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Representing Iceland on the UN Security Council: Does Nordic membership matter?

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Abstract

Are Iceland's interests represented on the UN Security Council, even when Iceland is not a member? This paper explores two questions: whether the Nordics share cohesive foreign policy preferences, and whether these shared preferences translate into substantive representation on the UN Security Council. Using ideal points derived from UN General Assembly voting patterns, the study systematically compares the alignment of Nordic preferences with Iceland's. The analysis finds that while Nordic countries consistently align in their foreign policy preferences, their ability to advance shared goals during Security Council membership is limited. These findings suggest that substantive representation is constrained, but that does not preclude the possibility that Iceland may still benefit from the symbolic and descriptive representation afforded by Nordic involvement. The study contributes to broader debates on small-state collaboration and the complexities of achieving tangible policy outcomes within multilateral institutions.

Keywords: United Nations; Security Council; Iceland; Nordics.

Introduction

How can small states like Iceland ensure their interests are represented in the world's most powerful multilateral institutions? This is a complicated question, but one that is important to try to answer if we want to understand how a country like Iceland

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might most productively operate in international affairs. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is a pivotal organ within the United Nations system, tasked with the responsibility of maintaining global peace and security (United Nations, n.d.). With its 15-member composition, including five permanent members wielding veto power and ten members elected for two-year terms, the UNSC exerts unparalleled influence on international politics and diplomacy. Consequently, countries worldwide harbor aspirations to secure a place on the UNSC (Luck 2006). While the influence of the permanent members (P5) dominates much of the Council's agenda, this paper focuses on the role of elected members, particularly Nordic states, in shaping outcomes through their collective normative agenda.

To date, Iceland has not held a seat on the UN Security Council. It ran for the Council once, in 2008, but did not win one of the two coveted seats available in its regional group that year. Thus, to the extent that Iceland wishes to be involved in Council decisionmaking, it needs to do so indirectly, or via other member states. Historically, much of Iceland's collaboration and coordination at the United Nations has been with the other Nordic countries (cf. Götz 2011). The extensive Nordic collaboration within the UN suggests that pooling resources enables them to amplify their influence (Laatikainen, 2003; Haugevik & Sending 2020). For example, the Nordics seek to rotate memberships in important UN bodies which has enabled them to have greater visibility on issues that they collectively care about (Tuominen & Kronlund 2023).

Although the Nordic countries frequently coordinate their activities within the UN and share many foreign-policy objectives, their cohesion has sometimes been called into question. Scholars such as Laatikainen (2003), Haugevik and Sending (2020), and Jakobsen (2017) highlight factors that may limit collaboration, including divergent national interests and the increasing influence of the European Union on three of the five Nordic states. EU coordination shapes the positions and actions of EU members within the UN, creating a potential divergence in priorities with Iceland and Norway, the two Nordics who remain outside the EU but often align with its positions informally. These influences may dilute the potential for unified Nordic policymaking and, consequently, their ability to present a cohesive policy agenda.

This paper seeks to contribute to this discussion by investigating two key questions. First, it explores whether the Nordics exhibit shared foreign policy preferences that distinguish them from other countries in the United Nations. Second, it examines whether a shared Nordic policy agenda translates into substantive policy outcomes when the Nordics hold a non-permanent seat on the Security Council. By focusing on Iceland's position within this collaborative framework, the analysis sheds light on whether Iceland's substantive interests are advanced through Nordic representation or whether Nordic collaboration is better understood in terms of descriptive representation and symbolic value.

When investigating the first question, the analysis finds that Nordic foreign policy outlooks are more aligned with each other than with those of other UN member states, indicating that the Nordics are natural collaborators for advancing shared priorities.

However, when investigating whether this alignment translates into substantive policy promotion when the Nordics hold a non-permanent seat on the Security Council, the paper finds no evidence that it does. Focusing on topics central to Nordic foreign policy—such as women, peace and security, protection of civilians, and children in armed conflict—the findings reveal no significant increase in the prominence of these issues in Security Council outputs during Nordic membership. This raises questions about the effectiveness of Nordic coordination in achieving substantive representation on the Council.

1. Membership in the UN Security Council and its Benefits

Although every member state holds a seat in the UN General Assembly, the same cannot be said for the other political organs of the institution. The Economic and Social Council has 54 members, or just over a quarter of the total UN membership, and the Security Council, with its 15 members, includes less than 10 percent of member states at any given time. That fact, combined with the Security Council's status as the only organ that can pass decisions that are binding on the membership at large, making it the single-most influential entity in the organization, means that membership has become a much sought-after goal and one that member states often expend considerable energy and vast amounts of money to make a reality (Malone 2000).

The non-permanent seats are split between five regional groups[1] of various sizes, with a certain number of seats per regional group becoming available each year. In some regional groups, such as the African Group, there exists a strong norm of rotation, meaning that elections for African seats are almost never contested within the UN and any politics involved in who runs for the Council is settled within the group. In other groups, there are no such norms. In the Western European and Others Group (WEOG), there is often fierce jockeying for seats on the Council and these are the seats that most often see contested elections (Malone 2000).

Countries vie for a seat on the UN Security Council for a variety of reasons. One such reason may be that countries want to extend their influence and project power on the global stage. This is made possible by the unique privilege awarded members of the Security Council by Article 24.1 of the UN Charter: the ability to pass resolutions that are binding on the organization's member states on issues such as peacekeeping missions, sanctions, and even military interventions (Luck 2006).

Other reasons may also factor into states' decisions to seek a seat on the Security Council. For instance, Hurd puts significant stock in the symbolic authority of the UN Security Council and argues that "Council membership confers status and recognition on a state and allows the state to appropriate some of the authority derived from the legitimacy of the Council" (2002, p. 43). He furthermore notes that the cost of elections has risen quite a bit in recent years, which provides evidence that states do believe that membership is valuable. Malone (2000) largely concurs, but adds that states may run either to advance a particular national cause (such as Morocco on Western Sahara in in the early 1990s) or to further a broader agenda or issue that the state cares about (such

as Canada's stated agenda to promote human security during its 1998 Council bid).

A sizeable strand of literature has argued that one of the reasons that states seek Council membership is for material gain. Kuziemko and Werker (2006) show that Council membership is associated with a 59 percent increase in total aid from the United States and suggest that temporary Council members may essentially be "bribed" for their votes on the Council. They also find a statistically significant, but smaller, effect of Security Council membership on UN aid, and show that this appears to be mostly driven by UNICEF. Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland (2009a) find that Security Council membership has a significantly positive effect on the number of new World Bank projects approved and Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland (2009b) also find a positive and significant relationship between UN Security Council membership and participation in IMF programs and a negative and significant relationship between the number of conditions attached to said programs. These results are notable, not least because all the international organizations mentioned—UNICEF, the World Bank, and the IMF—are known to be heavily influenced by the United States, which is one of the permanent members of the Security Council and often considered the Council's most important member state.

Research on the hypothesized private benefits of Security Council membership has largely focused on developing states, which are most likely to seek economic benefits measurable through aid and loan receipts. Literature on potential financial benefits of elected members from industrialized countries is sparser. In part this may be because industrialized members are less in need of those benefits but also because these countries are less likely to have diverging preferences from the United States, meaning that there is no need to bribe them or otherwise entice them to change their intended votes (Vreeland & Dreher 2014). There is some evidence, however, that even the wealthy WEOG countries may benefit from temporary Security Council membership, although it comes in a different form. For example, Mikulaschek (2018) finds that even EU members benefit from their membership on the Security Council through increased receipts from the EU budget during their tenure.

Although material benefits have loomed large in the literature on why states seek Security Council membership, there are other reasons why membership may be an enticing prospect. By virtue of the prominence of the Council, its members receive more attention and may be able to highlight their foreign policy agendas in ways that they might not otherwise be able to (Kuziemko & Werker 2006). Membership may also have other intangible benefits, such as being seen as a responsible and active member of the international community (Kuziemko & Werker 2006).

In the case of the Nordics, the last mechanism appears to be quite prominent, as they seem to pursue membership primarily for normative and collective gains, aligning with their broader foreign policy goals. Rather than being perceived as potential rent-seekers, however, the Nordics are generally seen as some of the more altruistic actors in the international system (cf. Jakobsen 2017) and ones whose foreign policy goals are often couched in terms of norms rather than hard security (Ingebritsen 2002). Throughout the history of the United Nations, the Nordics have coordinated on policy

positions and statements to collectively champion these causes (Laatikainen 2003). This approach positions the Nordics not only as altruistic actors but also as proponents of normative frameworks that prioritize global governance over narrow national interests. It is worth noting, however, that even normative actions could yield indirect benefits, such as enhanced diplomatic standing or influence in international forums, which is hard to explicitly measure. Thus, even when material gains are limited, Council membership can bolster a state's diplomatic standing and influence, contributing to its soft power within the international system.

Security Council membership provides elected states with opportunities to shape the Council's agenda through several mechanisms. These include agenda-setting during Council Presidency, contributing to the drafting of resolutions, proposing thematic debates, and participating in informal consultations, which together allow members to advocate for specific priorities (Ossoff et al. 2020). However, the dominance of the P5 often constrain the ability of elected members to significantly influence outcomes (Martin 2019) which, for smaller states like the Nordics, raises the question of whether their membership can elevate their key foreign policy priorities, such as gender equality and human rights, within this constrained environment.

2. Nordic Group Representation at the United Nations

Article 23 of the UN Charter states that due regard shall be paid to equitable geographical representation in the composition of the UN Security Council. Thus, the idea is there that countries represent not only themselves but also, to some extent, the interests of the region they are in. The Nordics form a subgroup within a the larger WEOG-group and practice rotation across multiple UN bodies, reflecting a coordinated multilateral approach. This broader rotational system reflects the importance of group dynamics in UN multilateralism, where regional and political alliances play a key role in shaping outcomes (Laatikainen & Smith 2020). When it comes to Security Council, however, its high-profile nature, the bindingness of its resolutions, and the significant financial and political costs associated with candidacy make it a particularly high-stakes arena for the Nordics, distinguishing it from other UN bodies where rotational systems are practiced. This high level of cooperation among the Nordics reflects shared foreign-policy objectives and the belief that collective action enhances their impact. (Haugevik & Sending 2020; Jakobsen 2017). This aligns with Thorhallsson's (2012) argument that small states, including the Nordics, leverage their collective identity and reputation as norm entrepreneurs to amplify their influence in multilateral settings, despite their limited individual capacities.

This coordinated multilateral approach, rooted in shared identity and collective action, raises important questions about whether the Nordics' descriptive representation at the United Nations also translates into substantive outcomes, particularly within high-stakes settings like the Security Council. The concept of descriptive representation posits that representatives who share characteristics or identities with a particular group can effectively advocate for that group's interests (Pitkin 1967). In the context of the Nordic

countries at the United Nations, this shared identity may also facilitate substantive representation, where common values and policy objectives are actively pursued (Lefler & Lai 2017). However, the extent to which descriptive representation translates into substantive outcomes remains a subject of debate and extant literature on the Nordic countries provides varying perspectives on how collective Nordic foreign policy goals are today or have been in recent decades (cf., Laatikainen 2003; Brommeson 2018; Haugevik & Sending 2020; Brommeson et al. 2024). Additionally, Finland's unsuccessful bid in 2012, following on Iceland's unsuccessful bid four years prior, further highlights the challenges faced by Nordic countries in maintaining their perceived relevance and appeal within the United Nations system, despite their traditionally strong profiles as cooperative and norm-driven actors. However, if the Nordics share cohesive foreign policy preferences, that suggests a level of alignment that could better enable them to act as a unified bloc within the United Nations, particularly in advancing shared priorities. This alignment also mirrors broader trends in UN multilateralism, where regional and political groupings play a pivotal role in amplifying the influence of individual member states (Laatikainen & Smith 2020). Therefore, the first hypothesis posits:

> *H1: If the Nordics share cohesive foreign policy preferences at the United Nations, this will manifest in their alignment on key policy priorities across both formal voting patterns and less formal expressions of policy, such as speeches and statements.*

Building on these questions of representation, it is useful to consider the distinct challenges and opportunities Iceland faces within the Security Council context. Iceland's reliance on Nordic representation underscores the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation (Pitkin 1967), where the presence of a Nordic country might symbolically reflect Iceland's interests or actively promote them through policy outcomes. Iceland being substantively represented on the Security Council would mean that when a Nordic country holds a seat on the Council, it seeks to advance issues that are important to Iceland. Descriptive representation, on the other hand, means that there need not be an observed policy influence for Iceland to be represented; rather, it is sufficient that a Nordic country is present because policy is not the only thing that matters, but also being present as active members of the important work that the Council does.

For Iceland, the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation is particularly salient due to its limited individual capacity to influence Security Council outcomes, making reliance on Nordic representation more critical. This makes Iceland a useful case for exploring whether descriptive representation—where presence matters—can translate into substantive outcomes, particularly in advancing shared policy priorities. In the context of this paper, these models of representation provide a framework for assessing whether Nordic countries on the Security Council act in a way that reflects Iceland's specific interests or broader Nordic priorities. By applying this framework, the analysis focuses on whether Nordic participation results in measurable policy

outcomes or remains limited to the symbolic value of their presence as members of the Council.

In order to investigate whether Iceland is substantively represented by the other Nordics on the Council, it is necessary to identify some shared policy priorities that are measurable as part of the Council's activity. Existing literature on the Nordics on the Security Council can help us shed light on this. Ingebritsen (2002) identifies the Nordics as norm entrepreneurs; others largely agree in terms of the issues highlighted by the Nordics in the Security Council and within the United Nations more broadly. Laatikainen (2003) identifies several issues that have become part of a distinct Nordic profile, among them development of human rights laws and gender equality. Tarp and Hansen (2013) agree when they discuss the "Nordic brand" of promotion of value-based and normative issues, such as gender and equality. These issues—gender equality, human rights, and women's roles in conflict—are not only central to Nordic foreign policy identity but also reflect areas where the Nordics have been recognized as norm entrepreneurs within the UN system (Thorhallsson et al. 2022; Basu 2016).

Given the emphasis placed by the Nordics on issues such as gender equality and human rights in the international arena, it is unsurprising that these are also issues that the Nordics commonly emphasize in their bids for seats on the Security Council. For example, gender equality was a central pillar of Iceland's failed bid in 2008 (Thorhallsson et al. 2022), women, peace and security was one of Finland's areas of emphasis in its failed 2012 bid (Security Council Report 2012), and both Sweden (during its 2017-2018 term) and Norway (during its 2021-2022 term) made mainstreaming Women, Peace and Security into Council processes and procedures a priority (Olsson et al. 2021). Consequently, if Iceland were being substantively represented by other Nordic states on the Security Council, we would expect to see these core "Nordic" issues featured more prominently in the Council's work when a Nordic country serves a term as an elected member. Thus, the second hypothesis of the paper relates to the potential ability of individual Nordic Security Council members to substantively represent other Nordics during their tenure:

> *H2: Issues of collective interest by the Nordics should be more prominent in Security Council documents when a Nordic country holds a non-permanent seat on the Council.*

3. Empirical Design

A battery of empirical analyses are employed to test these two hypotheses. A test of the first hypothesis requires data on preferences of UN member states so that we can ascertain whether the Nordics do, in fact, share foreign policy preferences at the UN. General Assembly voting records, widely used to measure foreign policy preferences over time, provide a consistent and comparative dataset across member states and have been used for decades to measure state preferences in a variety of contexts (for discussion of this literature, see Bailey et al. 2017).

One potential problem that arises when estimating state preferences across time within an institution such as the UN is that the content of the resolutions that are being voted on shifts over time, which means that what looks like a shift in how states vote might really just be a shift in the content of the votes. The ideal point estimation developed by Bailey et al. (2017) resolves this issue by taking advantage of methodological developments in spatial estimation, which allow for bridging voting records over time by anchoring votes on resolutions with the same content over time (the assumption being that states with consistent preferences over time would vote the same way on these resolutions). Temporal anchoring resolves the challenge of comparing votes across time by connecting different years through resolutions with consistent themes or language over multiple years. This ensures that changes in ideal point estimates reflect genuine shifts in preferences rather than differences in the types of resolutions being voted on. Thus, this measure of state preferences is chosen for the analysis below, instead of other measures, such as the affinity score (Gartzke 1998), which is a dyadic measure of state preferences also based on UN General Assembly votes, or the S-score (Signorino & Ritter 1999), which is based on formal alliances between states in combination with other variables, such as UN voting records.

The ideal point estimates resulting from this statistical procedure are unidimensional scores that place UN member states on a spectrum relative to other countries based on their overall voting patterns in the General Assembly, similar to how we might conceive of the left-right policy spectrum in domestic political systems. What the spectrum represents in terms of actual policy preferences is not identified by the procedure but is instead identified by the researchers. In general, the UN General Assembly ideal points are interpreted as level of agreement with the US-led liberal order (Bailey et al. 2017). Ideal point estimates are available from 1946 until 2020.

For the purposes of this study, ideal points are particularly useful for systematically comparing how closely aligned the Nordic countries are with Iceland relative to other states, allowing us to test whether the Nordics exhibit shared foreign policy preferences. Overall, we would expect Nordic votes in the General Assembly to be quite similar to each other over time, given what we know about their collaboration within the organization and the fact that resolutions are oftentimes outcomes of pre-negotiated agreements between different member states or groups of member states (meaning that policy differences would be ironed out before the resolution were ever voted on). It is nonetheless important to verify that Nordic collaboration does, indeed, yield observable similarities in policy preferences within the UN.

To give an initial idea of similarities or dissimilarities across member states, Figure 1 plots ideal point estimates over time for each Nordic country, for the United States (as a reference, as the scale is interpreted to mean agreement with the US-led liberal order), and for two group averages: all countries in the dataset and WEOG-countries specifically. Overall, the graph confirms our expectations: the Nordic ideal points tend to be close together and travel together. Thus, this graph not only conforms to our ideas, as discussed above, that the Nordics tend to share foreign policy preferences and also that

the UN General Assembly is one locale where those preferences are expressed. In addition, the Nordics are distinct from the United States, which occupies one extreme of the ideal point scale, and from the average of all member states. Unsurprisingly, however, the similarity with other WEOG states is greater.

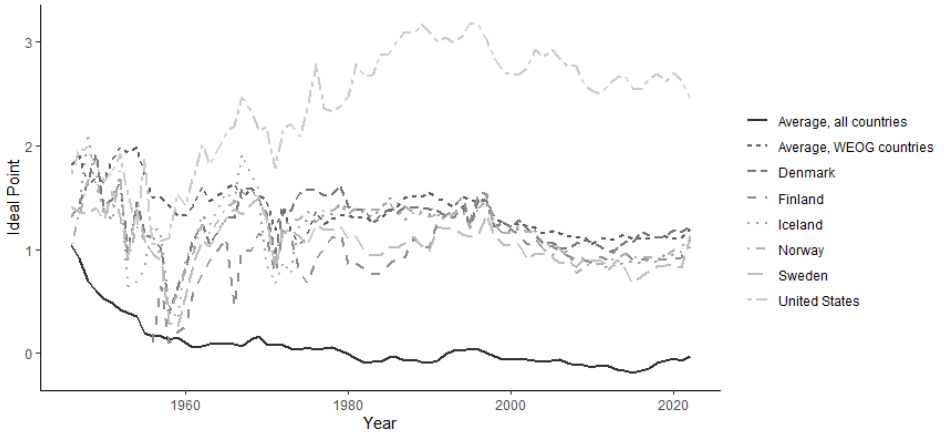

Figure 1. Ideal Points over time for Nordics, United States, and averages for all countries and WEOG group

It is, of course, possible that the similarity between the Nordics (and distinctiveness from others) is not actually due to anything particular to the Nordics, but rather is a result of shared democratic outlook, size of economy, or other relevant factors. The analysis below uses regression to explicitly take these possible alternative explanations into account. Due to the paper's empirical focus on the similarities not just across all Nordics but specifically as they relate to Iceland, the dependent variable is a recalculation of the ideal points as absolute differences from Iceland's position, rather than as the raw scores presented in Figure 1. Thus, a value of zero would indicate a country with completely identical preferences to Iceland in a given year (a value of zero is not observed in the data although a few observations are quite close). Higher scores indicate ideal points further away from Iceland's position and could be in either direction, i.e., either countries that are more aligned with the US-led liberal order, or less. Iceland itself is removed from the dataset for the analysis so that its zero values do not artificially decrease the average preference distance of the Nordics. Descriptive statistics for this variable are shown in Table 1.

The main independent variables are dichotomous variables identifying various regions or individual countries, depending on specification. To control for potential alternative explanations for similarity between the Nordics, several control variables are included in the analysis. First, logged values of per capita GDP are included to take into account that wealthy countries may have more similar outlooks on UN policy and thus might vote in ways similar to Iceland. Second, logged population values are included to

ensure that population similarity isn't driving voting similarity. Both these variables are obtained from the World Bank Databank and are available on an annual basis between 1960 and 2022, although the GDP data is sparse until the mid-1970s and only available for a small subset of countries (World Bank 2023). Due to this, regressions results are presented both with and without these variables. Third, the analysis controls for level of democracy via the Polity score (Marshall & Gurr 2020). The Polity score measures the level of democracy in all countries with a population greater than 500,000 on a 21-point scale, where -10 indicates complete autocracy and 10 indicates complete democracy. This variable is available from the founding of the United Nations until 2018. Lastly, year fixed-effects are included in all the models to take into account any time-varying external factors that may affect overall agreement or disagreement in a given year. Descriptive statistics for these variables are also shown in Table 1.

One limitation of the ideal points scores is that they are based on voting in the General Assembly which may only reveal country preferences to a limited degree. In particular, they reveal a country's foreign policy agreement with other member states only after negotiations. Thus, as a further probe of the substantive similarity between the Nordics within the United Nations, I also take advantage of the recently available UN General Debate corpus (Baturo et al. 2017). The corpus, available via Kaggle[2], contains the text of each country's statement during the UN General Debate, where countries present their government's perspective on major global issues, permitting me to analyze the speeches for similarities. These speeches are not pre-negotiated with other countries in the same ways as resolutions may be so they reflect only what individual state leaders choose to highlight. Further details on this dataset are presented below, along with the analysis.

The second hypothesis investigates whether issues prioritized by the Nordic countries become more prominent on the Security Council's agenda during their tenure as temporary members. As the preceding discussion illustrates, the Nordics frequently emphasize themes such as gender equality, women's roles in conflict, and human rights. While these issues have not traditionally been at the forefront of the Security Council's agenda, three landmark resolutions around the turn of the century significantly elevated their prominence. These are Resolution 1261 (1999) on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), Resolution 1265 (1999) on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (POC), and Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). Among the thematic issues addressed by the Security Council, these align most closely with Nordic foreign policy priorities, making them particularly well-suited for examining the extent to which the Nordics can amplify such issues during their tenure.

Amplification, in this paper, is measured by how frequently these issues appear in the main output documents of the Security Council, namely resolutions and presidential statements. Resolutions are binding on all member states and are subject to veto by the permanent five members of the Council. They generally contain two parts: a preamble and an operative part. The preamble gives the background for the resolution and the operative part states what the Council has decided or requested on the matter at hand.

Presidential statements are not subject to a vote on the Council, but instead are presented by the President of the Council on behalf of its members, generally following discussion or consultation among member states.

The data, collected by the Security Council Affairs Division of the UN Secretariat, records all instances of certain key words related to the three topics in presidential statements or as preamble and/or operative statements in resolutions. The data is made available on the website of the Security Council and is compiled at the resolution or statement level. For the present analysis, the data is aggregated to reflect an annual number of appearances for these key words. As these issues appear on the Council's agenda in 1999 and 2000, the data is only collected from those dates onwards so the analysis is restricted to this more recent time period.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Ideal Point Estimate	9,949	-0.02	0.97	-2.99	3.19
Ideal Point Distance from Iceland	9,949	1.31	0.817	0.0001	4.62
(log) GDP per capita	8,139	8.24	1.43	4.98	12.03
(log) Population	9,138	15.56	1.95	9.75	21.06
Polity Score	8,546	1.12	7.34	-10	10
Number of presidential statements on:					
Women, Peace and Security	23	26.96	15.82	1	56
Children and Armed Conflict	23	18.83	13.62	0	54
Protection of Civilians	23	61.21	26.78	4	117
Number of preamble paragraphs on:					
Women, Peace and Security	23	52.00	36.50	6	117
Children and Armed Conflict	23	31.21	20.15	3	72
Protection of Civilians	23	128.46	75.46	40	296
Number of operative paragraphs on:					
Women, Peace and Security	23	91.67	64.94	8	230
Children and Armed Conflict	23	51.46	28.85	10	106
Protection of Civilians	23	186.38	94.89	48	330

4. Results

4.1 Nordic Foreign Policy Similarity

To more directly test H1, Table 2 below presents results from several regressions of ideal point distance from Iceland on various sets of country and region identifiers and control variables. The odd-numbered models show results without any control variables other than fixed effects (to account for any events that may shift everyone's preferences in a given year), and the even-numbered tables show results including control variables. Models 1 and 2 provide a baseline result, regressing the ideal point distance between

Iceland and other countries on several important regional groups, namely the Nordics, non-Nordic countries in the WEOG group, and the group of Small Island Developing States (to investigate whether "smallness" is really what is driving policy similarity rather than "Nordicness"). The omitted category is all other countries, which means that each of the regional coefficients is being compared against those countries that belong to none of the three groups. Models 3 and 4 restrict the analysis to the WEOG-group only, i.e., the group that is likely to be most similar to Iceland in general and compares the Nordics with the other members of that group. Further exploring the effect of the Nordics, Models 5 and 6 examine the individual Nordic countries to investigate whether they are all individually significantly more similar to Iceland than the non-Nordic WEOG countries.

As the dependent variable measures distance from Iceland's position, positive coefficients indicate greater distance and negative coefficients the opposite. The negative and statistically significant effect of the Nordics across Models 1-4 consistently support the hypothesis that the Nordics are closer to Iceland than other countries, on average. In Model 1, the effect is particularly large, indicating that the Nordic ideal points are, on average, 1.3 points closer to Iceland than the reference group, an effect size of around 1.5 standard deviations of the variable. This effect is rendered rather smaller in Model 2, once the control variables are included but is still negative and statistically significant. The negative coefficient on GDP per capita suggests that richer countries tend to be closer to Iceland, which is as one might expect. The positive coefficient on population indicates that Iceland's position tends to be closer to smaller countries which, again, is what we might expect. The negative coefficient on the Polity score is also as expected, implying that more democratic countries have preferences closer to Iceland.

It is furthermore notable that the coefficient on the other WEOG-countries is also negative and statistically significant, although the coefficient size is somewhat smaller. These two coefficients cannot be directly compared, as the distributions of the underlying variables are not the same, but a linear hypothesis test shows that the difference between them is statistically significant (p-value of 0.00 in Model 1 and 0.02 in Model 2), indicating that the foreign policy preferences of the Nordics are statistically significantly closer to Iceland's than those of other WEOG countries. Lastly, the effect of the Small Island Developing States is interesting. In Model 1, without controls, the preferences of the SIDS countries are closer to Iceland than to the rest of the world; in Model 2, however, the effect sign is flipped, and the SIDS are further away from Iceland's preferences than others. One possible interpretation of this shift might be that Iceland and the SIDS largely share preferences on a narrow set of issues that are reflected in the three control variables and that once those have been taken into the account, Iceland and the SIDS have quite diverging interests.

Table 2. Regression results. Dependent variable is ideal point distance from Iceland

	All countries		WEOG-group only			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 5**	**Model 6**
Nordics	-1.30***	-0.45***	-0.35***	-0.18***		
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)		
Other WEOG countries	-0.97***	-0.36***				
	(0.02)	(0.03)				
Small Island Developing States	-0.13***	0.33***				
	(0.02)	(0.02)				
Norway					-0.45***	-0.29***
					(0.06)	(0.05)
Sweden					-0.33***	-0.19***
					(0.06)	(0.05)
Finland					-0.23***	-0.02
					(0.06)	(0.05)
Denmark					-0.38***	-0.21***
					(0.06)	(0.05)
(log) GDP p.c.		-0.11***		0.15***		0.17***
		(0.01)		(0.02)		(0.02)
(log) Population		0.06***		0.12***		0.12***
		(0.005)		(0.01)		(0.01)
Polity Score		-0.04***		-0.02***		-0.02***
		(0.001)		(0.004)		(0.004)
Constant	1.97***	0.60***	0.55**	-2.67***	0.55**	-2.86***
	(0.34)	(0.11)	(0.27)	(0.28)	(0.27)	(0.29)
N	9846	6949	1627	1184	1627	1184
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adj. R-squared	0.27	0.48	0.16	0.26	0.16	0.27

***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1

As noted above, Models 3-6 restrict the analysis to the WEOG-group only, thus providing a somewhat stronger test of whether the preferences of the Nordics are, in fact, significantly closer to Iceland than of other countries who might also be largely expected to be more similar to Iceland than the rest of the world. Despite the more restricted (and more homogenous) group in Models 3 and 4, the Nordics prove, yet again, to be significantly closer to Iceland than the reference group of other WEOG-countries and that effects holds once control variables are added. In contrast with the previous models, the coefficient on GDP per capita is positive and significant, indicating that richer members of the WEOG-group are further removed from Iceland. Population and the Polity score have the same effect as before.

Lastly, Models 5 and 6 explore the effect of individual Nordics. It is possible that

the group average in Models 1-4 hides significant heterogeneity across the countries and that Iceland's preferences are much closer to some Nordics than others. By and large, however, this does not seem to be the case. Rather, the Nordics are all individually closer to Iceland than the reference group. Only in the case of Finland in Model 6 (the model with full controls) is the effect rendered statistically insignificant (p-value of 0.6), although the sign on the coefficient is still negative. A potential explanation for this result is that, throughout the Cold War, Finland had to pay closer attention to the Soviet Union, due to the two countries' shared border, and that this fact significantly impacted its foreign policy preferences, as measured by voting behavior in the General Assembly. All in all, the models show a strong association between the preferences of Iceland and the Nordics, providing support for H1.

As noted above, it is also possible that countries may not be voting sincerely in the UN General Assembly. A vast literature has identified various kinds of bribery or side payments for votes in the Security Council, but due to the non-binding nature of General Assembly resolutions, it is generally assumed that vote buying is less of an issue in that body. However, as Carter and Stone (2015) demonstrate, it may be the case that countries' vote choices aren't always entirely sincere. If it is the case that countries are voting strategically at least some of the time, it is possible that the ideal points used above do not fully represent their true foreign policy preferences.

Therefore, a secondary clustering analysis was conducted to further examine these to visualize the extent of speech similarity among the Nordics. In particular, this analysis uses a recently compiled corpus of speeches made by government representatives during the UN General Debate, which takes place during the opening week of the UN General Assembly, traditionally in the second half of September (Baturo et al. 2017). During the General Debate week, country leaders (heads of state or other senior government officials) lay out their countries' positions and present their foreign policy priorities at the UN for the coming year. These speeches are not subject to a vote or even a debate; thus, if the Nordics' speeches during the General Debate resemble one another, that would provide further evidence that their foreign policy interests are truly aligned.

The corpus consists of speeches (in English) from each country during each opening sessions of the General Assembly. Text-as-data methods can then be used to extract information from these speeches and to compare them with each other. Use of text-as-data methods has been on the rise in recent years, as technological advancements have made it easier to convert documents to machine-readable text (Carvalho & Schenoni 2021; Gray & Baturo 2021; Laver 2014). As the analysis here is for verification purposes and robustness rather than as the main analysis, speeches are compared across countries using simple hierarchical clustering, which allows us to explore graphically which speeches are most or least similar.

The speeches were converted into a document-feature matrix (DFM), which records the frequency of each word appearing in the corpus and enables various types of further analysis. During this conversion, all punctuation and stop words, such as "a," "an,"

"but," and "and," were removed. Additionally, the words "united" and "nations" were specifically excluded to avoid similarities based solely on mentions of the organization's name. The Euclidean distance between each country's speeches was then calculated, and these distance measures were used to create clusters, grouping countries with similar speeches together and placing those with more dissimilar speeches further apart. The clustering was performed using the commonly employed "average" method, which connects two clusters by comparing the average distance between the countries in each cluster. To account for the sensitivity of clustering methods, a robustness check was conducted using the "complete" method, which connects clusters based on the maximum distance between countries. While the two methods produced slightly different results, they were sufficiently similar, and only the results from the "average" method are reported here for simplicity.

This clustering can be graphically shown in a dendrogram, which demonstrates how individual countries branch with or away from others. Figure 2 shows this clustering for all countries across the entire time period. Note that the order of the branches does not itself indicate distance (i.e., the order of the top two branches could be flipped without changing the interpretation), it is the clustering within branches that matters. The graph with all countries is quite dense and presented only to show the overall shape of the clustering. Figure 3, however, zooms in on the area of the graph that contains the speeches from the Nordics. Notably, the Nordics are all grouped quite close and share a sub-branch only with one another, indicating that, as a group, they are closer to each other than to any other country in terms of the content of their speeches in the UN General Debate. Iceland does appear in a separate sub-branch from the other Nordics, indicating that it is the most dissimilar from the others, while e.g., Denmark and Norway are the closest to each other out of the five Nordics. In sum, however, this analysis suggests that the similarity in voting uncovered in the previous analysis does not appear to be based on insincere voting, at least not unless we assume that the General Debate speeches are similarly strategic, which seems unlikely. Thus, we can conclude with some confidence that the Nordics appear to have similar foreign-policy outlooks, at least as expressed through activity within the United Nations.

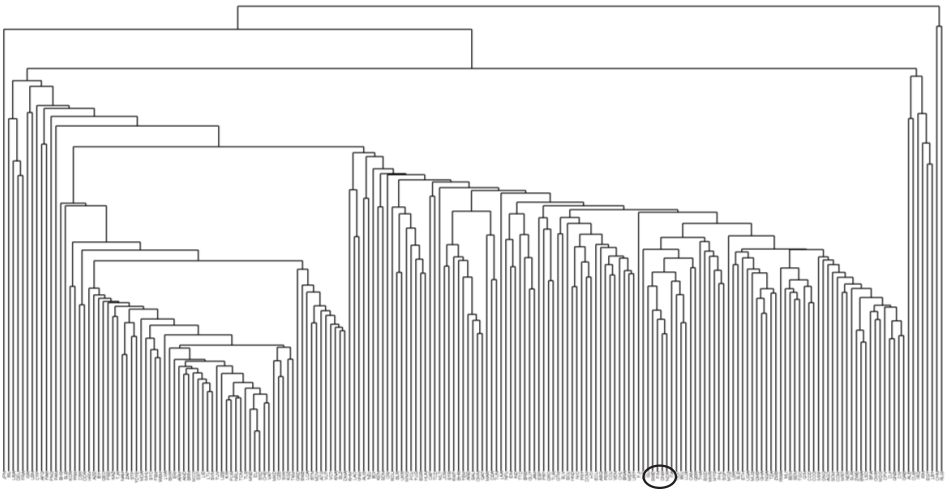

Figure 2. Dendrogram of speech similarities across countries. Distance between countries was calculated using Euclidian distance and the "average" method was used for clustering. ISO-3 country codes were used instead of full country names due to space constraints. The black circle shows the location of the Nordics

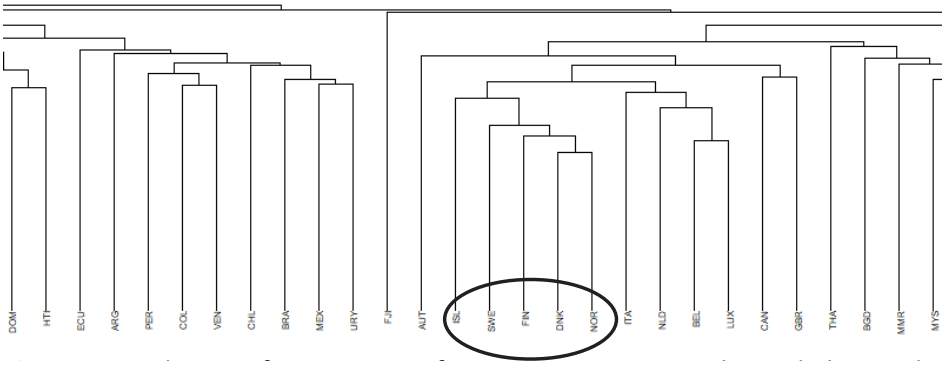

Figure 3. Dendrogram from Figure 2 after zooming in on area that includes Nordics. For orientation purposes, the ISO-3 codes for the Nordics are as follows: DNK – Denmark, FIN – Finland, ISL – Iceland, NOR – Norway, SWE – Sweden. The black circle identifies the location of the Nordic countries

4.2 Representation on the Security Council: Issue Emphasis

The final part of the empirical analysis turns its attention to Nordic presence on the Security Council. As noted above, the Nordics rotate seeking one of the WEOG seats every other time a seat is available (two WEOG members are elected every other year). Since 2000—the time period included in the below analysis—the Nordics have held a seat on the Security Council four times: Norway in 2001-2002, Denmark in 2005-2006, Sweden in 2017-2018, and Norway again in 2021-2022. Iceland and Finland have had one failed bid each in this period, Iceland in 2008 and Finland in 2012 and thus, neither has been present on the Council during the period in question. Whether the Nordics represent each other's substantive interests while members of the Council is, however, not easy to measure and the literature seeking to measure proxy representation is sparse. As examples, however, Lai and Lefler (2017) use voting similarity in the General Assembly is a proxy for substantive representation in the Security Council, and Mikulaschek (2021) leverages regional rotation within the African group to show that a region sees an increase in the number of peacekeepers when it is represented on the Security Council.

As noted above, for the purposes of this analysis, the focus is on substantive representation in terms of the three thematic issues that most closely map onto issues highlighted by the Nordics in their Security Council bids, namely protection of civilians, children in armed conflict, and women, peace and security. If the Nordics are effective promoters of these shared values, we should observe an increase in the mentions of these issues in Security Council documents when the Nordics are present on the Council. If these issues do not appear more prominently during years of Nordic presence, that undermines claims that the Nordics successfully substantively represent each other on the Council. It may rather be the case that the Nordics descriptively or symbolically represent each other, or simply that they largely enhance their own status through their membership and that the region overall does not enjoy greater representation of any kind.

Figures 4, 5, and 6 graph the number of references to children in armed conflict, protection of civilians, and women, peace and security across presidential statements, preamble paragraphs in resolutions and operative paragraphs in resolutions. It is immediately notable that there have been large shifts in the number of preamble and operative paragraphs referring to these issues. The number of mentions in presidential statements is more variable, making it harder to discern a trend. Overall, however, mentions of all three themes is frequent in Council output documents, indicating that these are issues that the Council is actively seized of and does not simply take a back seat to more "traditional" security concerns.

The vertical bars in the graphs indicate years when a Nordic country is present as a member of the Council. It is readily apparent from the graphs that there is no observable increase in the number of mentions of these issues during years of Nordic representation. Only in the case of Presidential Statements does the number of mentions of these issues appear to increase (and then only in the case of the protection of civilians and children in armed conflict. The lack of association between Nordic membership and

mentions of these three issues suggests that the Nordics are not able to effectively bring these issues to the table in such a way that they end up in the Council's policy documents.

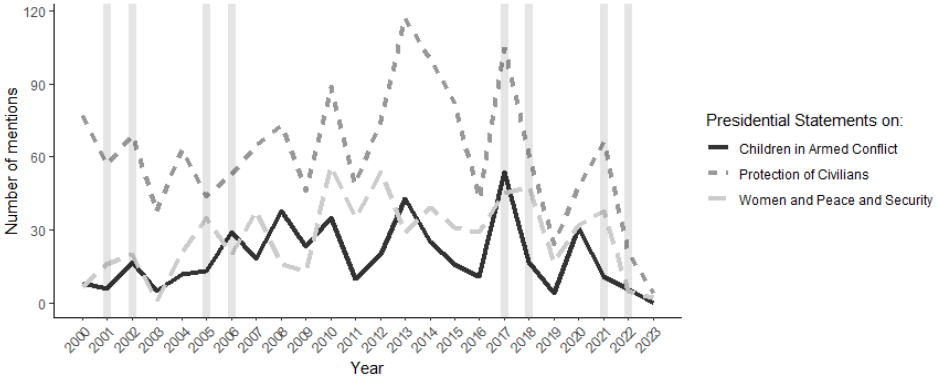

Figure 4. Number of mentions of the three issues in UNSC Presidential Statements. Shaded vertical bars represent years where a Nordic country is a member of the Council

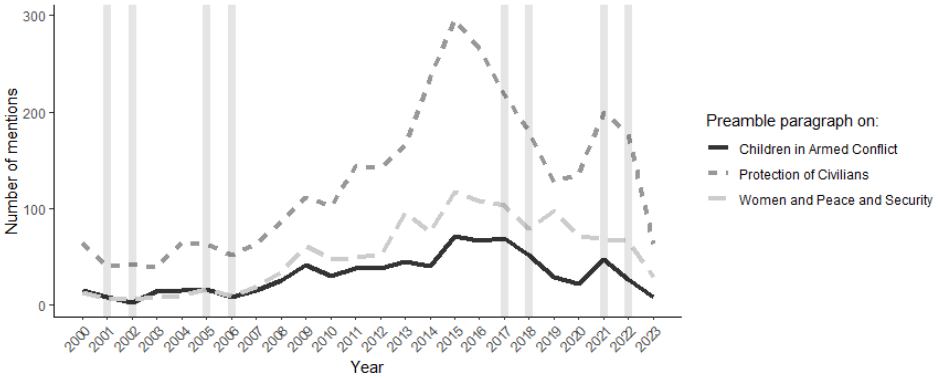

Figure 5. Number of mentions of the three issues in preamble paragraphs to UNSC Resolutions. Shaded vertical bars represent years where a Nordic country is a member of the Council

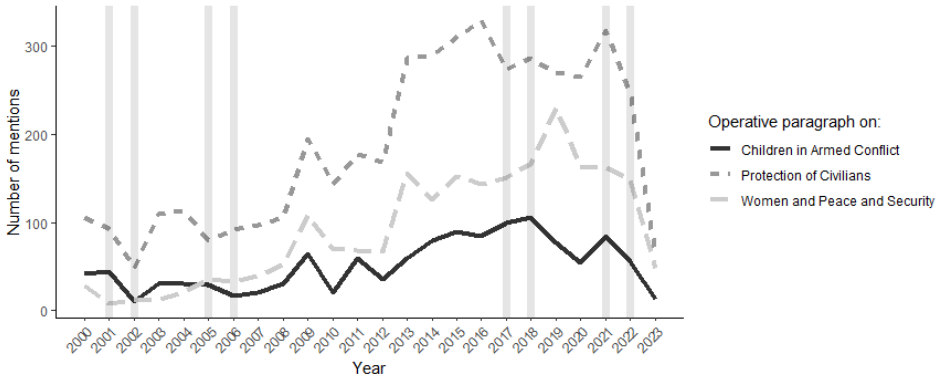

Figure 6. Number of mentions of the three issues in operative paragraphs to UNSC Resolutions. Shaded vertical bars represent years where a Nordic country is a member of the Council

To further probe these initial results, regression analysis was again conducted to see whether a statistical association could be found between Nordic presence on the Council and emphasis on these three issues, reported in Table 3. Due to the limited number of years that a Nordic has been on the Council in this time period, however, the regression analysis is unlikely to yield statistically significant results. To be consistent with the graphs above, the first three models show results from regressions of presidential statements, the next three regressions of preamble paragraphs, and the final three of operative paragraphs. One control variable was included, namely the number of resolutions passed in a given year, to account for varying levels of activity within the Council, although its omission does not change the substantive or statistical results of the models.

The results match the findings of the descriptive analysis, giving no indication that Nordic membership is associated with increases in mentions of protection of civilians, children in armed conflict, and women, peace and security. Some of the point estimates are negative and others are positive and the standard errors are, in many cases, very large, indicating very imprecise point estimates. Simply put, there is nothing to suggest that the Nordics are effective at getting these three issues prominently featured in the output documents of the UN Security Council.

Table 3. Regression results

	Presidential Statements			Preamble Paragraphs			Operative Paragraphs		
	Mod 1 WPS	Mod 2 POC	Mod 3 CAAC	Mod 4 WPS	Mod 5 POC	Mod 6 CAAC	Mod 7 WPS	Mod 8 POC	Mod 9 CAAC
Nordic presence	0.61	-4.92	-1.00	-10.39	-14.60	-4.56	2.12	-10.19	6.68
	(7.15)	(11.24)	(6.24)	(16.92)	(35.45)	(9.30)	(29.51)	(42.77)	(12.85)
Number of	-0.02	-0.37	0.05	-0.59	-0.01	-0.09	-2.02	-1.89	-0.74
resolutions	(0.36)	(0.57)	(0.32)	(0.86)	(1.79)	(0.47)	(1.49)	(2.17)	(0.65)
Constant	29.33	87.51**	17.24	92.38*	137.16	39.29	214.68**	309.18**	95.32**
	(21.71)	(34.13)	(18.96)	(51.36)	(107.61)	(28.24)	(89.58)	(129.87)	(39.01)
N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Adj. R-squared	-0.10	-0.06	-0.10	-0.04	-0.09	-0.08	-0.01	-0.05	-0.03

***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1
WPS: Women, Peace and Security; POC: Protection of Civilians; CAAC: Children in Armed Conflict

5. Conclusion

The Nordic countries have long been recognized as advocates of normative international values, and their role in the United Nations offers a compelling case for understanding the dynamics of small-state collaboration. This paper provides new insights into their capacity to coordinate and represent shared interests on the Security Council. The analysis finds strong evidence of shared foreign policy preferences among the Nordics, as demonstrated by their voting patterns and speech content in the UN General Assembly. However, when it comes to substantive policy promotion on the Security Council, Nordic countries appear unable to translate these shared priorities into measurable outcomes.

When it comes to advancing shared goals on the Security Council, the evidence suggests that Nordic countries fall short. Specifically, their membership does not enhance the prominence of core issues like gender equality and human rights in Council documents. This challenges the notion that Nordic countries can substantiate shared priorities within the Security Council's policy outputs. Thus, to the extent that substantive representation is measured by the ability to advance shared goals, the Nordics cannot be said to achieve this based on the evidence analyzed in this paper.

Although substantive representation may be limited, descriptive representation remains a potential strength for the Nordics. By regularly securing Council membership and coordinating regionally, they enhance their collective visibility and prestige, reinforcing their identity as champions of normative international values. This symbolic presence may also bolster their broader influence across the United Nations system.

Alternatively, each Nordic country may behave independently on the Security Coun-

cil, prioritizing national interests or responding to the most salient global issues of the moment rather than advancing collective concerns. This possibility underscores the distinction between symbolic presence, which enhances visibility and prestige, and substantive representation, which requires measurable policy outcomes. Future research could explore whether the private benefits of Council membership influence such behavior, particularly for developed countries less dependent on aid or peacekeeping missions.

While this analysis provides valuable insights, it is limited by its reliance on measurable outputs such as voting patterns, speeches, and document mentions. Future research could explore alternative dimensions of influence, such as informal negotiations or behind-the-scenes advocacy, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Nordic representation on the Security Council. Ultimately, this study underscores the complexities of translating regional solidarity into tangible policy outcomes within multilateral institutions.

Notes

1 The UN regional groups are the African Group, the Asia-Pacific Group, the Eastern European Group, the Latin American and Caribbean Group, and the Western European and Others Group. The Western European and Others Group (WEOG) consists, as the name suggests, of Western European countries and a few other industrialized countries, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Out of the regional groups, it is the only one that is not fully contained within a single geographical region.

2 See here: https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/unitednations/un-general-debates

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