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Why is change so slow? Assessing prospects for United Nations Security Council reform

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The article explores how changed patterns of UN membership affected the prospects for UN Security Council institutional reform. First, we outline a theoretical framework based on path dependency, veto player analysis and social choice theory. Second, we offer calculations of decision probability and show that a higher voting threshold lowers chances of winning coalitions in a non-linear fashion. Third, we explore the specific decision-making procedures for UNSC reform and which actors can block reform. We conclude that not only diverging preferences, but that hurdles established early on combined with membership growth have ‘locked in’ the current institutional arrangement.

Keywords: path dependency; veto players; social choice theory; security council reform

1. Introduction

Reforming the institutional structure and core decision-making procedures of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) remains one of the most difficult challenges of UN reform. The UNSC is the world’s only global body that can authorize the use of force. Only 15 members, five of those being a member since 1945, decide on behalf of all other UN Member States. After the cold war, the Council asserted a more interventionist role in addressing violent conflict, nuclear proliferation and terrorism. The Council installed peacekeeping missions with increasingly robust mandates, created sanctions regimes – some over extended periods of time – and regularly authorized military interventions. But the world is still plagued with wars and violent conflict. Often, the UNSC is deadlocked (such as in the case of Syria), essentially because a permanent member cast or threatened to cast a veto on the basis of its domestic interests (e.g. Annan and Brundtland 2015). The veto right of the permanent members (P-5) provides them with a huge advantage, while the general membership has to compete for ten rotating two-year term seats without such far-reaching privileges.

It is widely acknowledged that the UNSC needs to be reformed, notably to account for the shifting distribution of global power and to strengthen its legitimacy. Many states favor Council reform to ensure a broader representation of the general

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membership, which has grown tremendously since 1945. Clearly, there are several countries ambitious to accede to the Council mainly because of their population size, their economic power, and their financial or peacekeeping contributions. In particular, India and Brazil, which together with Germany and Japan are eager to gain permanent seats as tabled in their the G-4 proposal – a proposal that German Chancellor Angela Merkel reinvigorated recently.¹ However, even though several well-prepared proposals have been put forward, so far no proposal has gained the required support.

In contrast to other multilateral institutions, the UNSC is a special case for the representation of emerging economies, several of which could qualify to join the Council. First, China has been a UNSC member since 1945 with the Chinese seat having changed from the Republic of China to mainland China in 1971. The Council did not have to go through a phase of adaptation, such as, for example, was the case for the WTO (Scott and Wilkinson 2015). China, as a P-5 member and generally aspiring to fulfill a “bridging” function to bring developing countries closer to the decision-making process, has a special position in the UNSC. Similarly, Russia, as a successor of the Soviet Union, is a permanent Council member. In spite of the conflict and tensions related to the Ukraine crisis – after which the “West” and “Russia” found itself in a state of serious confrontation – Russia remains a “status quo” power. In this sense, China and Russia are privileged within the UNSC, which contrasts with their representation in some other multilateral institutions. Whereas in the IMF and the World Bank (Lesage et al. 2015; Vestergaard and Wade 2015),² recent voting weight reforms have led to a modest increase of China’s role, within the UNSC, it remains in a fairly strong position.

Hence, emerging economies are involved in the UNSC in a somewhat fragmented way. Whereas they usually form a “caucus” within multilateral fora such as the G-20, their position is different within the UNSC. Smaller member states, mostly of the global South demand a more equitable representation and reject P5 dominance, both established and emerging economies demand a permanent representation (Brazil, Germany, India, Japan) in the framework of the G-4 proposal. Some regional rivals, including Pakistan, Argentina, and South Korea, are instead included as candidates in the proposal “Uniting for Consensus”. South Africa, is a major candidate to gain a permanent seat on the African proposal, along with Nigeria.

Whereas a number of multilateral institutions increasingly take the role of rising powers into account, it appears to be notoriously difficult to reform the UNSC (Hosli and Dörfler 2015). What is the reason for this? To what degree are there any structural hurdles that make change particularly difficult to effect? The article explores how changed patterns of UN membership have had an effect on prospects for change. The theoretical framework is based on path dependency, insights derived from veto player analysis and combined with results gleaned from social choice theory. We emphasize the decision-making procedures for UNSC reform and conversely, investigate which actors can block UNSC reform. The empirical observations lead us to argue that the UNSC setup does not respond to changes in the power structure, largely due to a high decision-making threshold for Charter amendments coupled with a steep increase in UN membership that decreases the likelihood of finding a winning coalition. We argue that the difficulty is not only due to diverging preferences as to which countries should “legitimately” be permanently represented in the Council, but that decisions early on have created “lock in” effects that now make change difficult to implement.

In the next section, we outline the theoretical framework. In sections three and four, we apply this framework to the UNSC, assessing prospects for reform based on calculations on institutional inertia. Section five concludes and offers some additional

thoughts on the challenge of UNSC reform. We hope that an appreciation of the institutional reform obstacles may help pave the way for proposals that address this difficulty more explicitly and provide an additional tool to get over the required “threshold”.

2. Inert institutions: the status quo bias of political institutions³

Path dependency seeks to illuminate how and why institutions change and goes beyond the mere idea that “history matters”. It centrally focuses on the effect of self-reinforcing mechanisms of *increasing returns* and feedback loops (Rixen and Viola 2015, 305–306). As Paul Pierson defines it,

[i]n an increasing returns process, the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path. This is because the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time. To put it a different way, the costs of exit – of switching to some previously plausible alternative – rise. (Pierson 2000a, 252)

Feedback loops highlight the endogenous feature of path-dependent processes, namely that the “system being studied (whether a technological standard or an institution) has effects which then become the causes of subsequent effects on the same system” (Rixen and Viola 2015, 305).

Pierson highlights four factors that particularly favor processes of increasing returns in the political world (Pierson 2000a, 257, 2000b). First, decisions in the political world are highly interdependent (Pierson 2000b, 489). Pierson argues that collective action contains many factors that favor processes of increasing returns such as adaptive expectations and high starting costs. For example, it only makes sense to invest in the creation of a new political party when one can expect that a high number of others will also do so (Pierson 2000a, 257–259).

Political actors operate in a densely institutionalized environment. In contrast to the economic world, strongly characterized by patterns of exchange, the political world rather relies on authority. Institutions, as well as policies, limit an actors’ room of maneuver in the long run. In turn, actors align their behavior with the resources and incentives of political arrangements. In complex social interactions, new policies and institutions are costly to create, and often generate learning and coordination effects as well as adaptive expectations. These factors increase the attractiveness of existing institutions compared to their – possibly more effective – alternatives (Pierson 2000a, 259).

Pierson further describes how asymmetric power relationships shape the political world. If a certain political group gains political authority, this can trigger a process of “increasing returns”. The group can use its power position to subdue other actors to its rules, and thus change the rules of the game to increase its own power. Even a small advantage for one group regarding its power can amount – through increasing returns – to a significant power asymmetry between groups (Pierson 2000a, 259).

Lastly, Pierson argues that politics is intrinsically complex and opaque. Economic theory assumes that actors seek to maximize their utility. A simple and transparent mechanism is the price, supplying all economic actors with relevant information. In contrast, in the political world, there is no direct “tool of comparison”, such as a price. Accordingly, it is difficult to measure whether a political institution functions well and if it does not, why this might be the case (Pierson 2000a, 259–260).

In the political world, corrective mechanisms, or competition among different actors, are less effective than in economics (Pierson 2000b, 489–490). Even if an

inefficient institution is identified, to adapt the institution, several obstacles have to be overcome. Political actors have short time horizons, especially as a result of electoral democracy: They aim to be reelected and are thus more interested in short-term rather than long-term benefits. Therefore, these actors will rather remain on the same path, because changing the path is more expensive in the short run, and most likely creates payoffs only in the long run. Political institutions also have a certain status quo bias (Pierson 2000a, 261–262). They are generally hard to change, or even resistant to change.

The creators favor inventing stable institutions to fix the current constellation of interests and power within the institutional setup (Pierson 2000b). States are uncertain as to what future political developments may be. Hence, states must fear that any political opponents will gain control over the necessary majorities to direct the organization's political agenda so as to change the action capability of the initial creators. To prevent the institutional setup to be altered against the preferences and power constellation among its creators, states deliberately ensure that the organizational structure is rigid. Therefore, institutions are equipped with high decision-making thresholds for institutional change, to prevent that the institution will be used against the preferences of its creators. However, it will also become increasingly difficult, if not completely unfeasible, for its creators to change the institution. Understanding path dependency as a process enables to evaluate how a decision at the time of the institution's creation may restrict or enable certain later institutional choices (Pierson and Skocpol 2002, 698).

We argue that the creators purposely design institutions in a way that inhibits institutional change either by installing high hurdles for institutional change or equipping certain members with veto rights. Many constitutions forego certain adaptations as they grant veto rights to actors in need of special protection or privileges. In fact, this ensures that the creators are able to prevent any institutional change that will bring them into an inferior position. While designing an institution as “change-resistant” (Pierson 2000b, 491) promises to ensure that a creator will not be worse off in the future, it will also introduce institutional hurdles for the improvement of the position of all other members. Even if the creators favor change at some point in the future, they might not be able to get the necessary majorities. Hence, the institution will not always be able to adapt to altered interest constellations (Mahoney 2000, 519).

What does this imply for the study of institutional change? Which specific “stabilisation mechanism” (Beyer 2010, 5) secures institutional continuity of the UNSC? Hence, we need to theorize about which aspects of an institution are relevant to explain the prospects of institutional change, and to explain its development over time. Consequently, it is the central task in studying institutional stability to examine under which conditions an institution's setup can, in fact, be amended. Usually, designers of international institutions include certain flexibility provisions, i.e. decision-making procedures for adapting the institutional setup to changing circumstances (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001, 773). Any such decision procedure will provide a social choice that either opens new, alters, or completely forecloses existing options.

At this point, we suggest extending Pierson's concept to establish a link between institutional change and the extent of status quo bias. To this end, we add insights from veto player analysis and complement this with insights from social choice theory. Tsebelis suggests that any decision-making procedure gives rise to certain “veto players”:

In order to change (...) the (legislative) status quo a certain number of individual or collective actors have to agree to the proposed change. I call such actors veto players. Veto players are specified in a country by the constitution (the President, the House, and the Senate in the US) or by the political system (the different party members of a government coalition in Western Europe). (...) [E]very political system has a configuration of veto players (a certain number of veto players, with specific ideological distances among them, and a certain cohesion each). (Tsebelis 2002, 2)

Veto players, are actors needed to change the status quo or conversely, without their consent, no institutional change will be feasible. The constitutional provisions that give rise to the structure of an institution determine the configuration of veto players. Hence, the probability to be able to successfully change the status quo will depend on the number of veto players and their preferences for a new policy. Thus, when analyzing the stability of institutional arrangements, a focus on the decision-making procedure is needed in a first step. In a second step, a focus needs to be on the actors empowered to be veto players on the basis of the decision-making rule (Tsebelis 2002).

3. The difficulty of reform

We identify the majority threshold that Pierson refers to as status quo bias as a (concrete) stability mechanism of the UNSC. To support this argument, we offer calculations based on social choice and cooperative game theory. Moreover, the decision-making provisions empower certain actors to block institutional change, either by providing explicit veto rights to certain members, or on the basis of the majority threshold. If, for example, the threshold is at a two-thirds majority, then more than one-third of the members together can, in essence, veto a decision. Hence, we have to evaluate which actors are empowered to veto UNSC reform on the basis of the relevant decision-making procedure.

To alter the fundamental properties of the UNSC, namely its size, composition, the majority threshold or the P-5 veto, the UN Member States have to amend UN Charter articles 23 and 27 collectively (Russett, O'Neill, and Sutterlin 1997, 163). This could be done in two ways: Article 108 of the UN Charter requires two-thirds of the UNGA membership including all of the P-5 to ratify an agreement on UNSC reform. Alternatively, article 109 stipulates that two-thirds of the UNGA membership, in addition to nine of the 15 UNSC members can convene a conference of UN member states. Any amendment adopted there enters into force if two-thirds of the UNGA, as well as all permanent members, have ratified it (Witschel 2012b). With a total number of 193 member states, the two-thirds majority threshold amounts to 129 votes. Accordingly, 65 UN member states can form a blocking minority. To date, UN Member States have amended the UN Charter three times on the basis of article 108, notably to increase UNSC membership from 11 to 15. In contrast, the UN Member States have never invoked article 109 (Witschel 2012a, 2012b).

Hence, we will assess the decision probability for the UNGA accounting for changes over time. It is likely that the increasing number of UN member states has affected both the contents of UNGA resolutions and the probability that the UNGA managed to reach decisions on resolutions, notably those requiring a two-thirds majority for their successful adoption. The UN has experienced significant membership growth: It has more than tripled in size between 1945 (with 51 member states) and the present (193 states). The organization's founders had not anticipated such a drastic increase in UN membership, which was largely due to processes of decolonization.

Membership growth, however, had significant consequences for UNGA decision-making and therefore on prospects for UN reform (Childers and Urquhart 1994, 124).

We argue that on average, a higher voting threshold in any political institution – such as a two-thirds instead of a simple majority rule – lowers chances that winning coalitions can be formed. While this seems straightforward, this effect is not linear. It leads to a decrease in *decision probability* and accordingly, an increase in “institutional inertia” (or status quo bias). Decision probability, in a fairly rough approximation, can be assessed for the UNGA as the likelihood that a random coalition of UN member states can form a winning coalition. To demonstrate this, we compute a measure developed by James Coleman: The index of the power of a collectivity to act (Coleman 1971). We will check for robustness by using some modifications to this measure.

In essence, the Penrose–Banzhaf–Coleman (Penrose 1946; Banzhaf 1965) measures, all rooted in cooperative game theory and important for social choice analysis, are calculated assuming that each member casts an affirmative vote independently of all other members (and with a probability of 0.5).⁴ This implies that all voting outcomes are equally probable, an assumption that is consistent with the binomial model of voting, where each vote has an equal probability of being for or against a motion (with all votes being independent of each other). Hence, all conceivable arrangements of votes, i.e. coalitions, are equally likely to occur (often called “Impartial Coalition Culture” (ICC)). The key probabilistic assumption underlying the Penrose–Banzhaf–Coleman measures is that votes constitute independent random variables. This assumption, however, seems implausibly strong. But it may be more intuitively applicable when recalling that their purpose is to evaluate the voting rule, hence abstracting from the preferences, behaviors and strategies that the voters – e.g. UNGA members – may have.⁵ This also applies to measures related to an institution’s “capacity to act”, where similarly, independence is a rational assumption when a priori knowledge about the issues at stake (and how divided UN members will be over them) is absent. Without restrictions on expected coalition-formation processes, based on the ICC principle, Coleman’s index is helpful to assess the decision probability of an institution, given applicable voting rules. But this measure, similar to voting power indices, can be adapted if needed, to account for specific preference constellations among relevant actors.

We can demonstrate how to calculate the Coleman index with a simple example. Take a committee that should take a decision and consists of three individuals. These players have voting weights of 1, 2, and 4, respectively. Assuming the “decision quota” (or “decision threshold”) is 5, this results in the voting game [$G = 5; 1, 2, 4$]. In this example, $\{1, 4\}$, $\{2, 4\}$, and $\{1, 2, 4\}$ are the “winning coalitions”, with the total number of possible coalitions being $2^n = 2^3$. According to Coleman’s index, decision probability in this example then is $3/8$ (or 37.5%). If the decision quota is increased, for example, to 6, decision probability decreases to one-fourth (or 25%).

To check the “robustness” of calculations using Penrose–Banzhaf–Coleman measures, we introduce assessments based on empirical evidence, such as correlations between players’ votes. Using the P-5 votes as an indication of effects when votes are correlated rather than independent of each other (that is, have a positive association), an empirical check demonstrates that the Coleman measure of a collectivity to act is rather robust to assumptions of correlated votes (at least when taking, as an example, voting patterns among the P-5 within the UNGA into account).⁶ In the following assessments, we will base calculations on the standard assumptions related to

Coleman's index of the capacity of a collectivity to act, but keep in mind that deviations from these basic assumptions may affect results.

The effect of the voting rule on the power of a collectivity to act is distinct from the effect of the joint probability distribution (Laruelle and Valenciano 2005; Kaniovski 2008). Accordingly, coalitions that are winning under equally probable and independent votes continue to do so when the votes lose either property, but in this case, probabilities of their occurrence may change (Kaniovski 2008). So as concerns calculations regarding the capacity to act, effects of voting rules and voting behaviors can be separated, except perhaps when the vote concerns the actual voting rule itself. Preferences and strategies of the voters are given by the joint probability distribution (Hosli et al. 2011, 169).

Decision capacity measures such as Coleman's index of the capacity of a collectivity to act focus on the institutional "skeleton" of an organization and provide results in a long-term perspective, assuming that patterns of collaboration between players – and hence, coalition-formation – may change over time. This assumption can also be applied to the UN, where in a short-term perspective, some member states are much more likely to collaborate with each other, making certain "coalitions" more likely; but in a long-term perspective, due to domestic changes or adaptations of member states' relative power in the global system such coalitions may again change. Therefore, measures such as the Banzhaf-Penrose-Coleman indices can also be applied to, for example, suggested changes to the composition of the UNSC, keeping in mind that de facto probabilities of coalition-formation may change the results of these basic

Table 1. Assessing decision probability ('power of a collectivity to act'), United Nations General Assembly (calculations based on ICC assumption).

Number of UN members	Decision threshold and decision probability	Decision rule		
		Simple majority	Two-thirds majority	Change in decision probability (compared to baseline scenario with 51 UN members)
51	Decision threshold (number of votes)	26	34	–
	Decision probability (in percent of total)	50	1.2	0
101	Decision threshold (number of votes)	51	68	–
	Decision probability (in percent of total)	50	0.032	–37.5
193	Decision threshold (number of votes)	96	129	–
	Decision probability (in percent of total)	50	0.000002	–600,000

Source: Adapted from Hosli and Dörfler (2015). Results were generated with Bräuning and König, Indices of Power (IOP), version 2.0; available at <http://www.tbraeuning.de/download/> and Pajala, Meskanen, and Kaase (2002) Powerslave Power Index Calculator: A Voting Body Analyser in the Voting Power and Power Index Website [online], published 22.4.2002 and updated 31.5.2007 (University of Turku), available at <http://powerslave.val.utu.fi/>. Earlier calculations on power distributions in the UNSC include Shapley and Shubik (1954), Ordeshook (1986, 467–468), O'Neill (1997) and Taylor and Zwicker (1993).

assessments. Table 1 shows, assuming ICC applies, effects on decision probability of the UNGA when the simple and two-thirds majority rules apply, for different sizes of total UN membership.⁷

Under the simple majority provision, decision probability (the capacity of the UNGA to act) remains constant at 50%, irrespective of the number of UN member states. But when a decision rule larger than simple majority, such as the two-thirds majority clause applies, membership size matters. Assuming ICC, with a fairly simple measure such as Coleman's index of the power of a collectivity to act, decision probability under the UNGA's two-thirds clause is found to have decreased considerably with 101 members compared to a membership of 51 states. Results are even more striking when applied to the current 193 UN members. As Table 1 shows, decision probability assessed on the basis of the ICC assumption, measured by Coleman's index of the power of a collectivity to act, decreases from 1.2% (51 UN members) to 0.032% (101 members), and even to 0.000002% (193 members) under the two-thirds majority rule. Of course, these calculations underestimate actual decision probability in the UNGA, since in practice, UN members will be inclined to vote "yes" with a higher probability than 0.5 (at least empirically, the probability to vote "yes" appears to be much higher). Similarly, it is unlikely that UN member states' votes are truly independent of each other. They are often formed in negotiation processes affected by issue-linkage, actor socialization and exchanges between member states over time. Nonetheless, the calculations show that when coalitions build independently and votes among UN member states are non-correlated, it is about 37.5 times more difficult to agree on a UNGA resolution on the basis of a two-thirds majority vote when UN membership was 101 than it was when the UN was formed (51 member states). The hurdle is much steeper for a membership as large as 193. If the additional requirement of the "concurrent votes" of the P-5 is taken into account, decision probability in the UNGA is likely to even be lower.

The assumption of independent voting behavior and non-correlated votes, based on the ICC assumption, provides conservative estimates ("baseline scenario") for the probability that UNGA resolutions are adopted, since they simplify the actual probabilities of voting "yes" and the fact that UN states are likely to form a priori coalitions. But the decrease in decision probability, due to increased membership, still demonstrates how there is an inherent status quo bias. They clearly indicate that decision-making, based on a quota higher than simple majority, combined with increased membership, faces increasingly steep hurdles and may significantly contribute to the difficulty of achieving reform. This status quo bias, incorporated into the institution's design, safeguards the institution's stability, but may also constitute a serious hurdle for change.

The end of the cold war is likely to have strengthened cleavages that make institutional reform increasingly difficult. In this sense, an institution's ability to adapt generally depends on the constellation and intensity of state preferences, but also on the flexibility of its institutional design. How could calculations of Coleman's index be affected if the UNGA was characterized by a dominant North-South division (Dirks et al. 1993) or a division East-West (Voeten 2000), or if both of these cleavages are assumed to be present simultaneously (Kim and Russett 1996)? To obtain estimates for this extension, one might assume that coalitions among UNGA members only form when they are connected on these major policy dimensions (implying that UN members only vote with others whose preferences are immediately adjacent to them on the underlying policy scale). For the one-dimensional case, Table 2 demonstrates how

Table 2. Coleman's measure of an institution's capacity to act, adapted to the assumption that only connected coalitions form in the UNGA (one policy dimension): example of modifications for a membership between 1 and 20.

Number of UN member states	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Number of connected coalitions (one dimension)	1	3	6	10	15	21	28	36	45	55	66	78	91	105	120	136	153	171	190	210
Number of connected winning coalitions (CWCs, One Dimension)	1	1	3	3	6	6	10	10	15	15	21	21	28	28	36	36	45	45	55	55
Share of CWCs in all possible connected Coalitions	1	0.33	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.29	0.36	0.28	0.33	0.27	0.32	0.27	0.31	0.27	0.30	0.26	0.29	0.26	0.29	0.26

Source: Calculations based on authors' own programming.

adapted measures of Coleman's index of the probability of a collectivity to act would develop with increasing membership, here for an increase from 1 to 20 members.

Here, decision probability will decrease less drastically with increasing membership (and stable voting rules and decision thresholds) when assuming that UNGA members are aligned on given policy scales. For example, a comparison of a committee size of 4 and 20 shows a decrease in action probability by a factor of 1.15. Similarly, an increase from 3 to 19 members results in a decrease in decision probability of 1.72. Accordingly, if UNGA voting occurs on the basis of clear East–West or North–South divisions, for example, it is safe to assume that decision capacity drops less drastically with expanding UN membership size as compared to estimates based on the ICC assumption. In other words, the probability of members voting “yes”, in this case, may be correlated and higher than 0.5. Of course, it is a strong assumption and likely unrealistic that only one policy dimension will be relevant on which members exclusively form connected coalitions. Hence, actual assessments of the probability that winning coalitions in the UNGA form are likely to fall somewhere between estimates based on the ICC assumption (Table 1) and those based on the connected coalitions assumption (results displayed in Table 2, but extended to a membership of 193). As the UNGA members may be voting on a multitude of issues (at least for a resolution in which they resort to a formal vote), it may be reasonable to view the connected coalitions approach as a lower limit, and the ICC approach as an upper limit. As these scenarios demonstrate, a threshold as high as the two-thirds requirement, coupled with the need for P-5 agreement, constitutes a significant hurdle for change – and may be somewhat underestimated by accounts that simply focus on divisions in members state preferences or blame actors within and outside the UN for disagreeing on UNSC reform.

4. Security council reform: veto players and institutional obstacles

The founders of the UN aimed to create a new global order enshrined in an international organization that would overcome the deficiencies of its predecessor. Yet, decisions on the UN's fundamental constitutional provisions necessarily involved to trade-off between effectiveness, representativeness and the flexibility of the arrangement (Russett, O'Neill, and Sutterlin 1997, 169). The global system post-1945 was to be based on the sovereign equality of states, and the predominant responsibility of the great powers for maintaining international peace and security. For this reason, the permanent members demanded veto rights, aiming to prevent that the smaller UN member states could ever outvote them (Sutterlin 1997, 2–5).

The UN Charter provides the seat distribution in the UNSC that represents the status quo (Weiss and Young 2005, 140). Accordingly, the UNSC has 15 members, of which five are permanent: The United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia. The UNGA elects the non-permanent members for non-renewable two-year terms. The UNGA introduced a regional distribution for non-permanent UNSC positions: Three seats are allocated to African countries, two to Latin America, two to Asia and two to Western Europe, and one to Eastern Europe. The majority threshold for UNSC decisions is nine affirmative votes (see article 27 UN Charter). The P-5 can veto all substantive decisions. At the 2005 World Summit, it seemed that UN member states were close to a settlement. However, due to political disagreement, none of the reform proposals was vote on. Since then, in the format of “intergovernmental negotiations” on UNSC reform, several text-based negotiations have taken place, with no concrete outcome yet.

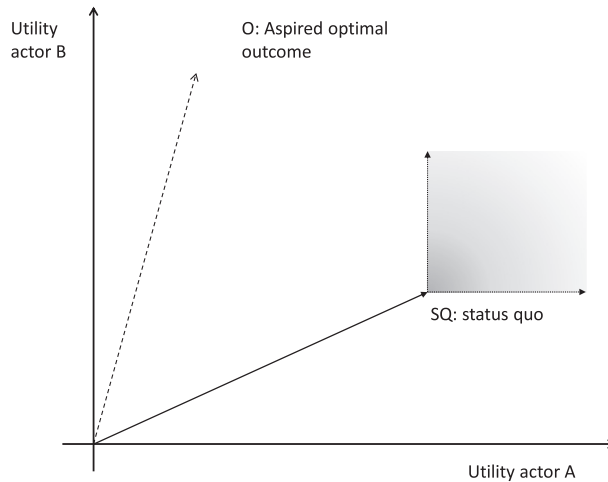


Figure 1. Negotiation space for negotiations with veto players. Source: Authors' illustration based on Scharpf (1997) and Sebenius (1992, 340).

How about the role of potential veto players for UNSC reform? A large majority of states as represented in the UN rejects the current UNSC setup. Nonetheless, there are groups of states that do not necessarily benefit from a reformed UNSC, while simultaneously, may have a privileged position in the decision-making process. Figure 1, based on classical bargaining theory in international relations (Sebenius 1983; Scharpf 1997; Tsebelis 2002), demonstrates what an actor constellation in the UNSC reform negotiations might look like. The two axes in the figure refer to the individual utility of actors A and B, respectively. The more distant from the origin the outcome of the negotiations is, the higher is their respective payoff. In Figure 1, Actor A, for example, might represent the P-5 that can veto any decision. Actor B, encompasses all other UN member states, which all hold no veto rights. Point O is the optimal outcome that would be reached if the institution would be established today, reflecting a changed power distribution. The arrowhead of the continuous arrow marks the current arrangement (status quo).

Actor A has a veto and can block all outcomes it deems unfavorable. This exemplifies that the originally optimal outcome cannot be achieved, as in such a configuration – and every other left or below the status quo – actor A would lose (i.e. have a decreased payoff). Only the points within the hatched area in Figure 1 are achievable since in these cases, actor A benefits or at least incurs no costs on the basis of a new arrangement. However, a reform proposal that provides negative utility relative to the status quo for at least one veto player will not find a winning coalition. The point is that when the organization would be created today, it would reflect current distributions of power (i.e. the “optimal outcome”). However, since there are several veto players and that potentially the optimal outcome is not within the hatched area, it might not be a feasible option.

But which states or groups of states also constitute veto players? We argue that there are two groups of veto players: The permanent members and regional groups. As concerns the former, every additional seat in the reformed UNSC implies a loss of power for the permanent UNSC members, for example, as they will now need more non-permanent members for the adoption of a resolution. Notably, new permanent members would weaken the power position of old permanent UNSC members.

US diplomatic cables reveal that the current P-5 “arithmetic advantage” (US Permanent Mission to the UN 2007b) drives their opposition:

We believe expansion of the Council, along the lines of the models currently discussed, will dilute U.S. influence in the body. USUN currently starts most discussions about important Council statements or resolutions with at least six votes (U.S., UK, France, and the three European delegations) and must secure three more to reach the required nine votes – barring a P-5 veto – for adoption. To take just the G-4 countries plus the yet-unidentified African state(s) that would join them in permanent membership, we are confident we could reliably count on Japan’s support, and to a lesser degree, on Germany’s. However, on the most important issues of the day – sanctions, human rights, the Middle East, etc. – Brazil, India, and most African states are currently far less sympathetic to our views than our European allies. (US Permanent Mission to the UN 2007b)

While the P-3 have publicly voiced some support for Council expansion, internally, they made clear that they are ready to prevent any proposal that would encroach on the “special status’ of permanent members” (US Permanent Mission to the UN 2007a).

In addition to the P-5, nearly all UN regional groupings are able to block a UNSC reform proposal. To exemplify the position of the regional groupings, actor A could be substituted by any regional grouping, or a coalition of such groupings that hold a blocking minority exhibiting the same effect on prospects for a solution. Again, actor A will not approve any point suboptimal compared to the status quo.

In short, an increasing returns process can be identified for the permanent members as well as for the regional groupings. For the permanent members, the costs of UNSC reform are high. Under these circumstances, a transition to other possible equilibria – i.e. to the proposed reform plans – is difficult. Without the decision-making rule empowering the permanent members to veto a decision, a solution would be much more likely to be achieved. For the other possible veto players, holding at least one-third of the UNGA votes, only a solution not decreasing their utility in relative terms – compared to other regions – can have a chance for success. This situation exemplifies the consequences that the decision in 1945 to grant veto power to the permanent members had for the prospects of today’s reform efforts. We clearly observe a status quo bias.

As there is a tendency to work within the UN regional groupings, it is important to focus on these entities to assess the decisive actors needed for a UNSC reform proposal to succeed. Clearly, they are “veto players” as regards UNSC reform (assuming the regional groups vote fairly cohesively). The distribution of regional groups in total UN membership shows that the African group (28.2% of the membership) and the Asian group (27.6%) are particularly large. But the combined share of three other regional groupings – Latin America and the Caribbean, Western Europe and Others, and Eastern Europe – is also over 40% of the total UNGA membership. A coalition of the “Latin American and Caribbean” and the “Western Europe and Others” groups reaches a share of almost 33%. However, P-5 membership also matters: Even in the case when all other regional groupings in the UNGA are united as regards support of a specific reform proposal, it can be vetoed, by the Asian group (of which China is a member), the “Western Europe and Others” group (containing as members France and the United Kingdom and in fact also the United States), or the “Eastern Europe” group (with Russia).

In practice, the sponsors of each of the UNSC reform proposals aim to gather a large number of supporting nations – partially across the boundaries of the existing regional groupings. However, no reform of the UNSC is feasible without the consent

of – at least large parts of – all UN regional groups. Accordingly, UNSC reform and in fact, any amendment to the UN Charter, can be seen as a truly international effort which is simply not feasible if it lacks political support on any of the continents.

Concluding, status quo bias as regards the potential for UNSC reform is affected both by the existence of different veto players and by increased institutional inertia over time. These factors explain why change is so difficult to effect in the framework of today's 193-member UNGA. This constitutes a major, and generally underestimated, challenge to global diplomacy. We observe path dependence and "lock-in effects" that help explain the challenge to reform this preeminent institution for the maintenance of international peace and security.

5. Conclusions

Drawing on insights from path dependency, veto player analysis and social choice theory, we aimed at showing why UNSC reform is so difficult to achieve. The article focuses on the decision-making procedure for UNSC reform and discusses actors capable of blocking reform. Clearly, the UNSC in its current composition is not based on global power positions and a majority of UN states favors (formal) change. Obstacles to reform, however, are situated in the institutional provisions for UN Charter reform, specifying a high hurdle for UN Charter amendment and granting veto power to the P-5 as well as – in the current constellation of UN membership – to two of the largest UN regional groupings. Accordingly, not only the divergent preferences of UN members prevent a decision on UNSC reform, but the procedure for UN Charter amendment poses a major obstacle to change.

Our analysis shows that institutional thresholds have been "locked in" in the provisions for UNSC reform as incorporated in the UN Charter. Path-dependency can illustrate how the original design now prevents reform. Simultaneously, social choice theory helps demonstrate how these locked-in decision rules affect chances for reform, given expanded UN membership over time. Our article demonstrates that the two-thirds majority requirement in the UNGA, coupled with the requirement of P-5 inclusion, constitutes a major institutional hurdle for change, given the current number of UN member states. Clearly, although the UNSC no longer represents today's global power structures, changing its composition and decision rules is a task not only made difficult by diverging state preferences on this politically sensitive issue, but by decision rules that constitute a – probably underestimated – extent of status quo bias. This helps to explain why no proposal for UNSC reform has been accepted yet. Ultimately, a reform proposal will need to be integrated into one package solution that meets the two-thirds majority requirement and has P-5 support, which certainly constitutes a major challenge. Altogether, so far the UN member states have not been able to consolidate their diverging preferences in favor of a compromise solution that would overcome the many reform obstacles. By comparison, while the permanent members share a preference for the status quo, they tried hesitantly to deflect the criticism by improving transparency, involving troop contributing countries or more regularly briefing the general membership. Hence, recent attention has shifted towards the issue of improving the UNSC working methods, an issue where the P-5 have been less change resistant. For many UN member states, however, this adaptation does not suffice to ensure that the UNSC operates in satisfactory ways.

Several reform proposals have been presented to make the UNSC more representative of the distribution of influence of states in the current global order. Much applied

diplomacy, global negotiations and skills in finding compromise solutions will be needed for this institution to be adapted, but reform may benefit the Council's ability to operate as an institution seen to be legitimate, and effective, to maintain global peace and security. Adaptation of the institutional structure is a challenge that seems to affect many international organizations (including, for example, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), but the case of the UNSC very clearly illustrates the influence of path dependency and how high decision thresholds for change may prevent an institution from adapting to current challenges and circumstances.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. On renewed support, see <http://www.dw.com/en/chancellor-merkel-says-un-security-council-must-be-reformed/a-18743897> (accessed 11 December 2015).
2. For OECD developments gradually moving away from the concept of a “club of the rich”, see Clifton and Díaz-Fuentes (2014, 2011).
3. This section partially draws on Dörfler and Hosli (2013) and Hosli and Dörfler (2015).
4. Moving from an a priori analysis to an *ex posteriori* assessment, changes respective calculations, see Kaniovski and Das (2015).
5. Serguei Kaniovski describes these measures and calculations in Hosli et al. (2011).
6. For respective calculations see Hosli et al. (2011, 185).
7. Similar results can also be found in Hosli and Dörfler (2015).

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