Legitimacy in Time:
Design, Drift, and Decoupling at the UN Security Council

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This article theorises the legitimacy of international organisations (IOs) in time. Conceiving of legitimacy as a core goal of institutional design, it develops the concept ‘legitimacy drift’ to identify the processes by which institutional legitimacy can gradually diminish over time if an institution fails to adapt to a changing environment. Three sources of legitimacy drift are identified: legitimacy erosion, shifting standards, and audience shift. Responses to legitimacy drift include re-legitimation through institutional reform, and the emergence of operational and rhetorical decoupling. Decoupling is especially likely where reform is blocked. The approach’s plausibility is probed using the case of the United Nations Security Council, shedding new light on the origins and effects of its current legitimacy deficit. A conclusion calls for bridging rival institutionalist theories to better understand IO legitimacy in time.
Introduction

The legitimacy of international organisations (IOs) has become a central concern of theorists and practitioners of international relations. An organisation is legitimate to the extent that the subjects of its decisions feel that it ‘ought’ to be obeyed.\textsuperscript{1} If IOs can command legitimacy in the eyes of their members, they will be freed from having to resort to coercion or material inducements.\textsuperscript{2}

To existing theories of institutional legitimacy, IOs with persistent legitimacy deficits are puzzling. States are said to favour acting through multilateral institutions in order to garner legitimacy, giving them an interest in ensuring important institutions retain this legitimating function.\textsuperscript{3} Moreover, a lack of legitimacy must be compensated by increased material inducements or coercive imposition, which increases an institution’s operating costs.\textsuperscript{4} Why, then, would states allow legitimacy deficits to persist? At the same time, it has been widely observed that in many institutions, much of the real work takes place away from its formal

\textsuperscript{2} Hurd (1999).
\textsuperscript{4} Hurd (1999).
meetings, in informal gatherings and corridor diplomacy. But why would an institution be designed in such a way that states opt to avoid its formal structures?

The United Nations (UN) Security Council exemplifies these ambiguities. Few countries are enthusiastic about the institutional design and procedures of the Council, and many question its legitimacy. Its formal procedures are often avoided in favour of informal consultations and other flexibilities in its working methods. Its institutionalisation of great power hierarchy conflicts with modern norms of sovereign equality and democratic decision making. By all accounts, it is an anachronism. Yet it remains central to the international political and legal order, and states persist in seeking its reform, as they have done for decades. How is it possible that the Security Council, ‘the most powerful international organisation in the history of the interstate system’, has such precarious legitimacy?

This article seeks to address such puzzles by developing a theoretical approach to institutional legitimacy in time. First, in contrast to strict interpretations of rational choice institutionalism, it conceives of legitimacy as having an important role in institutional design—legitimacy considerations are never far from the minds of those who design and set up IOs. Second, it develops the concept ‘legitimacy drift’ to conceptualise the legitimacy deficits that can emerge when an institution stays the same but its normative and

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political environment changes around it. It further identifies the causal processes by which this occurs. These are changes in an organisation’s relevant public (audience shift), changes in perceptions of whether an organisation meets pre-existing standards of legitimacy (legitimacy erosion), and shifts in the standards of legitimacy themselves (shifting standards). Third, the approach posits that responses to legitimacy drift on the part of IOs include re-legitimation through institutional reform, but also the emergence of operational and rhetorical decoupling. Decoupling is especially likely where reform is blocked due to vested interests or institutional lock-in.

In a second step, these theoretical propositions are illustrated in the case of the UN Security Council. A case study approach fits the research goal of theory development, while clearly falling short of an evaluative test. Instead, the case study allows the key theoretical concepts and causal processes to be empirically elucidated and their plausibility assessed.  

Moreover, the Security Council is both substantively interesting and widely studied, making it particularly suitable for theory elaboration. The case study draws on secondary literature and a range of UN documents—focused on intergovernmental debates at important moments in the Council’s history in the 1940s, 1960s, and mid-2000s. The case study finds evidence of all three processes of legitimacy drift: the expansion in UN membership has altered the Security Council’s relevant public (audience shift); its capacity

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8 In particular, the case study draws on UN documents recording speeches made in the UN General Assembly at three points. The first relate to the Council’s ‘founding moment’ and come from the first sitting of the General Assembly in Central Hall, Westminster, London, in January 1946. The second emerge from the mid-1960s, when the number of rotating members of the Council was expanded from six to ten. The third occurred at the height of reform debates in the mid-2000s.
to deliver on its original criteria for legitimacy has eroded (legitimacy erosion); and it has become subject to a different repertoire of legitimacy demands (shifting standards). Moreover, the absence of re-legitimation of the Council through reform has led to operational and rhetorical decoupling, as it increasingly relies on informal hearings in its working procedures, and large gaps have emerged between rhetoric and operational practices.

In developing this model, the article draws from multiple institutional theories. It draws on concepts from historical institutionalism, a research tradition deeply familiar with institutional inefficiencies, but which has until now neglected the problem of institutional legitimacy.\(^9\) This study’s assumption that IOs, such as the Security Council, are created by ends-oriented—if legitimacy-aware—actors is arguably consistent with a modified version of rational choice institutionalism,\(^10\) and its focus on the role of perceptions of legitimacy for institutional development and the emergence of decoupling originates from an engagement with discursive and sociological institutionalism.\(^11\) This approach is therefore

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unrepentantly ‘eclectic’. Some may object to combining theories in this way. But this would be to assume that institutional legitimacy should be explainable using a single theoretical lens and a single ‘logic’ of action, in which analysis takes the form of a zero-sum theoretical contest. Often, doing so results in theoretical caricature. Rather, it appears at least as plausible to draw from multiple theories in order to provide a convincing—albeit less parsimonious—account of empirical puzzles.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section presents the concept of legitimacy drift, elucidates its three causal origins, and discusses institutional responses. The second section empirically assesses the theory’s plausibility in the case of the Security Council. Finally, a conclusion summarises the findings and suggests implications for legitimacy research and institutional theory in International Relations.

1. The Legitimacy of International Institutions in Time

While IOs have traditionally been understood in power-based or functionalist terms, a burgeoning body of scholarship has recognised the significance of legitimacy for IOs and other international institutions as well. The legitimacy of an institution consists of the

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13 Ibid.

degree to which its relevant public regards its features and behaviour as correct or appropriate.\textsuperscript{15} Because an IO’s basic structures and principles must resonate with social beliefs in order to be perceived as legitimate,\textsuperscript{16} its legitimacy is bound to the perceptions and beliefs of those who are the addressees of its decisions. In turn, these perceptions become subject to a politics of (de)legitimation in which symbols of legitimacy are manipulated for their strategic value.\textsuperscript{17}

While these dimensions of IO legitimacy have already been theorised in International Relations, with notable exceptions,\textsuperscript{18} less attention has been accorded to changing patterns of legitimacy over time. Moreover, the institutional ‘coping mechanisms’ that emerge under the conditions of a legitimacy deficit remain underexplored. While legitimacy

\textsuperscript{15} Following the empirical–sociological tradition, in this paper an institution is taken to be ‘legitimate’ quite simply when its subjects believe it to be so. A legitimate institution in this sense may be good or bad from one’s own normative point of view.


‘crises’ have garnered attention, institutional legitimacy may also be subject to slower changes over the long term (decades, or even centuries). This calls for ways of conceptualizing how institutional legitimacy deficits can emerge gradually over time, rather than necessarily culminating in critical turning points.

The approach below is elaborated with reference to IOs and therefore assumes that nation states constitute the major relevant public. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence that IOs are affected by the legitimacy perceptions of audiences beyond the inter-state sphere, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens. Where the relevant public changes in such a manner, we will speak of audience shift (see below). The goal here is not to establish a competing model of institutional change, but to suggest how existing institutional theories can be drawn upon to generate novel concepts and propositions relating to legitimacy change over time. Figure 1 summarises the proposed model of ‘legitimacy drift’ which is explained below.

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The theory departs from a simple observation: in their creation of IOs, states seek not only to achieve certain instrumental objectives, but to achieve legitimacy for the IO they seek to create.\textsuperscript{21} This imposes limits on the range of ‘rational’ choices available, and is a neglected dimension of ‘institutional design’.\textsuperscript{22} Just as questions of institutional design and purpose are up for grabs during founding moments, considerations of how to design and represent an institution as legitimate are central to founders’ goals. Core issues of institutional design—especially issues such as who will join (membership), how decisions will be made (control), and how the institutions can be reformed (flexibility)—are driven not only by the functional considerations but also by questions of legitimacy. For example, it is hard to explain the goal of universal membership in many international agreements without acknowledging the legitimacy dividend that emerges from this inclusiveness, or the logic of ‘one-state, one-vote’ decision-making rules.\textsuperscript{23} Likewise, the International Criminal Court

\begin{figure}
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Institutional Design} & \textbf{Drift} & \textbf{Outcomes} \\
\hline
Founding legitimacy & Audience shift \hspace{1cm} Legitimacy erosion \hspace{1cm} Shifting standards & Reform \hspace{1cm} Reform \hspace{1cm} Re-legitimation \hspace{1cm} Decoupling (operational and/or rhetorical) \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Legitimacy Drift}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{22} Wendt (2001), p. 1039.

\textsuperscript{23} Wendt (2001), p. 1025. Wendt gives the example of landlocked countries being included in framing the Law of the Sea.
(ICC) may have been set up in part to remedy the deficient legitimacy of *ad hoc* UN tribunals. The designers of IOs have an interest not just in establishing institutions to serve particular functional purposes, but also to ensure that they are perceived as legitimate, at least by those with the capacity to undermine their activities.

The design phase of an IO typically takes place in ‘founding moments’, which historical institutionalists suggest are deeply significant for shaping an institution’s future trajectory. This is because such moments constitute critical junctures that temporarily open up possibilities for contingency and institutional innovation. The reason is that, during founding moments, structural constraints on choices are lower and institutional structures can be negotiated from scratch—in ways often unpredictable by nomothetic theories alone, but they must be understood using historical methods. Especially where institutions are created with strong status quo coalitions or veto players, the decisions reached during founding moments can persist long into the future, setting institutions ‘on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter’. As legitimacy depends on the beliefs of a relevant public, an institution’s legitimacy will be related to beliefs prevalent during this critical juncture.

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But institutions are embedded in changing environments to which they may not perfectly adapt.29 Like computer software, institutions need to be regularly updated to correspond to new circumstances. As a consequence, institutions may in time become less efficient or effective than a purely functionalist approach would suggest. The concept of ‘institutional drift’ is one way to capture this mode of incremental change. This describes a process in which an institution remains the same while its impact changes or becomes less effective due to shifts in the broader environment.30

If founding moments establish the terms by which an institution is to be legitimated in the eyes of its relevant public, institutional legacies suggest that its legitimacy, just like its functional design, may need to be updated to correspond to changes in the political and normative environment. But due to endogenous features of institutions such as multiple veto points and vested interests, this updating can easily be prevented. Over time, an institution’s legitimacy may thus be undermined. This describes ‘legitimacy drift’. It refers to the situation when an institution fails to adapt to a changing political and normative environment.


environment, leading to a decline in its perceived legitimacy. Legitimacy drift is a process that gives rise to the outcome of a legitimacy deficit.\textsuperscript{31}

Institutional legitimacy can increase or decrease according to the extent to which an institution meets the criteria for legitimacy in the eyes of its relevant public. It follows that there are three processes which can generate legitimacy drift: (1) changes in perceptions of whether an institution meets existing standards of legitimacy (legitimacy erosion), (2) changes in the standards or criteria for legitimacy applied to an institution (shifting standards), and (3) changes in an institution’s relevant public itself (audience shift). While hard to separate empirically, these processes are analytically separate and they help to clarify the mechanisms that generate legitimacy drift.

*Legitimacy erosion:* One cause of legitimacy drift is when an IO is perceived to no longer meet the standards of legitimacy traditionally applied to it. When an organisation is perceived as not living up to its prior standards for legitimacy, its legitimacy erodes. For example, if an IO’s legitimacy was originally predicated on its ability to provide public goods, a perceived decline in its capacity to provide these goods is likely to erode its legitimacy. Similarly, if the legitimacy of an institution such as the Security Council is predicated on its representing the countries of principal industrial and military strength, the emergence of new major powers outside of the institution will lead to a decline in this

\textsuperscript{31} Drift thus describes a form of change that emerges from an endogenous factor (institutional stasis) combined with an exogenous factor (a changing environment).
condition for its legitimacy. Legitimacy erosion thus refers to the decline of an institution’s capacity to live up to its initial promises.

**Shifting standards:** An institution may or may not live up to existing conditions for its legitimacy; however, the conditions of legitimacy that are applied to an IO by its relevant public may also change. If the criteria for institutional legitimacy themselves change, an institution becomes subject to legitimacy assessments based on new standards of legitimacy. A failure to adapt to these ‘shifting standards’ will result in legitimacy drift. For example, some institutions may have been formerly evaluated primarily according to output-oriented, technocratic standards of legitimacy. Over time, however, the technocratic justification may be joined by new demands for transparency or to represent a particular constituency.  

Alternatively, an institution’s entire mandate may change, as occurred to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1970s, leading to new questions of institutional legitimacy. Shifting standards may also be a question of extent, in which case a previously minor legitimacy criterion becomes more important over time. The importance of giving a voice to transnational societal actors may have increased over time, for example. Where an institution is unable to adapt sufficiently to these shifting standards, legitimacy drift emerges.

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Audience shift: Finally, an institution can be exposed to new legitimacy demands through a change in its relevant public.\textsuperscript{34} Most IOs’ primary audiences will be their member states. However, this can potentially widen to include secondary audiences, such as non-member states, domestic publics, NGOs, or other transnational actors. Moreover, IOs may become reliant on these secondary audiences to achieve their goals. This constitutes audience shift through an expansion of an IO’s relevant public. In these cases, an institution may remain legitimate in the eyes of its founding members, but lose legitimacy through a shift in the relevant public. As Symons outlines, ‘an IO might face a legitimacy crisis because it comes to require legitimacy in a particular constituency for the first time, rather than because an existing endorsement has been withdrawn’.\textsuperscript{35} This can occur, for example, through the accession of states as new members of an IO. New members of an institution’s relevant public may hold different ideas about what makes an institution legitimate, which may contribute towards shifting standards. Yet audience shift can also have an immediate effect in cases where an institution is thought to require participation or representative legitimacy—in such cases, the addition of new members without changes in the procedures by which interests are aggregated and represented may \textit{ipso facto} erode its representative legitimacy. Such cases of audience shift are likely to give rise to calls for institutional reform to keep an institution in line with these external developments.

Changes in these three dimensions—audience shift, legitimacy erosion, and shifting standards—all generate the potential for drifting institutional legitimacy. While these

\textsuperscript{34} Also referred to as a ‘legitimacy constituency’. See Reus-Smit (2007); Symons (2011).

processes often interact, they can also vary independently of one another. An institution’s legitimacy can be undermined through audience shift, even if it continues to perform well according to previous established criteria. Alternatively, shifting standards of legitimacy can also lead to new challenges for institutional legitimacy, even where the relevant public remains unchanged. In turn, an IO’s legitimacy may erode simply because it becomes less able to fulfil the legitimacy demands originally made of it.

These mechanisms of legitimacy drift also indicate different potential avenues for an IO to deal with legitimacy drift. One is *re-legitimation through institutional reform*. In response to audience shift, institutional reforms that integrate new members into its activities could recalibrate an institution’s design with its new public. This could be achieved, for example, by integrating new state members, or by allowing for a greater role for NGOs in its activities. Legitimacy erosion could be addressed through compensatory reforms that bolster an IO’s performance in weak areas or meeting increased expectations. Shifting standards may require more fundamental reform, such as changing an institution’s mandate to cover new areas that it is expected to deal with, or changing its decision-making procedures to accord with new ideas of legitimate procedures.

Re-legitimation through reform is, however, not always a viable response to legitimacy drift. Organisational adaptation can be blocked for multiple reasons. On the institutional side, the status quo may empower vested interests, or distributional conflicts may prevent agreement for reform even amongst reform-minded principals. Reform can also be prevented due to problematic features of legitimacy concerns themselves: diverse
legitimacy demands may be contradictory, or actors might attach very different operational meanings to the same legitimacy criterion. In such cases, new legitimacy demands may be internally inconsistent, leading to a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ trade-off. Sociological institutionalism suggests that persistent legitimacy deficits combined with institutional inertia is likely to generate *decoupling*. A compensatory alternative to institutional reform, decoupling is understood as a way to ‘cope’ with normative pressure for organisations to conform to particular global standards, even if it would be dysfunctional, or impossible, in practice. Decoupling refers to the gaps that tend to emerge between institutions’ structures, policies, and practices, and is most vivid in the ‘famous gaps between norms and behavior’. Decoupling ‘enables organisations to seek the legitimacy that adaptation to rationalized myths provides while they engage in technical “business as usual”’. It is likely to ensue when reform paths are blocked but legitimacy demands remain unfulfilled.

Decoupling can be both operational and rhetorical. Operational decoupling takes place through changes in organisational practice—de facto rather than de jure change. It allows the organisation to continue business as usual while seeking legitimacy by paying homage to the idea of institutional reform. Examples of operational decoupling include exploiting

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38 Meyer (2009), p. 50.


40 Ibid., p. 87.
slack by organisational officials, invigorating informal consultations over formal procedures, or creatively reinterpreting existing rules. Rhetorical decoupling is often understood as a form of ‘hypocrisy’—saying one thing and doing another. Actors who seek to re-legitimate an institution, but cannot do so through reform, may revert to rhetorical decoupling through hypocrisy, euphemisation, and indirect speech. These forms of rhetorical decoupling enable speakers to bridge the gap between normative rhetoric and political reality. Rhetorical decoupling may not be sustainable in the longer-term, either because actors’ preferences converge with their espoused beliefs in order to reduce cognitive dissonance, or because decoupling is exposed by critics and denounced as hypocrisy. Alternatively, it may persist as a more or less regularised way of mediating competing normative and functional demands. Operational decoupling, likewise, may be seen to subvert an IO’s formal mandate, but it may also strengthen it by making it more adaptable. While decoupling may be seen as less preferable to institutional reform, in an imperfect world it may play an important role in mediating legitimacy drift and institutional stability.


44 Finnemore (2009).

45 Another avenue to institutional stabilization may be strategic re-legitimation through communications, such as a public relations offensive. Legitimation in this sense may qualify as an intervening variable affecting states’ legitimacy perceptions. In the case of the Council, however, I assume (1) that UN diplomats have a high level of access to information about the institution, and (2) are highly attuned to (and wary of) symbolic legitimation strategies. In such a case, it is reasonable to assume that states’ legitimacy beliefs are shaped
The next section applies this model to the case of the Security Council. In keeping with much of the existing literature on Security Council legitimacy, the empirical discussion below is based on two core methodological assumptions. The first is that the relevant public of legitimacy in the case of the Security Council is the Members of the UN. The second assumption is that while legitimacy cannot be directly observed, evidence for it can be observed in public communication. Just as norms have an inherently communicative dimension, examining what states say about an institution and its legitimacy can be a useful entry point to understanding an institution’s legitimacy. Taking these statements in their broader political context, the perceived legitimacy of international institutions can be evaluated. The section begins by examining the standards of legitimacy that underpinned the Security Council at its founding moment and earliest months of operation. It then examines changes in the political and normative context of international society that subsequently took place in the post-war era, leading to legitimacy drift. Decolonisation and new UN members resulted in audience shift, the Cold War and later power shifts led to


legitimacy erosion, and the delegitimation of ‘sovereign inequalities’ generated shifting standards. It then shows how the resulting legitimacy deficit prompted (until now unsuccessful) attempts at institutional reform, leading to increased operational and rhetorical decoupling.

2. The Legitimacy of the Security Council in Time

The institutional design of the Council began as the Second World War drew to a close—a critical juncture in which powerful states could redraw the institutions of world politics with few constraints. Initially sketched out by American and British policy planners, the basic design for a new IO to replace the League of Nations solidified during the ‘Dumbarton Oaks Conversations’ from August to October 1944. The war context and the limited number of participants gave the negotiators unparalleled flexibility to set the terms of the new organisation.

The Security Council would embody Roosevelt’s idea for a ‘trusteeship of the powerful’, whose institutional design would be the result of hard bargaining, mainly among the ‘Big Three’ wartime allies of the United States, United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. While most UN organs were based on sovereign equality, the Security Council granted special

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rights and responsibilities to the five permanent veto-wielding members (the P5).\textsuperscript{50} To this day, the veto remains an ‘icon of inequality in the UN system’.\textsuperscript{51} Moreover, this departure from the norm and legal principle of sovereign equality appears to conflict with the UN’s own commitment to be based ‘on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its members’ (Article 2, para.1). How was this institution legitimated at this founding moment?

\textit{Institutional Design and Founding Legitimacy}

The Security Council was designed with three primary goals in mind: to ensure its control by the victorious ‘great Power’ permanent members, to prevent a rerun of the failure of the League of Nations, and to secure some legitimacy in the eyes of other UN members. The hierarchical veto system would solve the first two problems, but raised complications for the third. As permanent members, the Big Three were joined by China (effectively an American client at that time) and France (on Britain’s behest). Eventually, Stalin agreed to these additions despite considerable initial opposition, trusting in the force of the veto to secure Soviet interests in the face of any potential clash with the Western powers.\textsuperscript{52} Having established the five permanent members of the Security Council each with a veto power, the other members were to be elected for staggered two-year terms. That the great powers

\textsuperscript{50} The question of voting procedures was deferred until agreement was announced at Yalta in February 1945. See United Nations, Yearbook of the United Nations 1946–47 (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1947), p. 9.

\textsuperscript{51} Hurd (2007), p. 86.

were intent on keeping the new IO under their control was embodied in the veto, ensuring that the organisation never took decisions that went against the core interests of the great powers.\textsuperscript{53} In this way, it was hoped that the new organisation would avoid the fate of the League of Nations. The Security Council, with its entrenched privileges for the P5, was seen as the only way to overcome the weaknesses of the League of Nations and effectively secure international peace and security.\textsuperscript{54} Indeed, the General Assembly was originally thought of as an appendage to the Council of major powers, rather than the other way around. Later, the design of the Council would be presented to the other wartime allies at the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco in 1945.

Existing accounts of the Security Council’s founding legitimacy centre on three components. The first element of the Council’s founding legitimacy was emerged simply from the organisation’s primary purpose of maintaining international peace and security. By all accounts, small and medium states were reluctantly persuaded to accept the inequalities inherent in the veto system if this bought them a functional organisation to maintain international peace and security.\textsuperscript{55} This ‘output’ mode of legitimacy is fundamental to the extent that any institution’s legitimacy must depend, to some extent, on its capacity to fulfil its goals. The privileges of the P5 had to be accepted as a \textit{sine qua non}


\textsuperscript{54} Hilderbrand (1990), pp. 1–2, 15–6, 26, 33, 122.

of an effective organisation. On offer to the UN membership was a choice between an organisation with special privileges for the great powers or no organisation at all.\textsuperscript{56}

A second element of the Security Council’s founding legitimacy resided in its capacity to represent UN members beyond the P5.\textsuperscript{57} The presence of small and middle powers as elected non-permanent members would indicate that the Council would not exclusively reflective of the priorities of the great powers, even if this was primarily designed to let the small powers ‘blow off steam’, in Anthony Eden’s words.\textsuperscript{58} However, at the stage of the Council’s founding legitimacy, representation appears to have been primarily understood as a question about the representation of power, rather than as a representative sample of the UN membership.\textsuperscript{59} After much debate at the San Francisco conference, the only substantive amendment to Chapter V of the Charter drafted by the great powers was the addition of two criteria for election as elected members: contributions towards maintaining international peace and security, and equitable geographical distribution.\textsuperscript{60} This is notable not only for according priority to a member’s contributions over geographical distribution, but also because these were only applicable to the ‘second rank’ powers. There was no hint that the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Bourantonis} Bourantonis (2004), p. 6.
\bibitem{CitedinBosco} Cited in Bosco (2009), p. 15.
\bibitem{Luck} Luck (2006), p. 11.
\end{thebibliography}
Security Council should in some way ‘represent’ the UN membership generally. As such, representation had a relatively minor role in the Council’s founding legitimacy.

Thirdly, as Ian Hurd has persuasively argued, the conference at San Francisco allowed for a public process of deliberation that also contributed in some way to the legitimacy of the UN and its proposed organs. Post-war planners, such as President Roosevelt, had initially conceived of a less institutionalised and even more hierarchical institution, involving simply ‘peace by dictation’ by the world’s ‘four policemen’. In contrast to this, the process of being able to debate about the modalities of formal organisation with an elected membership, even with institutionalised privileges for the P5, appears to have lent the Security Council more legitimacy than imposition by the great powers alone would have done. The debates and arguments that occurred between the great powers and smaller states was a case of ‘legitimation in action’ that gave the Council at least some semblance of democratic approval, despite the Charter adopted being almost identical to what was originally proposed by the great powers.

But an account of the Council’s founding legitimacy would remain incomplete if it did not take into account two further dimensions: the legitimacy accorded to the allied great powers by virtue of their roles in fighting the war and defeating the fascist powers, and the

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63 Hurd (2007), p. 84.
widespread acceptance that an institutional hierarchy favouring the great powers was a legitimate feature of international society.

A large part of the Council’s founding legitimacy derived from the war. All along, the Council had its routes in a wartime alliance, in which the ‘big four’ powers (the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union, and China) were accorded special status. Articles 53 and 107 of the UN Charter ratified in San Francisco contained references to ‘enemy states’, and still do. The major powers’ roles in the war were critical for the legitimacy of their privileges in the Security Council. Indeed, the five permanent members were not selected based on their perceived capabilities alone. Both France and China were added in large part because of their status as major allies in the war, not their power capabilities.

The significance of legitimacy derived from the war was apparent when the General Assembly met for the first time in London in January 1946. With the legacy of the war still the dominant issue of discussions, the Council’s founders sought to associate it with the defeat of Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. In the first Plenary Session, the United Kingdom Prime Minister Clement Attlee reminded delegates that the UN had its origins in

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65 Even today, countries such as Germany, Italy and Japan qualify as ‘enemy states’ due to their each being a state ‘which during the Second World War has been an enemy of any signatory of the present Charter’ (Article 53.2).

plans made ‘while our enemies were still in the field against us’ (A/PV.1, 39). Likewise, the delegate from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) told the General Assembly:

The United Nations … was created by the same anti-Hitler coalition that was headed by the United States of America, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, which bore on their shoulders the brunt of the struggle against our common enemy and which were anxious to create an effective international organization for the defense of post-war peace and security (A.PV/42, 836; also A/PV.84, 92).

The USSR also justified its support of the Norwegian Foreign Minister for the office of President of the General Assembly on the basis of Norway’s role in the war (A/PV.1, 43). Small states also linked the Council and its great power members to their parts in winning the war. New Zealand stated that ‘…we, and those who think as we do, recognize and acknowledge at once that the great Powers who played the predominant part in winning the war must similarly play the predominant part in winning the peace’ (A.PV/39, 785).

Uruguay had also earlier circulated a position document conceiving the great powers’ roles in the Security Council as a ‘reward’ for their role in the war. The speeches delivered at the Security Council’s first meeting were also permeated by references to its members’ roles in defeating the Axis powers. To a significant extent, the legitimacy of the Security Council is premised on the roles of the great powers in winning World War II. 

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67 All UN documents were accessed via the UN Bibliographic Information System, Ubisnet, available at: {http://unbisnet.un.org/}, last accessed 14 April 2016.


69 Bosco (2009), p. 41.
Council had already been prepared at Stalingrad and Normandy. The origins of the Security Council in the wartime alliance appear to have contributed to its founding legitimacy.

The legitimacy derived from the war effort was accompanied by a widespread belief that the great powers, those states with the greatest material capabilities, had special rights and responsibilities in international politics. Recognition was explicitly tied to (material) power. Hierarchy was not foreign to the international system during the Council’s founding moment and institutional design. Sovereign states were accorded superior political rights to dominions and colonies; great powers were accorded greater rights and responsibilities than lesser sovereign states. International institutions like the Council could therefore draw on a degree of stratificatory legitimacy: a conviction that ‘institutionalized inequality in the distribution of primary resources—such as power, wealth, and prestige—is essentially right and reasonable’.

At the San Francisco conference, the great powers repeatedly ‘emphasized the naturalness and inevitability of an unequal international system’. This tried to appeal to a widespread understanding that great powers had special entitlements and responsibilities, and that such privileges could be legitimate if they served the common good. Of course, the specific extent of great power privilege was hotly contested. Many small and medium states were dissatisfied with the broad sweep of the

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P5’s veto power, and saw the San Francisco conference as an opportunity to pressure the great powers into limiting the veto’s place in the functioning of the Council.\textsuperscript{73} But this dispute ‘mostly concerned the detailed implementation of special responsibilities, rather than any object to the basic principle itself’.\textsuperscript{74} Proposals by Cuba, Ecuador, and Iran that would have limited the veto even in enforcement actions ‘were as unpopular with the rank and file as they were with the Great Powers.’\textsuperscript{75} The fundamental concept of great power hierarchy, as well as the ‘basic concept’ of the veto, was taken for granted.\textsuperscript{76} Some form of legalised hegemony was widely perceived as inevitable.\textsuperscript{77} As the Chairman of the General Assembly outlined in the first address at that forum, the great powers were defined by ‘the immense power of their military, financial and industrial resources’ and ‘which, by virtue of Articles 24 and 27 of the Charter, and by the very nature of things, will shoulder the chief responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security’ (A/PV.1, 38).

This survey of the historical evidence shows that the Council’s founding legitimacy was based not only on its promise to secure international peace and security, its capacity to represent UN members, and deliberative legitimation at the San Francisco conference; but it was also intimately connected to two widespread beliefs: that the Council represented the countries that had defeated fascism and won the war, and that its hierarchical structure simply reflected the inherent rights and privileges of the great powers in organizing

\textsuperscript{74} Bukovansky et al. (2012), p. 30.
\textsuperscript{75} Hurd (2007), p. 94, note 37. For an overview of these and other proposals see Simpson (2004), pp. 180–8.
\textsuperscript{76} Hurd (2007), p. 93.
international affairs. As the following section will show, this established a legacy that, in the longer run, would prove increasingly problematic.

Legitimacy Drift

The Security Council is a paradigmatic case of path-dependence in the institutional design of an international institution. Entrenched veto players have strongly limited institutional adaptation. Initial proposals to ‘index’ the distribution of privilege in the Council were rejected outright by the wartime great powers.\(^{78}\) While the Security Council remained remarkably static, the world changed rapidly around it. This had important implications for Council legitimacy.

First, the Council’s audience shifted. Soon after the Council’s first meeting in 1946, the number of sovereign states began quickly to increase. The anti-colonial struggles led to the gradual universalisation of the principles of self-determination and sovereign equality, expanding the number of UN members and leading to new calls from Asian and African states for expansion in the membership of the Council. From the original 51 founding members in 1945, the membership of the UN increased to 76 by 1955, and to 117 by 1965, mostly from newly independent African and Asian states.\(^{79}\) Decolonisation dramatically expanded the relevant public to which Council decisions were addressed. This directly

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\(^{78}\) Mexico had proposed a system of un-named ‘semi-permanent’ delegates and noted in a memorandum that ‘there is no State whose relative international importance fails to suffer with the passage of time’. See Simpson (2003), p. 174.

\(^{79}\) Bosco (2009), pp. 98–9.
undermined the representative legitimacy of the Council, as the relative opportunities for participation in its activities decreased. It also upset its geographic apportioning of rotating seats, as new UN members came overwhelmingly from Africa and Asia.\textsuperscript{80} Additionally, many newly independent states had very different legitimacy beliefs, which congealed into a North-South conflict at the UN.\textsuperscript{81} The Security Council had difficulties adapting to these changes in its relevant public.

Second, audience shift was also related to a process of legitimacy erosion, as the Council’s capacity to live up to its initial criteria for legitimacy declined. The loss of empire rendered Britain and France’s great power status increasingly honorific,\textsuperscript{82} calling into question the legitimacy of its composition as a great power directorate. At the same time, the incapacity of the Council to act, arising from the paralysis of the Cold War, undermined its claim to be able to uphold international peace and security through great power cooperation, undermining the output dimension of its institutional legitimacy.\textsuperscript{83} Many countries began to question why they had agreed to the creation of a Council that appeared racked by Cold War rivalries.

\textsuperscript{80} Bourantonis (2004), pp. 7–8, 12–7; Morris (2000), p. 266.


\textsuperscript{82} Morris (2000), p. 266.

While these challenges to Council legitimacy have been widely recognised, these changes were also accompanied by shifting standards. This was signified not only by decolonisation and the increase in UN membership, but also by a normative shift that discredited hierarchy and venerated equality as a Grundprinzip of nearly all political institutions. This normative shift manifested itself in various forms: in the rules that determined who could claim membership in international society and achieve statehood (liberating colonial peoples), in how domestic political orders were justified (democracy in liberal or socialist variants), and in prevailing cultural values (reason and equality).\textsuperscript{84} The Non-Aligned Movement became a significant force challenging inequalities and stratification amongst the society of states, championing norms of self-determination, racial equality, sovereignty, democracy, and equality. These began to percolate into international institutions. Landmarks included the 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (General Assembly Resolution 1514) and the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation Among States (Resolution 2625).\textsuperscript{85} This contrasts strongly with the situation that prevailed in 1945, when anti-colonial campaigners had failed to have an anti-colonial clause inserted into the UN Charter.\textsuperscript{86} In the same way that democracy became a way to realise the political equality of individuals through equal representation, the sovereign equality of states came to be


associated more strongly with equal representation in international institutions. Democratic pressures made themselves felt also regarding IOs.  

The debates about Council reform of the 1960s show evidence of the early stages of this normative shift. At this time, it was (at least publicly) acknowledged by both defenders and detractors of reform that the Security Council should give a greater role to newly independent states. At the same time, changes were taking place in the diplomatic vocabulary. At the San Francisco conference, the debate was framed largely as a discussion about the rightful extent of the privileges and responsibilities of the ‘great Powers’. For years thereafter, references to the great powers remained a standard part of diplomatic vocabulary. But by 1963, a profusion of terminology can be witnessed as UN members struggle with the stratification embodied in the term ‘great Powers’. The term ‘great Power’ was still a widely used expression by states in General Assembly debates. But references to ‘the great Powers’ were joined by alternatives, such as the ‘big Powers’, ‘major Powers’, ‘industrial powers’, and ‘nuclear Powers’, or ‘great nuclear powers’.

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88 See the comments and responses of the Soviet representative debating the draft resolution. A/PV.1285, pp. 7–9.
90 Yugoslavia (PV.1316, p. 6), Cyprus (A.PV/1235, p. 4).
91 Iraq (A/PV.1239, p. 6), Norway (A/PV.1233, p. 7).
92 Central African Republic (A/PV.1235, p. 8).
Moreover, speakers associated with the Non-Aligned Movement spoke not of great powers but of ‘colonizing Powers’⁹⁴ and ‘colonial Powers’.⁹⁵ Some speakers even began to openly contest this categorisation of countries, referring to ‘the so-called great Powers’.⁹⁶ In general, international society was becoming less tolerant of obvious sovereign inequalities. Subsequently, it became impossible for the permanent members to avoid Council reform entirely.⁹⁷

While often taken for granted today, these shifting standards were explicitly discussed at the time. In 1972, the UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim, reflected upon the meaning of this normative transformation for the Council in his annual report:

> Even if the security council were to acquire a new effectiveness through Great Power détente, the idea of maintaining peace and security in the world through a concert of great powers, although these powers obviously have great responsibilities in matters of peace and security, would seem to belong to the nineteenth rather than to the twentieth century, where the process of technological advance and democratization is producing a new form of world society.⁹⁸

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⁹⁴ Madagascar (A.PV/1236, p. 10),
⁹⁶ Somalia (A/PV.1290, p. 6).
⁹⁷ On 17 December 1963, the General Assembly passed Resolution 1991 to expand the Council from 11 to 15 members and increasing its supermajority for decisions from seven to nine. Although the resolution was opposed by the Soviet Union and France, with the other permanent members abstaining, it would come into effect on 31 August 1965 when it was ratified by two-thirds of the UN membership including all the permanent members.
By 2005, when Security Council reform was once again debated in the General Assembly’s 59th Session, a further semantic shift had occurred: the term ‘great Power’ had disappeared from the diplomatic protocol. In contrast to the debates of the 1940s and 1960s, not once was the phrase ‘great Power’ uttered. In the intervening years, the ‘great Powers’, which had constituted the main actors of international diplomacy since the Congress of Vienna, disappeared. Likewise, the role of member states in the Second World War is no longer invoked as a legitimacy claim relating to the Security Council. While the Council’s institutionalised inequality could initially draw quite explicitly on notions of great power privilege and its permanent members’ contributions to the Second World War, today these sources of Council legitimacy appear to have lost their force.

At the same time, contemporary debates about Council reform indicate that the legitimacy of the Security Council has become increasingly evaluated according to democratic principles such as accountability, transparency, and representativeness. Many UN member states have stated that, in order to be regarded as more legitimate, the Council needs to become more representative. Particularly notable is that aspiring permanent members have not so much framed their demands in terms of great power rights and responsibilities, but have rather been especially trenchant in framing their demands for Council reform in democratic language. During the 59th General Assembly Plenary addresses, India’s Prime Minister criticised the UN’s ‘democracy deficit’ and argued:

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100 At least, I could find no evidence of it used publicly in recent UN General Assembly debates. See also Binder and Heupel (2015).  
‘Democracy’s representative nature validates the commitments we take on as countries; it should also determine the manner in which the architecture of international institutions evolves’ (A/59/PV.7). Brazil’s Lula was even more explicit: ‘The improvement of the multilateral system is the necessary counterpart to democratic practice within Nations. Every nation that practices democracy must strive to ensure that in international affairs decision-making is equally open, transparent, legitimate and representative’ (A/58/PV.7). Even a non-democratic status quo power like China has conceded that there is ‘good reason [for UN members] to request that the Security Council increase its size, democracy and transparency and to expect a reformed Council to serve them better’ (A/63/PV.54).

Representation has become central to the legitimation of the contemporary Security Council that it can sometimes function as ‘a proxy for legitimacy’ generally.102 While explicit appeals to great power entitlements could suffice in the immediate post-war period, states today appear more reluctant to invoke explicit inequalities as a legitimate procedural norm.

Even from the Council’s inception, the dissatisfaction of some states with the extent of the veto power indicated that its legitimacy was never beyond question. However, the Security Council’s legitimacy has also drifted as a result of the expansion in UN membership (audience shift); difficulties in living up to traditional standards, such as encompassing the most powerful states (legitimacy erosion); and changing norms about representation, democracy, and sovereign equality (shifting standards). The founding legitimacy afforded

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by fighting the Second World War, and the special rights and responsibilities of great powers, has waned.

Responses: Attempted Reform and Decoupling

The Council’s drifting legitimacy has provoked recurrent reform attempts. By the end of the Cold War, new space had been opened up for the Council’s institutional design and legitimacy to be renegotiated. Moreover, it became increasingly active in deploying peacekeeping operations, coercive interventionism, and initiating new international legal precedents and obligations. Particularly since 1993, when the General Assembly unanimously tabled an agenda item on reforming the Security Council, it seems to have operated with a chronic legitimacy deficit. This set the stage for several attempts at reforming the Security Council to bring it into line with contemporary developments. Nonetheless, attempts to reform the Council have been famously unsuccessful. On paper, the Council remains largely as it was framed in 1945—and subsequently amended in 1965. Nonetheless, alternatives to re-legitimation through institutional reform have come in the forms of operational and rhetorical decoupling.

103 The major landmarks before the 1990s were the (ultimately successful) campaign to increase the number of rotating members in 1965, and a second (failed) 1979 resolution to again increase membership.


Operational decoupling has occurred in different guises. For instance, in contrast to the explicit wording of Article 27 of the UN Charter, it became standard practice from the early days of Council operation not to regard abstentions and absence from voting by the permanent members as equivalent to a veto. The logic of decoupling from the formal rules is underlined by Ian Hurd: ‘The practical advantages of the current practice are often noted: treating abstention as something less than a veto allows for more nuanced signalling and diplomacy by permanent members. They can express displeasure with a draft while still allowing the will of the majority to go ahead.’ Other anachronisms of the UN Charter live on but are ignored in practice—such as references to ‘enemy states’ or to states that no longer exist (such as the USSR). Such creative reinterpreting of the Charter has been an important alternative to formal change.

Other operational decoupling has taken place through the evolution of Security Council working methods, which the Charter (Article 30) left up to Council discretion. Many of these ad hoc changes have been made in response to new legitimacy demands for more ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ in the Council’s activities. The working methods of

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107 Article 27 stipulates that decisions of the Security Council on non-procedural matters ‘shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members including the concurring votes of the permanent members; provided that, in decisions under Chapter VI, and under paragraph 3 of Article 52, a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting’.
109 Bourantonis describes the inheritance by Russia of the USSR’s seat without vote or debate as a case of ‘de facto reform’ (2004, pp. 32–4).
the Council have been adapted pragmatically, centring on dialogue with non-members, consultations and ‘voice’ with troop- and police-contributing countries as well as the Secretariat, and informal interactive dialogues with NGOs and so-called ‘Arria-formula’ meetings.\footnote{Hulton (2004); United Nations, ‘Note by the President of the Security Council: UN Document S/2013/515, 28 August 2013’ (2013), available at: \{http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/515\}, accessed 14 April 2016. Arria-formula meetings, according to the Council’s Working Methods Handbook, are not envisaged in the Charter, but are informal and confidential ‘gatherings’ with anyone with whom an inviting member or members wish to include. They have been in use since 1992. United Nations, ‘Background Note on the “Arria-Formula” Meetings of the Security Council Members’, available at \{http://www.un.org/en/sc/about/methods/bgarriaformula.shtml\}, accessed 4 April 2016.} In these ways, the Security Council has engaged in practices decoupled from its formal structures as a way of responding to new legitimacy demands. Working methods have been adjusted as an alternative to re-legitimation through institutional reform.\footnote{Wood (1996).}

Rhetorical decoupling can also be observed in the proliferation of indirect and euphemistic language that often characterises debates about the Security Council and its reform. While explicit appeals to great power entitlements were appropriate in the immediate post-war period, states today are reluctant to invoke explicit inequalities as a legitimate procedural norm, even if this is widely understood as a necessary concession to Realpolitik. A clear sign of this is that while ‘great Power’ talk has gone into decline, it has become common to argue that the Council should reflect current ‘global realities’. Most contemporary major powers have argued in General Assembly debates that the Council should reflect contemporary ‘realities’,\footnote{For examples from the 65th and 66th General Assemblies, see A/65/PV.49 and A/66/PV.51 (United States), A/66/PV.52 (United Kingdom), A/65/PV.48 and A/66/PV.51 (Japan), A/65/PV.49 (India), A/65/PV.48 (Germany), and A/66/PV.51 (Brazil).} and Kofi Annan’s High Level Panel also singled out those countries ‘who contribute the most to the United Nations financially, militarily and...
diplomatically’ as deserving of stronger influence in Council activities.\textsuperscript{115} Global ‘realities’ often serve as an indirect way to discuss (material) power capabilities and the new members of the great power club.\textsuperscript{116} The contemporary debates are characterised by rhetorical decoupling to the extent that they try to discuss international hierarchies \textit{while appearing not to do so explicitly}. Where earlier debates were framed almost universally as a debate about the rightful privileges and responsibilities of the ‘great Powers’, today this discussion must use a less direct vocabulary and coexists with stronger norms of sovereign equality and democratic decision making. In this way, great power principles that legitimise the Security Council as a ‘directorate of the most powerful states’ have to be ‘softened’.\textsuperscript{117} Aspiring permanent members must therefore carefully frame their arguments for status inequality between greater and lesser powers in terms that affirm equality: adding new members to the great power club will make the Security Council more representative, transparent, effective, participatory, and inclusive.\textsuperscript{118} In this way, rhetoric becomes decoupled from the political reality. The logic was recognised already by Hedley Bull: a condition for the great powers to garner legitimacy in international society is that their dominance cannot be made too explicit, lest the full extent of their special rights and duties provoke resistance from smaller powers.\textsuperscript{119}


\textsuperscript{118} Stephen (2015), p. 780, and documents cited there.

At the same time, debates over making the Security Council more ‘representative’ appear to be plastic enough to accommodate widely different understandings of what the notion of representation means, whether it refers to the general UN membership, world population, geographical distribution, or in fact representing today’s balance of power. In this way, debates about great power privilege today take place at one remove. In fact, the very existence of a ‘reform process’ may attenuate the legitimacy deficit of the Security Council—even if it is chronically deadlocked and open-ended. It allows the Council to remain as it is, while reaffirming the commitment to eventual reform and providing a focal point for endless debates. In the absence of tough reform decisions, lip service fills the gap.

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**Figure 2. The Security Council’s Drifting Legitimacy**

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3. Conclusion

This article has argued for a historical and theoretically eclectic approach to institutional legitimacy. While institutions are typically designed with their own legitimation in mind, failure to subsequently ‘update’ an institution to changed circumstances can engender legitimacy drift. Responses to legitimacy drift include re-legitimation through institutional reform, but also decoupling. The Security Council exemplifies these processes, while providing a vivid illustration of the changing normative structure of international society over time. The initial legitimacy of the Security Council was founded not only on its capacity to deliver peace, by representing UN members, and through discussions at the San Francisco conference. It was also intimately tied up to perceptions of the great powers’ inherent special rights and responsibilities, and the legitimacy that the allied great powers accrued in fighting the Second World War. While this mixture of legitimation fitted the critical juncture of the immediate post-war setting, subsequent political developments and normative shifts subjected this legitimacy to a process of drift. At the time of the Security Council’s founding, the legitimacy of great power privileges was widely accepted and openly discussed; today, such privileges are increasingly frowned upon due to their incompatibility with sovereign equality. In 1945, the victory over the Axis powers boosted the legitimacy of the Security Council; today, this looks anachronistic. At the same time, the audience to which the Council must appeal for legitimacy has become far larger and more diverse, while the Council’s permanent members account for a much-diminished share of global power capabilities. Processes of legitimacy erosion, shifting standards, and audience shift have resulted in legitimacy drift. As attempts at re-legitimation through
institutional reform have not been successful, operational and rhetorical decoupling have proliferated.

This article has not attempted to test its theoretical propositions, but to assess their plausibility in the substantively interesting case of the Security Council. This approach generates several new *ceteris paribus* hypotheses about the legitimacy of IOs. The concept of *audience shift* suggests a causal relationship whereby the extent of change of an IO’s relevant public leads to reduced organisational legitimacy. Thus, IOs whose memberships or wider publics change significantly are more likely to face legitimacy challenges. The notion of *shifting standards* suggests likewise that IOs that experience big changes in the normative demands they face will be less likely to remain legitimate in the eyes of their relevant publics. And the concept of *legitimacy erosion* posits that IOs have to adapt in order to remain legitimate even according to their original legitimacy criteria. To the extent that these hypotheses garner empirical support, it would appear useful to take the concept of legitimacy drift seriously, and expose it to stronger empirical tests.

While the Security Council may be a particularly ‘sticky’ institution, and thus particularly prone to legitimacy drift, the theory sketched above emphasises the diversity of processes contributing to legitimacy drift. Analogous processes can probably be observed in relation to other IOs. The Bretton Woods institutions are prominent examples, whose nature as shareholding institutions with weighted voting has also conflicted with the shift towards principles of democracy and sovereign equality between states. Recent attempts at institutional reform have also been fraught, even if they appear more successful than the
example of the Security Council. The Group of Seven industrialised countries (G7) provides another example, in which an informal club of like-minded capitalist democracies began, over time, to assume competencies that affected all states in the global economy, exposing it to new legitimacy demands that eroded its legitimacy over time—from excluded states to broad social movements and civil society groups. Placing institutional legitimacy in time may help in explaining the legitimation dynamics that other IOs face today.

This article also suggests that developing persuasive and historically sensitive accounts of IO legitimacy needs to draw on insights from multiple institutionalist theories. What do we stand to gain from bringing different institutional theories together? First, we stand to gain a more explicit understanding of the origins and causal processes of institutional legitimacy deficits. Second, we begin to see how concepts and causal factors associated with different institutionalist theories might be assembled together in pursuit of persuasive descriptions and explanations. In the case of the Security Council, understanding its institutional design needs to take legitimacy into account. At the same time, it is hard to understand how Council legitimacy was initially framed without paying attention to the strategic goals of the state representatives who negotiated and designed it. It is also important to be explicit about how this developed over time in interaction with exogenous changes—and resulted in changes such as decoupling. As such, convincing accounts of legitimacy in time will be strengthened by taking into account the strengths of different institutionalist approaches.
Finally, in contrast to accounts suggesting that a legitimacy deficit must be offset either by increased coercion, material inducements, or both,\footnote{Hurd (1999); Reus-Smit (2007), p. 158.} this article suggests that decoupling may be an alternative path towards institutional stabilisation. Moreover, history itself plays a role, contributing to habituation and reinforcing a lack of alternatives.\footnote{See also Symons (2011), p. 2560.} Despite its many dysfunctions and chronic legitimacy deficit, the Security Council remains ‘the only game in town’.