**Who We Are and How We Vote: A Metanarrative Analysis and the UNGA**

**Abstract**

**Identities play a central role in defining national and transnational interests and are therefore considered a relevant reference for understanding political behaviors. However, scholars of politics have yet to agree on a way to operationalize these identities This paper highlights the concept of metanarrative and its ability to characterize similarities and differences between nations’ identities and to explain their actions. Focusing on the seventy-second session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), we offer an empirical model that incorporates the concept of metanarratives into traditional explanations of voting behaviors of nations. We show that affinities between metanarratives embraced by different nations are positively correlated with similarities in their voting patterns. This effect holds even when controlling for key explanatory factors of voting behavior. Additionally, we test whether the content of a nation’s metanarrative can anticipate the likelihood of the nation voting in favor of motions regarding one of the UNGA’s most central political topics – human rights. While** results were directionally consistent, the effect held when controlling for some, but not all, **explanatory factors of voting behavior**.

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Identities are normatively significant as well as behaviorally consequential aspects of politics (Smith 2004). Groups’ goals, preferences, and interests stem largely from their identities (Berenskoetter 2010; Brubaker et al. 2004; Risse et al. 1999). Furthermore, identities influence collectives’ understanding of the political sphere and consequently shape their practical actions (Abdelal et al. 2006; Georgiadis & Manning 2013; Hansen 2013 [2006]; Hintz 2018; Kunovich 2009). Thus, identities have been shown to structure behavior in both national and international arenas (March & Olsen 1998; Shain & Barth 2003).

Despite the common understanding that identities can shed light on foreign policy decision-making (Carlsnaes 2013), scholars of politics have yet to agree on a way to operationalize them (Hopf 2002). Some scholars have highlighted the difficulty of measuring identities and have suggested that they are too elusive to be used as a valuable variable in the social sciences (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). Others have utilized the concept of identities as part of empirical studies on political behaviors (e.g., [Abdelal et al. 2009](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756223/obo-9780199756223-0190.xml#obo-9780199756223-0190-bibItem-0122); Brady & Kaplan 2000; Drulák et al. 2003; Hornung et al. 2019). Nevertheless, scholars argue that identify still seems to have less impact on political research than might be expected (Huddy 2001).

This paper addresses the challenge from different theoretical and empirical points of view. Drawing on narrative literature, we suggest employing a *metanarrative analysis*. Metanarratives are culturally shared dominant stories that guide values, beliefs, and behaviors, thereby helping communities understand desirable social conventions (Andrews 2007; McLean & Syed 2015; Squire et al. 2014). By offering a comprehensive framework through which the specific stories countries collectively tell about themselves are generated, metanarratives help construct national identities (e.g., Bamberg 2004; Connerton 1989; Hammack 2011b; Thorne & McLean 2003). However, a metanarrative analysis goes beyond the specific events included in the chronicles of a particular nation, addressing a more abstract level of the story and enabling a comparative perspective (de Rivera & Sarbin 1998). We therefore suggest that metanarrative analysis is a practical approach, not only for characterizing similarities and differences between nations, but also for explaining their actions. We test this claim on nations’ voting behavior in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Employing network analysis to study the behavioral consequences of national metanarratives, we offer an empirical model that incorporates the concept of metanarrative into traditional explanations of the voting behaviors of nations in the UNGA. We gauge each country’s metanarrative from its constitution’s preamble and show how an affinity between metanarratives embraced by different nations is positively correlated with similarities in their voting patterns in the UNGA. This effect holds when controlling for key explanatory factors of voting behavior, such as level of democracy, wealth, and political as well as regional affiliation. We also test whether the elements of a nation’s metanarrative can predict the likelihood of it voting in favor of a central political topic – human rights. This effect holds when controlling for some explanatory factors of voting behavior, but not for all. Finally, we discuss the potential contribution of metanarrative analysis to our understanding of national identities and their effect on voting behavior in international arenas.

**Identities, Metanarratives, and the International Arena**

Identities determine states’ preferences as well as serve as a source of justification for foreign policy decisions (Carlsnaes 2013; Price & Reus-Smit 1998). Due to the central role identities play in the process of constituting national and transnational interests, they are considered a relevant frame of reference for understanding political behaviors (Adler 2013). For example, identities have been used to study Soviet and Russian foreign policy (Hopf 2002), the development of security communities (Adler & Barnett 1998), regional order in the Arab political sphere (Barnett 1998), Jordan’s foreign policy (Lynch 1999), and the regional formation of the European Community (Checkel & Katzenstein 2009; Oshri et al. 2016).

Previous studies have regarded identity as a narrative construct that has significant influence over international politics in a variety of areas, such as the design of security communities (Williams & Neumann 2000), international order at times of crisis (Mattern 2005), and the formation of cross-national communities (Neumann 1999). This growing use of narratives as a frame of reference for identities, i.e., *narrative identity* (Ezzy 1998; Hammack 2008; Ricoeur 1991; Sheafer et al. 2011), relies on the notion that narratives consist of stories people tell in order to organize their experiences and construct their perception of reality (Bruner 1991; Monroe 2001; Roselle et al. 2014; Selbin 2013). By telling stories, people make sense of the social and political world and thus constitute their selves (Bueger 2013; Meyer 2010; Miskimmon et al. 2017; Singer 2004; Somers 1994; Tilly 2002)*.*

For individuals, narratives serve a purpose within collectives, such as nations (Shenhav 2015). Nations use stories to weave their reconstructed pasts and imagined futures in order to provide foundations for their collective identities (Berenskoetter 2014) and give them a sense of purpose and meaning (McAdams & McLean 2013). These national stories not only help nations define who they are, but also provide them with an understanding of how to act (Somers 1992).

Following the reasoning that identity influences actions, it would make sense to analyze national narratives to understand political behaviors. Yet, this approach poses some difficulty when addressing international arenas, as national narratives are unique to each country. Thus, these narratives refer to specific characters, events, actions, and so forth (Oren et al. 2015). We posit that making insightful observations regarding the global arena requires the analysis of a narrative level that crosses specific times and places (Hobson & Lawson 2008). Therefore, we wish to highlight the potential contribution of a *metanarrative analysis* for such studies.

The notion of metanarratives has been previously addressed in relation to international arenas, mostly referred to by the term *grand narrative* (Lyotard 1984 [1979]). For example, Linklater (2009) studied metanarratives’ ability to systematically reflect the normative principles that regulate global interconnectedness. Diez (2001) and Cebeci (2012) examined metanarratives’ contribution to understanding European policy and governance, and Mattern )2005) pointed to the importance of deconstructing metanarratives. However, to date, the effect of metanarratives on voting behavior has not been studied.

Metanarratives function as a platform through which distinctive social identities of collectives are shaped and specific narratives are designed (Auerbach 2010; Bamberg 2005; Elkins 2013 [2005]). By placing specific narratives within a wider context, national metanarratives present communities with appealing social conventions while creating a sense of a unique and united entity (Andrews 2007; Bamberg 2004; Ross 2007; Thorne & McLean 2003). If narratives fundamentally rest upon stories (Hammack & Pilecki 2012), then a metanarrative is the story behind the story (Auerbach 2010; Somers & Gibson 1994; van Eeten 2006).[[1]](#footnote-1) In other words, a metanarrative serves as the reason that constitutes all specific stories. This reason is expressed by “a cast of characters who are the subjects or objects of action” and by the values that lie at the base of these characters’ views (Causadias et al. 2018: 829).[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, a metanarrative can be gauged through the pillars that comprise it: actions, actors, and values. Addressing metanarratives via these structural components is also consistent with Jones et al. (2014) and Merry’s (2016) work on narrative policy, and Fisher's (1987) understanding of story components.

This approach allows us to deconstruct metanarratives’ abstracted nature yet, at the same time, benefit from the comparative perspective they offer. Specifically, such analysis enables the organization of different stories according to conceptual frames, hence creating a comparable thematic coherence (Pyrhönen 2010). For example, representatives of different states, to varying extents, relate to past injustices inflicted on oppressed minority groups. This is the case for the United States and the issue of slavery, South Africa and the apartheid policy, and Australia and its treatment of the native aborigines once immigrants arrived.. While each of these cases explicitly relates to the history of a different nation, there are commonalities in the way they are all addressed: by relating to types of actors such as “*Minority Groups*” or “*The State*”; the action of “*Recognizing Past Injustice*”; and the value of “*Democratic Ideas*” in acknowledging the wrongness of their past behavior. This example suggests that while national stories are distinct, metanarratives are not necessarily exclusive and can be compared quite easily. Exploring them through their structural components allows both signification of the meaning of a given national story as well as comparison with alternative stories other nations tell about themselves. Assessing such points of resemblance and divergence can be valuable for gauging proximity between countries.

**The Metanarrative Proximity Hypothesis.**

The concept of proximity between nations has been previously highlighted as an influential factor in a broad range of political phenomena in international contexts, such as international aid (Ball 2010), economic ties (Shoemaker et al. 2007), public diplomacy (Sheafer et al. 2013; Sheafer et al. 2014), and the probability of war engagement (Maoz et al. 2006). Often, proximity between nations is measured by the extent to which they are similar (or dissimilar) in key identity characteristics, such as dominant language, religion, and ethnicity. While these conventional measures can capture symmetries and thus measure affinity between nations, they do it in a limited way, as they account only for dichotomous identity features – for example, whether a pair of nations share a common language (Felbermayr & Toubal 2010).

Metanarratives can articulate a broader notion of identity, as they are not limited to traditional measures, such as religion or language. If a nation regards a feature such as religion as a significant part of its identity, it will be encapsulated in its metanarrative. However, a metanarrative is not limited to predetermined measures but allows the content of the nation's identity to dictate the indices by which proximity should be measured. Thus, if a different characteristic is more representative of the nation’s identity than religion or language (for example, the importance of national unity), it will be embodied in its metanarrative. Accordingly, utilizing a metanarrative analysis allows a higher resolution measurement of similarities between nations. Moreover, as we will demonstrate in the next section, a metanarrative resemblance can be measured across a continuum rather than dichotomously, thus enabling a more complex observation of the international arena.

Considering the normative nature of metanarratives and how they help communities understand how they should act (Hammack 2008, 2011a), we hypothesize that nations that share similar metanarratives would be more likely to vote alike than do nations that embrace different metanarratives. That is,

H1: The more proximate nations are in their metanarratives, the more similar their voting pattern at the UNGA.

*The metanarrative motivated action hypothesis*. The question of what determines nations’ voting choices in the UNGA has been previously discussed but has not been determined unequivocally (Boockmann & Dreher 2011). Some scholars argue that political behavior in the global arena represents contestation between states over matters of foreign policy and that contestation takes place in “a low-dimensional ideological space” (Voeten 2021: 14). Voting choices are thus made in accordance with cohesive ideological ideas regarding how different issues should be resolved, and by whom. Others suggest that states’ decisions are made both according to their common foreign policy interests and in line with their sense of understanding of a particular situation (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; March & Olsen 1998). Thus, voting choices in the UNGA stem from the desire to achieve specific goals, advance existing alliances, and attain ethical perspectives.

As a key source for identity formation that guides nations on how to act, the concept of metanarrative can be expected to add another tier to existing explanations of voting behavior in international arenas. Thus, there is room to explore whether metanarratives can enhance our ability to predict nations’ specific positions on certain issues. Most UNGA resolutions are concerned with six categories of issues: security (including disarmament), decolonization, environment, the Middle East (including the Israeli–Palestinian conflict related votes), United Nations (UN) internal issues, and human rights (Hosli et al. 2010). So, if, for example, a nation’s metanarrative emphasizes the importance of independence and sovereignty, we would expect it to be reflected in votes pertaining to decolonization. Similarly, if a nation expresses its concern with the idea of protecting the environment, we assume this will influence its voting choices on related matters.

Of the six main resolution categories, human rights are considered one of the most significant policy areas with which the UN deals (Boockmann & Dreher 2011). Various bodies within the UN are designated to address this area, and many UNGA members view it as an urgent issue for discussion (Luif 2003). Considering the importance of the issue, it could be used as a good indicator for studying the influence of metanarratives on the content of nations’ voting choices. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: Nations that specify the value of *Democratic Ideas* in their metanarrative are more likely to vote in favor of human rights related motions than nations that specify other values.

**Comparative Metanarrative Analysis and Voting in the UNGA**

Using UNGA roll call voting records, constitutional preambles, and methods of network analysis, we present a model for measuring proximity between nations based on their individual metanarratives. We also explain how we overcame possible statistical challenges inherent to this analysis. In addition, we test whether the content of metanarratives enhances our ability to predict the likelihood of actual voting choices related to the issue of human rights in the UNGA.

**Data**

To examine the correlation between metanarratives and political behavior, we analyzed two main datasets: constitutional preambles as a source for gauging metanarratives, and UNGA members’ roll call voting records.

*Constitutional preambles.* As of 2021, the UN included 193 member states. Of these, 158 countries have published a constitution containing a preamble.[[3]](#footnote-3) Our choice to focus on constitutional preambles stemmed from the goals these documents were designed to accomplish. In addition to their institutional role of laying a stable political framework and assigning institutions their political power (Elkins et al. 2009; Elster 1988), constitutions establish common ground rules, signify collective values, and indicate the nation’s future aspirations (Aucoin 2010; Henkin 1994). A constitution’s underlying philosophy is often presented in its preamble (Voermans et al. 2017), which presents both the country’s ideals and its national story, thus playing an essential part in the continuous construction and consolidation of national identity (Addis 2018; Breslin 2009; Law 2016; Orgad 2010; von Arnauld 2017). Constitutions were taken from the constitution project database, which consists of English translations of current constitutions (Melton et al. 2013).[[4]](#footnote-4)

*All UNGA voting*. To test the metanarrative proximity hypothesis, we measured shared political and policy interests. To do so, we used the voting similarity between states in the UNGA (e.g., Davis & Wilf 2017; Girod & Tobin 2016; Reed et al. 2008; Ward & Dorussen 2016; Wolford 2014). UNGA voting records have become a standard data source for this type of research, as it is the only forum in which such a large number of nations regularly converge and express their positions regarding a broad range of international issues (e.g., Bailey & Voeten 2018; Bailey et al. 2017; Kim & Russett 1996; Voeten 2013).

Data were derived from voting records regarding all resolutions brought to a vote during the seventy-second session of the UNGA (2017/2018). Testing the validity of both hypotheses required the constitutional texts to accord with the time voting choices took place. Both before and after this session, some nations were going through different degrees of constitutional modifications. Thus, the particular interest in this session derives from the timing of the constitutional writing it captured, as it allowed us to include all countries with a constitutional preamble (158 nations). Following the literature on roll call voting, we excluded all those with fewer than 2.5% votes in support of the minority side (i.e., unanimous or nearly unanimous votes) and nations that voted less than 20 times (e.g., Poole & Rosenthal 2000 [1997]; Rosenthal & Voeten 2004; Thomassen et al. 2004). The final dataset consisted of 154 countries and a total of 95 resolutions. Voting records were taken from the index to proceedings of the UNGA.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*UNGA voting on human rights issues.* In line with previous work, our sample consisted of all resolutions where the title specified the words “right” or “rights” (e.g., Boockmann & Dreher 2011).[[6]](#footnote-6) We also included resolutions dealing with violations of human rights, such as racism and discrimination, and thus examined a total of 19 resolutions taken from the seventy-second UNGA session.

**Method**

*Gauging metanarratives*. Building on Causadias and colleagues (2018) and their understanding of the concept of metanarrative, we gauged each country’s metanarrative by extracting the most salient structural component that appeared in the constitutional preamble. We expected national stories to refer to more than one type of action, actor, or value. Thus, to determine the most prominent action, actor, and value in the text, we coded each preamble using Discourse Network Analyzer software (Leifeld, 2010). This software allows empirical analysis of political discourse, producing numeric coding of texts. The relative share of each specific component was calculated by dividing the number of times it appeared in the text by the total number of component types.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A codebook for analyzing the constitutional texts was built based on a preliminary reading of all 158 constitutional preambles. The codebook contained 19 actions, 22 actors, and 36 values, a total of 77 types of metanarrative components (for a complete list, see Appendix A). The coding process can be demonstrated using the following sentence, taken from the 2005 Sudanese constitution:

We the people of the Sudan, grateful to Almighty God who has bestowed upon us the wisdom and will to reach a comprehensive peace agreement that has definitively put an end to the longest running conflict in Africa (Sudan’s constitutional preamble 2005).

The sentence above contains references to the following actors: *The People* (“we the people of the Sudan”), *A Religious Figure* (“Almighty God”); actions: *Struggle & Revolution* (“longest running conflict”), *Peace & Reconciliation Processes* (“reach a comprehensive peace agreement”); and values: *Religion & Sacredness* (“grateful to Almighty God who has bestowed upon us the wisdom”). As can be seen in this example, one sentence can include more than one structural component.

To test the reliability of the coding, two independent coders, both advanced graduate students, coded 100 randomly chosen sentences. Coders attributed relevant types of metanarrative components taken from the predetermined constitutional preamble codebook. Coders were asked to choose between 77 component types. In the event that none of these seemed relevant, coders were able to choose a component called “other.” Intercoder Krippendorff’s alpha test showed reliability of < 0.85 (for a complete list of all national metanarratives, see Appendix B).

*Assessing metanarrative proximity.* The scale reflects the extent to which a nation’s metanarrative is consistent with that of other nations, based on their respective attributions to the most common action, actor, and value structural components. To quantify the proximity between each pair of nations’ metanarratives, we created a four-point scale that reflects the number of shared components. The scale ranged from 0 (the two countries did not share any of the three structural components) to 3 (the two countries shared all three components, meaning they had identical metanarratives).

*Assessing voting similarity between nations.* For this purpose, we adopted a model that derived nations’ relative position from their voting in the UNGA. The NOMINATE algorithm (Poole & Rosenthal 2000 [1997]) sets an ideal point for each nation that represents their preferred outcomes relative to other states. Therefore, two countries exhibiting similar preferences would be assigned similar values, while countries that have more distinct preferences would be assigned relatively different values. To quantify their levels of similarity, we calculated the difference between the values of each pair of nations. This is an acceptable scaling procedure for analyzing political choice data. It was previously used to study choice behavior and its effect on polarization in the American Congress (McCarty et al. 2016), political competition in the European Parliament (Thomassen et al. 2004), and, most relevant to this paper, Cold War and Post-Cold-War voting behavior in the UNGA (Voeten 2000).

*Network analysis*. Comparing all pairs of the 154 nations in our dataset produced 11,781 dyads. Since these dyads were not independent of each other, we applied a common approach in network research and analyzed the data using Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) regression (Dreiling & Darves 2011; Krackhardt 1988; Mizruchi [1992](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/657524#rf69)). In QAP models, the data is permuted numerous times via bootstrapping to simulate a distribution of hypothetical correlations between the two variables (1,000 times in this study). Then, the coefficient in the data is tested against the simulated distribution, yielding unbiased parameter estimates and significance *p* values (Burris 2005; Cranmer et al. 2017; Krackhardt 1988; Schreiber & Carley 2007; Whitbred et al. 2011).[[8]](#footnote-8) QAP was implemented using r ‘sna’ package (Butts 2008).

*Measuring UNGA roll call votes regarding human rights issues.* Voting in the UNGA includes three possible options: voting in favor, voting against, and abstaining. Substantial disagreement exists regarding how to treat abstentions in the UNGA. Some scholars view abstention as a softer way of opposing a decision and therefore merge them together (Voeten 2000; Volgy et al. 2003). Others consider this vote choice to have some meaning and thus include it in their scales when calculating the votes (e.g., Luif 2003; Rai 1972; Russett 1967; Thacker 1999). We tested for both by building two scales. The first scales voting such that a vote in favor is coded as 1, and both abstentions and opposing votes are coded as 0. The second scales voting such that a vote in favor is coded as 1, a vote in opposition is coded as 0, and an abstention as 0.5.

*Controls.* To test whether metanarratives explain nations’ vote choices above and beyond other factors, we controlled for the influence of the following variables:

Level of democracy and wealth*.* Previous studies have found states’ relative position in international organizations to be strongly influenced by their level of democracy and wealth (e.g., Carter & Stone 2015; Kim & Russett 1996; Lai & Morey 2006; Lebovic & Voeten 2006; Russett & Oneal 2001; Thacker 1999). We measured the level of democracy using a score taken from the 2018 Freedom House analysis of political rights and civil liberties (House 2018).[[9]](#footnote-9) This data set utilizes a seven-point scale to measure the extent to which a country is free (from 1 for being fully free to 7 for being not free). We included gross national income per capita (Atlas method) as a proxy for economic development (The World Bank national accounts dataset 2018).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Constitutions’ age. It is possible that constitutions that were written around the same time express similar content due to dynamic trends in global political discourse. For example, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 15 countries gained independence and published constitutions containing a preamble; 12 of them did so between the years 1992–1996 and had not since changed their constitution. Therefore, we controlled for the difference between pairs of nations in the year their constitutions were published. Controlling for constitutions’ age allowed us to test whether the proximity in metanarratives could explain the similarity in voting behavior, beyond any effect of constitution writing trends.

Political and regional affiliations. Scholars indicate that nations’ conduct in the UNGA is influenced, to some extent, by their affiliation with various interest groups (Volger 2010). To examine whether metanarratives provide an explanation that exceeds associations with such groups, we controlled for regional affiliation as well as political alliance ties using the following: the G-77, the Non-Aligned Movement (MAM), the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), and the League of Arab States.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Findings**

*Metanarrative proximity hypothesis*. The premise of the approach developed here is that proximate identities will be indicated by proximate metanarratives. Consequently, we predicted that pairs of nations that have more proximate metanarratives would also demonstrate relatively similar voting patterns in the UNGA (H1). As described in the Method section, due to the dyadic structure of the data, we employed a QAP regression model.

In support of H1, we found a significant correlation between metanarrative proximity and voting similarity (*β =-0.07*, *p* < = .001), such that higher metanarrative proximity was associated with higher voting similarity.[[12]](#footnote-12) In other words, we found that the more nations are similar in their metanarratives, the smaller the distance between their political positions, as reflected in their voting patterns at the UNGA. This effect held even when controlling for other key possible predictors of political behavior: i.e., gross national income, freedom level, and regional and political affiliations. It also held when controlling for the possible effect of constitution writing trends (see Table 1).

*Table 1:* Summary of QAP regression analyses predicting similarity in UNGA voting with proximity in national metanarrative, with and without control variables.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Model 1** |  | **Model 2** |
|  | **β** | ***p value*** |  |  **β** | ***p value*** |
| Metanarrative Proximity  | -0.071 | .001 |  | -0.045 | .004 |
|  Control for: |  |  |  |  |  |
|  GNI\* |  |  |  | 0.085 | <.001 |
|  Democracy  |  |  |  | 0.039 | <.001 |
|  Constitution Age |  |  |  | 0.007 |  .558 |
|  Regional Affiliation |  |  |  | -0.007 | .679 |
|  Political Group Ties |  |  |  | -0.102 | <.001 |
| R-square | .028 |  | .272 |
| N | 11,781 |  | 11,781 |

*Note:* N=11,781 dyads among 154 member states of the UN.

Regression coefficients are standardized.

Voting data is taken from the seventy-second sessions of the UNGA.

\*Gross National Income

*Robustness Tests*. As noted, our analysis focused on the seventy-second session of the UNGA due to the timing of constitutional writing it captured (both prior to and following this session, some nations were going through different degrees of constitutional modification; changing the constitutional text may entail a change in the metanarrative). To test the robustness of our findings regarding H1, we recoded the constitutional preambles of eight nations that had either changed or amended their constitutions after 2017 and reran the QAP regression on voting data taken from the seventy-third and seventy-fourth UNGA sessions (2018/2019 and 2019/2020, respectively).[[13]](#footnote-13) The dataset for these two sessions consisted of 158 countries and a total of 206 resolutions. Voting records were taken from the index to proceedings of the UNGA.[[14]](#footnote-14) Results remained significant (r = *-0.09*, *p* < = .001) and held when controlling for key explanatory factors of voting behavior (see Table 2).

*Table 2:* Summary of QAP regression analyses predicting similarity in UNGA voting with proximity in national metanarrative, with and without control variables.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Model 1** |  | **Model 2** |
|  | **β** | ***p value*** |  |  **β** | ***p value*** |
| Metanarrative Proximity  | -0.095 | .001 |  | -0.043 | .007 |
|  Control for: |  |  |  |  |  |
|  GNI\* |  |  |  | 0.137 | <.001 |
|  Democracy  |  |  |  | 0.033 | <.001 |
|  Constitution Age |  |  |  | 0.051 | .042 |
|  Regional Affiliation |  |  |  | 0.009 | .657 |
|  Political Group Ties |  |  |  | -0.155 | <.001 |
| R-square | .034 |  | .386 |
| N | 12,403 |  | 12,403 |

*Note:* N=12,403 dyads among 158 member states of the UN.

Regression coefficients are standardized.

Voting data is taken from the seventy-third and seventy-fourth sessions of the UNGA.

\* Gross National Income

*Metanarrativ- motivated action hypothesis.* Thus far, we have shown that countries with similar metanarratives vote in a similar way at the UNGA. This finding, however, does not inform us of the *content* of political behavior that is associated with specific metanarratives. Next, we tested whether the content of nations’ metanarratives could anticipate their likelihood of voting in favor of particular issues. Specifically, we tested whether emphasizing *Democratic Ideas* as the main value in the metanarrative is correlated with greater support in human rights related votes (H2).

Of 158 UN member nations, 110 have a constitutional preamble that specified *Democratic Ideas* as their main value*.* This finding is in line with previous work indicating that human rights language is present in most constitutions (Beck et al. 2019). However, human rights rhetoric is not necessarily a product of regime characteristics (Beck et al. 2012). Accordingly, some of these nations are ranked as unfree autocracies (e.g., Azerbaijan, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Syrian Arab Republic). A vote on their part in favor of human rights related issues would therefore not necessarily be an obvious choice.

We dummy-coded nations by their metanarrative value such that nations that highlighted *Democratic Ideas* as their main value were coded as 1, and all other nations were coded as 0. Support for human rights related motions in the UNGA was computed by coding a “yay” vote as 1, an abstention as 0.5, and a “nay” vote as 0.

Analysis showed that nations that highlight *Democratic Ideas* as the main value in their metanarrative supported petitions on human rights issues (*M* = 15.33, SD = 2.72) more than nations that highlight other values (*M* = 13.90, SD = 3.07, *t*(152) = 2.75, *p* = .007). This effect held when controlling for the level of freedom of a country as a proxy for democracy, GNI as a proxy for their economic strength, and the age of each constitution. However, while results were directionally consistent, the effect was not significant when controlling for regional affiliation and political ties (see Table 3).[[15]](#footnote-15)

*Table 3:* Summary of regression analyses predicting voting in favor of human rights related motions in the UNGA, with and without control variables.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Model 1** | **Model 2** | **Model 3** |
|  | **B** | ***p value*** | **B** | ***p value*** | **B** | ***p value*** |
| Metanarrative Proximity  | 0.227 | .004 | 0.152 | .055 | 0.092 | .159 |
|  Control for: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  GNI\* |  |  | -0.240 | .006 | -0.003 | .964 |
|  Democracy  |  |  | 0.158 | .059 | -0.072 | .350 |
|  Constitution Age |  |  | 0.016 | .825 | 0.010 | .860 |
|  Regional Affiliation |  |  |  |  | 0.041 | .675 |
|  Political Group Ties: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  G-77 |  |  |  |  | 0.422 | <.001 |
|  EU |  |  |  |  | -0.059 | .401 |
|  AU  |  |  |  |  | 0.019 | .827 |
|  MAM |  |  |  |  | 0.297 | .004 |
|  Arab League |  |  |  |  | 0.093 | .150 |
| R-square | .045 | .137 | .479 |
| N | 154 | 154 | 154 |

*Note:* N= 154 member states of the UN.

Voting data is taken from the seventy-second sessions of the UNGA.

\*Gross National Income

**Summary**

National identities have long been a central focus of research, as they have been shown to explain political behaviors. Despite acknowledging their importance, political scholars have yet to agree on a way to operationalize identities. This paper offers new theoretical and methodological directions for meeting the challenge of analyzing identities and understanding their meaning in the international arena. Relying on narrative theory and, in particular, utilizing the concept of metanarratives, we focused our analysis on voting behavior in the UNGA, adding another tier to existing explanations.

Efforts to incorporate a metanarrative analysis in social science research is gaining momentum (e.g., Syed & McLean 2020). Previous work has emphasized the importance of the concept of metanarrative in a range of political contexts (e.g., Auerbach 2016; Razakamaharavo 2018; Roe 1994; Shenhav et al. 2020). This paper contributes to the existing literature by bringing attention to the structural character of metanarratives. It stipulates and organizes the meaning of the national metanarrative presented in each constitutional text (as this process extracts its particular content) and, at the same time, enables the comparison of metanarratives on a unified and coherent continuum, as the constitutional texts exhibit the same types of components regardless of specific time and place. Moreover, while previous work focused mostly on the theoretical implications of metanarratives, this paper offers an empirical model that incorporates them in a comparative analysis.

Our findings indicate that a metanarrative analysis can contribute to the mapping of inter-country relations within the global arena. Supporting the *metanarrative proximity hypothesis*, the level of proximity between nations’ metanarratives predicted the similarity of their voting behaviors. Further research is required in order to test whether such proximity correlates with different types of formal and informal international alliances, such as mutual defense pacts, nonaggression treaties, etc. Results also lend some support for the *metanarrative motivated action hypothesis*; accordingly, the content of the national metanarrative, and specifically its endorsement of the value of *Democratic Ideas,* can explain a nation’s voting choices regarding human rights related motions, as indicated in Models 1 and 2 (see Table 2). However, as indicated in Model 3 (see Table 2), results were not significant for all control variables.

On a more general note, we believe these results provide preliminary evidence for the explanatory power of metanarratives. Of course, there are limitations to this research. Our analysis included nations that had a constitution containing a preamble, which constitutes most but not all UN members. Future work could analyze alternative constitutive documents to gauge each nation’s metanarrative; this might include annual speeches made by heads of state in UNGA summits or declarations made by leading opposition leaders. Future research could also examine the role of metanarratives in other international arenas, such as the European Parliament or other UN bodies. Nevertheless, this study does provide an encouraging indication of the potential contribution of metanarrative analysis to understanding political behaviors in international arenas.

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**Appendix A**

*Table 3.* All types of values, actors, and actions appearing in the analyzed corpus

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Values** | **Actors** | **Actions** |
| Affinity to the Land | A Party | Aid & Assistance |
| Authoritarian Ideas | African Community | Competitiveness & Achievements |
| Capitalist\Liberal Ideas | Arab Community | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Cooperation & Unity within the Nation | British Crown Community | Economic Improvement\Deterioration |
| Creativity | European Community | Elections, Referendums & Change of Governmental Personal |
| Democratic Ideas | Immigrants & Refugees | Encourage immigration |
| Diversity | Intellectuals & Scientists | Formation\ Dissolution of a Party |
| Effectiveness & Capability | International Community | Fulfilling Civic Duties |
| Feminism | Minority Groups | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Gratefulness | Other People | International Collaboration |
| Happiness | Our Ancestors | Limit Immigration |
| Hope | Religious Figure | National Catastrophe |
| Integrity | Royals | Opposing Colonialism & Imperialism |
| Intellectual Ideas | Security Forces | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Justice & Morality | Statesman | Realizing the Potential of Every Citizen |
| Maintaining Family Values | The Court | Recognizing Past Injustices |
| Maintaining Tradition | The Enemy | Security & Defense |
| Moderation | The Individual | State Building & Reform |
| Modernization | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Patriotism | The State |  |
| Pride & Prestige | The Workers |  |
| Progress & Development | Weak & Disabled |  |
| Prosperity |  |  |
| Protection of the Environment |  |  |
| Quality of Life |  |  |
| Religion & Sacredness |  |  |
| Responsibility |  |  |
| Rule of Law |  |  |
| Secularism |  |  |
| Self-Orientation |  |  |
| Social Democratic Ideas |  |  |
| Socialist Ideas |  |  |
| Stability |  |  |
| Strength & Power |  |  |
| Tranquility |  |  |
| Universal Values |  |  |
|  |  |  |

**Appendix B**

*Table 4.* A Full List of all National Metanarratives According to Country

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Country** | **Value** | **Actor** | **Action** |
| Afghanistan | Religion & Sacredness | The State | Struggle & Revolution |
| Albania | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Algeria | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Andorra | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Angola | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Antigua and Barbuda | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Argentina | Religion & Sacredness | The State | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Armenia | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Australia | Cooperation & Unity | The State | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Azerbaijan | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Bahamas | Religion & Sacredness | Religious Figure | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Bahrain | Religion & Sacredness | Statesman | Competitiveness & Achievements |
| Bangladesh | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Barbados | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Belarus | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Belize | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Benin | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Bhutan | Religion & Sacredness | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Bolivia (Plurinational State) | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Democratic Ideas | International Community | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Brazil | Democratic Ideas | The State | State Building & Reform |
| Brunei Darussalam | Rule of Law | Statesman | State Building & Reform |
| Bulgaria | Democratic Ideas | Statesman | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Burkina Faso | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Burundi | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Cabo Verde | Democratic Ideas | The State | State Building & Reform |
| Cambodia | Democratic Ideas | The State | Struggle & Revolution |
| Cameroon | Democratic Ideas | The People | Security and Defense |
| Canada | Cooperation & Unity | British Crown Community | State Building & Reform |
| Central African Republic | Democratic Ideas | The State | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Chad | Democratic Ideas | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| China | Socialist Ideas | The State | Struggle & Revolution |
| Colombia | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Comoros | Democratic Ideas | The People | Security & Defense |
| Congo (Republic of the) | Democratic Ideas | The State | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Costa Rica | Democratic Ideas | Statesman | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Cuba | Socialist Ideas | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Czechia | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Dem People’s Republic of Korea | Socialist Ideas | Statesman | Struggle & Revolution |
| Dem Republic of the Congo | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Recognizing Past Injustices |
| Djibouti | Democratic Ideas | The People | International Collaboration |
| Dominica | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Dominican Republic | Democratic Ideas | Statesman | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Ecuador | Diversity | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Egypt | Democratic Ideas | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| El Salvador | Democratic Ideas | Statesman | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Equatorial Guinea | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Eritrea | Democratic Ideas | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Estonia | Progress & Development | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Ethiopia | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Fiji | Diversity | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| France | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Gabon | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Gambia | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Georgia | Social Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Germany | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Ghana | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Greece | Religion & Sacredness | Religious Figure | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Grenada | Democratic Ideas | The People | Fulfilling Civic Duties |
| Guatemala | Democratic Ideas | The State | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Guinea | Democratic Ideas | The People | International Collaboration |
| Guinea-Bissau | Democratic Ideas | The People | State Building & Reform |
| Guyana | Democratic Ideas | The People | State Building & Reform |
| Haiti | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Honduras | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Hungary | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| India | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Indonesia | Justice & Morality | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Iran (Islamic Republic) | Religion & Sacredness | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Iraq | Religion & Sacredness | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Ireland | Religion & Sacredness | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Israel[[16]](#footnote-16) | Affinity to the Land | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Japan | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Jordan | --- | Statesman | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Kazakhstan | Cooperation & Unity | The People | State Building & Reform |
| Kenya | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Kiribati | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Kosovo | Democratic Ideas | The State | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Kuwait | Democratic Ideas | The State | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Kyrgyzstan | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Lao People's Dem Republic | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Latvia | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Lebanon | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Liberia | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Libya | Democratic Ideas | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Liechtenstein | Religion & Sacredness | Statesman | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Lithuania | Maintaining Tradition | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Madagascar | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Malawi | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Mali | Democratic Ideas | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Marshall Islands | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Mauritania | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Micronesia (Fed States) | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Mongolia | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Montenegro | Democratic Ideas | The State | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Morocco | Democratic Ideas | The State | International Collaboration |
| Mozambique | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Myanmar | Democratic Ideas | The State | State Building & Reform |
| Namibia | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Nauru | Religion & Sacredness | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Nepal | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Nicaragua | Democratic Ideas | Statesman | Struggle & Revolution |
| Niger | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Nigeria | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Pakistan | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Panama | Democratic Ideas | The State | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Papua New Guinea | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Paraguay | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Peru | Religion & Sacredness | Statesman | Struggle & Revolution |
| Philippines | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Poland | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Portugal | Democratic Ideas | The State | Struggle & Revolution |
| Republic of Korea | Democratic Ideas | The People | State Building & Reform |
| Republic of Moldova | Democratic Ideas | Statesman | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Russian Federation | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Rwanda | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| St. Kitts and Nevis | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| St. Lucia | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| St. Vincent & Grenadines | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Samoa | Religion & Sacredness | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Sao Tome and Principe | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Senegal | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Serbia | Democratic Ideas | The State | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Seychelles | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Slovakia | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Slovenia | Strength & Power | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Solomon Islands | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| South Africa | Democratic Ideas | The People | State Building & Reform |
| South Sudan | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Spain | Democratic Ideas | The People | State Building & Reform |
| Sri Lanka | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Sudan | Democratic Ideas | The People | Peace & Reconciliation Processes |
| Suriname | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Eswatini (Formerly known as Swaziland) | Progress & Development | The People | State Building & Reform |
| Switzerland | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Syrian Arab Republic | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Tajikistan | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Thailand | Democratic Ideas | The State | State Building & Reform |
| The FYR Macedonia | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Timor-Leste | Democratic Ideas | The State | Struggle & Revolution |
| Togo | Democratic Ideas | The People | International collaboration |
| Tonga | Rule of Law | Statesman | State Building & Reform |
| Trinidad and Tobago | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Tunisia | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Turkey | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Turkmenistan | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Tuvalu | Maintaining Tradition | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Uganda | Democratic Ideas | The People | Constitution Adoption & Implementation |
| Ukraine | Democratic Ideas | The State | Independence & Sovereignty |
| United Arab Emirates | Religion & Sacredness | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| United Kingdom[[17]](#footnote-17) | Democratic Ideas | Statesman | State Building & Reform |
| United Rep of Tanzania | Democratic Ideas | The People | State Building & Reform |
| United States | Justice & Morality | The People | State Building & Reform |
| Vanuatu | Cooperation & Unity | The People | Struggle & Revolution |
| Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic) | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Vietnam | Socialist Ideas | The State | Struggle & Revolution |
| Zambia | Democratic Ideas | The People | Independence & Sovereignty |
| Zimbabwe | Democratic Ideas | The People | Struggle & Revolution |

1. For further discussion on the definition of narrative, see also: Genette 1980 [1970]; Jaworski & Coupland 1999; Prince 1980; Rimmon-Kenan 2002 [1983]; Shenhav 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion on metanarratives as value-oriented concepts, see McLean & Syed 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Of the 158 constitutional preambles included in this study, 154 were written either in the twentieth or the twenty-first century. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.un.org/en/library/page/index-proceedings-general-assembly-regular-sessions>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These do not include Israeli–Palestinian conflict-related resolutions as these belong to the Middle East category (Boockmann & Dreher 2011; Kim & Russett 1996; Voeten 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While a nation may strongly express more than just one type of actor, action, or value, we focused on the most salient ones due to the extensiveness of our analysis (over 150 nations). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more applications of QAP in political networks research, see Henry 2011; Lee et al. 2012; Shrestha & Feiock 2009; Weible et al. 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FreedomintheWorld2018COMPLETEBOOK_0.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.un.org/en/model-united-nations/groups-member-states>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. We operationalized the voting similarity variable as the difference between the values derived for pairs of nations using the NOMINATE algorithm (see the method section). Therefore, a correlation between higher similarity in nations’ metanarrative and voting was denoted with a *negative* coefficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The eight nations are Algeria, Burundi, Chad, China, Comoros, Cuba, Georgia, and Sudan. Metanarratives are considered relatively stable by nature but not unchangeable. Accordingly, some of these countries did not change their metanarratives (Algeria, Burundi, China, Cuba), and some changed only one of the three possible structural components (Chad, Comoros, Georgia, and Sudan). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. https://library.un.org/index-proceedings/general-assembly. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The results were directionally consistent when scaling abstentnions the same as a “nay” vote, but were not significant. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As a proxy for a codified constitution, we analyzed The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As proxy for a codified constitution, we analyzed the Magna Carta. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)