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**The Domestic Threat to the LIO:
Assessing International Cooperation in the Era of
Democratic Recession**

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Abstract

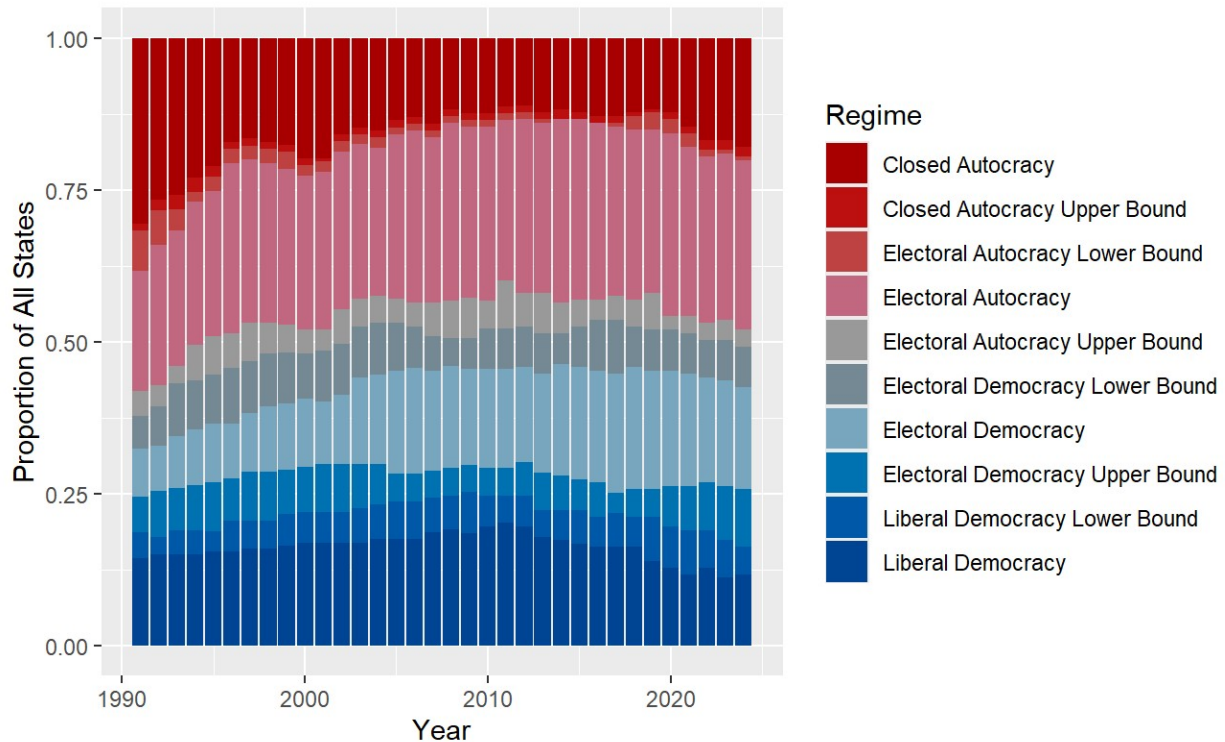
As the breakdown of democratic institutions commonly known as “democratic backsliding” accelerates, scholars are left to wonder what its impact will be on the international institutions that form the backbone of the liberal international order (LIO). Existing work has documented some actions backsliders have taken, assessing how backsliding states obstruct action in international organizations (IOs), form coalitions to contest norms, and create competing organizations to counter the order more generally. However, scholars frequently conflate backsliding states with illiberal and autocratic regimes, effectively denoting backsliding as simply a means for states to become less democratic, rather than attempting to understand if this process creates novel effects. This paper aims to understand not only if backsliding states are different from their entrenched counterparts, but also how international cooperation has changed in the era of democratic recession more generally. In doing so, I create a typology of regime types based on their levels of democracy and changes therein and find that states’ voting and rhetorical behaviors align more closely with overall levels of democracy, not backsliding status. Overall, autocracies vote in favor of resolutions less frequently and will utilize normative language favoring non-interference in internal affairs. However, specific voting and rhetorical behaviors are more inconsistent, indicating a focus on self-interest rather than any categorical rejection of the LIO and its values.

Introduction

On 20 January 2025, Donald Trump returned to the White House as the forty-seventh president of the United States. To many, Trump's re-election meant a further breakdown of American democracy: Trump regularly displayed autocratic tendencies throughout his previous presidency and showed little interest in maintaining democratic norms – or, for that matter, the US-centric liberal international order (LIO) that dominated the international world since the end of the Second World War (See Cooley and Nexon 2020; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Rather than maintaining this alliance structure, he began acting as if his allies were his adversaries, actively antagonizing them via steep tariffs and refusing to work with them to resolve the Russia-Ukraine War, instead directly negotiating with the Russian president and even seeming to favor his position (*Al Jazeera* 2025; Maynes 2025; NPR Staff 2025; Swanson, Rappeport, and Romm 2025). These actions alarmed the United States' traditional allies; seemingly, the trans-Atlantic alliance that had defined the U.S. foreign policy for nearly a century was no more.

Trump's return, however, was not in isolation. Since the turn of the millennium, but particularly in the last fifteen years, states have moved away from democracy at an alarming rate, reverting to more authoritarian forms of rule. This process, referred to as democratic backsliding, is defined by autocratization through nonviolent and often legal means; rather than use the military to seize power, potential autocrats erode norms and institutions, centralizing their power in the process (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 97-117). As a result, the number of democracies has consistently decreased since 2010, with the number of liberal democracies experiencing an especially sharp downturn (Figure 1). However, it is currently unknown the extent to which backsliding states pose a threat to the liberal international order – that is, the American-led system of multilateral institutions established after 1945 and the power

Figure 1. States split by the Varieties of Democracy's Regime score, 1991-2024.



structure therein (see e.g., Ikenberry 2019). If all backsliding states are as hostile to the LIO as Trump is, the sheer level of autocratization inherently poses a danger to it. Moreover, if these states are at least hesitant towards the international order, states more openly opposed to it – such as Russia, whose invasion of Ukraine openly flouted one of the order's core tenets – could tilt these states from being wary of the LIO to openly against it. In other words, how has international cooperation changed in the era of democratic recession?

This paper will attempt to answer this question by assessing how backsliding states act in what some of the leading representations of the international order are – that is, international organizations (IOs). In it, I will draw from literatures discussing both backsliding specifically and the LIO's foundation, logics, and health more generally to connect these discussions. To adequately understand backsliding's effects on the existing international order, we must first discuss *why* it exists and *how* it operates. After all, states that oppose the LIO frequently attack

the norms and power structure that defines it, and the order's stability is dependent not only on the political power used to create it but also on the resilience of the norms that give the order structure.

The Normative Foundation of the International Order

G. John Ikenberry detailed the foundations of international orders in his work *After Victory*, finding that the LIO is more institutionalized than previous orders, and thus, its stability relies on its resilience to challenges. Ikenberry argued that the American-led order was a *hegemonic constitutional* order, with the United States as the sole superpower while organizing international relations on the rule of law and binding institutions, which in turn, limit raw power (Ikenberry 2019: 4-6, 29-37). He further found that the order derived its legitimacy from its normative foundations, which set binding and authoritative limits on power, and it remained stable due to democracies' unique capacity to work in institutions and facilitate other states' integrations into the LIO (Ikenberry 2019: 30-32, 246-49). Thus, the order will survive as long as these norms remain dominant, but its stability is heavily associated with the number of democracies in the order. Ikenberry additionally attributed an order's stability to its resilience; for constitutional orders, that required political institutions to withstand challenges (Ikenberry 2019: 44-48). While *After Victory* was originally written in 1991, it provides key insight into how the LIO formed and how it remains stable, along with potential threats to the order. The LIO formed from an institutional transaction; in response to American supremacy, states created institutions to both limit and entrench the United States' power, creating norms as ways to define rules for this era of international relations. However, the order remains stable only when states agree to it and work within it. In his 2019 edition, Ikenberry asserted that the "liberal hegemony"

was weaker than initially thought; if the United States “steps out” of the international order, the order may decline and fall apart (Ikenberry 2019: xviii-xix). Without the hegemonic state defining the order, states are open to question the order in its entirety, which may be a challenge that the institutions defining the LIO cannot adequately respond to. Backsliding also plays a role – if there are fewer democracies to buy into institutions, then those pillars of the LIO may very well deteriorate.

Ikenberry also contended that the liberal international order was defined by its democratic norms, which states often target in their objections to its legitimacy. While questioning these normative foundations can indeed play an active part in shaping and strengthening them (Orchard and Wiener 2024), resisting or outright violating them – for instance, invading another state – can show a rejection of the overall normative framework, potentially weakening the international order itself. One such way states contest norms is by pitting two norms against each other, as Rüländ and Welsh (2024) discussed; they depicted norm conflict as a state encountering two norms perceived to be incompatible. To resolve this, states can argue for one to take priority, attempt to reconcile the differences between the two, or take various ad hoc responses to address the situation (Rüländ and Welsh 2024: 43-51). If states find there is a norm conflict, they may attempt to render one invalid in favor of another, offering another lens into how norms can be shaped by situations themselves. Liese (2024) also discussed norm conflict, but she argued that transnational crises can both shape norms and be shaped by norms, and the crisis’s existence shows existing structures are inadequate (Liese 2024: 72, 75-80). If two norms come into conflict, Liese argued, existing normative structures must come short, and thus, they must be reworked or reinterpreted to resolve the issue. If norms are in conflict, then, states have the opportunity to actively challenge existing normative structures – both in favor of and against the

existing order. While this can be a result of circumstances, as these scholars depicted, states can create norm conflicts intentionally, weaponizing one norm against another to achieve a state's goals. Moreover, these discussions do not fully examine outright violations of normative commitments, perhaps a more blunt rejection of the existing framework.

Evers (2017) does focus on norm violations and transgressions, which he attempted to classify based on the social effects of noncompliance. In his typology, he asserted that states overtly violate international norms to assert their identity – either as an insider or an outsider of the existing order (Evers 2017: 786-88). Among norm transgressions, states can not only assert their identity, but they also reinforce or challenge the existing bounds that define international society, advocating for differing understandings of who is truly an insider or outsider in global politics (Evers 2017: 786, 788-91). Through this categorization, Evers identified the functions of why states violate norms, which can be used empirically to understand why a state rejects or violates its normative commitments.

Understanding the LIO's foundations – normative or otherwise – displays how central and interlinked democracy and norms are. If democracies are unique in being able to join and support institutions as Ikenberry finds, their maintenance is vital for the international order to survive. With democracy in recession, the LIO may become unstable directly due to a lack of democracies willing to uphold the order in its current state. Moreover, the institutional bargain at the core of the international order is also based on all sides accepting it. With global power always being dynamic, new states may rise to challenge a United States that is less interested in maintaining its global hegemony. States may also seek to challenge the normative basis of the LIO, identifying themselves as outsiders for self-interested means, or even contest the order wholesale by arguing for a different boundary between who can take part in shaping the

international system and who cannot. While discussions on the effects of outright transgressions adequately document its effects, states can also attempt to justify their norm violations through norm collisions. While Rüländ, Welsh, and Liese argue that norm contestation is part of building stronger and more resilient norms, they do not discuss manufactured norm conflicts in the sense of deliberately pitting two norms against each other. Doing so has revealed a new route to warp norms for self-interested means: as Russia was invading Ukraine, for example, it decried Ukraine's refusal to recognize what it called the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, deploring its "shell[ing of] peaceful civilians" in the process (S/PV.8970 2022: 11-13). While actively violating Ukrainian sovereignty, Russia claimed it was doing so on humanitarian grounds and the need to allow Luhansk and Donetsk self-determination. This type of violation is not well-researched, yet states regularly use other norms to justify their transgressions. Moreover, while Ikenberry discusses democracies as being uniquely able to commit to an institutionalized order, it remains unclear how democratic backsliding affects an order's stability from this literature.

Backsliding, Illiberal, and Authoritarian States in the Multilateral World

With backsliding's prevalence in international affairs, it is not surprising scholars have attempted to understand exactly how backsliding states act in multilateral organizations. Existing work (e.g., Bargués, Joseph, and Juncos 2023; Carothers and Press 2022; Cooley 2015, Cottiero et al. 2024; Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2024; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023) documented some actions backsliders have taken to resist liberal norms in international organizations, providing a direct connection, but these works often use the term "backsliding" interchangeably with "illiberal" or "authoritarian," confusing its role. While this provides a fruitful discussion on

what these states do in multilateral contexts, conflating terms results in a confused role for backsliding itself. Without a clear understanding of if backsliding states are unique, we cannot adequately answer how it affects the LIO.

One piece that addressed backsliding in through the lens of international politics, Cooley and Nexon (2020), implied backsliding is nought but a route for states to become autocracies, referring to the phenomenon as “multipolar populism,” part of a larger “counter-order movement” (Cooley and Nexon 2020: 132-136).¹ Rather than backsliding being distinct, Cooley and Nexin argued it was just one aspect of a larger competition between great powers, insofar as smaller states move between competing international orders as they change regime type. Other scholars referred to democratic backsliding through similar means, utilizing the term “illiberal” to denote these states (e.g., Cottiero et al. 2024; Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2024; Lipps and Jacob 2024). While they did not dismiss backsliding as solely a way for states to become authoritarian, using “illiberal” allows for confusion between if a state is a stable – albeit not fully liberal – democracy or a backsliding state actively moving away from a democratic system.

Despite utilizing “illiberal” when referring to these states, Cottiero et al. (2024) provided a useful discussion on how backsliding states affect international organizations. They claimed that illiberal regimes seek “to challenge norms, sway votes, and influence procedures that ultimately affect what these organizations are able to do,” and that their success depends on their resources and power within an organization, if they can form interest coalitions, their influence over formal decision-making procedures, and how IO action changes based on the prior steps (Cottiero et al. 2024: 13, 15-16). Cottiero et al. went further when discussing heterogeneous IOs

¹ While Cooley and Nexon do not directly link these two ideas, they are clearly correlated, as “Multipolar populists publicly reject liberal elements of international order” while “counter-order movements...usually object to aspects of international architecture on ideological grounds” (Cooley and Nexon 2020: 57, 132).

like the United Nations, asserting that in these organizations, “there is come competitive process of coalition formation with democratic and illiberal regimes presenting both arguments to persuade and inducements, both positive and negative, to secure support” (Cottiero et al. 2024: 9). To Cottiero et al., these normative divisions are driven by regime type, as “illiberal regimes have divergent preferences from liberal ones,” driving the need for some sort of resistance to the LIO from these states (Cottiero et al. 2024: 14). In their analysis, backsliding is a way for illiberal states to appear in otherwise democratic organizations, causing issues in IOs like the EU that utilize consensus decision-making and allowing for more expansive illiberal coalitions in heterogeneous IOs. Otherwise, though, backsliding and illiberalism are regarded as one and the same in this work.

However, Meyerrose and Nooruddin (2023) suggested that backsliding is unique among forms of illiberalism and autocracy, breaking from the rest of the literature. In their intervention, they asserted that backsliding states were *uniquely positioned* to act against liberal IOs, and these states used their positions on the inside to oppose liberal norms and protect themselves from scrutiny (Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023: 8-10). Due to their previous democratic status, backsliders are uniquely defensive of their sovereignty, opposing targeted UNHRC measures while attempting to maintain their “democratic veneer” (Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023: 3, 16-17, 26). In doing so, Meyerrose and Nooruddin’s argument was distinct from much of the literature, which dismissed backsliding as only a way for states to become less democratic. Not only do backsliders have a stronger position in the international system to oppose democratic norms and measures, but they also are more defensive of their sovereignty – as they are more directly witness to the LIO’s promotion of democracy and are part of organizations that focus on driving democratic values, all while resisting those values and eroding their democracy

(Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023: 8). This argument thus raises the question of exactly how scholars should treat backsliding, particularly in terms of cooperation on the international stage. Is backsliding important only through its creation of less democratic actors, or is it an entirely novel phenomenon that provides unique motivations to states?

Despite the plethora of terminology, none of these attempts to define backsliding and determine its effects are sufficient. Assessing backsliding as a type of “counter-order movement” and analyzing it through the lens of competing international orders groups backsliders alongside all states opposed to the current international order. If backsliding states are anomalous, as Meyerrose and Nooruddin assert, they deserve their own analysis. However, while Meyerrose and Nooruddin *claim* backsliding is unique, their argument does not adequately back this finding, calling it into question. Furthermore, using “illiberal” to refer to these states is also inadequate: while illiberalism may exist as a rejection of at least some parts of liberalism and the West more broadly, and often can be strongly tied to a breakdown of democracy (see e.g. Berman 2017; Laruelle 2024), I define democracy much more procedurally, utilizing the Varieties of Democracy’s *electoral* democracy index. This index refers to electoral democracy as making leaders responsive to citizens insofar as there exists free and open electoral competition for the chief executive, with freedom of expression and an independent media (Coppedge et al. 2025: 46). While this does include some aspects of liberalism, its focus is on free and fair elections. Backsliding is defined as an erosion of democracy, after all – while backsliders may target liberal norms and procedures in their attacks against democracy, their usual target is on democracy itself, hence why I treat democracy and liberalism as mostly separate.

Even though these literatures provide a foundation for understanding how the LIO was made and how it works, along with displaying what backsliding states do in IOs, they fail to resolve the uncertainty about how to understand backsliding states in the multilateral world. Clearly, scholars do not agree on the terms to refer to backsliding states with: are they like other illiberal and authoritarian regimes, or something entirely novel? Does their existence alone shake the institutional foundations of the liberal international order, and to what extent do their actions shake the order's normative bedrock in a way that weakens it? Cottiero et al. (2024) alluded to these states moving in tandem through coalition-building, insofar as states work together largely by regime type to contest democratic norms, yet they did not discuss how pervasive these coalitions are. Do these coalitions define heterogeneous IOs like the United Nations, or are they less regime-focused and instead vary by issue? A final issue none of these literatures cover is when states utilize norms to justify transgressions of other norms, essentially forcing a norm conflict to shield themselves from condemnation. As mentioned, Russia used arguments of self-determination and protecting civilians while actively breaching Ukrainian sovereignty in 2014 and 2022 (S/PV.7138 2014: 2-3; S/PV.8968 2022: 10-12, 25; S/PV.8970 2022: 11). Instead of rejecting the norms presented by the LIO wholesale, the Russians warped the norms of self-determination and Responsibility to Protect to conflict with sovereignty, justifying its aggression. The literature does not seem to have accounted for such a tactic, and it remains unknown the extent to which backsliding and other illiberal or authoritarian states engage in similar activity.

This paper intends to fill this gap in two ways. First, I will create a quantitative typology of regime type based in part on democratic backsliding, as the differences in terminology seen throughout the literature confuses backsliding's role in the international world. Critically, I separate backsliding into democratic *erosion*, which does not result in autocracy, and democratic

reversion, which does. With this classification, I can then clarify if backsliding states are indeed distinct from other regimes and discuss international cooperation more generally, both through my typology and independent of it. I do this both through testing Cottiero et al. (2024)'s claims of coalition-building by regime alongside addressing states' rhetoric around norms presented in the LIO – with a particularly strong focus on sovereignty, non-interference, and self-determination. All three terms are regularly utilized to justify or block multilateral action, and backsliding states may use these terms to more aggressively preach non-interference than others. From this, I can discuss how international cooperation has changed in the era of democratic recession from multiple angles, something critical for understanding the future of the LIO.

Expectations

Based on existing literature, I expect that backsliding states aim to advance countervailing norms to resist the dominance of those previously advanced in the LIO. Instead of at least nominally upholding the values and norms the existing international order advances, these states prioritize national interests far more than democracies, and they are also more likely to transgress or contest norms in international bodies. This effect is at least in part due to the international order's focus on advancing democracy, and as these states erode their democratic institutions, they are then incentivized to counter democratic norms or else face condemnation. However, these states justify their resistance to international norms through those existing norms, frequently emphasizing sovereignty and non-interference to resist international action. As a result, backsliding not only strikes the normative foundations of the LIO, since it is less able to act on international crises that often develop from domestic issues, but it also weakens the LIO due to a lower number of democracies in general. I intend to utilize international organizations to

test my hypotheses. While cooperation exists outside of IOs, these organizations often serve as a basis for international cooperation, whether that be through sharing a symbolic position through rhetoric or pushing for international action through a resolution.

In addition to a more general discussion of resistance to international cooperation, I have two testable hypotheses:

H1. Backsliding states are less likely to cooperate in IOs, and they are instead more likely to block actions that target their interests. While democratic states may be willing to cooperate in international organizations and advance the norms of the LIO, backsliding states are more resistant to it. Democracies are more likely to buy into international institutions, as Ikenberry argues, yet backsliders' resistance to the international organization is also due to self-interest. After all, the LIO's normative foundations are steeped in the language of democracy, so states that resist democracy open themselves to condemnation by that same order. Thus, they may block actions by the international order more often, usually through voting against resolutions more frequently than other states, signaling their displeasure if nothing else.

H2. Backsliding states justify their opposition by using normative language at a higher rate than other states, emphasizing sovereignty and non-intervention in particular. In response to blocking action in IOs, states are expected to justify their reasoning; I focus on international organizations here in part due to them providing a platform for norm contestation in states' rhetoric. Given that platform, states should use normative language to explain their votes against international action, especially by using the language of sovereignty and non-interference to oppose intervention to promote democracy or for humanitarian reasons – effectively pitting these norms against one another. Doing so not only reveals these states' focus on self-interest, as prioritizing sovereignty allows them the same argument to protect themselves against

condemnation for democratic backsliding, but it also creates a norm collision that could weaken the overall normative foundations of the international order.

I also aim to test both Cottiero et al. (2024)'s discussion of coalition-building by regime and Meyerrose and Nooruddin (2023)'s argument that backsliding is distinct in its resistance to the international order. Cottiero et al. claims that illiberal states will cooperate in heterogeneous IOs like the United Nations to resist democratic norms, so states should group themselves somewhat clearly by regime type in their voting or rhetorical behavior. Not doing so would indicate that regime type is not primary, that instead, states are more focused on their own interests rather than some wholesale rejection of the LIO. Moreover, Meyerrose and Nooruddin's assertion that backsliding states are unique is vital to test; if backsliders are distinct from other states, then they will have a novel effect on the LIO's stability. Alternatively, if they are similar to non-backsliding regimes, then the effect of backsliding may be more a result of the state's retreat from democracy towards authoritarianism rather than anything distinct.

After assessing backsliding states through the lens of their voting and rhetoric in IOs, I find support for both of these hypotheses, yet importantly, do not find a significant difference between backsliding and entrenched states and do not find a distinct coalition of non-democracies in voting or rhetorical behavior. Backsliding states do differ from entrenched democracies, but they resemble more autocratic states in their differences and thus are not entirely unique in their challenges to the international order. Instead, resistance to international cooperation is driven by the overall level of democracy in a regime, with more autocratic regimes voting in favor of international action less often and emphasizing sovereignty and self-determination as a way to forestall intervention. Furthermore, their resistance is not unified: there

does not seem to be a coalition of illiberal or autocratic states working in tandem with each other and resisting the LIO wholesale. States instead put more of an emphasis on self-interest than democracies, which regularly conflict with the normative commitments of the LIO. This leads to reduced cooperation in international organizations, where states challenge the norm-based foundations of the international order to protect their interests or advance a narrative, often forcing collisions between two norms to make their point. Despite backsliding states being similar to their entrenched counterparts, however, this phenomenon still poses a danger to the liberal international order. Even if backsliders do not act entirely uniquely, they reduce the level of democracies in the international order and seem to have fractured the once-unified group of democracies that have long dictated the trajectory of the LIO.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, I will create a typology of backsliding states with which I can analyze their actions and elaborate on my methods of analysis. With that, I will then cluster states' voting and rhetoric to understand the groupings they create in international organizations and examine the normative aspects of states' speeches to not only understand *when* states utilize norms to justify their actions, but also *how* and *why* they do so. This will be done through a case study of the evolution of and resistance to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm in Libya and Syria, as democracies and autocracies argued over whether humanitarian intervention superseded the need to respect a state's sovereignty.

Methodology

I use a primarily quantitative yet mixed-method approach to assess how backsliding states resist cooperation in IOs, how different they are from other states, and if states cooperate by regime type in multilateral organizations. In doing so, I create a typology of states based on

their overall level of democracy and state of backsliding using a combination of the electoral democracy and regime scores from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. I will then employ this classification in the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly to analyze states' voting patterns and normative rhetoric, in addition to utilizing clustering techniques to organize coalitions based on these patterns.

Along with the V-Dem dataset, which I use to classify states, I source my UNSC and UNGA voting and speech data from mostly existing datasets (Barash 2022; Jankin et al. 2025; “Research Guides” 2025; Sakamoto and Matsuoka 2025; UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library 2025).² These datasets contain the voting records for SC and GA resolutions since 1991 along with speech data from all UNSC meetings and the UNGA General Debate speeches – a yearly special session of the General Assembly where states speak on the matters they deem most important in the world, effectively revealing their positions on security issues. These related yet distinct bodies of the United Nations are necessary for thorough analysis, as each one serves a different purpose. The UNSC is focused on international security, passing binding resolutions while also acting as an arena for regular political grandstanding between states. The UNSC also is expected to address international crises and provide information on conflicts as they happen. However, its small size of fifteen states in a given year makes it difficult to assess coalition-building in the UNSC; instead of being able to have comprehensive results based on regime type, clustering outcomes would focus on the dynamics between the five permanent members, limiting

² UNGA voting will use the readymade dataset found at the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library; UNGA speech data is from Jankin et al.'s General Debate corpus (2025); UNSC speeches uses Sakamoto and Matsuoka (2025)'s data of all UNSC speeches; and UNSC voting uses Barash (2022)'s dataset alongside hand-collated data from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library's research guides on the topic. Barash's dataset only includes *passed* resolutions until the end of 2021. I have expanded it to include resolutions up to 31 December 2024, and all *failed* resolutions from 1991 to 2024. You can find the augmented dataset here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1SVc_7DYnKmHyd8wzIFafd19ya-IHpJv-SP0KB0Xkk-Q/edit?usp=sharing.

the scope of analysis. The UNGA resolves this issue, as it also discusses matters of international peace and security yet does not pass binding resolutions. As a result, these resolutions are more performative than actionable, yet they still indicate a state's position on the matter and its normative grounding. By using both, then, we can fully understand the general coalitions states vote in on international matters while also focusing on matters of international security – specifically focusing on crises, which the UNSC regularly deals with.

Quantifying Democracy

To create my typology of backsliding states, I use V-Dem's electoral democracy and regime indices to split states by regime type and backsliding status. The electoral democracy index measures states through the lens of electoral competition, rating them in terms of clean and meaningful elections, suffrage, and a free political and civil society, with 0 being a fully consolidated autocracy and 1 being a strong democracy (Coppedge et al. 2025: 46). Since I am defining backsliding through the breakdown of norms and institutions as autocrats subvert democracy to centralize power, the electoral democracy score is a better fit than other V-Dem indices such as the *liberal* democracy score, which is more far-reaching in its definition.³ I also use V-Dem's Regimes of the World measure to further classify states into democracies and autocracies more generally. This score integrates the electoral democracy score alongside other scores in its ten-point scale from closed autocracies (0) to liberal democracies (9) (Coppedge et al. 2025: 297).

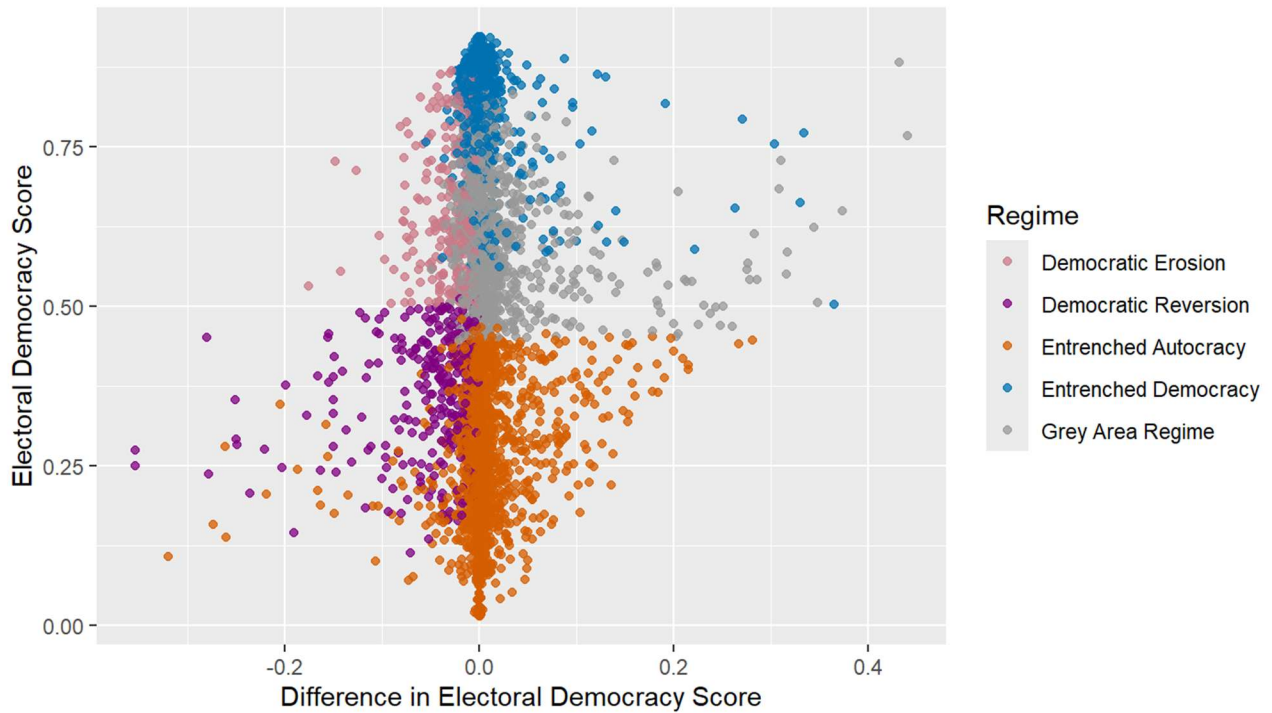
From these measures, I divide the data first on whether a state is backsliding or not, and then by its overall level of democracy. I identify a case of backsliding as follows: if a state has

³ Regardless, the electoral and liberal democracy scores since 1991 have a correlation value of 0.976, so it is unlikely that one score would provide significantly different results.

decreased at least 0.005 in a given year and has decreased by at least 0.03 over a three-year period, or if it has decreased at least 0.001 in a given year and the two years before, after, or around it are also classified as backsliding, I classify the state as having experienced backsliding for a given year. Doing so not only results in a fine-grained definition of what it means to be backsliding but also allows for more general periods of backsliding: if a state decreases marginally in a given year yet has decreased by a larger amount in the years around it, it still is a period of backsliding. By this measure, Hungary had a period of backsliding from 2010 to 2020, when it fully became an entrenched autocracy. Similarly, Russia had a period of backsliding from 2000 to 2004 as it slid more definitively from a grey area regime to an autocracy, and it has remained an entrenched autocracy since. While this definition is created to catch periods of democratic reversion, like Russia, I only determine if a state is backsliding if its regime score is at least 3 – meaning it fulfilled the minimum institutional prerequisites of polyarchy (see Coppedge et al. 2025: 297). Otherwise, any further moves from democracy would simply be consolidation of an already autocratic regime – not backsliding.

I then split backsliding states again based on regime type. I classify states with a regime score of 3 or 4 as undergoing democratic reversion, and those with a score of 5 or higher as undergoing democratic erosion. This splits between electoral *democracies* and electoral *autocracies*, creating a natural divide between regimes and anticipating a state's decrease in regime score during its backsliding episode. For entrenched regimes, that is, those that are not backsliding, I do a similar split, although I denote autocracies as states with a regime score of 3 or less, democracies as states with a score of 7 or higher, and the remainder as a “grey area” regime. A regime score of 4 indicates that there may be some overlap between a state's score in free and fair elections with electoral democracies, thus making it difficult to justify being an

Figure 2. States divided by my typology.



entrenched autocracy. Similarly, a regime score of 7 shows that a state may have the guardrails needed to classify as a more liberal democracy (see Coppedge et al. 2025: 297).⁴ While the splits between regimes in backsliding and entrenched states may not be identical, it allows for states who shift backward to still be counted as the regime type they were *before* the backsliding episode, and allows states who experience democratic reversion to be counted before being simply classified as an autocracy. A chart of all states' scores from 1991 to 2024, divided by this classification, can be seen in Figure 2.

⁴ Both scores mean that the confidence intervals of the measures of electoral and liberal democracy overlap with the range above it.

Understanding Cooperation through Voting and Rhetoric

With this typology, I can analyze states' voting behavior and rhetoric in the UNSC and UNGA. First, I will compare states' voting records for or against resolutions in the UNSC, aggregating by regime type. While comparing the average rate of votes in favor, against, or abstaining from resolutions by a given state in a given year may not be a perfect measure of cooperation, since resolutions are not singularly focused on international cooperation, discussing voting in aggregate can indicate general levels of cooperation in the LIO. The UN is often expected to push a democratic agenda, with leading states like the United States, United Kingdom, and France regularly focusing on promoting democracy and the norms underpinning the LIO. Checking votes in aggregate can reveal overall levels of cooperation in IOs.

Second, I will use hierarchical clustering to identify general coalitions between states in the UNGA, using five-year periods of voting to generally identify what states work together over time. I aim to understand how international cooperation has changed in IOs, so assessing clustering results in voting data allows me to identify coalitions in the UNGA and track how they change over time. In addition, clustering allows me to verify Cottiero et al. (2024)'s assertion that in heterogeneous IOs like the UN, there exists blocs of democratic and illiberal states which competitively form coalitions to persuade other states to their position (Cottiero et al. 2024: 9). Thus, there should be a significant clustering effect on the data when mapped to regime type.

Then, I will run similar analyses on a combined dataset of rhetoric from all UNSC speeches and UNGA General Debate speeches. I will cluster rhetoric based on the average number of word stems used that reference various norms like sovereignty, non-interference, and human rights, using these frequencies to create clusters of states who generally use the same levels of norm-based language. I can then not only map this to regime type but also see if it is

correlated to the coalitions I find from voting data. Finally, I will use frequency counties for these specific norm-based word stems to identify differences in the usage of specific norms, focusing primarily on discussions of sovereignty and non-interference. Through this, I will not only discuss general uses of these words but qualitatively assess how states utilize normative language to make their argument.

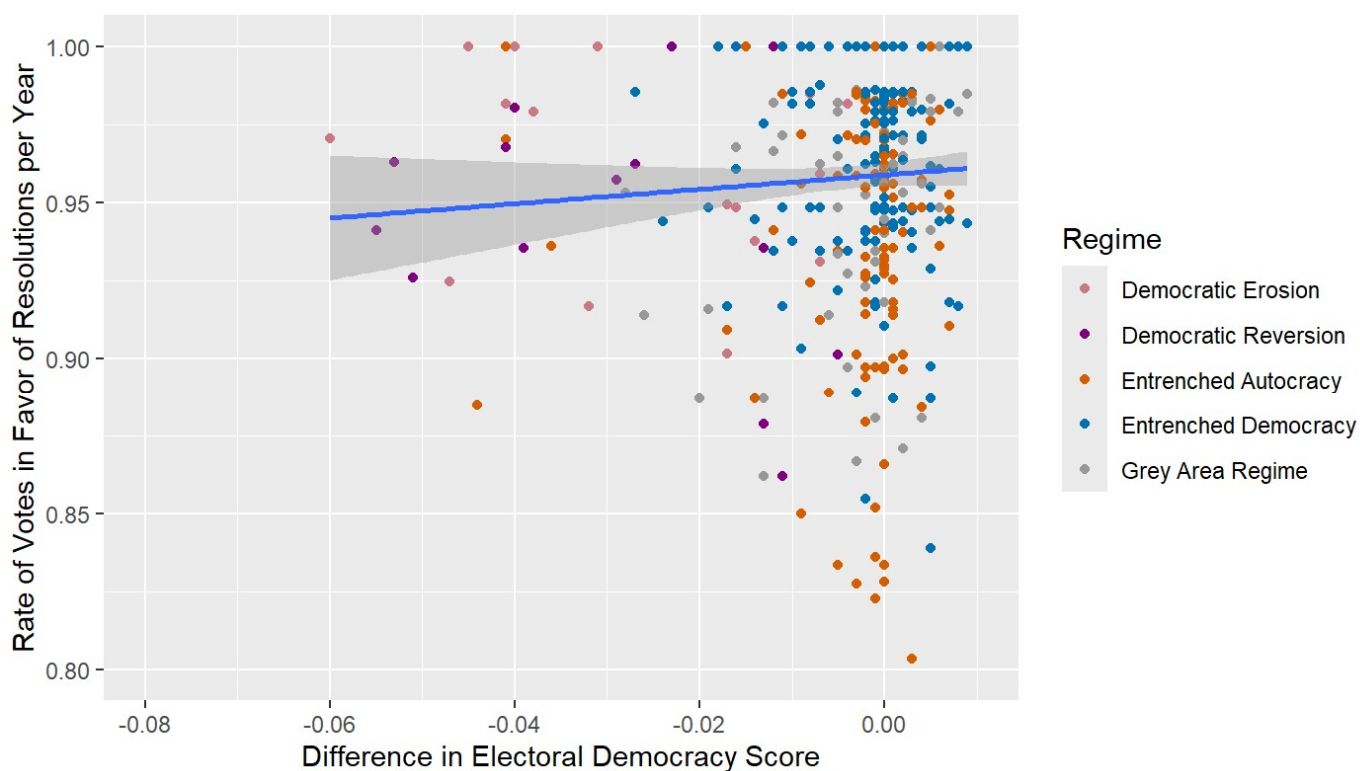
Voting

To understand how states cooperate in international organizations, it is intuitive to begin with voting behavior. States regularly show their position on a topic with their vote, and particularly when they vote against or abstain from a resolution, states are compelled to justify their position. Existing work implies that backsliding states are less likely to cooperate in heterogeneous IOs, regularly blocking IO actions against their position. While not all resolutions are explicitly in favor of the LIO, the United Nations often focuses on advancing the LIO's positions, particularly on democracy, so states' votes in aggregate could imply an inclination towards cooperation in IOs. Thus, I expect backsliding states to vote for resolutions less often than their entrenched counterparts – and in reverse, they would also vote *against* resolutions more often. Even though their votes may not outright block the resolution, unless the vote against is by one of the permanent members in the Security Council, a vote against a resolution or an abstention signals displeasure with the resolution, which states often voice in the justification behind their vote.

However, the result is more complex, and it does not necessarily agree with this expectation. Figure 3 shows that the overall share of votes in favor of resolutions drops marginally as the difference in electoral democracy score decreases, though the difference

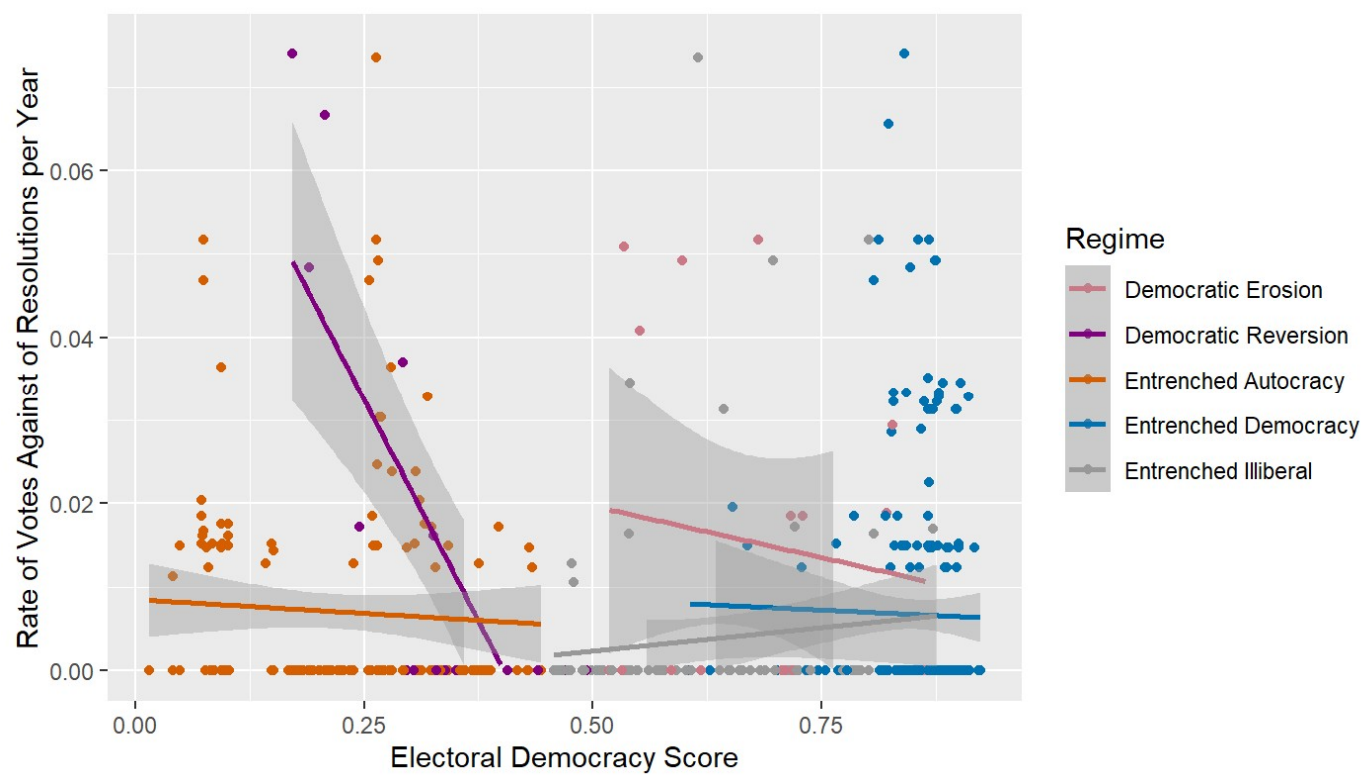
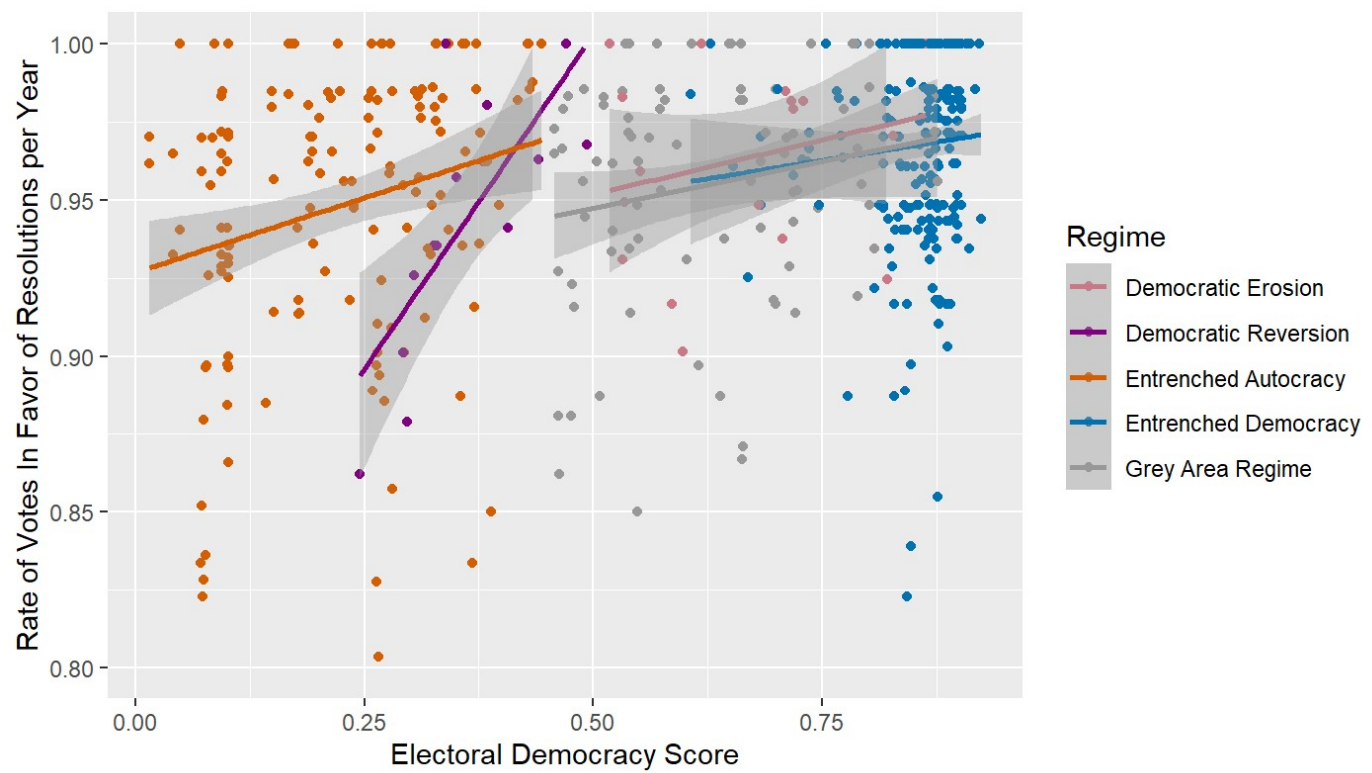
between the most democratizing and most autocratizing states is less than one percent. Figure 4 reveals a stronger correlation between votes for resolutions is with the overall electoral democracy score. As a state's electoral democracy score weakens, its overall rate of voting for resolutions decreases – regardless of whether a state was backsliding or not. Instead of states undergoing backsliding voting less often in favor of resolutions, the decrease aligns with the overall level of electoral democracy, refuting my hypothesis at least in part.⁵

Figure 3. Difference in the Electoral Democracy score compared to rate of votes in favor of resolutions per year.



⁵ Notably, democratic reversion has a much steeper decrease by overall level of electoral democracy than entrenched autocracies do, but this may be due to a smaller sample size. This would also account for a similar deviation in Figure 5, where it has a steeper increase in votes against resolutions.

Figures 4 and 5. Electoral Democracy score compared to the rate of votes in favor and against resolutions per year, separated by regime.



Using votes *against* resolutions instead of votes *in favor of* them reveals a slightly different picture. While there is little difference between backsliding and entrenched regimes in their votes *for* resolutions, there is a small disparity between the rate of which they vote against resolutions, seen in Figure 5. On average, it seems that states undergoing democratic erosion and reversion vote against resolutions more often than other states, indicating they may be more willing to push back against a resolution rather than only abstaining. Thus, the trends in voting indicate some difference between backsliding and entrenched regimes in terms of the level of votes *against* resolutions, but seemingly, the overall level of democracy is a clearer indication of the average rate a state will vote for a UN resolution.

Clustering

Clustering by UNGA voting records also yields results somewhat contrary to expectation. Initially, I expected backsliding or grey states to form a coherent voting bloc, as Cottiero et al. (2024) asserts that states form blocs to push for and against norms in heterogeneous IOs, arguing:

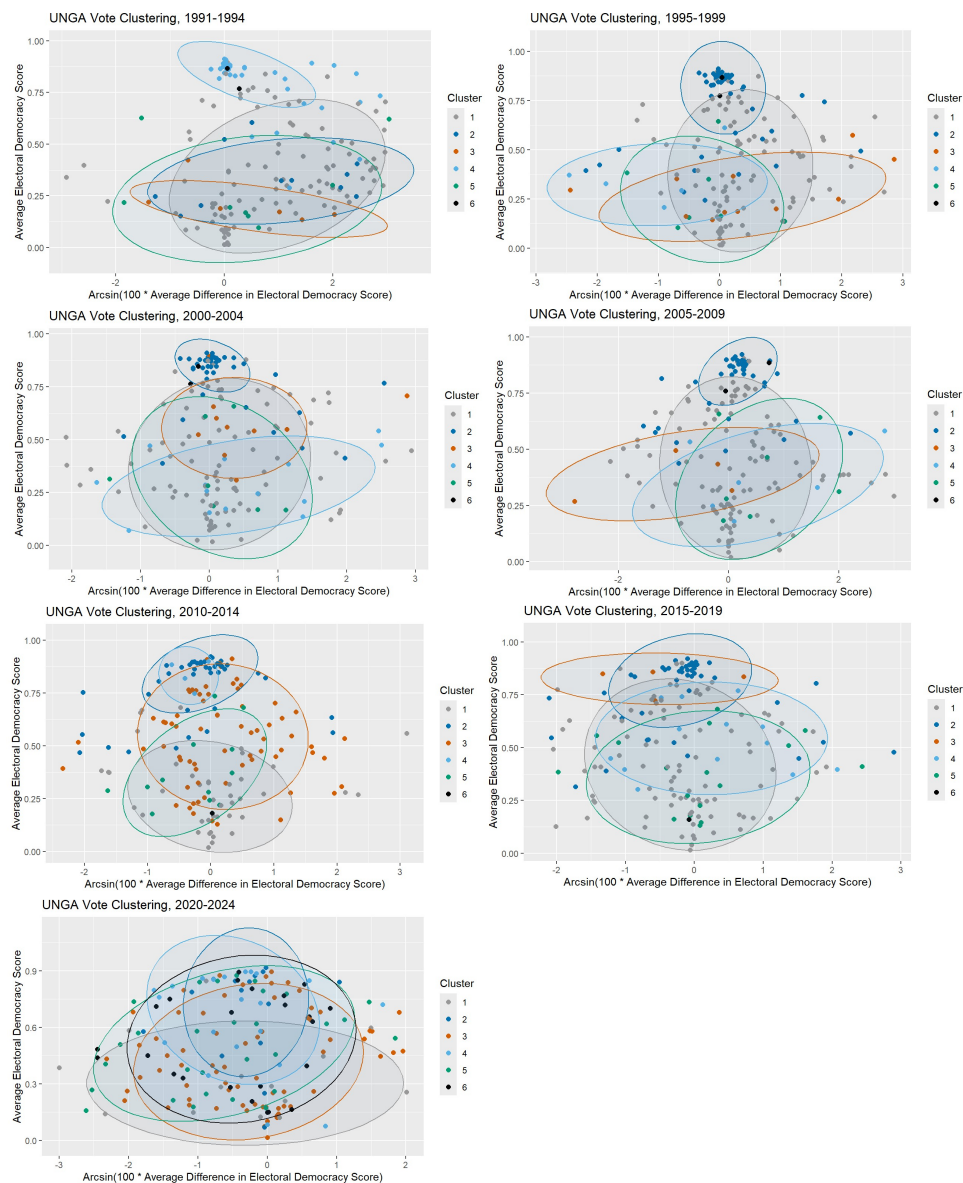
Now consider a stylized international organization that is more heterogeneous, in which there is a bloc of democratic states that are committed to democratic norms and their enforcement...a bloc of states that are illiberal and thus challenged by and opposed to such norms; and a bloc of swing states in which preferences fall in between...In such a heterogeneous institutional setting, there is some competitive process of coalition formation with democratic and illiberal regimes presenting both arguments to persuade and inducements, both positive and negative, to secure support (Cottiero et al. 2024: 9).

According to this claim, states should cluster based on regime type, with at least three blocs: that of democracies, that of what Cottiero et al. term illiberal states, and that of “swing” states.⁶ In other words, if we plot the clustering outcome on the axes of electoral democracy and

⁶ By being in the middle, I would expect “swing” states to have more in common with each other than with either the democratic or illiberal blocs.

the difference therein, the clusters should be somewhat separate. Yet this is not entirely true. By using hierarchical clustering to group states' voting patterns in the UNGA over five-year periods (Figure 6, see also Appendix 1),⁷ I find that there is only one distinct cluster: that of democracies. Indeed, the democratic cluster seems to hold for most periods except that from 2020 to 2024.

Figure 6. Clustering Outcomes in the UNGA Voting Data for five-year periods, 1991–2024.



⁷ As mentioned before, the UNSC does not have enough data to generate clusters, as only 15 states serve on the council in a given year. Appendix 1 has larger versions of the figures presented in Figure 6.

Other than democracies, there exist *some* periods that have other distinct clusters, but these are rarely consistent and seem to be more a result of my choice of the number of clusters rather than an emergent result. In Appendices 2 and 3, for instance, I increment the number of clusters in the 2010–2014 and 2015–2019 periods from two to nine clusters. However, an autocratic cluster only appears at six clusters from 2010–2014, and while there is somewhat of an autocratic cluster at three clusters in the 2015–2019 group,⁸ a clear group for autocracies only appears at seven clusters.

These results somewhat contradict Cottiero et al.’s argument. There is certainly a democratic grouping of states in the General Assembly, but autocratic or grey area coalitions are rarely distinct from one another – and a distinct autocratic cluster only forms at a high number of clusters. Moreover, backsliding states do not seem to be significantly less likely to cooperate in IOs than their entrenched counterparts, though there are some notable takeaways from analyzing voting in the UNSC and UNGA by regime type. First, backsliding states may vote *against* resolutions more often than entrenched regimes, potentially revealing that these states have a stronger reaction to resolutions they disagree with. Second, the sheer amount of noise in my clustering outcomes indicates that these states are not unified in their opposition to democracy, likely due to competing self-interests. This also explains why the seemingly consistent coalition of entrenched democracies does not exist in the 2020–2024 period; if we interpret backsliding, grey, and autocratic states as focused on preserving their position rather than pushing against democracy outright, then backsliding increasingly targeting states at the core of the LIO could drive them apart, particularly in response to divisive security issues like the Israel-Palestine conflict.

⁸ I say this since there is, in fact, a cluster seemingly centering on autocracies at three clusters, but it mostly overlaps with the non-democratic cluster that was there previously.

Rhetoric

While voting patterns indicate *where* states disagree, rhetoric provides the understanding of *how* they push back against the LIO. The current international order is built on norms and institutions; therefore, to resist the order, states attempt to degrade these norms, rejecting them or rendering them irrelevant. Thus, it is critical to not just understand *when* states resist international cooperation, but also *how*. I intend to examine this through analyzing rhetoric threefold. First, I aim to understand where states use similar language and compare it to voting clusters – in effect testing whether states’ rhetorical patterns are similar to that of voting. That is, do states with similar levels of democracy or backsliding use similar normative language, and do states with similar voting patterns also use similar rhetoric? Second, I break down speeches in the UNSC and UNGA by regime, discussing overall usage of language indicating norms in these bodies and further dividing it by regime classification. Finally, I will discuss a case where states of differing regime types utilized norm-based language to justify their resistance to a resolution or general normative stance pushed by entrenched democracies. In particular, I focus on matters of sovereignty and intervention, a frequently debated tension in the United Nations as states argue over whether to interfere in a state’s affairs, usually for humanitarian means, or stand aside and instead respect a state’s sovereignty over its internal affairs. I expect backsliding states may be particularly resistant to intervention since supporting an interventionist stance could result in them eventually being targeted for their antidemocratic actions. This approach allows me to assess the language used in the UN, understanding how it changes based on a state’s level of democracy, and it also enables me to delve into how states resist norms in an order so deeply entrenched in said norms.

Rhetorical Clustering

Much like voting, states' normative rhetoric does not match their regime. For this analysis, I obtained the rate of usage of all words in UNSC speeches and UNGA General Debate speeches,⁹ filtered based on word stems indicating norms defining the LIO,¹⁰ and clustered states based on these rates per year. Appendix 4 displays these results, mapped onto regime type. Appendix 4 displays the results of clustering mapped onto regime type, using the counts of specific words indicating norms. Instead of having clear groupings, this result again is extremely noisy, more so than the result for voting. This unclear result is further confused after attempting to correlate voting and rhetoric clusters; no pairing of voting and rhetoric clusters has a correlation value higher than 0.2 (See Appendix 5). Thus, states do not seem to use normative language in a coordinated manner. Clustering by the frequencies of words used provides little insight into how states use words by regime, and the extremely low correlation between these clusters and those of voting shows that any similarities in voting patterns is not reflected in the words they use.

Usage by Regime

While clustering may provide nought but noise, discussing frequencies based on my categorization of regime types does yield significant results – although the differences only reinforce the divide by overall democracy level rather than any changes in backsliding status.

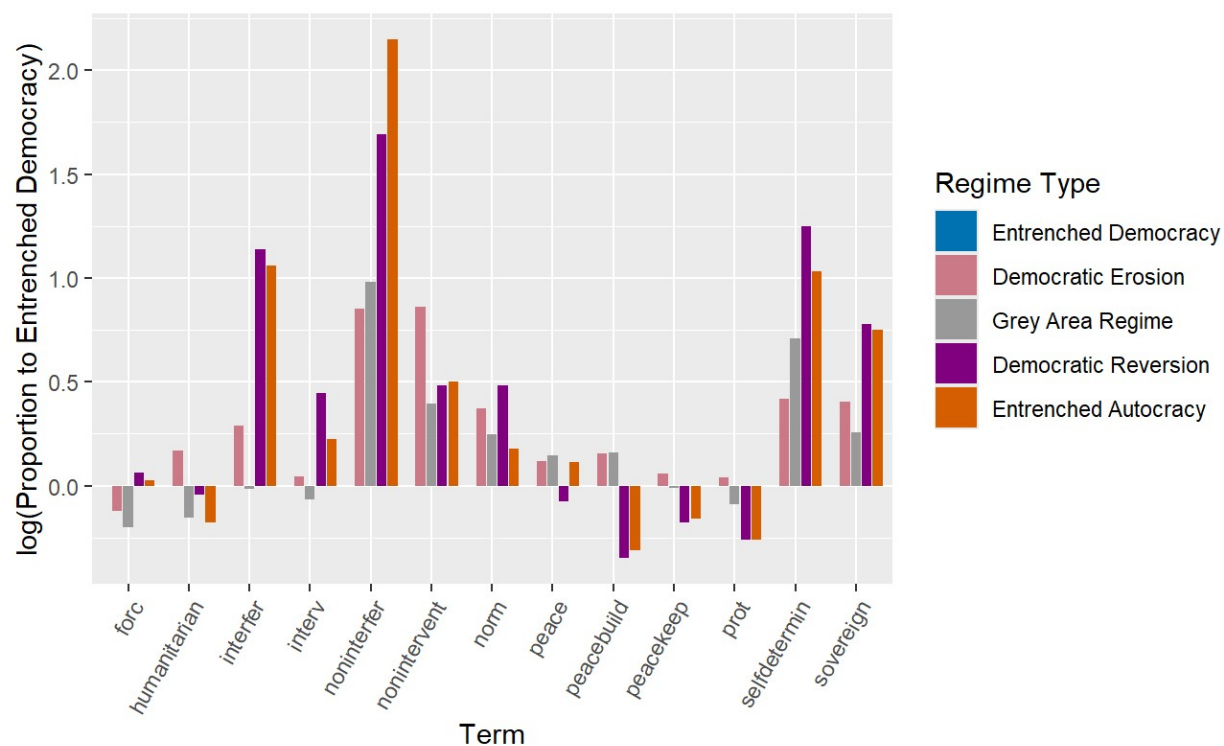
⁹ Importantly, I use the *rate* of usage here, which I am defining as words per million. While UNGA rhetoric would most directly correlate with UNGA vote clustering, adding UNSC speeches somewhat fortifies a small sample size resulting from only having access to UNGA General Debate speeches.

¹⁰ Specifically, I focused on the following words to indicate norms: intervention, interference, self-determination, sovereignty, use of force, human rights/humanitarian, and peace. I also added in word stems like “rights,” “regime,” “norm”/“normat,” and “liber”/“neoliber” to indicate discussions of democracy and regime types, specific mentions of norms, or references to the LIO. These words allow me to focus on normative language in my analysis in parallel with my later discussion in relation to the use of norms in the UNSC.

Here, I get the usage rate by regime type of a variety of word stems indicating norms such as “force,” “interference,” “sovereignty,” and so on. I then standardize these values by taking the proportion of these words in comparison to entrenched democracies, as seen in Figure 7.

Backsliding states may deviate some from their entrenched counterparts, but there is a more substantial split based on the overall democracy level. For nearly every norm tested, autocracies and states undergoing democratic reversion are significantly different from grey area states and democratic eroders, and both are also dissimilar from entrenched democracies. In other words, backsliding states pair with their entrenched counterparts rather than each other, particularly when discussing terms like non-interference, sovereignty, and self-determination. Rather than backsliding states utilizing these words in a manner distinct from grey or autocratic regimes, the divide between states is instead between overall level of democracy – not its change.

Figure 7. Logarithm of the proportion (in comparison to entrenched democracies) of certain word stems used in UNSC and UNGA speeches, broken down by regime type.



These splits based on overall levels of democracy are, seemingly, most evident when discussing sovereignty and interference. As Cottiero et al. (2024) states, these norms are particularly susceptible to pushback by grey and autocratic actors: “Principles of non-intervention and non-interference have long stood as constitutive elements of multilateral institutions, but those norms have been repurposed to combat liberal normative commitments” (Cottiero et al. 2024: 13). Thus, to understand *how* states resist international cooperation through normative language – and which states use that language most frequently – discussing the arguments they use to resist intervention is key.

The necessity of inspecting normative discussion around intervention is critical when inspecting comparative usage of norms as seen in Figure 7. All other regime types utilize words relating to sovereignty, self-determination, non-intervention, and non-interference far more than entrenched democracies, and this split is again separated based on overall level of democracy, not backsliding status. This result indicates – at least preliminarily – that grey and eroding regimes are somewhat keen to push back against intervention, using arguments of self-determination and sovereignty, and autocratic and reverting states even more intense in their resistance to international interference. This trend can also be seen in the reverse; entrenched democracies use word stems relating to protection, peacebuilding, and humanitarian themes more than any other regime, and especially autocracies and democratic reverters. Instead of prioritizing a state’s sovereignty, entrenched democracies prefer to focus on stressing *why* intervention is needed, whether that be for ending a long-standing conflict or under a responsibility to protect citizens from their governments.

R2P in Libya and Syria

One of the best instances this split can be perceived is in arguments around the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm, which democratic states utilize to justify intervention while others voice concern about this action or even resist it, citing concerns about a state's sovereignty. This tension is clearly displayed when democracies attempted to put R2P into action in Libya and Syria after the Arab Spring, as NATO intervened to maintain order – and eventually depose Muammar al-Qadhafi¹¹ – with the United Nations' support and attempted to get similar acquiescence for its intervention in Syria. During meetings on these topics, states considered whether intervening to halt a humanitarian crisis outweighed a state's right over its internal affairs, which became increasingly sensitive once NATO toppled the al-Qadhafi regime, showing that the organization was willing to act beyond simple protection of civilians. In both cases – and especially with Syria – more autocratic states repeatedly invoked sovereignty and non-interference over an active role for the UNSC, though this resistance varied based on states' interests in the region – not a variation seen in democracies, who propagated a mostly unified message entrenched in R2P and focused on the humanitarian aspect of the conflict.

Libya – Intervention on R2P

The Arab Spring in 2011 shook the Middle East and North Africa as protestors overthrew regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and caused widespread unrest throughout the region, particularly in Libya and Syria. These protests – along with their governments' often heavy-handed responses – were discussed across the multilateral world, with Libya in particular drawing fierce criticism with the African Union's Peace and Security Council condemning the al-Qadhafi regime and the

¹¹ Spelling the former Libyan leader's name can vary. For this paper, I will be referring to him as Muammar al-Qadhafi, as that is what is used in the UNSC's meeting notes.

League of Arab States outright suspending Libya's membership (Bellamy and Williams 2016: 701). The UN also added to this criticism; the UN Human Rights Council set up an investigation into Libya's human rights abuses on 26 February 2011 and suspended Libya from the UNHRC three days later (Bellamy and Williams 2016: 701). Thus, it is unsurprising that the UNSC addressed the issue with a similar ferocity; it passed Resolution 1970 unanimously on 26 February, with states emphasizing both the unfolding humanitarian crisis and the fact the Arab League and African Union had already censured the Libyan government for its actions (S/PV.6491 2011). While the resolution focused heavily on R2P, explicitly recalling the Libyan government's "responsibility to protect its population" and deploring its gross human rights violations (S/RES/1970 2011: 1-2), the norm's strength was not the sole factor in its unanimous passage. Libya's regional partners had clearly positioned themselves against the regime, and its own representative to the United Nations even spoke out against the regime, calling al-Qadhafi a "criminal leader" and declaring that "[t]he Tripoli regime no longer has any legitimacy" (S/PV.6491 2011: 7). With most of the region speaking out against the Libyan government, any hesitancy to vote in favor of the resolution on normative grounds would likely only do harm to a state's position. While the substantive action taken against Libya through Resolution 1970 may indicate the strength of R2P, the vote in the UNSC can be attributed to the unanimous stance against Libya – both among its neighbors and in parts of its government.

No matter the reasons for unanimity on Resolution 1970, its openness to "additional appropriate measures" would be utilized three weeks later to pass Resolution 1973, which allowed NATO to directly intervene in Libya for humanitarian reasons. In this relatively unprecedented step for the Security Council, the UNSC noted Libya's failure to end its humanitarian violations and authorized states "to take all necessary measures...to protect

civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in [Libya]” (S/RES/1973 2011: 3). From this, NATO would begin its intervention under the purview of humanitarian assistance and helping fulfill Resolution 1973’s obligations. Unlike the previous resolution on the topic, though, the vote on this resolution was not unanimous. Five members of the Security Council abstained: China, Russia, Brazil, India, and Germany. India and Brazil – both grey area states during this time – emphasized a need for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, with India calling on states to respect Libya’s sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity (S/PV.6498 2011: 5-6). Russia and China made similar statements, yet went further, with Russia arguing this resolution “transcend[ed] the initial concept as stated by the League of Arab States” and China stating its opposition to force in international relations (S/PV.6498 2011: 8, 10). While both grey and autocratic states used sovereignty to justify their caution to humanitarian intervention, autocracies used stronger language and expressed concern about the consequences of NATO’s intervention, a trend bolstered by later resolutions. Even though the Arab League had called on the UNSC to take further action, displayed in Lebanon’s vote in favor of the resolution, states hesitant to the normative consequences of Resolution 1973 may have felt more comfortable abstaining since the condemnation of Libya was nowhere near as strong as it was three weeks prior. Moreover, it began to build a normative case to voice hesitancy with NATO’s intervention, something not seen from Germany, who abstained on the grounds that any intervention could complicate a situation already in flux (S/PV.6498 2011: 4-5).

As NATO became increasingly involved in Libya, autocratic and grey states’ frustrations became increasingly vocal, contributing to the normative pushback against NATO’s intervention. When passing Resolution 2009 in September 2011, which created the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and noted an improved situation in the country, Russia and China again

objected to the intervention, despite voting for the resolution. China in particular asserted a normative framework to address the Libyan Question, calling for four principles to be adhered to: the restoration of stability and order, respecting the “aspirations and choices” of the Libyan people, creating an inclusive political process, and having the United Nations play a leading role in reconstructing Libya (S/PV.6620 2011: 4-5). While this framework seemed to agree with Western talking points throughout the conflict, the Chinese specifically denoted that “Libya’s sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity must be genuinely respected” (S/PV.6620 2011: 4), implying NATO did not do this during its time in Libya. Even though Russia and China acquiesced to NATO intervention in Libya, their concerns about the nature of its action resulted in some discord amongst the UNSC about how to deal with human rights violations, and if interference in a state was the correct route.

The Libyan case revealed cracks among the Security Council in responding to human rights abuses. While NATO did intervene in Libya, with autocratic and grey area states like Brazil, China, Russia, and India standing aside, divisions began to show as NATO pushed to depose al-Qadhafi rather than just restore peace, resulting in the beginnings of a sovereignty-based pushback to this “abuse” of humanitarian intervention (Bellamy and Williams 2016: 700, 711). Voicing concerns about NATO’s intervention on the grounds of sovereignty not only allowed states to attack R2P, but it also provided a basis for challenging intervention on similar means in the future, particularly when these states’ interests were at risk. This would become increasingly evident in the UNSC’s response – or lack thereof – to Syria, where autocratic states like Russia and China would directly block resolutions, and grey area states took a more assertive stance in expressing concerns about democracies’ willingness to meddle in other states’ affairs – even if it was for humanitarian reasons.

Syria – Resistance to Intervention from Russia and China

Syria also felt the effects of the Arab Spring, with anti-government protests resulting in a years-long civil war between the government and the opposition. Not only did the Security Council discuss Syria with NATO's Libyan intervention in mind, but Syria was also much more politically divisive due to foreign interests in the country (Shaikh and Roberts 2016: 718-20). Thus, the Security Council failed to take action, with states advocating for action on the grounds of R2P but failing to take meaningful measures due to Syria's placement in regional politics (Shaikh and Roberts 2016: 717-19). In this paralysis, though, we once again see resistance based on non-interference in internal affairs and a respect for a state's sovereignty, creating a split between democracies favoring intervention to counter human rights interventions and autocracies who resist by emphasizing sovereignty.

The first failed resolution on this conflict, S/2011/612, is a perfect example of this divide. Russia and China blocked this resolution, with four states – Brazil, India, Lebanon, and South Africa – all abstaining. In its justification, Russia focused on non-intervention, painting its position as one of respect for the sovereignty and unity of the Syrian people, and the proposed draft resolution as one based on reckless confrontation (S/PV.6627 2011: 3-4). Russia explicitly stated that “[t]he situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Council as separate from the Libyan experience,” using the memory of NATO overreach in this case to refute any foreign intervention in Syria (S/PV.6627 2011: 4-5). China explained its vetoes on similar grounds, arguing that pressuring Syria is unhelpful and focusing on non-interference and sovereignty. From these vetoes, it was clear that these autocratic states were pushing back with this argument of non-interference; while they may block UNSC action for their self-interested reasons, this was also tied to a normative justification. The abstaining states – three of which are grey area regimes

– took a similar, yet distinct approach. India, for instance, argued that it is a responsibility of states to respect the rights of their people, but states have an obligation to defend its citizens from terrorism, ending its speech with a call for time to let Syria reform (S/PV.6627 2011: 6-7). These statements for caution, echoed by other abstaining states, are mentioned in tandem with a need to respect the sovereignty and internal affairs of states. Rather than outright deploring any confrontation, states in between autocracy and democracy instead focused on the need for time to let the situation develop, indicating support for non-interventionist arguments but not arguing as fiercely as autocratic states may.

Russia and China were not the only ones that expressed dissatisfaction with intervention in Syria during this meeting, despite them being the only votes not in favor. Pakistan and India – both grey area states in this time – took a stance in the middle, condemning human rights abuses but calling for self-determination for Syrians and taking issue with violations in Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (S/PV.6711 2012: 8, 10-11). While they were not as heavy-handed as the Russians and Chinese, and even voted in favor of the resolution, they did so reluctantly, utilizing norms to describe their issue with the state of affairs.

The debate between sovereignty and interference on the grounds of human rights continued as the conflict wore on. Russia and China regularly voted against resolutions on Syria, with other autocratic and grey area states varying in their votes and often abstaining. Rhetorically, Russia and China often used discussions of sovereignty to back their argument, claiming it was an internal matter, while grey area states focused on needing a Syrian-led process for peace, advocating for unbiased resolutions, and mourning the polarization created around the conflict (see S/PV.6756 2012; S/PV.6810 2012; and S/PV.7785 2016). However, states who abstained were rarely consistent; whereas democracies regularly voted as a bloc, whether in

favor of various resolutions or against a Russian-backed draft proposed in October 2016, other states often moved between voting in favor and abstaining. This variation is in line with elected members moving in and out of the Security Council; instead of states having a unified position based on regime level, they instead can vary, regularly prioritizing self-interest over a firm normative stance (Shaikh and Roberts 2016: 731, 736-38). While Russia and China adamantly opposed involvement in Syria, they were often the only ones to use their vote to block resolutions, with other states expressing caution but only abstaining in the most extreme cases. Most states who abstained were indeed not entrenched democracies, but often, their vote was less dictated by their regime and more their political position.

Thus, whether grey area or autocratic states resisted cooperation in the cases of Libya and Syria seems to be incorrect, or at least partly so. A better explanation may instead be that these states are more likely to resist international cooperation for self-interested reasons and use specific normative grounding to justify these decisions. While voting varied from state to state, those opposing or abstaining from resolutions did use similar language, crafting arguments to tie discussions of sovereignty and non-interference in internal matters to their resistance to supporting an international response to humanitarian crises.

Conclusion

While backsliding states may not be uniquely resistant to international cooperation and do not use normative language at a higher rate than their entrenched counterparts, classifying states based on my typology reveals a different pattern. Instead of states dividing based on the *difference* in their levels of democracy, they separate based on *overall* levels of democracy, with autocracies being the most likely to refute the international order for self-interested reasons.

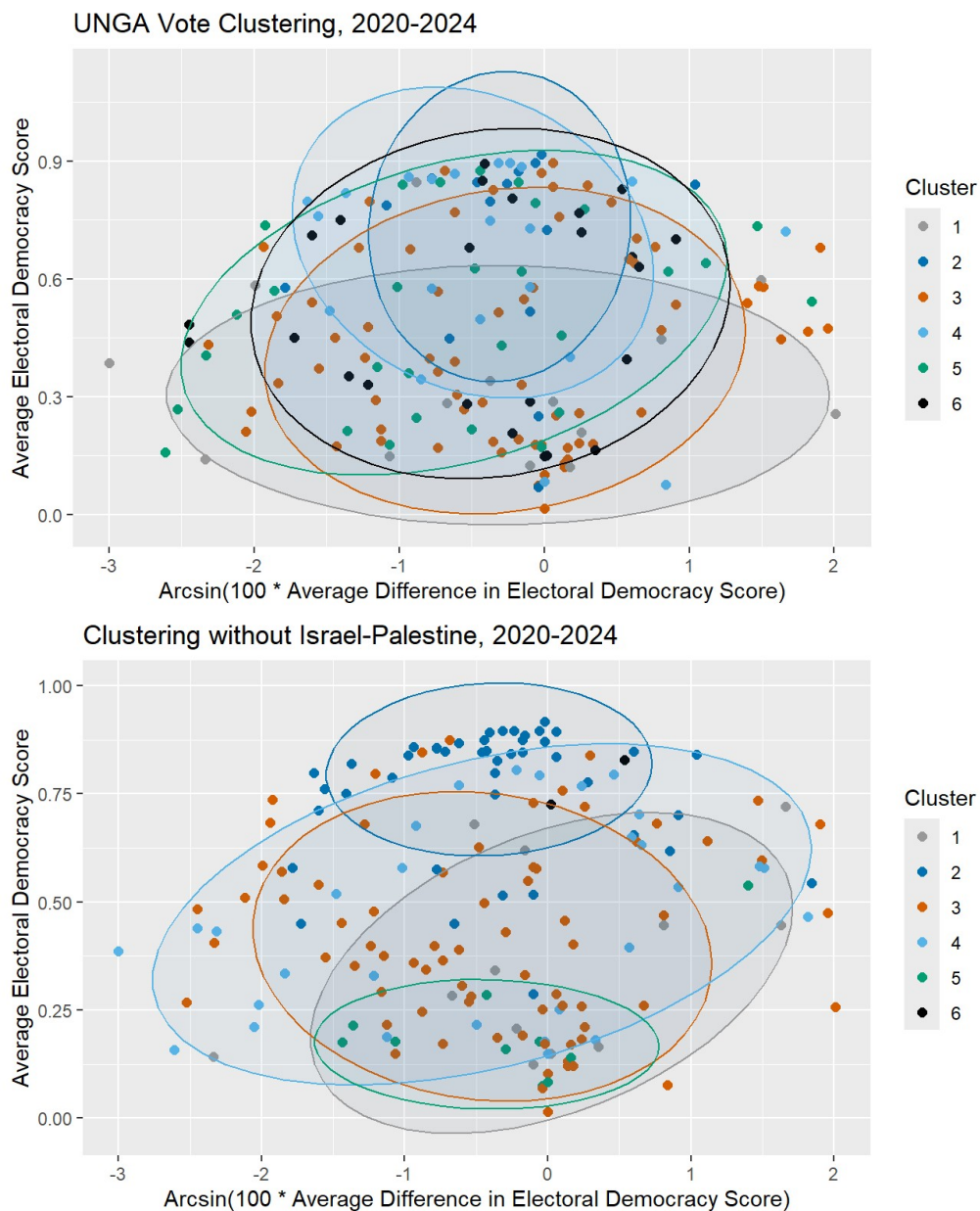
While grey area and autocratic states may not cluster together on voting, a sign of noise generated from self-interest, their overall votes in favor of resolutions decrease as their democracy score does, and they have significantly different rates of norm-based rhetoric. That is not to say backsliding has no effect on the international order. As more states move towards autocracies, the number of states prioritizing self-interest over the normative basis of the LIO increases, threatening it wholesale.

While my research provides strong results, it is not without its limitations. Counting by singular words, as I have done for much of my rhetorical analysis, removes context. I have attempted to resolve this issue through my case studies, but I still risk overgeneralization throughout my analysis. Moreover, the metric I use to create my typology is not perfect. When creating this metric, I aimed to create a metric that can include small, yet significant and persistent, decreases in democracy, but this makes it extremely sensitive, often finding backsliding where there is none. Even though it does capture most cases of backsliding in a solely quantitative manner, further refinement is needed to completely separate backsliding from entrenched states.

One area for future research is seen in the UNGA vote clustering outcome between 2020 and 2024. As seen in Figure 8, the democratic coalition that has persisted since 1991 is nonexistent, raising the question of whether this outcome is anomalous or signaling the breakdown of agreement between entrenched democracies. This period did have some particularly divisive votes and debate – namely, the Israel-Palestine dispute once again coming to the forefront of international politics – and removing mentions of the conflict does rectify the fracture (Figure 9). However, this conflict is not new; it has surfaced in the UN previously yet has never affected the clustering outcome so strongly (See Appendix 1, Appendix 6). A potential

explanation for this outsized effect could be how backsliding has permeated this coalition, and how backsliding states more often prioritize self-interest rather than agree to a singular democratic agenda. The fracture of the democratic coalition, then, could be seen as a result of conflicts of self-interests overcoming any unified democratic stance, exacerbated by a contentious geopolitical issue. While the democratic coalition may have weathered previous

Figures 8 and 9. Clustering outcomes for UNGA Resolution Votes with and without “Israel,” “Palestine,” or “Jerusalem,” 2020-2024.



flare-ups in the Israel-Palestine dispute, weakening consensus potentially due to backsliding seems to have allowed the bloc to fracture as Israeli-Palestinian affairs dominate the news once again.

This topic, among others, would provide increased clarity as to the state of international cooperation in the era of democratic recession. Namely, further discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the international response therein would allow me to fully investigate how much it has divided the democratic coalition, but it remains a developing crisis at the time of writing. Future research is needed to fully understand the ramifications of the war on the multilateral world, particularly in relation to how it has caused significant dissonance between democracies who regularly cooperate. Other geopolitical developments – namely, the Trump administration’s actions since retaking the American presidency – could further assist my research, as it is extremely likely that the state at the center of the LIO begins another period of backsliding, in addition to Trump’s verbal attacks on the United States’ traditional allies in Europe.

While some states may remain stable democracies and reject autocratic challengers, the democratic recession is only accelerating, particularly with the United States entering a renewed bout of democratic erosion. It remains critical, then, to understand how backsliding will affect not only individual states but also the stability of the LIO, and if it will be able to weather this novel challenge. If democracies can continue pushing their normative agenda and stabilize the LIO, it may continue and thrive once more. Otherwise, it could continue fracturing, effectively ending the international structure of the last eighty years in favor of a return to the politics of the past – if not something entirely new.

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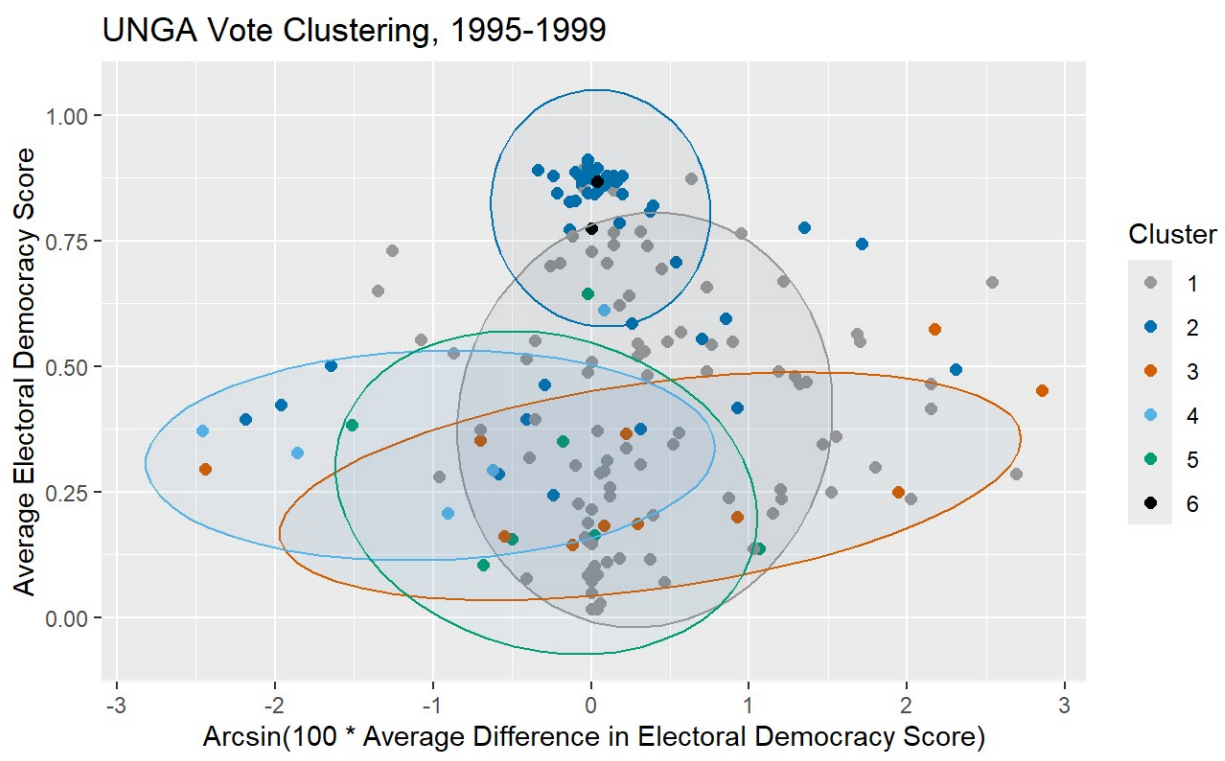
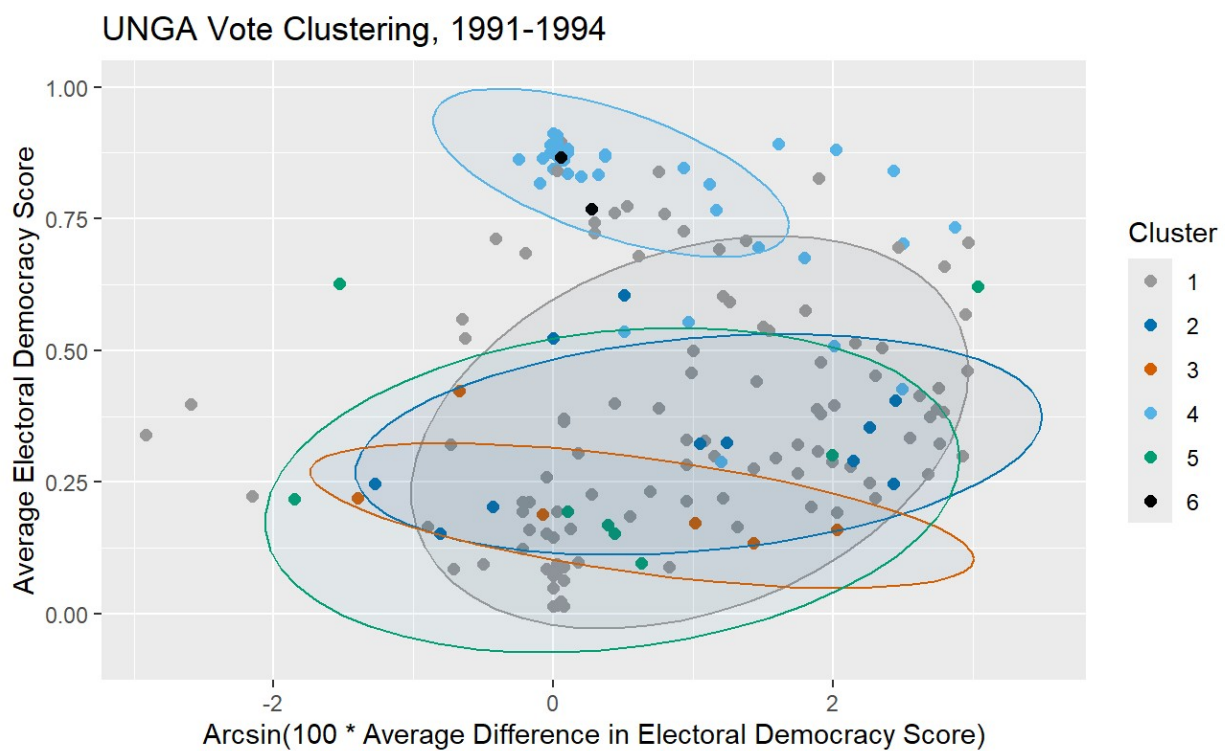
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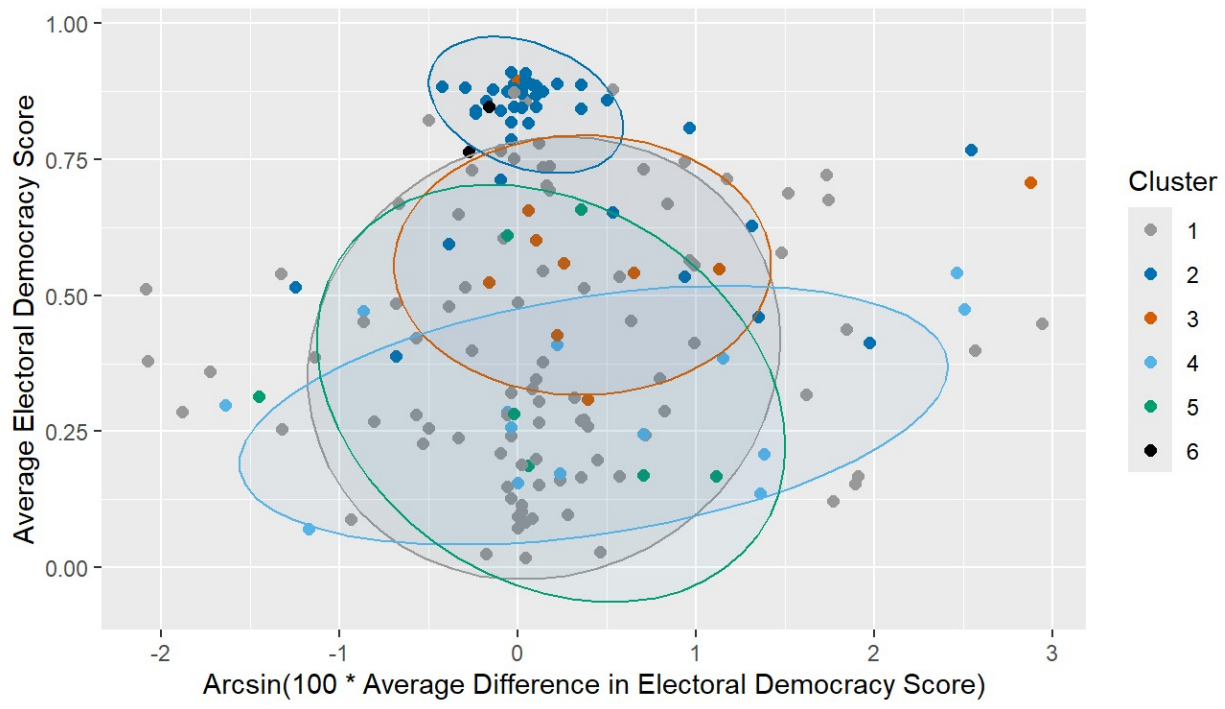
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APPENDICES

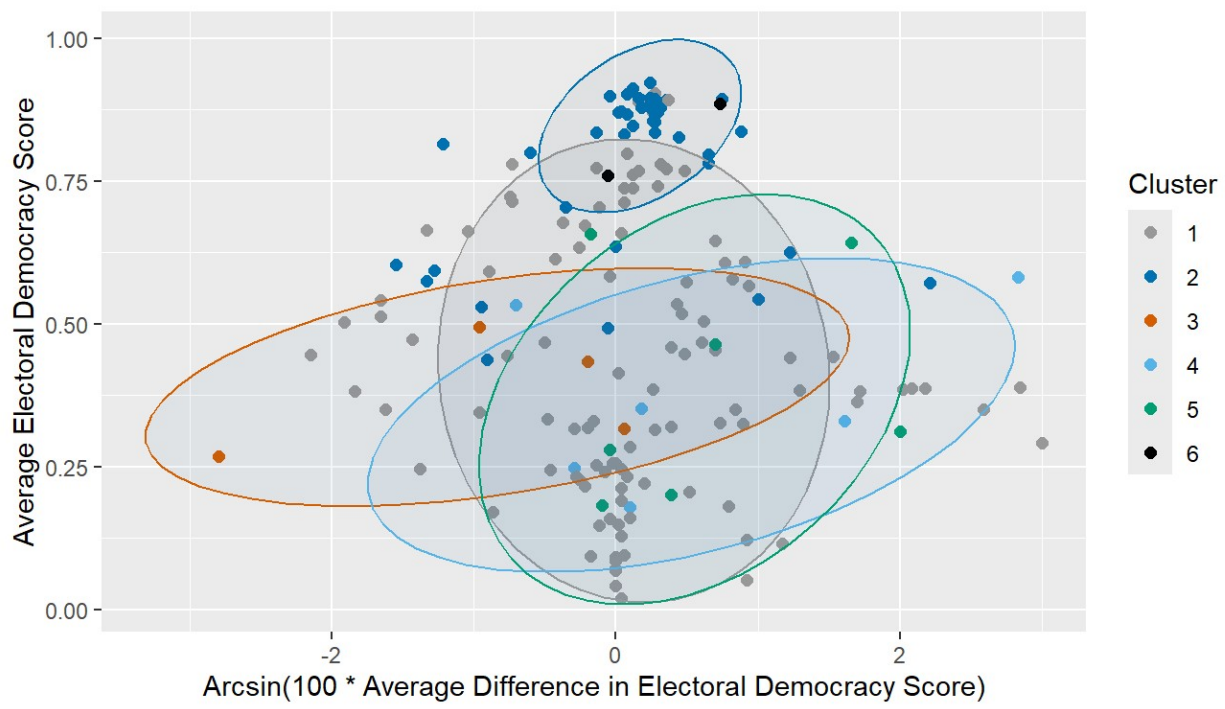
Appendix 1. Clustering of Votes in the UN General Assembly Over Time



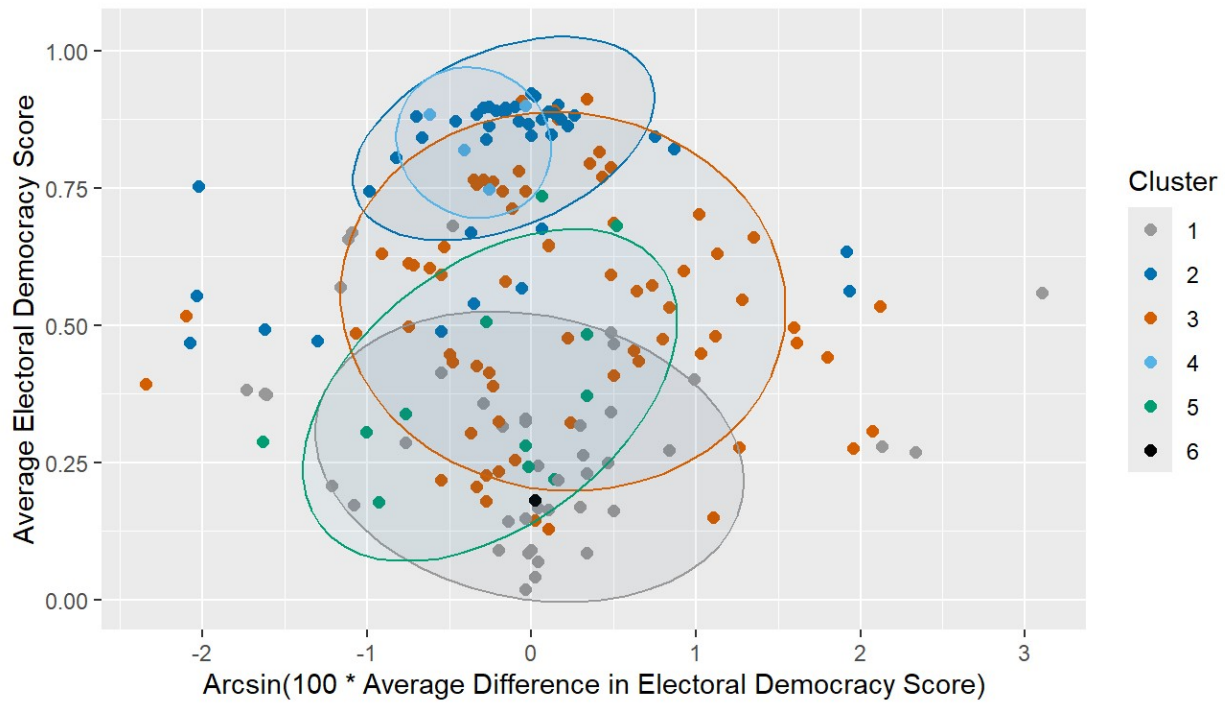
UNGA Vote Clustering, 2000-2004



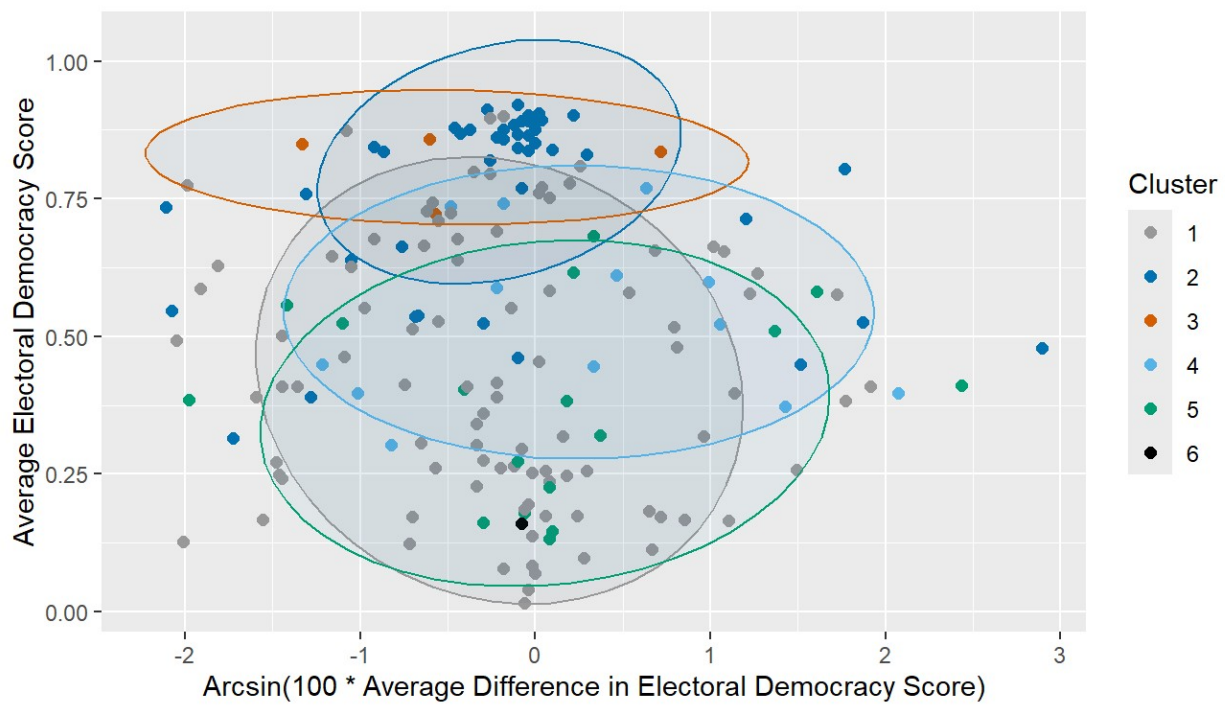
UNGA Vote Clustering, 2005-2009



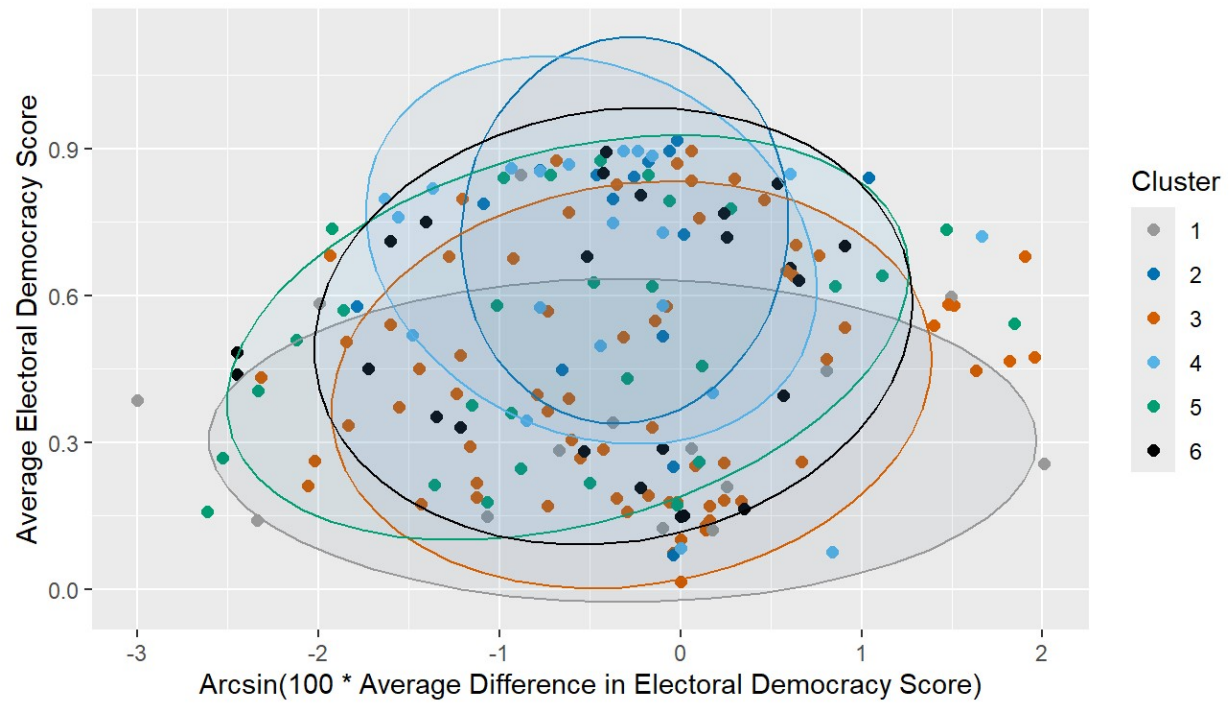
UNGA Vote Clustering, 2010-2014



UNGA Vote Clustering, 2015-2019

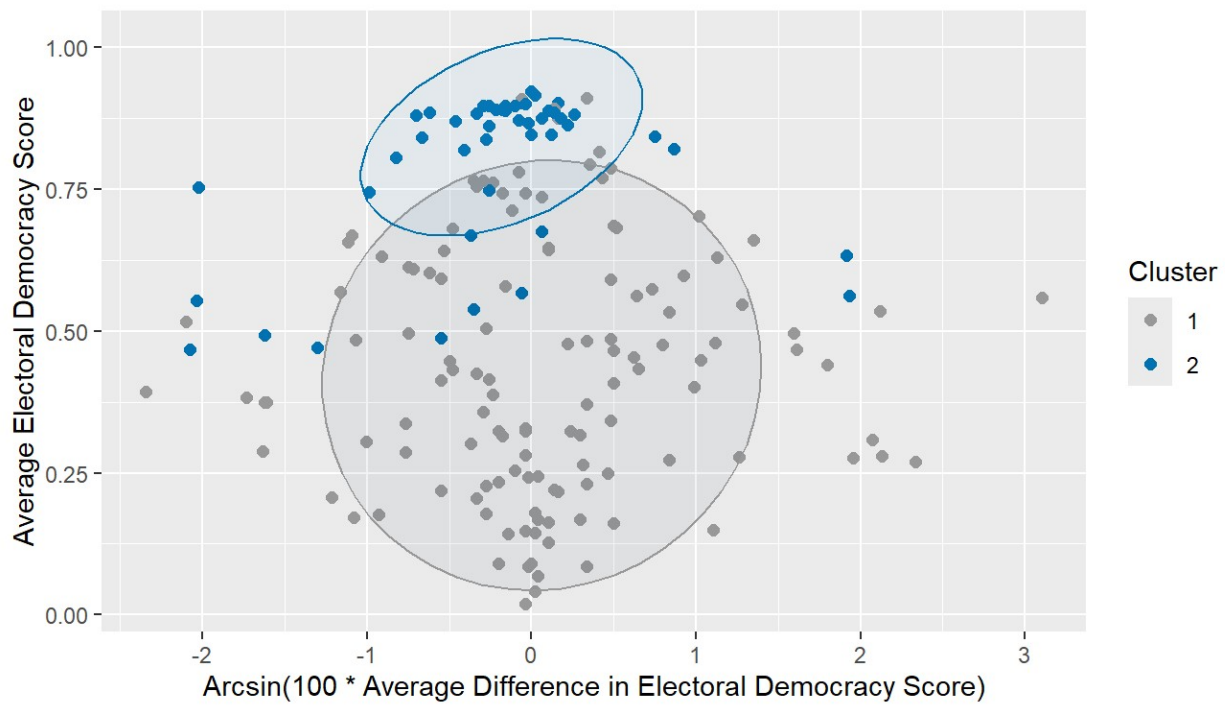


UNGA Vote Clustering, 2020-2024

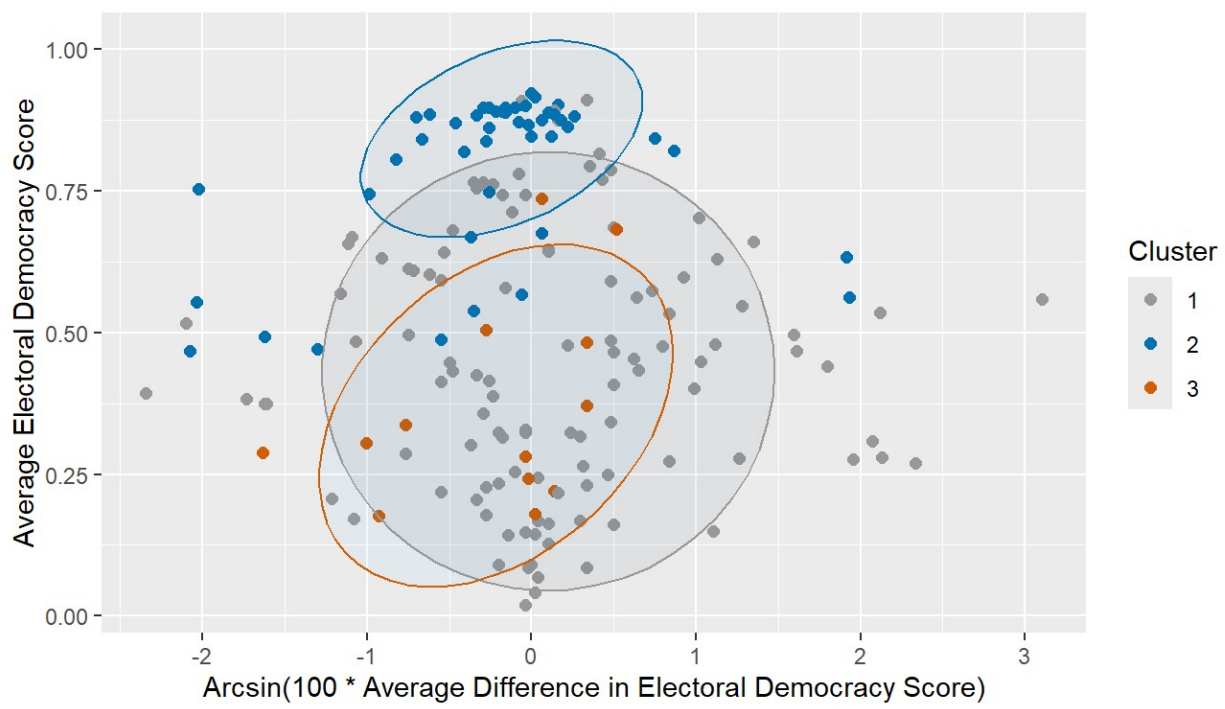


Appendix 2. Breakdown of Clusters in the UN General Assembly, 2010–2014

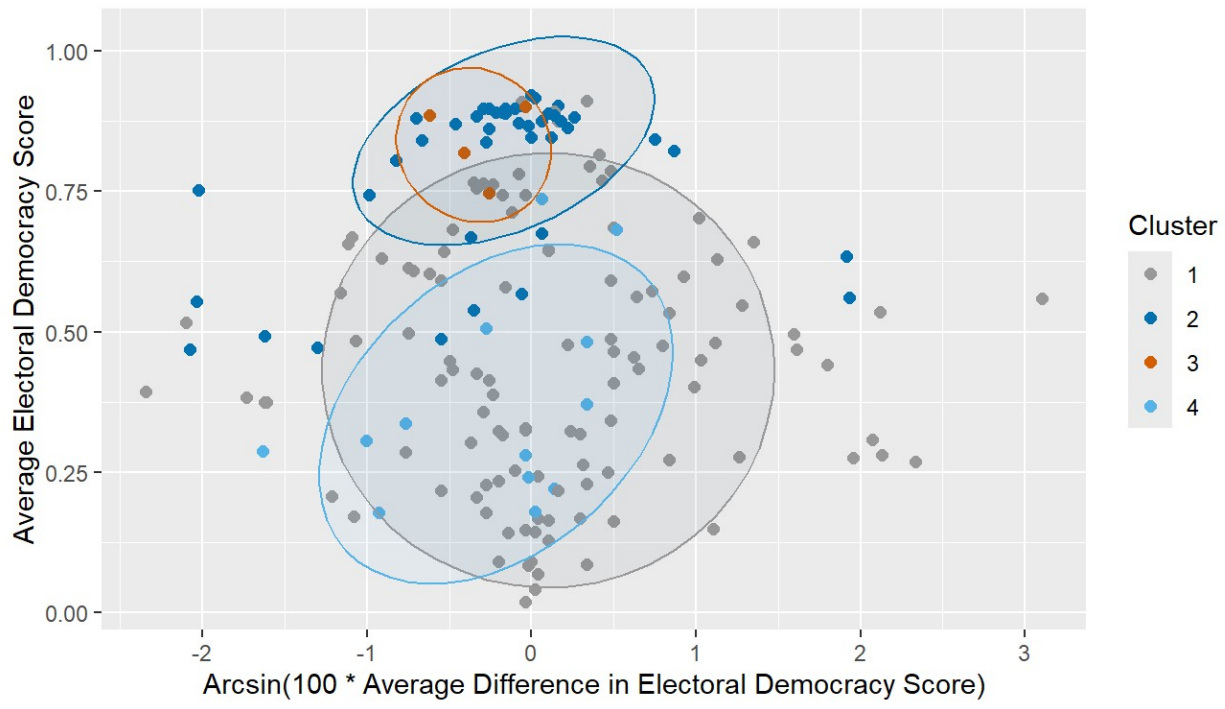
2010-2014 UNGA Vote Clustering, 2 Clusters



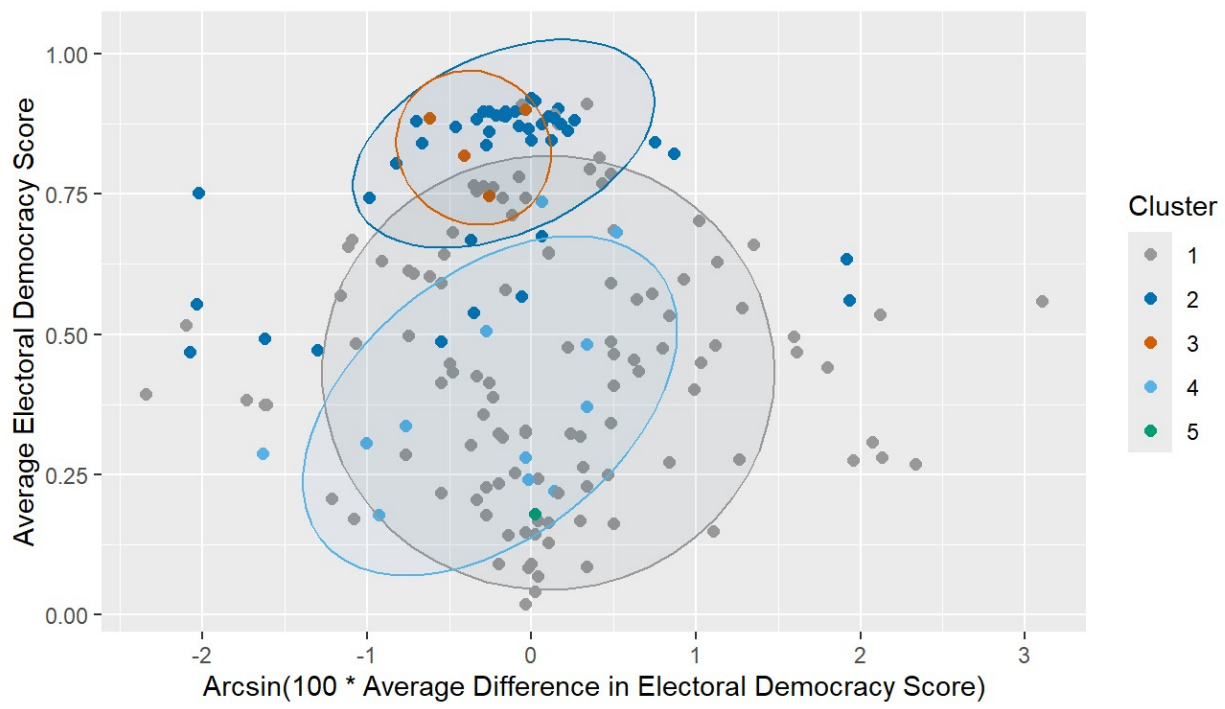
2010-2014 UNGA Vote Clustering, 3 Clusters



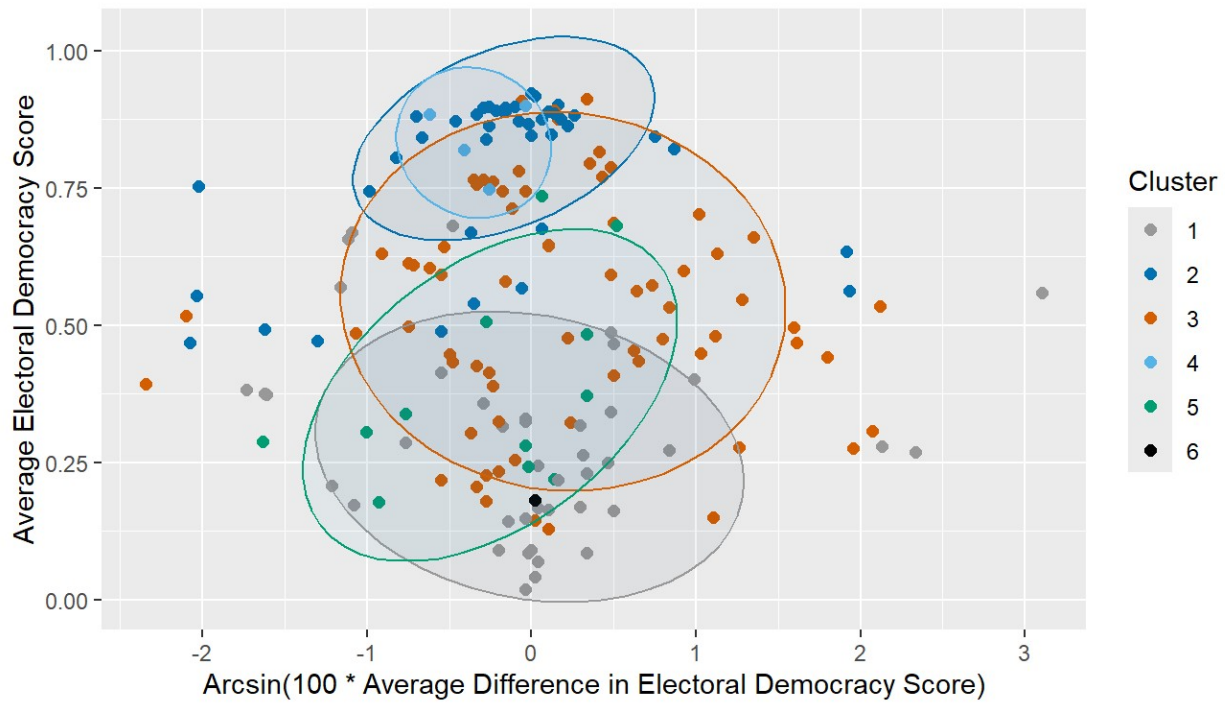
2010-2014 UNGA Vote Clustering, 4 Clusters



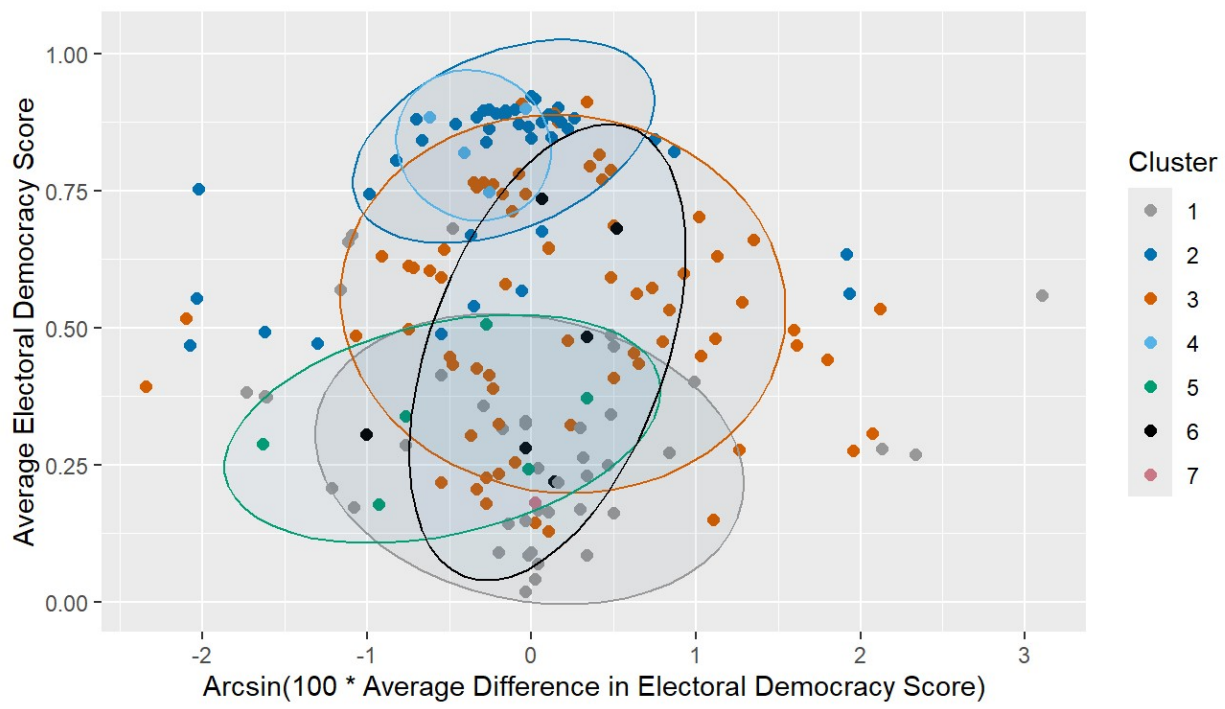
2010-2014 UNGA Vote Clustering, 5 Clusters



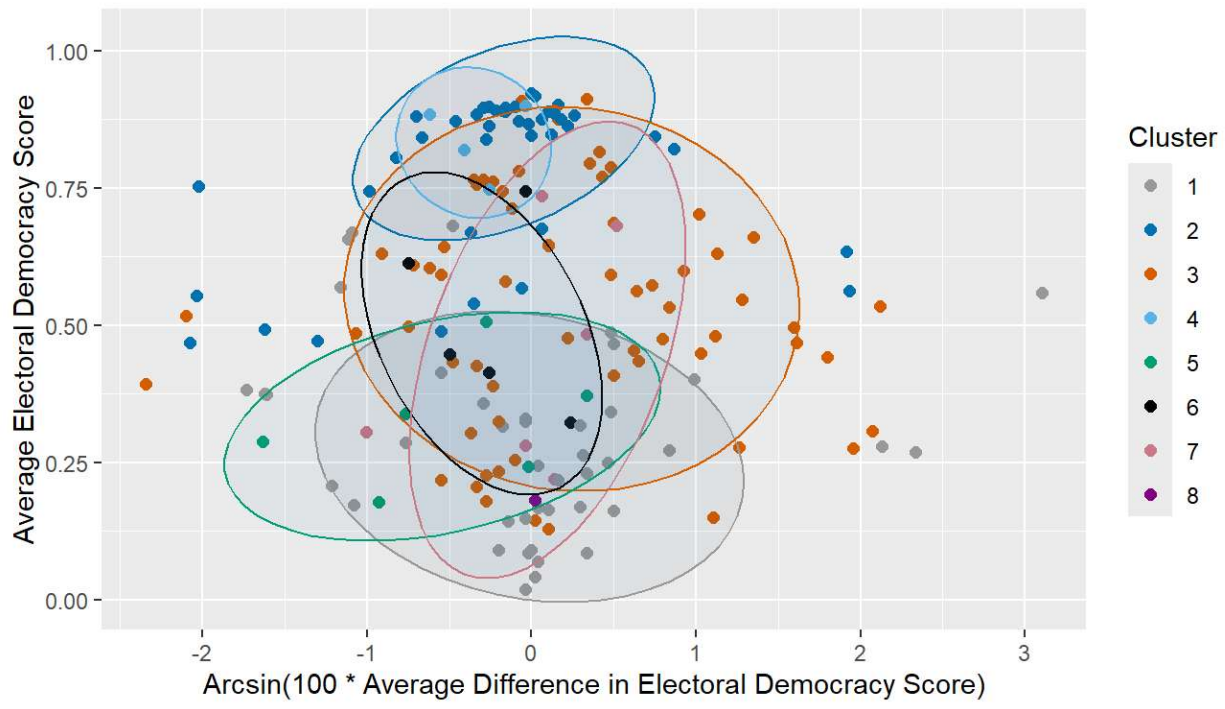
2010-2014 UNGA Vote Clustering, 6 Clusters

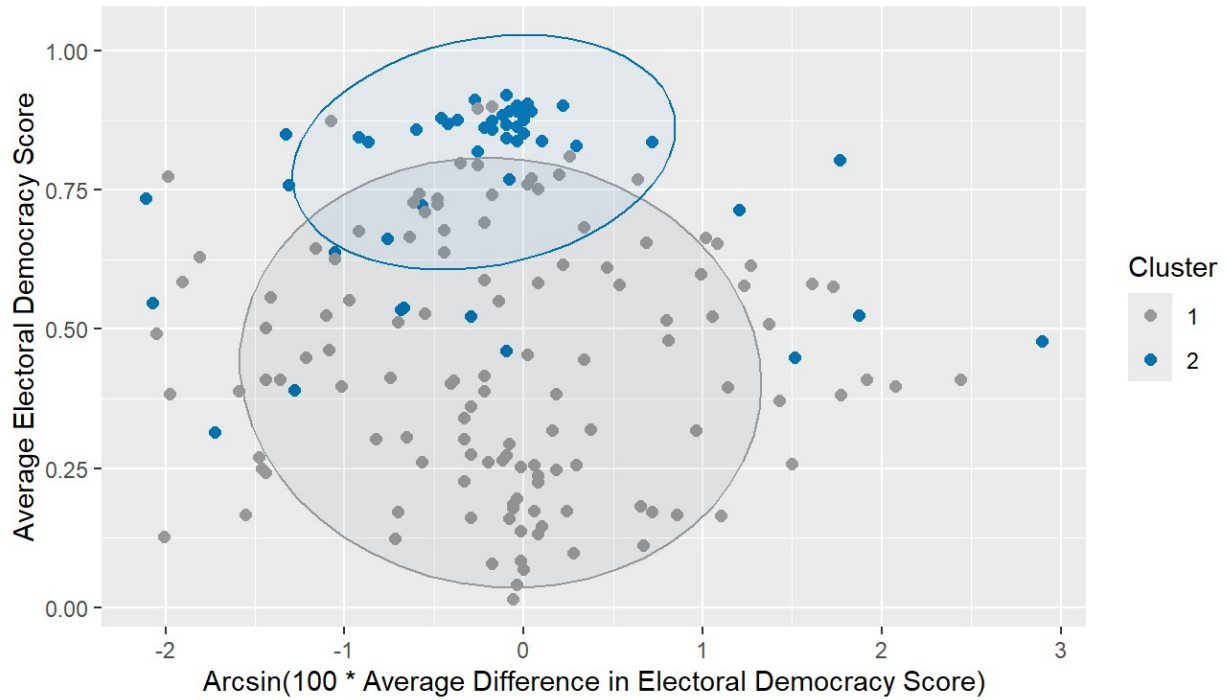
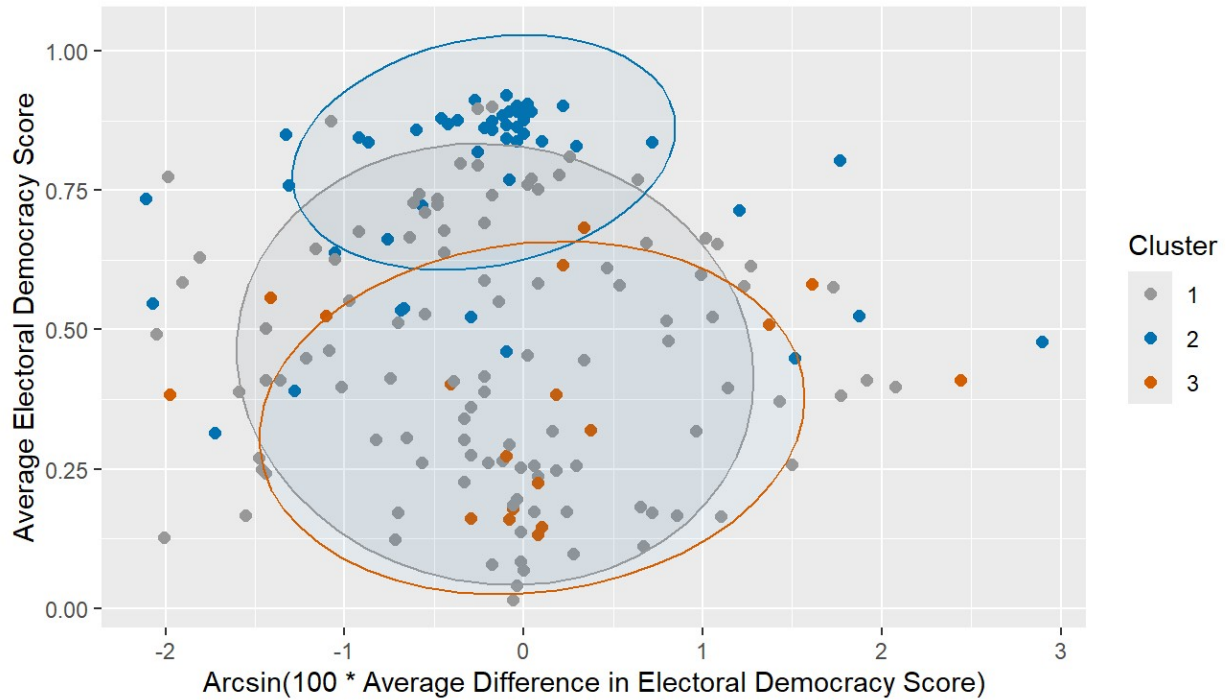


2010-2014 UNGA Vote Clustering, 7 Clusters

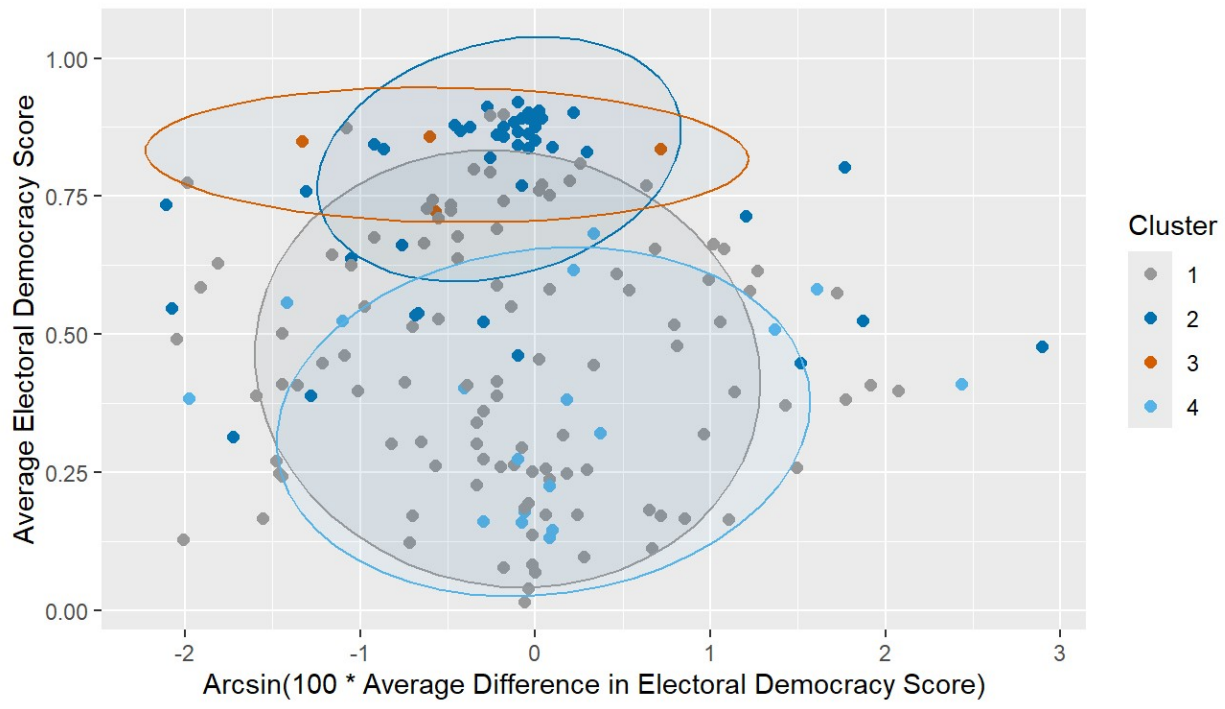


2010-2014 UNGA Vote Clustering, 8 Clusters

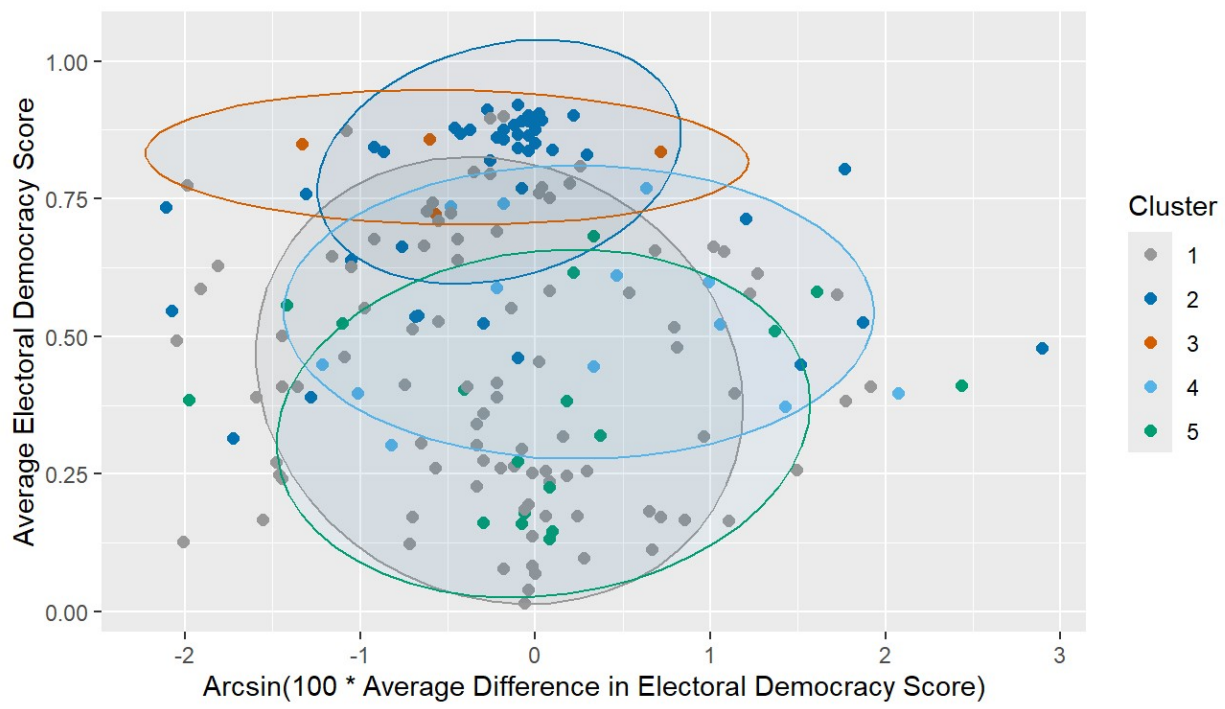


Appendix 3. Breakdown of Clusters in the UN General Assembly, 2015–2019**2015-2019 UNGA Vote Clustering, 2 Clusters****2015-2019 UNGA Vote Clustering, 3 Clusters**

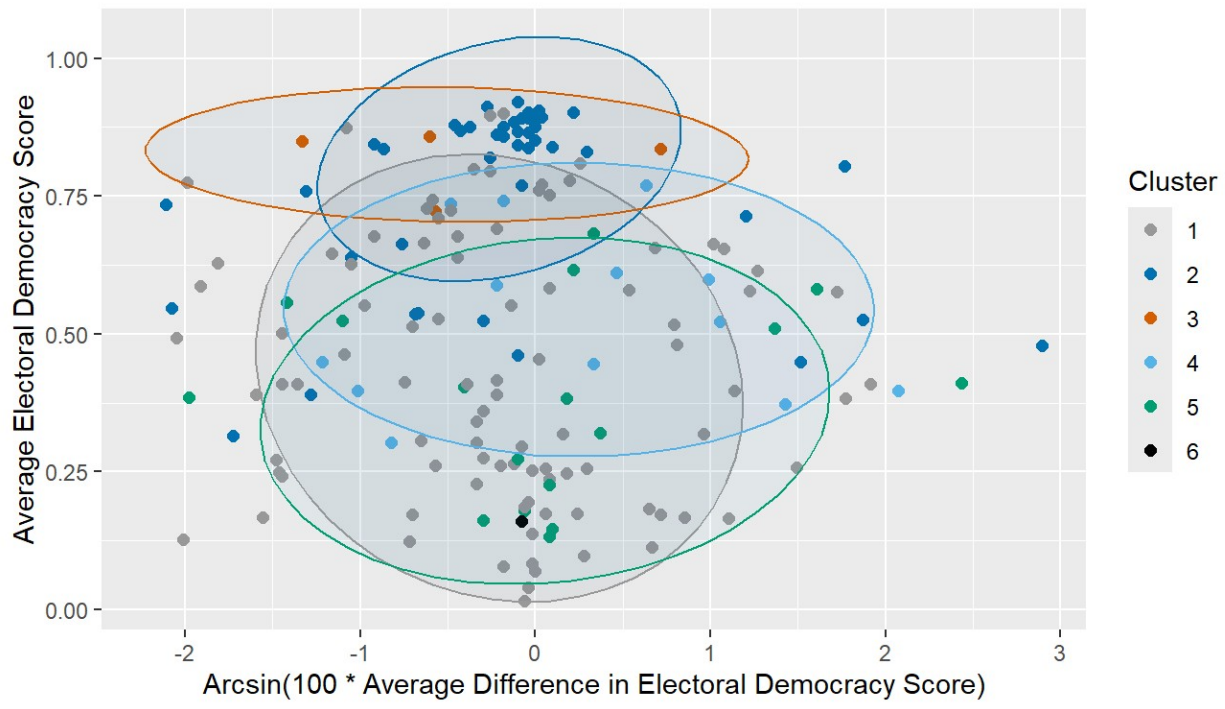
2015-2019 UNGA Vote Clustering, 4 Clusters



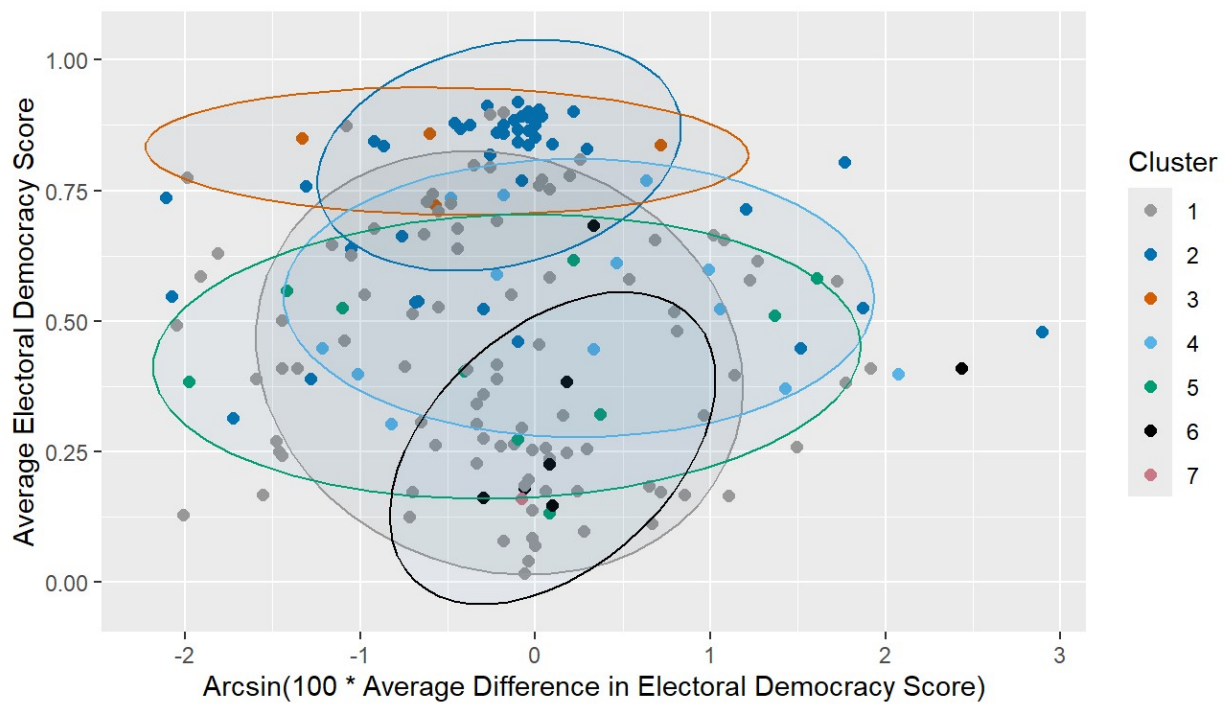
2015-2019 UNGA Vote Clustering, 5 Clusters



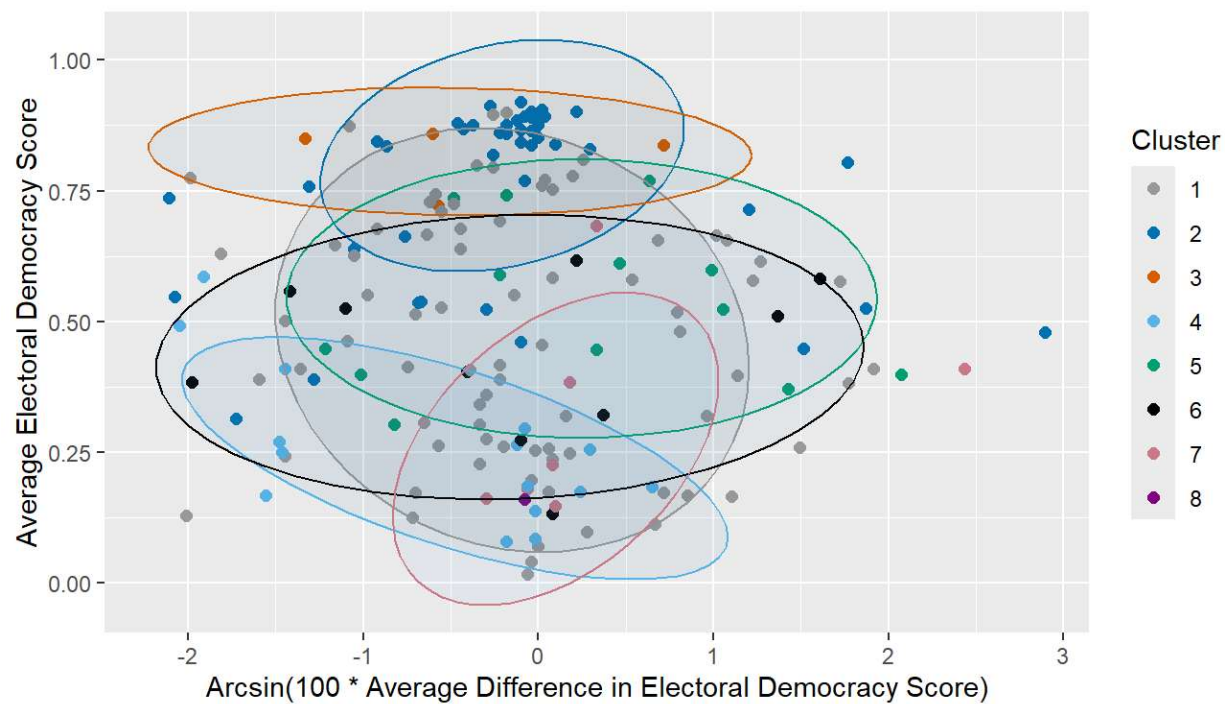
2015-2019 UNGA Vote Clustering, 6 Clusters



2015-2019 UNGA Vote Clustering, 7 Clusters

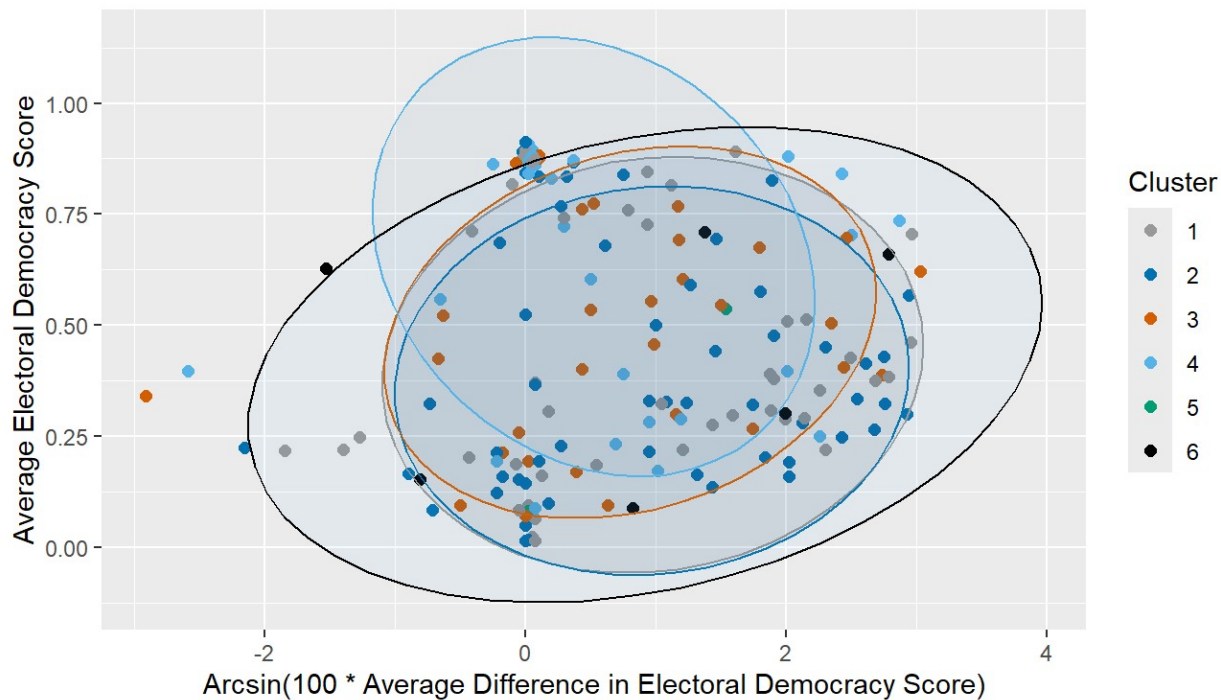


2015-2019 UNGA Vote Clustering, 8 Clusters

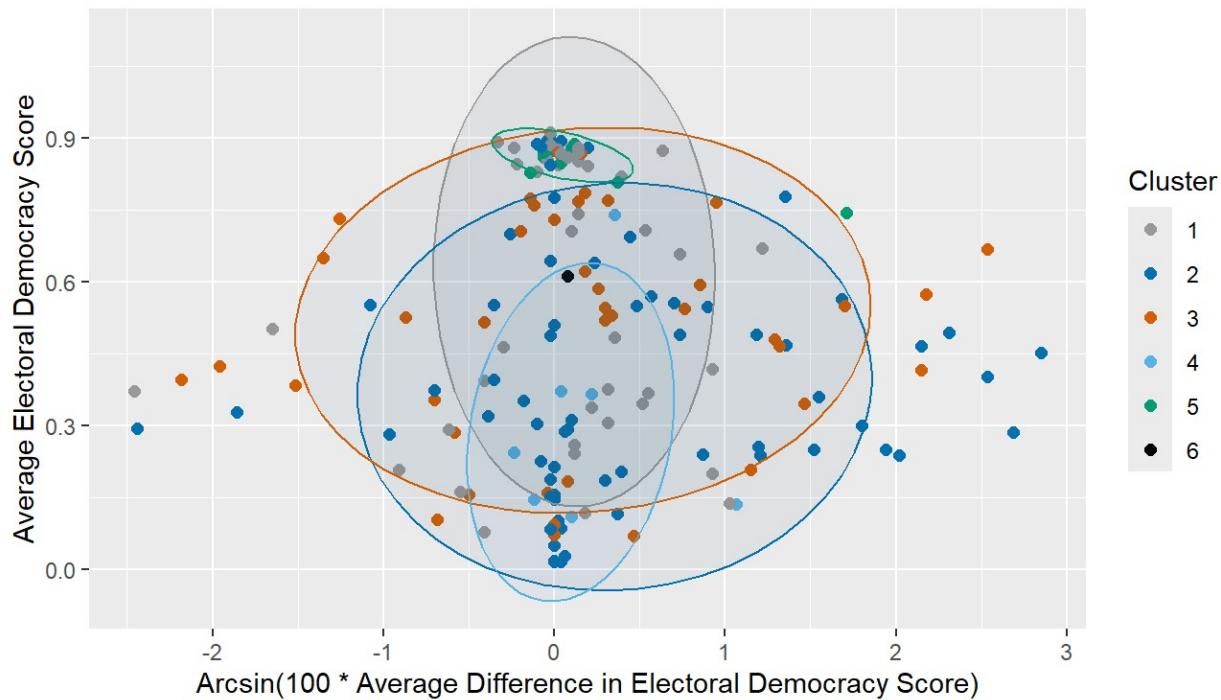


Appendix 4. Clustering of Usages of Norm-Based Words in the UNGA Over Time

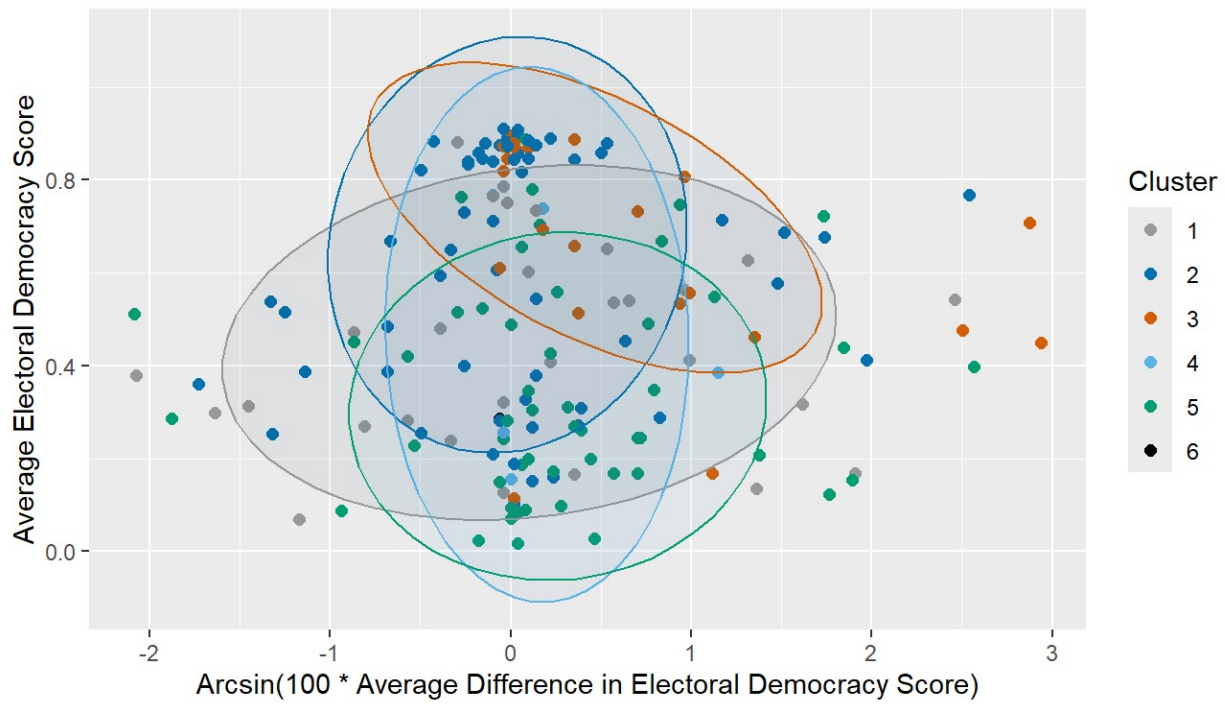
UNSC/GA Rhetoric Clustering, 1991-1994



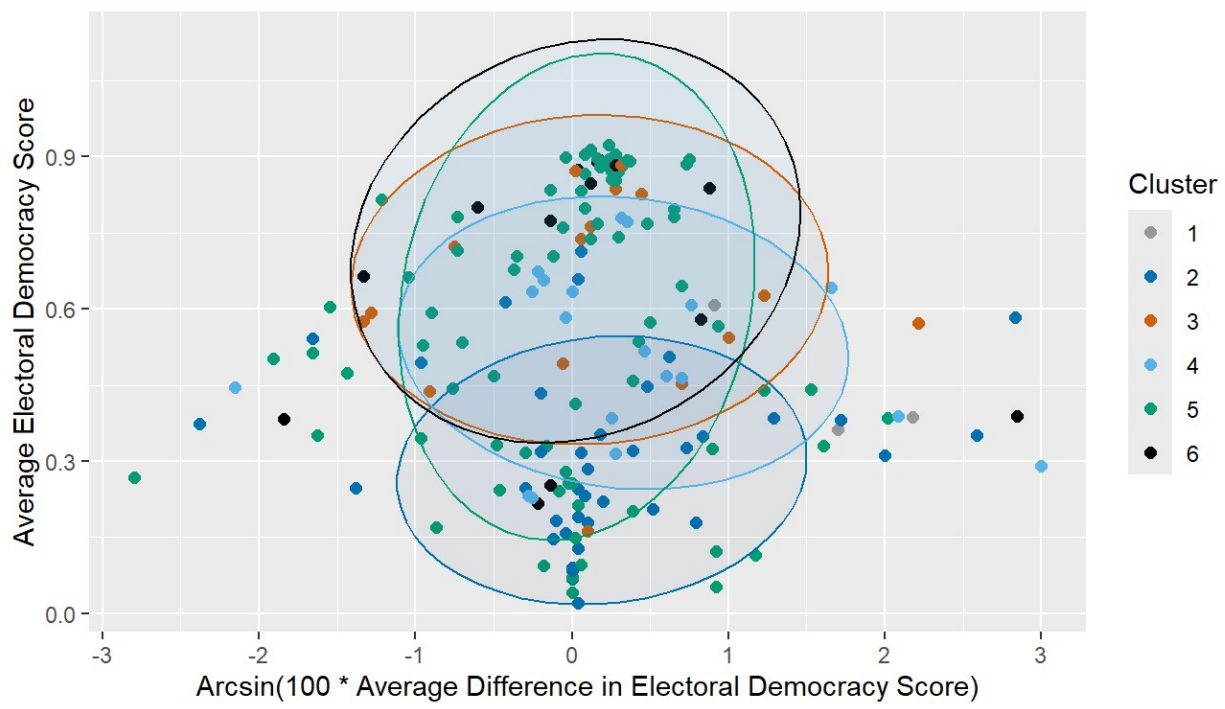
UNSC/GA Rhetoric Clustering, 1995-1999



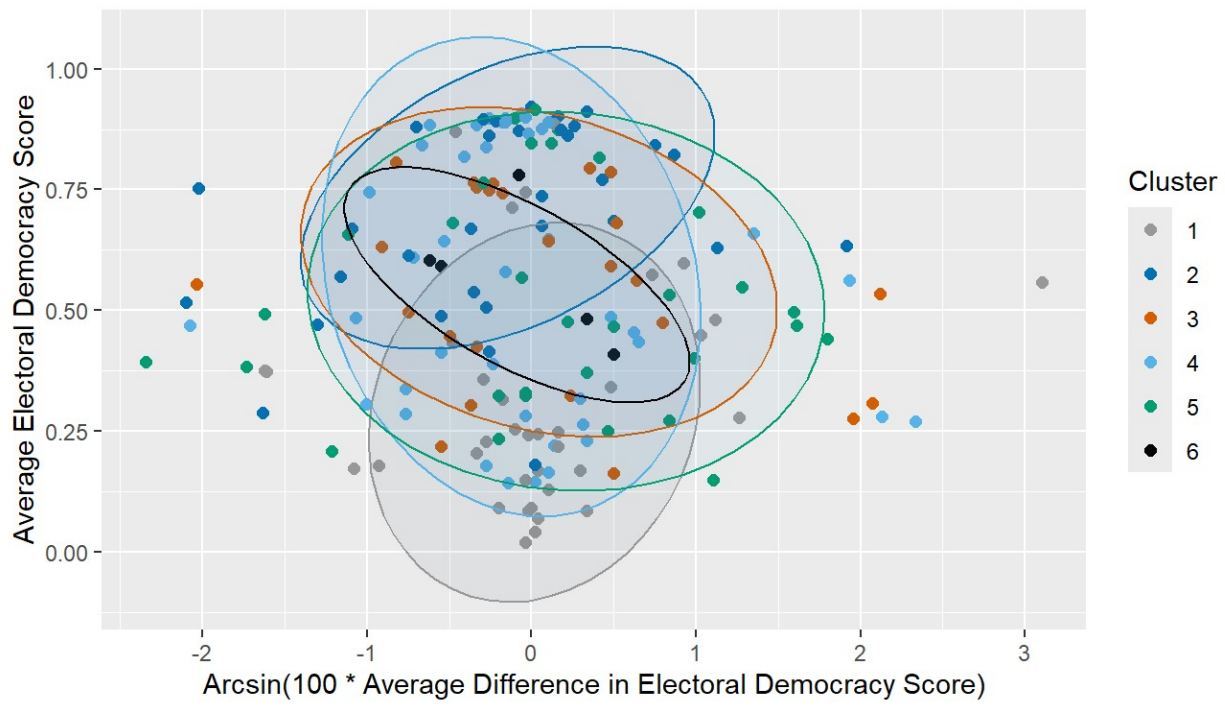
UNSC/GA Rhetoric Clustering, 2000-2004



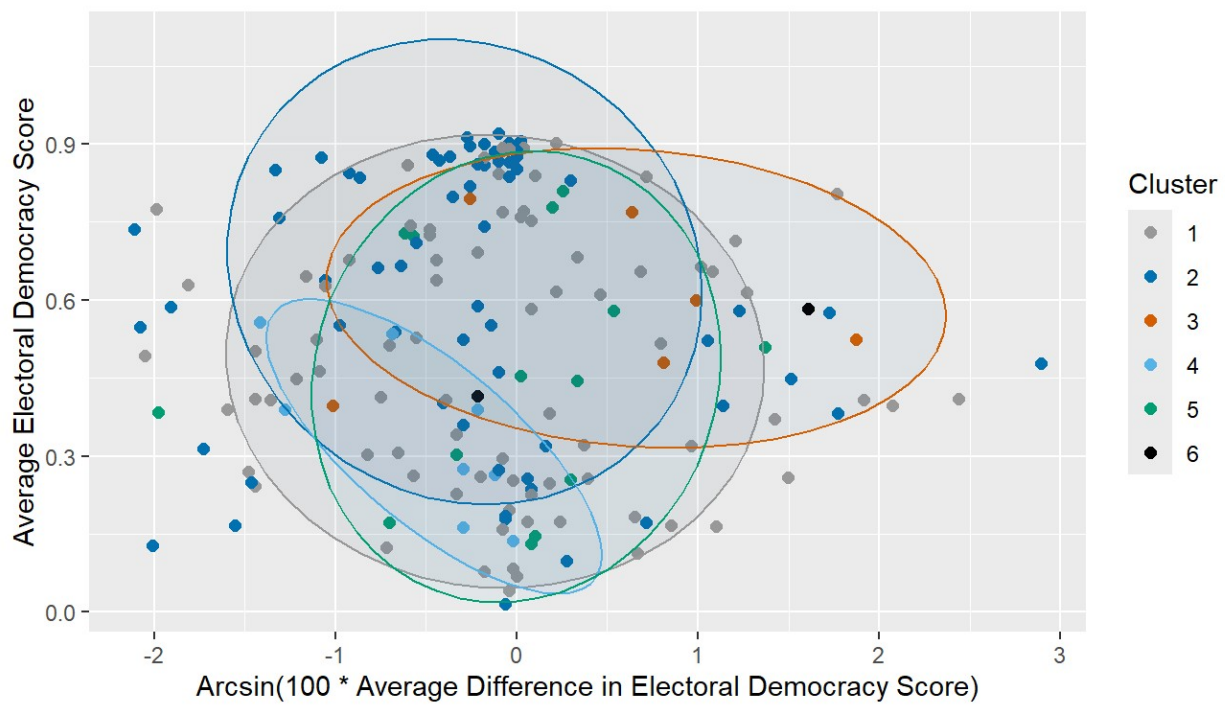
UNSC/GA Rhetoric Clustering, 2005-2009



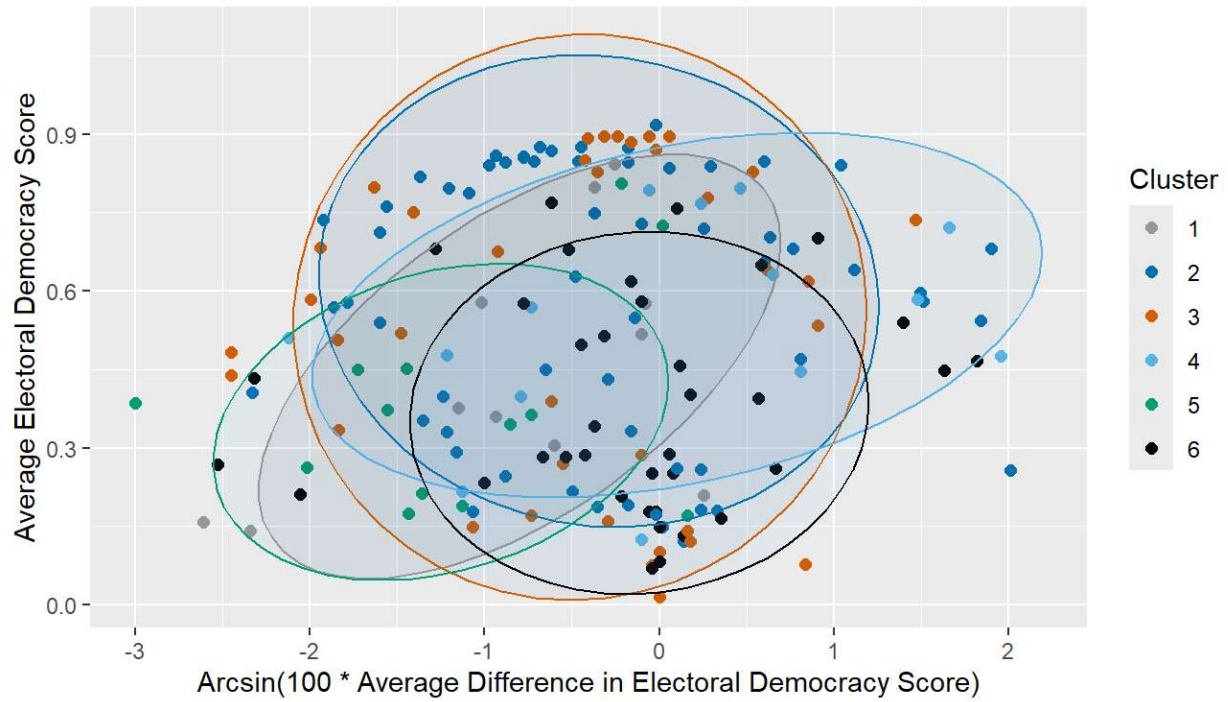
UNSC/GA Rhetoric Clustering, 2010-2014



UNSC/GA Rhetoric Clustering, 2015-2019



UNSC/GA Rhetoric Clustering, 2020-2024

**Appendix 5. Correlation Scores Between Voting and Rhetoric Clusters**

1991–1994: 0.1332445

1995–1999: 0.07480945

2000–2004: 0.02339483

2005–2009: -0.019201

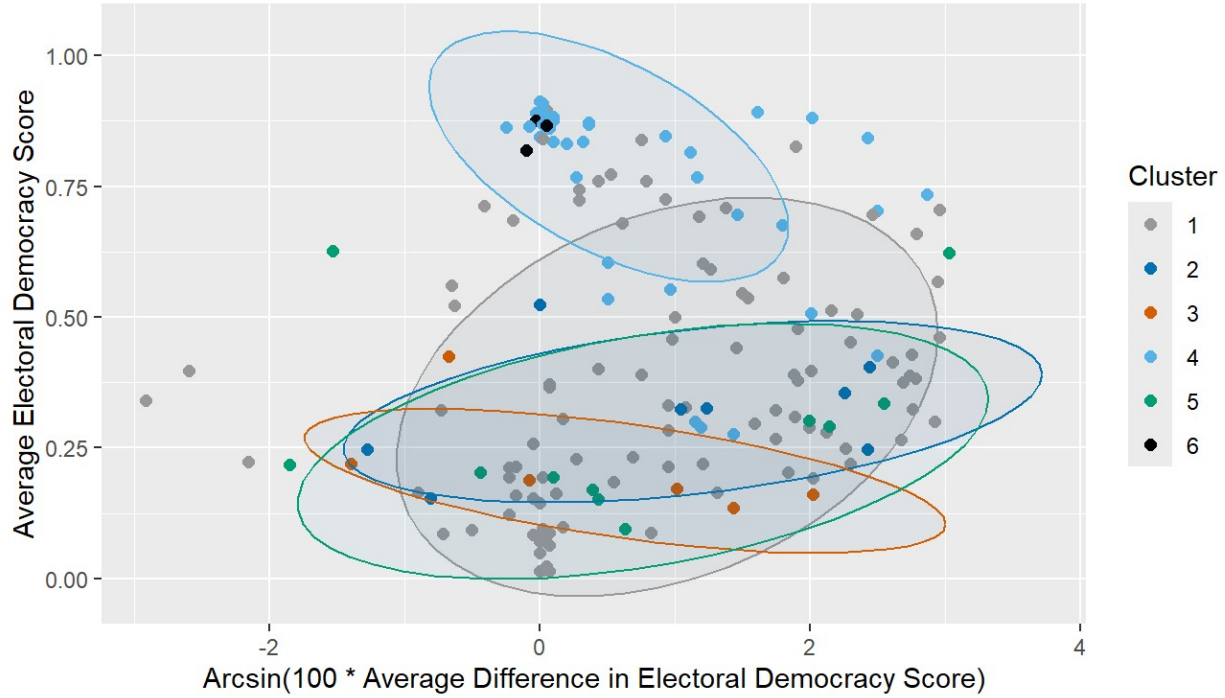
2010–2014: 0.09295232

2015–2019: 0.1744872

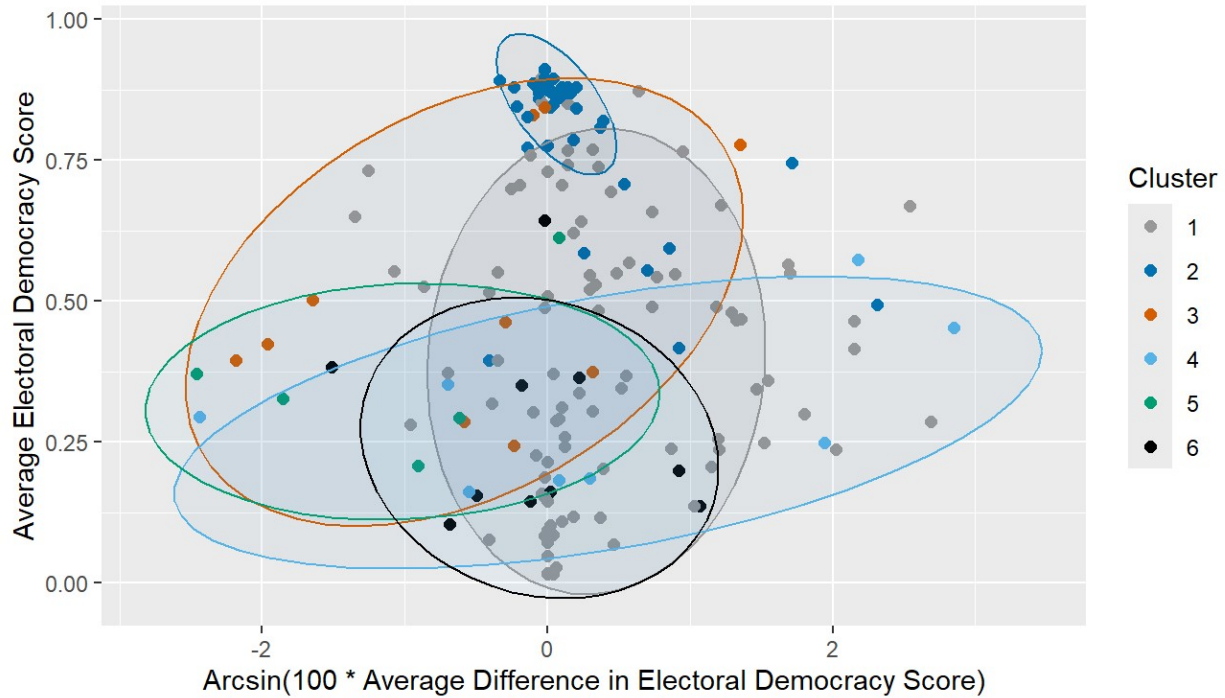
2020–2024: 0.01022622

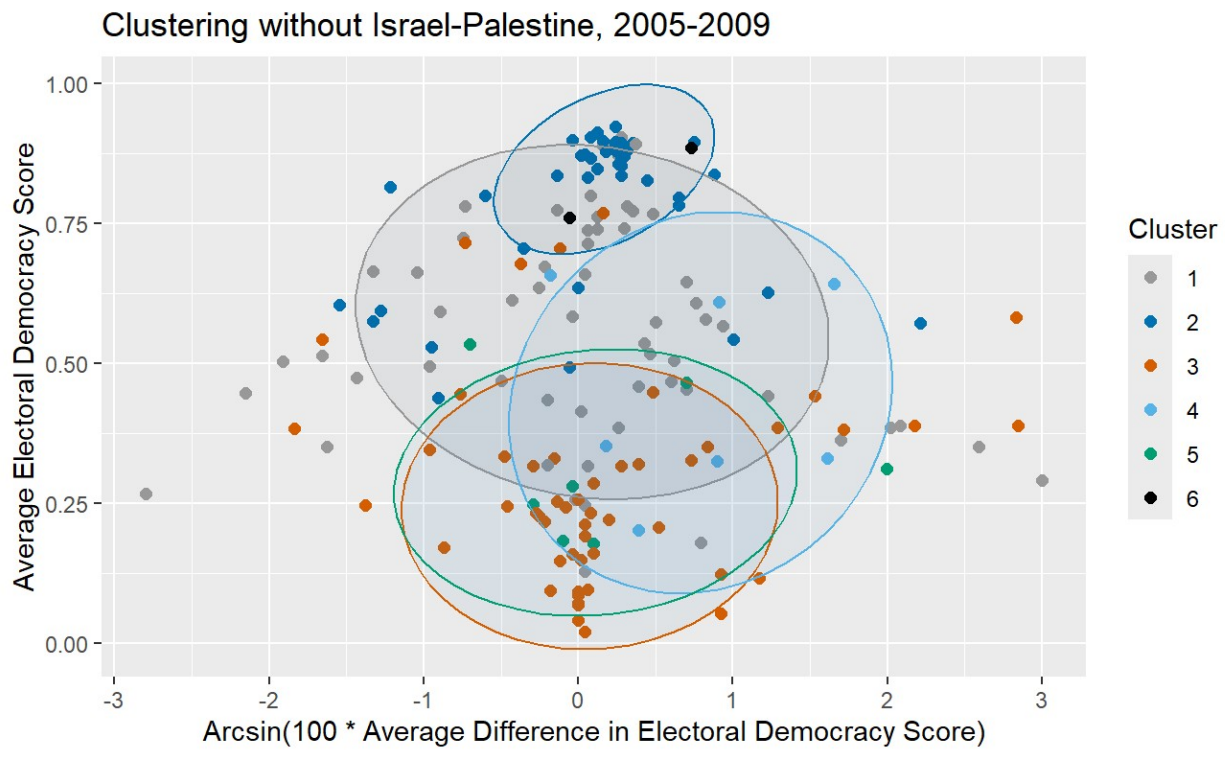
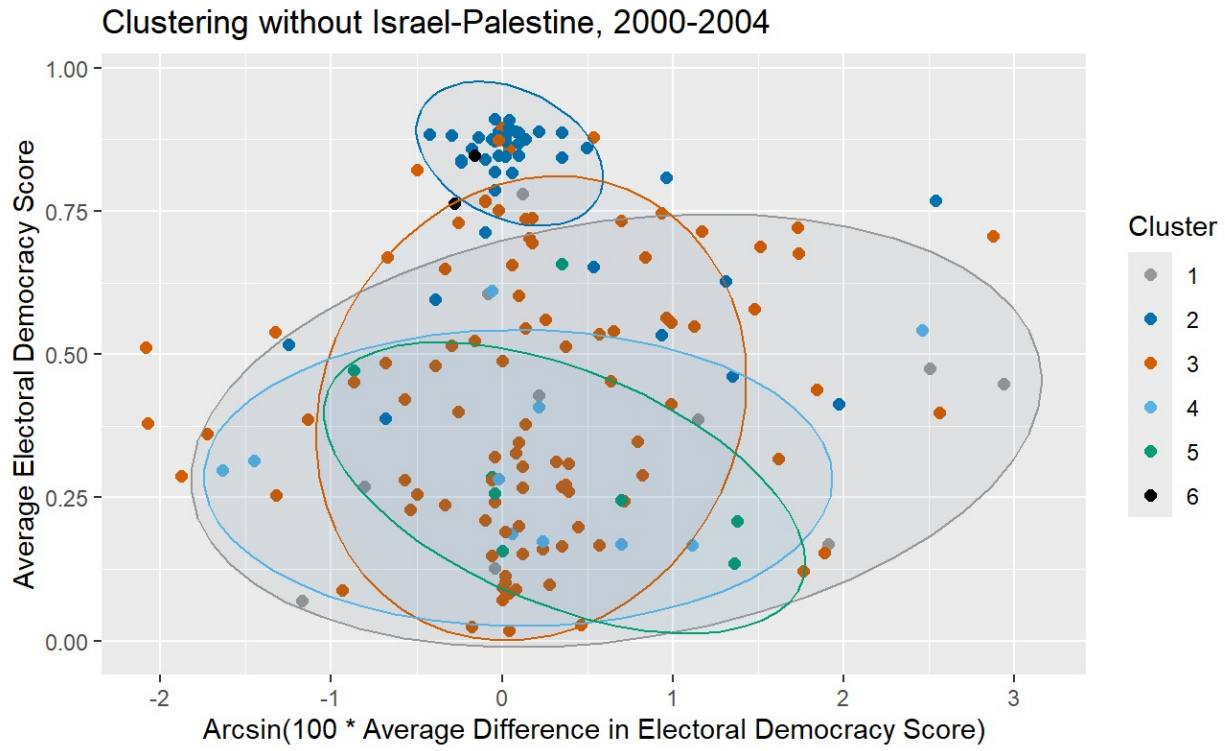
Appendix 6. Vote Clustering Outcomes in the UNGA without Resolutions Mentioning “Israel,” “Palestine,” or “Jerusalem”

Clustering without Israel-Palestine, 1991-1994

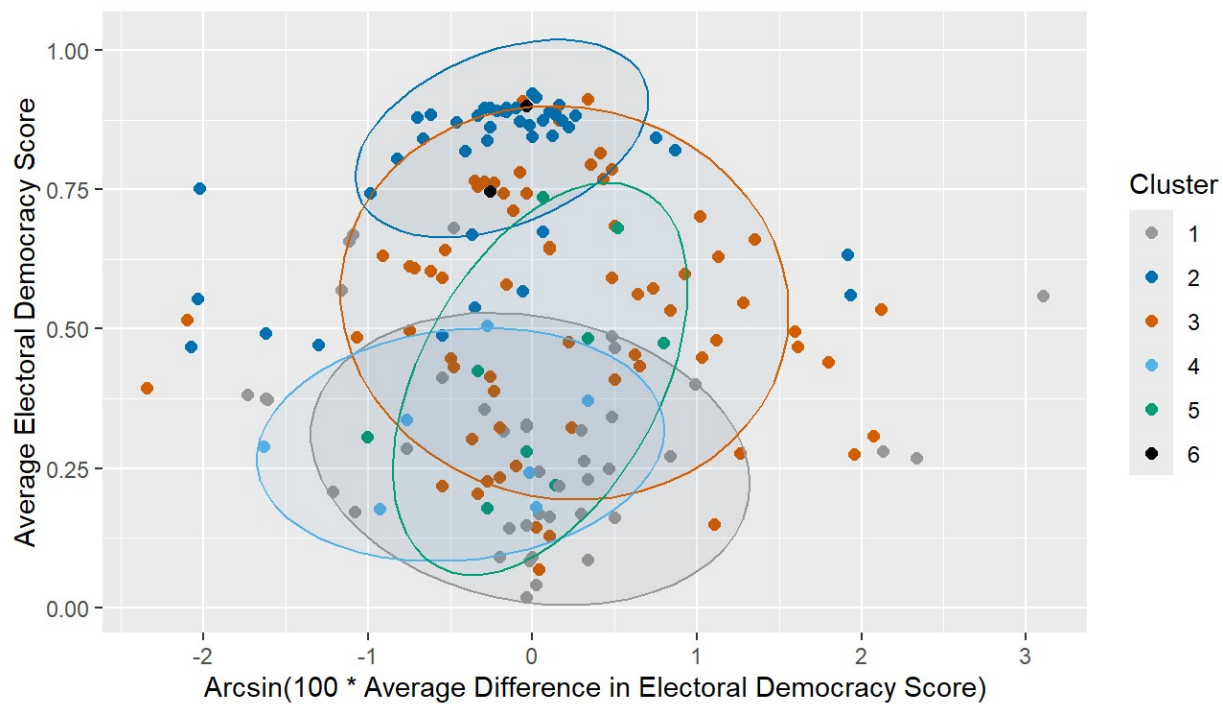


Clustering without Israel-Palestine, 1995-1999





Clustering without Israel-Palestine, 2010-2014



Clustering without Israel-Palestine, 2015-2019

