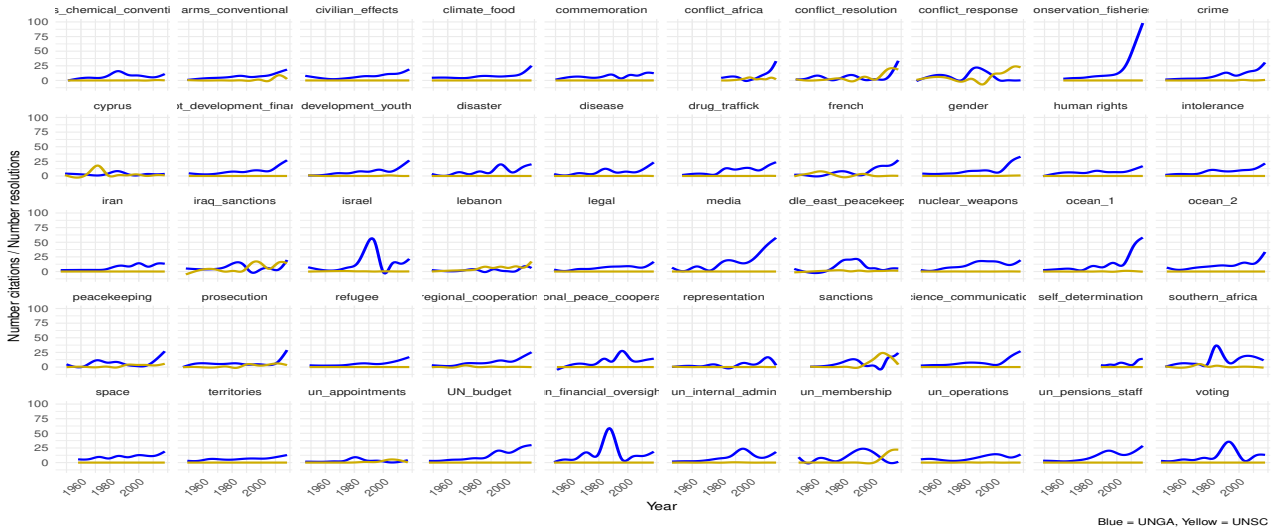
Linder et al. (2020), we calculate the 95th through 99th adjusted alignment scores for both chambers, as well as for cross-chamber alignments. Intuitively, high alignment scores should provide the strongest indications of shared policy language, and comparing the highest alignment scores in each chamber should indicate both the frequency and the scale of re-use across the two chambers. As Figure 5 shows, cross-chamber adjusted alignment scores are significantly lower across all quantiles than either set of within-chamber scores. However, cross-chamber citation and re-use both vary across topic area. On conflict topics, both chambers are more likely to be involved: on “middle_east_peacekeeping”, only 68% of the average resolution’s citations are within-chamber. This is demonstrated in Figure 3, which shows the dense nature of the cross-chamber citation network on the topic. Figure 4 further illustrates variation in cross-chamber involvement on different topics, and indicates that for some topics, at different points in time, the chambers alternate leadership (for example, “prosecution” and “gender”). Overall, the number of citations from both chambers is increasing over time—particularly in the GA— even when normalized for the number of citations.

Figure 3: Middle East peacekeeping is a dense cross-chamber citation network



While we expected that the UNSC would exhibit higher rates of citation than the UNGA because of its focus on controversial topics (Hypothesis 3a), particularly conflict issues, we find that in fact the UNGA has a higher rate of citation on average. However, this is not the case universally: the UNSC demonstrates clear issue ownership on conflict issues, citing on these topics at higher rates than the UNGA in the “conflict_response”,

Figure 4: UNSC and UNGA lead in citations on different topics over time

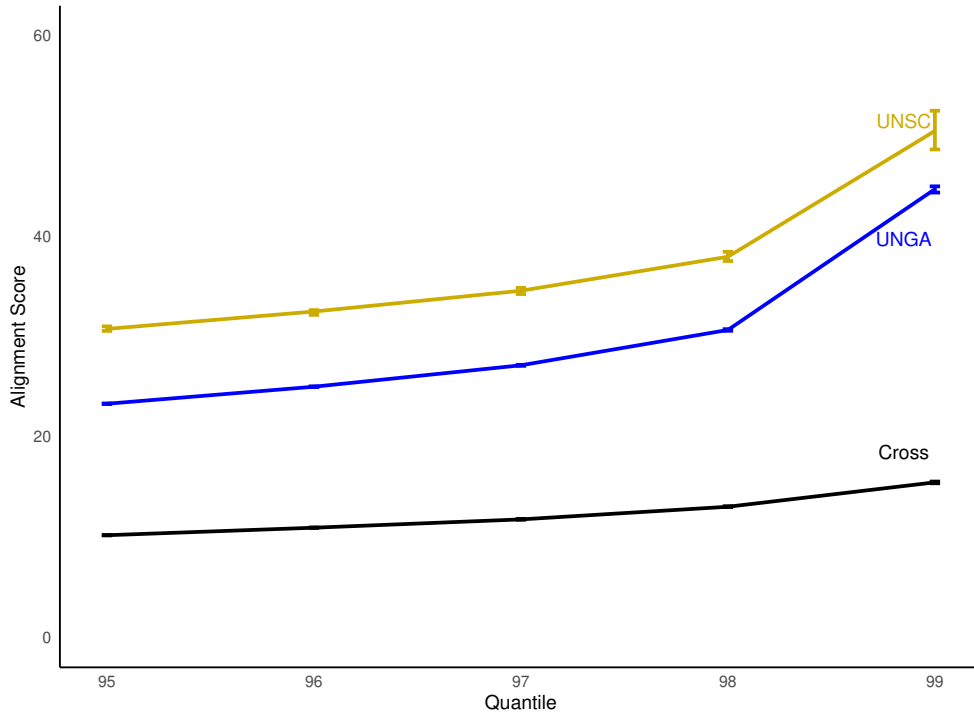


“conflict_resolution”, “lebanon”, and “iraq_sanctions” topics, and citing at roughly the same rate as the UNGA on “sanctions.” These are also the topics on which the UNSC produces the most resolutions, and include the only topic areas on which the UNSC produced more resolutions than the UNGA. Our intuition, then, is correct: citation is most likely to occur on controversial topic matters. However, because the UNGA undertakes a greater volume of work overall, it cites more frequently than the UNSC.

Also contrary to our expectations in (Hypothesis 3b), UNSC resolutions contain a higher rate of re-use than their UNGA counterparts. Again, though, this pattern is not universal. As with our citation data, the topics characterized by the highest rates of re-use – such as “un_appointments”, “territories”, “southern_africa”, “cyprus”, and “UN_budget” – are worked on frequently by the UNGA and less frequently by the UNSC. This pattern therefore provides qualified support for our intuitions. Though the *average* UNGA resolution contains lower levels of re-use than the *average* UNSC resolution, the topics containing the highest rates of re-use fall within the UNGA’s topical territory.

One explanation for this pattern of higher re-use in the UNSC is the difference in substantive focus across the two chambers. Based on their respective institutional missions, the UNSC is mandated to focus on a narrower set of substantive issues than the UNGA, which gives the UNSC a greater number of relevant in-chamber documents and more opportunities to develop a consistent, coherent legal canon. To test this ex-

Figure 5: UNSC, UNGA infrequently borrow text cross-chamber



Dots represent quantile values, and lines represent asymptotic 95% confidence intervals derived from a normal approximation of the order statistic confidence intervals.

planation, we compare the *topical concentration* of the resolutions in each chamber. For each chamber and each topic, we counted the number of resolutions from that chamber whose highest-probability topic label matched the given topic. We then calculated a normalized informational entropy value for these chamber-topic count values.¹¹ Informational entropy is a standard measure of dispersion for discrete probability distributions, which ranges from 0 (least dispersed) to 1 (most dispersed) (Boydston et al. 2014; Shaffer 2017). The results of this comparison support our topical concentration explanation. In our dataset, we observe an informational entropy value of 0.95 for UNGA resolutions. By contrast, UNSC resolutions exhibit an informational entropy value of 0.75. Since informational entropy is on a non-linear scale, interpreting the difference between these values is difficult. One way to ease interpretation is to use the “effective topics” transformation, which represents the number of equiprobable topics needed to produce a given entropy value Shaffer (2017).¹² For the UNGA, this transformation returns a value of

¹¹Normalized informational entropy is defined as $H(X) = -\frac{1}{\ln(n)} \sum_{i=1}^n X_i \log(X_i)$.

¹²Specifically, the “effective topics” for a topic proportion vector of length n with entropy η is $k = n^\eta$.

41.1, indicating that UNGA resolutions are almost equally split across all topics. By contrast, UNSC resolutions contain 18.8 effective topics, indicating that a topic proportion vector containing approximately half the number of equiprobable topics would produce an equivalent entropy value to the one observed.

This result likely explains at least some of within-chamber differences in alignment values shown in Figure 5. Since UNGA resolutions cover a diverse array of topics, the average UNGA document has fewer relevant points of comparison than the average UNSC document, which reduces the frequency of high-alignment pairs in the UNGA. Certainly, high-alignment, frequently-addressed topic areas exist in the UNGA, such as budgets, appointments, and territories. But, outside of these topic areas, many issues addressed by the UNGA arise relatively infrequently, which creates fewer opportunities for borrowing.

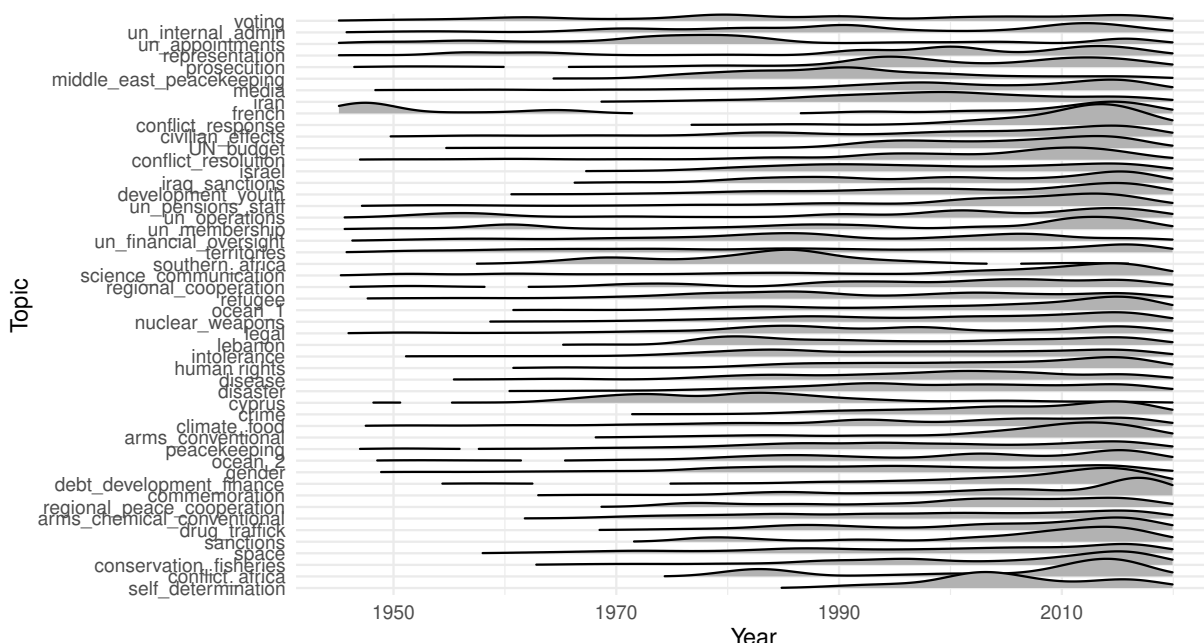
Temporal Effects

We expect in our last set of hypotheses that bodies of law develop over time, and as such that topics that were introduced earliest onto the UN’s agenda should exhibit the highest rates of citation to prior precedent and re-use of language from prior resolutions (Hypothesis 4a and Hypothesis 4b). Once issues are introduced onto the UN’s agenda, they are unlikely to be removed because of bureaucratic inertia and state incentives to maintain institutional attention (Hurd 2008, 114-118). We therefore measure topic age using the year in which a resolution with a given modal topic was first introduced onto the UN’s working agenda. Our data attest to the validity of this approach, showing that once a topic is introduced, the number of resolutions addressing it remains fairly consistent year on year. For most topics, the proportion of resolutions with that modal topic is also relatively flat over time, though some important exceptions where topic proportion notably changes over time— such as “conservation” – are present. The only topic that vanishes entirely from the agenda is “south_africa.”

Using this measurement approach, we find that the age of most topics is essentially equal. 46 of the 50 topics we identify were first introduced during the first decade of the UN’s work, which we can see in Figure 6. Alternative measures of issue age, including the mean of the resolution years for each topic, yield similarly little variation. Average

resolution age is one such example— for 43 of the 50 topics, the average resolution age is 1990 or more recent, and average resolution age has a standard deviation of just 7.78. This finding suggests that the topics identified by our model may be too broad to capture temporal variation in issue introduction. As we discuss below, subcomponents of the various topics may be introduced at various points in time, but the larger themes we identify have been present on the UN’s agenda in one form or another since the institution’s founding.

Figure 6: Resolutions Over Time, Oldest to Newest Topics



Across all topics, while the number of resolutions and topic proportions are relatively constant, the rate of citation is increasing over time, as we would expect to see under [Hypothesis 4a](#). Annual citations, even when normalized by the number of resolutions, particularly increase in the 1990s. This finding is intuitive, as the 1990s were an extremely active period of legislation in the UN, as Cold War politics no longer precluded consensus between the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia. This pattern is exhibited in both chambers, but is more pronounced in the UNGA. We also see that the rate of annual citations varies across topic areas. On some topics, trends in citation rates and resolution rates move together (“south_africa”), but sometimes they exhibit distinct patterns (“unraw_administration,” “conservation”). Examining temporal patterns in citation

shows us that on some topics, ‘ownership’ is passed back and forth between the UNGA and the UNSC over time. For example, “africa” and “conflict_response.” These findings underscore that examination of citation captures a distinct component of legalization that is not fully explicated by looking at resolution rates alone.

We also find qualified support for our expectations regarding topic age and re-use patterns (Hypothesis 4b). In Figure 7, we calculate the average year gap between highly-aligned resolutions in each topic. Specifically, we take all resolution pairs with alignment scores greater than or equal to the 97.5th percentile of all alignment scores in the dataset. Next, we calculate the year gap between all such pairs, and aggregate pairs based on the topic of the more recent resolution in the pair.¹³ Finally, we average year gaps for each topic to produce a per-topic average age gap between highly aligned resolutions.¹⁴

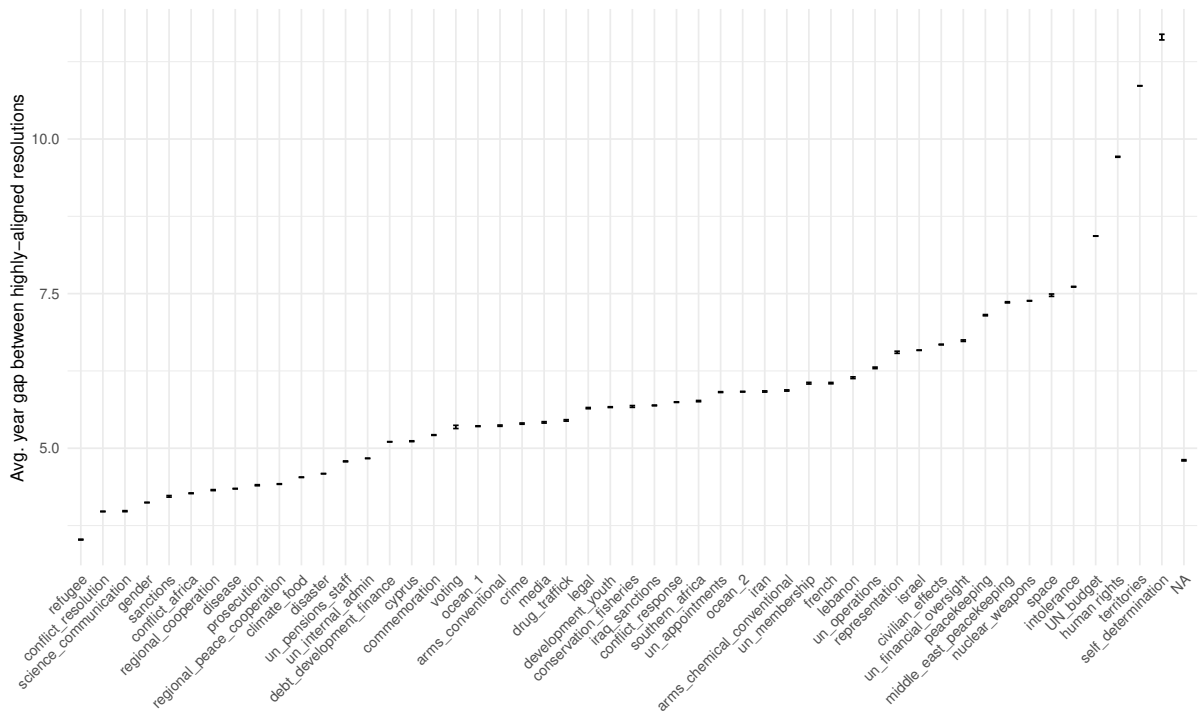
Examining Figure 7 suggests that the topics with the largest average year gap between highly-aligned resolutions are indeed those topics that are consistently and reliably part of the UN’s agenda, indicating a relevant body of law with continued legal relevance spanning an extended period of time. Resolutions on “territories” and “UN_budget”, in particular, employ the same language regardless of geographic region, which creates opportunities for temporally distant alignments that are uncommon in other topic areas. “self_determination” and “human_rights” are also regularly addressed in UN substantive resolutions with relatively consistent language. Finally, we observe relatively large temporal gaps between highly-aligned resolutions in some of the most controversial topic areas. “iraq_sanctions”, “iran”, “lebanon”, and “israel” all have above-median average year gaps, while “middle_east_peacekeeping” and “nuclear_weapons” are both in the top ten. If authors are indeed more inclined to re-use of language from older, accepted resolutions in controversial topic areas to provide political cover, then these conflict-oriented topics are precisely the ones we should expect to see in large year-gap group.

By contrast, the topics with a smaller average temporal gap between highly-aligned

¹³Using resolution number as a tiebreaker for resolutions passed in the same year.

¹⁴An analogous approach examining time lags between citing and cited resolutions is less appropriate for measuring legalization over time because of *chains* of citation, in which the most recent resolution cites only the resolution from the previous year, which cited the resolution from the year before that, *ad infinitum*. This effect c the measurement of citation lags.

Figure 7: Per-topic alignment for highly-cited resolutions.



Dots represent quantile values, and lines represent asymptotic 95% confidence intervals derived from a normal approximation of the order statistic confidence intervals.

resolutions are more idiosyncratic. Topics such as “gender” and “disease” have gained recent prominence through initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and institutional efforts in gender mainstreaming, which causes related resolutions in these areas to be more temporally contained. By contrast, topics such as “refugees” have been on the UN’s agenda since its founding. Among these topics, a low average temporal gap among highly-aligned resolutions likely suggests a low level of legalization, with few references to older, established areas of precedent.

Conclusion

We find several compelling patterns in legalization in the UN. We find that legal precision is highest when states seek political cover; thus, text recycling and citation are most prevalent on conflict-related matters. We demonstrate that the UNSC and UNGA have developed distinct legal competencies with different norms and bodies of law, and suggest that these bodies of law are becoming more legalized over time. These

theoretical contributions bring together distinct research threads in international law and the politics of IOs to develop a more holistic understanding of *how* and *why* we observe these distinct patterns of legalization in the context of the UN. We further expect that these findings would hold in other institutional contexts. Generally, IO outputs should show more precision when the institutional frameworks and issues under consideration have been present for longer. Precision should be higher on matters of greater political salience, as the tools of citation provide political cover to states. Finally, bodies with agendas that are more limited and concern more narrowly defined topical areas should be more precise. Some IOs would present harder cases for observing legal precision than the UN— for example, institutions where membership changes over time or has less regular opportunities to interact to develop shared legal practices. Future work should test these expectations in other institutional contexts to demonstrate the generalizability of our theory of legal precision in IOs, as well as test the mechanisms of precision—namely, seeking political cover—proposed here.

Our novel data contribution of resolution citations and alignments offer insights that simple resolution counts cannot show. By applying a machine learning approach to an extensive body of international law, we can examine macro-level trends in legalization unexplored by previous work. In this paper, we provide an example of the questions that these novel data can be used to address. In addition to exploring the generalizability of the theoretical predictions in other institutional contexts, future work should seek to understand the influence of state characteristics and groupings on legislative patterns in the UN. We believe that these data can also be fruitfully combined with other relevant datasets on UN politics, including patterns of voting on resolutions (Bailey et al. 2017) and speeches (Baturu et al. 2017). Are states with more similar characteristics or deeper alliances more likely to copy from or cite each other, as Allee & Peinhardt (2010) find in the case of BITs?¹⁵ Are resolutions sponsored by powerful states more likely to be copied or cited from, as Allee & Elsig (2019) find on PTAs? What rhetorical arguments deployed by state representatives are most associated with legally precise outputs? In addition

¹⁵We see suggestive evidence in this direction, as countries are more likely to cite resolutions on which they themselves were a sponsor.

to predicting citation and recycling, researchers could also examine the *implications* of legalization and its downstream effects on policy and state behavior. Are resolutions with higher rates of recycling and citation more likely to be adopted by consensus, or to be complied with? Is legalization related to other types of outcomes— funding, or conflict resolution, for example? Does legalization reflect institutional biases to focus on some issue areas to the exclusion of others, raising potential concerns for institutional legitimacy?¹⁶

Our analysis of legal precision over the history of the UN has illuminated areas in which the UN has successfully developed an elaborated set of rules and norms to guide state behavior. Understanding variation in *when* and *why* international law has developed has highlighted notable successes—and failures—of the UN in addressing the key concerns of its member states. Building on these insights, scholars and policy-makers can adopt a pragmatic approach to improving the efficacy of the UN in the *next* 75 years.

¹⁶Our data also suggests this may be the case, as the priorities of countries in the Global South such as development and migration exhibit low legalization, while security matters— of import to the great powers and the Global North— are highly legalized.

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