

Action or inaction: United Nations Security Council activity, 1994–2013

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Abstract

This article presents new data on the behavior of the United Nations Security Council from 1994 to 2013. Which international issues does the United Nations Security Council act upon? Which issues are ignored, languishing for years on the Council's agenda? What are the characteristics of the issues that are considered by the Council and what are the characteristics of those that are overlooked? Beginning with the annual Summary Statements on matters of which the Security Council is seized, information was gathered for every agenda item that appears on the Security Council's agenda during this period. Daily data are recorded for the number of public meetings and private informal consultations held, as well as the number of resolutions (which are voted on), presidential statements (which are a product of consensus), and vetoes that occur. These data offer scholars new opportunities for testing theories of legislative behavior in international institutions, particularly on issues of peace and security, that have not been available heretofore. In this article, we introduce the data and coding processes, present trends, illustrate prospects for research that could benefit from these data and provide an empirical application.

Keywords

international organization, international security organization, United Nations Security Council

Introduction

In October 1999, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) was created with a mandate to support the tenuous Lome Peace Agreement and to aid the government as well as the Economic Community of West African States military observer group with disarmament and demobilization. In May 2000, the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone kidnapped 500 UN peacekeepers and reneged on the peace accord that the peacekeepers were invested in implementing. These actions nearly derailed peacekeeping efforts there and perhaps in Africa more broadly.

Uncertain of how to respond to these challenges, the UN Security Council worked tirelessly in more than 75 informal sessions during 2000 to hammer out the details for how to create a mission and mandate up to the

challenges present in Sierra Leone.¹ Leadership from the United Kingdom was important for making progress on the recovery and re-invigoration of UNAMSIL, but this should not simply be seen as a story of P5 power and influence. UNAMSIL is also often lauded as a peacekeeping success story (Olonisakin, 2008; Bernath &

¹ While public records of these sessions are not kept, the topics for informal consultations are made public. Content from consultations is also referred to directly in several communications from the Secretary-General to the Council (S/2000/13) as well in speeches made in public meetings of the Council (S/PV.4098; S/PV.4168; S/PV.4186).

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Nyce, 2004), but that narrative also ignores the initial challenges.

After the kidnapping of the Zambian peacekeepers and subsequent attacks on other UN troops, the Security Council engaged in an intense review of UNAMSIL and opted to upgrade the mission (Harris, 2014). The number of troops was increased, the leadership of the mission was changed, and the Council created a panel of experts to explore the role that the diamond trade was having on the conflict. New targeted sanctions were imposed as a result as well. If we focused only on resolutions passed on this issue, we would see that six resolutions were passed following the kidnapping but greatly underestimate the effort and plenary time the Council invested in creating a revised mandate for UNAMSIL that was acceptable to all Council members and effective for the situation in the field.

When members of the Security Council meet, they discuss a broad range of threats to peace and security. Yet, we know that they do not discuss all crises in the international system. While any member nation may bring an issue to the Council, the Charter does not obligate the Council to act on every matter brought to its attention. Based on previous research (Mullenbach, 2005), we know that the work of the Council is shaped by the interests and preferences of the five permanent members. Yet, we also know that the Security Council is guided by the norms and principles of the institution in its decisionmaking on critical issues of peace and security (Gilligan & Stedman, 2003; Allen & Yuen, 2014; Beardsley & Schmidt, 2012). What has largely gone unexplored, however, is which issues come to the Council for discussion and which are handled outside of the institution's purview.

We argue that one reason for this lack of understanding of agenda-setting in the Security Council has been the dearth of data. While the UN as an organization makes a great deal of information about its goings-on public, the format for much of that information is not immediately conducive for quantitative analysis. As a result much of the scholarship on the Council's behavior has been case study work like Thompson (2006, 2015) and formal work like Voeten (2001), but their theories have not been quantitatively tested. If scholars and practitioners want to have a more universal understanding of agenda-setting and the decisionmaking process of the Security Council, it is important to understand the process that leads to the various policy outcomes (such as resolutions, presidential statements, and vetoes) that may be issued by the Council.

In response to these limitations, this article introduces new data on United Nations Security Council activity at the agenda-item level. For each agenda item, we have monthly and annual counts of the number of meetings, consultations, resolutions, and presidential statements in order to get a sense of the Council's action on each issue. The data cover January 1994 to December 2013. First, we discuss the justification for the collection of these data and describe how they create new opportunities for quantitative research on the UN Security Council and international organizations more broadly. We then provide a more detailed description of the data, discussing the information that is coded, definitions of terms, and the information sources. Finally, we present an empirical application and conclude with a brief discussion of the policy-relevant questions that may be addressed with these data.

Justification for a new dataset

The data introduced here should be valuable to both literatures on the United Nations specifically and international institutions more generally in many ways. These data will allow for more nuanced testing about the drivers of behavior in international organizations and prompt new avenues of research on topics that have yet to be meaningfully addressed in the quantitative literature. Below we highlight areas of scholarly interest that could benefit from the new data.

Foremost, previous research has focused primarily on Security Council outcomes such as resolutions, vetoes, economic sanctions, and peacekeeping missions. This focus, however, misses much of the variation in the deliberative process within the Council. For example, some agenda items are discussed but a draft resolution is never put forward, so there is no vote or resolution to observe. The Council acted, but due to significant differences of opinion among members, the process was halted before votes were cast. Without these data, we miss those cases. For example, in 2010, the Council discussed '[t]he situation in the Middle East including the Palestinian Question' more than 20 times but passed no resolutions. In 2009, there were a similar number of meetings and one resolution. In 2011, there were no meetings and no resolutions. We think this variation is meaningful.

Procedures and process matter in international organizations (Stiles, 2006; Koremenos et al., 2001). Nearly all international organizations have both formal and informal procedures to accommodate the needs of both weak and strong states (Stone, 2011). While many have

highlighted the fact that decisionmaking by the Council is influenced by the preferences of the permanent members as well as the principles of the organization (Gilligan & Stedman, 2003; Allen & Yuen, 2014; Beardsley & Schmidt, 2012), many of the claims about who ‘controls’ the Council can be more clearly examined in the context of what the Council talks about. Our research builds on previous work on agenda-setting international organizations (e.g. Pollack, 1997; Tallberg, 2004). Our data can help illuminate the process of choosing those issues.

The UN Security Council does not and cannot take up every international crisis and armed conflict. The UN Charter (UN, 1945) specifies a wide range of actors that can put items on the Security Council’s agenda including all member states of the UN, the Secretary-General, and under certain circumstances, non-member states can do so. While these formal agenda-setting powers are broad, nothing in the Charter obligates the Council to take up every issue brought to its attention. The more influential parts of the agenda-setting process involve creating the meeting schedule as well as proposing resolution texts. In this article, we focus on the scheduling aspect.

The working agenda of the Council is set each month by the Council President, a role that rotates among all members with assistance from the Secretary-General, pending approval from other Council members. Agenda-setting is a political process that is different from the bargaining that occurs to draft and pass resolutions. Council presidents choose the issues, but they do not control the drafting of resolutions. The process that selects issues for discussion is affected by but not identical to the process that leads to resolution passage. Using our data, it is possible to separate the influences on the two distinct political processes.

The number of meetings and consultations associated with an issue gives us information about how challenging it was for the Council members to reach agreement. Many meetings implies repeated bargaining, so there should be some observable effects for difficult versus easy bargains. Understanding the difficulty of this process can help us understand the type of sanctions imposed or the form that a peacekeeping mandate takes. Previous work on peacekeeping focuses on the nature of the conflicts and the relationship between the conflict states and permanent members of the Council (e.g. Frederking & Patane, 2017; Hultman, 2013; Binder, 2009; Fortna, 2008; Wallensteen & Johansson, 2004). Seldom in these studies, however, is the process *within* the Council by which a decision (or at times, no decision) is reached considered alongside these conflict factors.

Finally, these data can provide both big picture insights and finer-grained nuances of Council behavior and activity. First, the data can be used at an aggregate level to explore the pace and timing of action. We know that there is a big spike in Council activity and number of peacekeeping missions authorized after the end of the Cold War, but there is significant variation since then. Secondly, the data can also be used at the level of agenda items to test theories about which international crises receive attention in the Council and whether or not they are targeted for intervention. We know that the United Nations does not authorize missions in response to all armed conflicts. What factors influence the decisionmaking process in the Council behind this selection?

Data overview

Information coded

To improve quantitative testing of theories of UNSC behavior, we collected data on UNSC activity from 1994 to 2013 from the UN’s searchable online documents collection at www.un.org/documents. A complete codebook is included in the Online appendix. Our primary goal was to tabulate the number of public meetings and informal consultations held on individual agenda items each month. The information was available online but not in a user-friendly format. Additional information on the data collection process is available in an Online appendix.

We began with the Security Council’s Summary Statement of Matters on Which the Security Council is Seized for each year from 1994 to 2013. The Summary Statement is one of the two parts of the Security Council’s agenda, and it is a complete list of all the topics brought to the attention of the Council but that are not deemed fully resolved. The list is produced annually and presented to the General Assembly each January.² An example of one type of agenda item that appears on the Summary Statement is ‘The situation in Cyprus’, which was first discussed in December of 1963. This agenda item continues to be discussed regularly by the Council in the context of the continuing peacekeeping mission on the island. Because the peacekeeping mission is ongoing, the issue has never been fully resolved and thus the agenda item has remained on the Summary Statement for 50 years.

² These statements are available at www.un.org/documents as they appear as one of the Council’s first publicly released documents each January.

On the other hand, there are also topics included in the Summary Statement that were discussed at some point, but for which further discussion has been postponed. Despite this fact, the Council has not chosen to formally close the issue and remove it, leaving open the possibility that discussions could be restarted. One such item is ‘Letter dated 11 July 1960 from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Cuba addressed to the President of the Security Council’.³ Hurd (2008) notes that at the start of 2005, the Summary Statement contained 147 items, some nearly as old as the UN itself. In January of 2018, there were 81 items included on the Summary Statement.

After compiling a list of all agenda items by year from the Summary Statements, we turned to the other portion of the Security Council’s agenda – the provisional agendas for each meeting. Following the monthly calendar drawn up by the Council President, each provisional agenda is assembled by the Secretary-General. According to Rule 6 of the Provisional Rules of Procedure of the Security Council, ‘the Secretary-General shall immediately bring to the attention of all representatives on the Security Council all communications from States, organs of the United Nations, or the Secretary-General concerning any matter for the consideration of the Security Council in accordance with the provisions of the Charter’ (un.org). Items on the provisional agendas may be drawn from the Summary Statement or may represent new items brought to the attention of the Council.

Approved provisional agendas appear in the UN Daily Journal (<https://journal.un.org>), a publication of the United Nations that details all the meetings of major bodies that are expected to happen at UN Headquarters (and occasionally elsewhere) in a given day. Using the Journals, we were able to see when the Security Council planned to meet on particular agenda items and when items were first brought to the Council’s attention.⁴

After coding all of the provisional agendas, we double-checked the occurrence of meetings and coded outcomes (votes, resolutions, presidential statements, etc.) using the meeting records on the Security Council’s website. This site was also helpful to clarify exactly which agenda item a particular meeting or resolution should be

associated with in a small number of unclear cases.⁵ All told, we collected information on 353 distinct agenda items, which over time account for 30,899 agenda-item-months.

In order to demonstrate the variation in these data and highlight the potential types of research questions that can be answered using them, we present some graphical summaries of the data and offer a basic empirical application, exploring the determinants of whether or not a particular agenda item will receive Council attention in a given year.

An empirical application

For the purposes of exposition, we present a sample analysis below. Depending on a scholar’s research interests, the aggregate annual data used to create the figures might be more appropriate, but due to space constraints, we provide an in-depth analysis using the disaggregated monthly data because they are not easily constructed and represent the more novel contribution.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Council has been much more active – holding many more formal meetings and passing a greater number of resolutions. The Council has engaged in more binding action during this time period as well, passing more Chapter VII resolution. These resolutions are not just binding for Council members, but all members of the institution, something that has led permanent member China at times to express reservations or abstain when voting on resolutions that invoke Chapter VII (Voeten, 2001). Activity within the Council, however, has not been constant or consistent since the end of the Cold War. What factors explain the variation in UN Security Council behavior over time (Figure 1)?

We believe that one of the most important contributions that these new data can make is the opportunity to test theories of legislative behavior on a longstanding international body that passes binding resolutions. While the voting rules of the Council are unique, there are features of the Council to which established theories are relevant.

For nearly all legislative bodies, plenary time is a scarce resource. Looking at how that scarce resource is allocated tells us a great deal about the priorities and preferences of the voting members, especially the influential ones. The primary agenda-setting power in the UNSC lies with the ability to schedule plenary time.

³ There are several agenda items associated with the conflict between the United States and Cuba that have persisted on the Summary Statement for decades without additional discussion due to objections by the USA.

⁴ Date of the first appearance of agenda items was cross-checked using the UN Security Council Repertoire (2008; UNSC, 2012), which is available online and contains a table of first appearances.

⁵ Ambiguity arose in less than 5% of cases and was associated with issues that had multiple related agenda items.

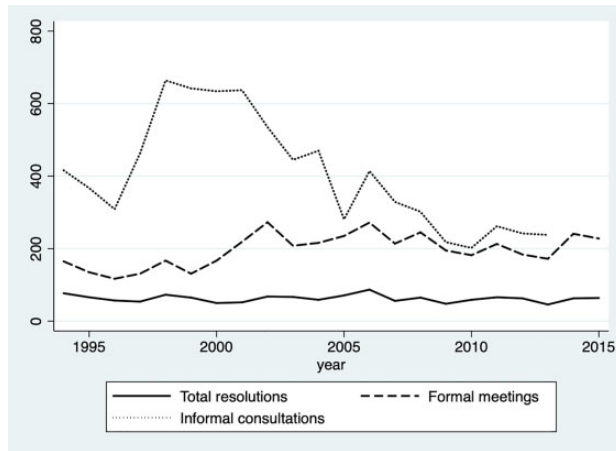


Figure 1. UN Security Council activities, 1985–2013

Any country that is a member of the United Nations can place an item on the Council's agenda, but only members of the Council can influence the legislative calendar, which is outlined each month by the Council's president. Without discussion, an issue will never be brought to a vote.

To this end, we use a probit model to estimate whether or not an agenda item was active. An agenda item is considered active in a given year if any meetings were held on the topic – either a formal public meeting or an informal private consultation or possibly both. There are many more items listed on the Council's formal agenda (which is referred to as the Summary Statement of Matters on Which the Security Council is Seized) than are or could be discussed in a given year. To determine whether or not plenary time will be allocated to a particular issue, we focus on two primary factors – the characteristics of the issue and the degree of harmony among the permanent members on the issue.

Looking at the characteristics of the issues themselves, some warrant faster consideration than others, depending on the nature of the issue. First, we consider the type of agenda item. Agenda items fall into two primary categories – national and thematic (UNSC Repertoire, 2018). A national issue might be 'The Situation in Iraq' while a thematic issue might be 'Women, Peace and Security'. We expect that national issues will receive more frequent attention than thematic as this type of issue is more likely to be connected to an international crisis or event demanding the Council's immediate attention.

Next we consider how much time has passed since the item first appeared on the agenda. The Charter does not include provisions about how items may be removed from the Security Council's agenda. Items only come off

the agenda when resolutions are passed, when all proposals on the matter are rejected, or by an explicit decision by a majority of the Council to remove the issue (Bailey & Daws, 1998). Removing issues can provoke strong reactions, and thus the Summary Statement has become a 'catalogue of simmering arguments', (Hurd, 2008: 144).⁶ Because these stale issues are seldom reopened by the Council, we expect that time on the agenda will be negatively related to the likelihood of Council action in a given year.

The Council is set up to be reasonably responsive to world events, since it is charged with the maintenance of peace and security. The way the Council typically does this is via peacekeeping missions. Because peacekeeping missions require a great deal of attention and oversight from the Council, we also include an indicator for peacekeeping.⁷ We also consider the total number of resolutions that the Council passes in a given year as a general indicator of how active the Council is overall, which may influence the likelihood that a particular agenda item will be active.

After we consider the characteristics of the agenda items themselves, we then examine the preferences of the permanent members. To measure UNSC preferences, we use the mean value of affinity scores between P5 nations and country. Political relationships are likely to influence how likely the UNSC is to take action on particular issues. To measure affinity, we use S-scores following Signorino & Ritter (1999).⁸ We opt to use

⁶ Some smaller states see symbolic power and importance in keeping issues on the agenda. In 1996, the Security Council attempted to create a new procedural rule allowing that 'matters that had not been considered by the Council in the preceding five years would be deleted from the list of matters of which the Council was seized'. Non-permanent members of the Council protested before the rule could even go into effect. As a compromise, any item up for deletion can be retained at the request of any UN member state, and some states like Pakistan, which actively works to keep India/Pakistan issues on the agenda, regularly file their requests more than a year in advance to maintain their symbolic place on the agenda (Hurd, 2008).

⁷ In previous analysis, we have included an indicator of whether there was an ongoing armed conflict associated with the agenda item based on data from UCDP – both in the current year and a lagged variable. Because of the UNSC's desire to send peacekeepers in after there is peace to keep, the peacekeeping measure seems to be a better predictor of whether or not a particular agenda item is active.

⁸ We used the capability weighted global S scores to calculate our average and variance measures. While all permanent members of the Security Council are strong, Voeten (2001) argues persuasively that the threat of the outside option by the United States, the strongest of the five, has the greatest impact on Council decisionmaking.

S-scores, which capture foreign policy positions based on information regarding alliance portfolios as well as UN voting, in order to capture a broader picture of security interests, as well as to avoid only using past UN behavior to predict future UN behavior.⁹

Preference variability is also coded using S-scores. Following the work of Copelovitch (2010), we calculated a coefficient of variance for each mission-year. To capture variation in preferences among the P5, the standard deviation of their S-scores is divided by the mean. Allen & Yuen (2014) applied this operationalization to the UN Security Council to help explain variation in peacekeeping mandates. We assume that when the permanent members have more divided feelings about a subject country and thus greater possibility for disagreement and no resolution, they will opt not to take up an issue. Thus as variability increases, the likelihood that a particular agenda item will be active in a given period decreases. Additionally, we include an indicator for whether or not the Council president is an elected member to test whether these members are packing their calendars more fully than permanent members as their time on the Council is more limited.

Finally, in order to control for time dependence in binary data, we follow the approach proposed by Carter & Signorino (2010) and utilize a cubic polynomial approximation to capture the temporal dynamics in the data. Over time, the level of activity in the Security Council has varied greatly, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Analysis

The results for the analysis of all Security Council agenda items are presented in Table I. Here we see that the most significant predictors of whether or not a particular agenda item is active are how long the item has been on the agenda, with older items being less likely to be discussed, and how many resolutions the Council passes. As more resolutions are passed, the likelihood of a particular item being discussed decreases. In some ways, this finding is surprising. We might expect that in years when the Council is able to agree sufficiently to pass a large number of resolutions, then there might be more

⁹ We find similar results when we use the ideal point data created by Bailey, Strezhnev & Voeten (2015), but interpreting the variance measure is more difficult because ideal point data tell us about distance from an arbitrary anchor point (the Western order), which is already expressing some information about variance. For this reason, we have opted to go with the S-Scores for clarity of interpretation. Those results can be found with the other robustness checks in the Online appendix.

Table I. Probit analysis of all agenda items, 1994–2013

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>(Std. err.)</i>
Thematic	−0.333**	(0.025)
Time on the agenda	−0.019**	(0.001)
Peacekeeping mission	0.511**	(0.021)
Total resolutions	−0.007**	(0.001)
Elected member president	−0.032	(0.019)
Time	0.114**	(0.017)
Time ²	−0.014**	(0.002)
Time ³	0.001**	(0.000)
Intercept	−0.874**	(0.079)
N	30,612	
Log-likelihood	−11,819.160	
$\chi^2(8)$	1,103.817	

Significance levels: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

enthusiasm for working through the Council in general, thus increasing the likelihood of action. What we see in looking at the data, however, is that resolutions tend to come in bunches on particular issues. For example, when the Security Council passed more than 80 resolutions in 2005, nearly 40% of those were associated with only four agenda items.¹⁰ In that year, there were 148 unique agenda items included on the Summary Statement.

To assess the influence of the interests of the P5, we look at the determinants of activity on only national issues. Because we are interested in whether or not foreign policy preferences influence Security Council activity, we must limit our attention in this analysis to only agenda items for which S-Scores can be calculated.¹¹

The results for this analysis are presented in Table II. The basic results from the previous model hold. Time on the agenda decreases the likelihood than any particular agenda item will be discussed while the presence of a peacekeeping mission increases the likelihood. Using Clarify, we generate predicted probability to

¹⁰ In 2005, eight resolutions were passed regarding ‘The Situation in Cote d’Ivoire’, and seven each were passed on ‘Report of the Secretary-General on Sudan’, ‘The Situation in the Middle East’, and ‘The Situation Regarding the Democratic Republic of Congo’.

¹¹ We recognize the importance of these thematic issues that deal with social, political, military or economic issues that are not tied to a specific member nation. The UNSC regularly discusses and passes resolutions on these issues such as the problem of child soldiers in warfare, first addressed with UNSC Resolution 1261, which prohibited the targeting and recruitment of children in war. The resolution names no specific nation but broadly prohibits several practices related to children as victims and combatants in warfare. Because we do not have a clear way to compare the policy preferences of the P5 on these issues, we have opted to exclude them here.

Table II. Probit analysis, national issues only

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>(Std. err.)</i>
P5 affinity	-1.225**	(0.204)
Preference variation	-0.613**	(0.102)
Time on the agenda	-0.021**	(0.001)
Peacekeeping mission	0.544**	(0.027)
Total resolutions	-0.002	(0.001)
Elected member president	-0.036	(0.026)
Time	0.302**	(0.031)
Time ²	-0.051**	(0.006)
Time ³	0.002**	(0.000)
Intercept	-0.451**	(0.164)
N	16,032	
Log-likelihood	-6,781.988	
$\chi^2(9)$	1,048.174	

Significance levels: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

demonstrate the substantive significance of the impact of each of the relevant variables. Holding all of the variables at their means, the baseline probability of any particular agenda item being active in a given month is about 14%.¹² The existence of an associated peacekeeping mission increases the likelihood that a topic will be active by 15%.

Moving to the variables measuring P5 preferences, we see that both affinity measures are statistically significant. The negative sign on the average score is a bit surprising and may reflect a Goldilocks scenario. When the Security Council lacks strong affinity for a target country, no political will for action exists. On the other hand, when one or more P5 countries have a strong affinity for the target country, they may prefer to take unilateral (or multilateral) action outside of the auspices of the Council. Activity may only occur when preferences are 'just right'.

The variability in the preferences also matter. When the P5 all agree about a target country, action is more likely on an agenda item than it is when there is large variation in P5 preferences regarding the target country. Varying the coefficient of variance (or variability in affinity) variable from its minimum to its maximum, the likelihood of Security Council action decreases 9% when holding all other variables at their means.

The results presented here only demonstrate the tip of the iceberg of the potential for these new data regarding the UNSC. Yet, even in this simple example, we are able

to demonstrate that both the norms of the Council and the preferences of the permanent members have a clear influence on when and how the Council acts on the relevant political issues of the day.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here demonstrates the evolving dynamics between the members as well as the informal processes in the Security Council, which influence how they conduct business and thus how they manage threats to peace and security. The new data introduced here enable us to explore how these processes vary both over time and by agenda item. Understanding the determinants of Security Council activities enables scholars to make more cogent arguments about international intervention, foreign policy substitution, and the relevance of international organizations – all important topics for IR scholars of a variety of stripes. The fined-grained nature of these data also allows for scholars to explore exactly how particular issues were handled over time and provide insight into the difficulty that may arise in the negotiating process.

The new data introduced here can be used to explain the relative ease or difficulty of bargaining regarding the parameters of new peacekeeping missions, the time required to reaffirm peacekeeping mandates, and the challenges in establishing new sanctions. These data provide information about the selection process that the Council engages in when choosing which issues to respond to. Insight into the agenda-setting process of the Council will strengthen our explanations of the behavior of international organizations.

The data introduced here do not exhaustively code the attributes of the agenda items. We focus primarily on the timing and type of action that the Security Council has taken on each agenda item. These data open up new possibilities for research about the Security Council specifically and international organizations more generally. How do states allocate scarce plenary time in their shared fora for discussion? What factors influence those decisions? We expect that the introduction of this dataset will encourage more scholars to explore these and other questions relating to institutional design, theories of agenda-setting, and international cooperation.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, as well as the Online appendix, can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets>.


¹² The likelihood that an agenda item is active in a given year is about 30%.

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