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Abstract (E)

Regional grouping systems are a common structure in international organizations aimed at ensuring that all geographic regions containing member states of the organization are equitably represented within the non-plenary decision-making bodies of the organization. Such structures exist in the UN, the IAEA, the WHO, the OPCW, and numerous other international organizations. However, the manner in which such systems are constructed can often obstruct member states from participating in the decision-making processes of the organization or even block them from doing so entirely. This thesis investigates the various types of regional grouping systems that are employed by international organizations through both a series of case studies and a larger comparative analysis. It identifies the patterns among regional grouping systems that cause them to either obstruct or enable member state participation in decision-making. Cases of geographical inequity can be attributed primarily to unproportional distribution of seats across regional groups and inflexible regional grouping systems that fail to respond to changing demographics within the body of member states.

Abstract (D)

Regionale Gruppierungssysteme sind eine verbreitete Struktur in internationalen Organisationen, die darauf abzielt sicherzustellen, dass alle geografischen Regionen, in denen Mitgliedstaaten der Organisation vertreten sind, in den gewählten Entscheidungsorganen der Organisation verhältnismäßig repräsentiert werden. Solche Strukturen existieren in den Vereinten Nationen, der Internationalen Atomenergie-Organisation (IAEO), der Weltgesundheitsorganisation (WHO), der Organisation für das Verbot chemischer Waffen (OVCW) als auch in weiteren internationalen Organisationen.

Die Art und Weise, in der sich solche Systeme zusammensetzen, kann jedoch häufig dazu führen, dass Mitgliedstaaten an den Entscheidungsprozessen der Organisation nur eingeschränkt teilnehmen können oder sogar vollständig von ihnen ausgeschlossen werden. In dieser Arbeit werden die verschiedenen Arten regionaler Gruppierungssysteme, die von internationalen Organisationen verwendet werden, untersucht, sowohl anhand einer Reihe von Fallstudien als auch durch eine umfassendere vergleichende Analyse.

Dabei werden jene Muster identifiziert, die dazu führen, dass regionale Gruppierungssysteme die Beteiligung von Mitgliedstaaten an Entscheidungsprozessen entweder behindern oder ermöglichen. Fallbeispiele geografischer Ungleichbehandlung lassen sich in erster Linie auf eine unverhältnismäßige Verteilung der Sitze zwischen den regionalen Gruppen sowie auf unflexible Gruppierungssysteme zurückführen, die aufgrund rigider Strukturierung nicht angemessen auf demografische Veränderungen innerhalb der Mitgliedschaft reagieren können.

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On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

Introduction

Kazakhstan is the world's single greatest producer of uranium. It is one of only three states to have previously possessed nuclear weapons stockpiles and fully relinquished them. It is currently in the process of building its first nuclear power plant.¹ All of these factors would make it expected that Kazakhstan would be a highly involved member state of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the international organization responsible for promoting peaceful uses of nuclear technology, establishing international standards for the safety and security of nuclear material, and negotiating nuclear safeguards agreements to ensure nuclear non-proliferation. However, until November of 2025, more than thirty years after Kazakhstan's accession to the IAEA, it was functionally excluded from election to the Board of Governors, the non-plenary executive body of the agency, because it was excluded from membership in any of the regional electoral groups, which effectively serve as geographical electoral districts in elections to the Board. Its inability to run for a seat on the Board of Governors kept Kazakhstan from discussing or contributing to decisions on issues such as the agency's budget and the selection of the Director General, both competences of the Board. Far from an anomaly, Kazakhstan is just one of 17 states that found itself in such circumstances; while Kazakhstan was admitted to a regional group in November 2025, there remain numerous states that are excluded from the IAEA regional grouping systems. Furthermore, such systems of regional groupings are a common tool of international organizations to promote geographic diversity in their non-plenary bodies. Their status as a tool of equity and fair representation belies the reality that these regional grouping systems often cause states to be underrepresented and sidelined at the very organizations that they are supposed to be full members of. However, the varied nature of regional grouping systems across international organizations offers an opportunity to identify the causes of these inequities and the design of the systems that most effectively promote regional equity in universal international organizations.

¹ World Nuclear News, "Russia and Kazakhstan sign nuclear power plant agreement," May 28, 2026, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/articles/russia-and-kazakhstan-sign-nuclear-power-plant-agreement>.

International organizations serve as a fundamental entity allowing for cooperation and collaboration amongst states. In contrast with bilateral agreements, which simply require the consent of both states, the taking of decisions and the implementation of policy in multilateral organizations often demands more complex political processes. The designers of the political structures of an international organization must balance the need for responsiveness—for the organization to take decisions swiftly and act effectively in response to dynamic international circumstances—with the need for the organization to remain representative of all member states and to take decisions that are in line with their views. This is especially true for universal international organizations, whose capacity for widespread membership often leads states to introduce safeguards into the political structures of the organization to ensure the equal representation of all member states. One facet of this desire to protect the sovereign equality of member states lies in efforts to ensure equitable geographic representation in the smaller organs of international organizations. While such efforts vary widely—in their degree of formalization, how fixed they are, the number and membership of the regions—a common aspect that they share is the grouping of states based on geographic region and the use of these groups to allocate seats in certain organs of the international organization.

As examples, the IAEA uses eight regional groups to allocate seats on its Board of Governors. The UN uses five official regional groups to distribute non-permanent seats on the Security Council, as well as other organs such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Universal Postal Union also identifies five geographical regions, and in electing both its Council of Administration and its Postal Operations Council seeks equitable distribution of seats among those regions. The International Telecommunication Union and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons use similar systems for the elections of their executive bodies.

Unlike organizations which merely coordinate their operations through regional offices, such as the World Bank Group, international organizations with systems of regional groupings for the purpose of voting and elections have a direct impact on the ability of those states to engage in the decision-making processes of the organization. In all such organizations, the precise configuration of the regions and the proportions in which they are allocated seats can play a substantial role in shaping the internal politics of the organization. These systems of electoral groups have historically enabled certain

states to be fully cut out of decision-making processes, or to have their opportunities for representation greatly diminished relative to those of other states. Nonetheless, in most international organizations, calls for structural reform have largely overlooked the influence of regional groupings in affecting the capacity of states to engage with the organization on an equal footing.² This thesis therefore aims to offer a comprehensive comparative analysis of regional groupings systems across major universal international organizations, and will subsequently investigate the impact of these systems on capacity of states to participate effectively in international organizations.

Definitions

International Organizations

While the degree to which any international organization is truly “universal” varies, for the purposes of this analysis, I will use the term “universal international organization” to refer to international organizations with a global scope whose membership is open to all states. I will also at times refer generally to these entities as “international organizations,” as unless otherwise specified this paper is only concerned with international organizations of a universal character. While regional organizations may at times implement similar measures aimed at ensuring geographic equity or have intraregional geographic groupings—such as strategic coordination among the Baltic states within the European Union³—the need to institutionalize regional groupings in the organization itself is unique to universal international organizations. Additionally, many of the international organizations that employ such systems of regional groups fall under the umbrella of the UN System, either as specialised agencies or as related organizations and in some cases even as different organs of the UN—as in the distinct implementation of regional distribution of seats on the International Court of Justice and the UN Security Council. Nonetheless, these organizations often implement their own unique systems for ensuring equitable geographic distribution of seats and therefore shall be considered as their own distinct cases, despite their shared ties to the UN System.

² The clear exception to this observation is the IAEA, where the exclusion of numerous states from the regional groupings system that underpins elections to the Board of Governors has been a major point of discussion for decades. The related calls for reform will be discussed later in this thesis.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, “Co-operation among the Baltic States,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2026, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/co-operation-among-baltic-states>.

Equitable Geographic Representation & Distribution

In discussions of the importance of ensuring access of states from all geographic regions to the policymaking organs of international organizations, many different terms are used to refer to this issue. For example, in the context of the IAEA's exclusion of certain states from the regional groupings system, member states generally refer to the "restoration of the sovereign equality" of member states."⁴ The U.N. Charter references "equitable geographical distribution."⁵ The constitution of the International Telecommunications Union similarly refers to a need for "equitable geographical distribution amongst the regions of the world,"⁶ and similar language is used in the constituent treaties of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,⁷ the International Seabed Authority,⁸ and others.⁹ However, in numerous other cases, particularly connected with reforming the structure of the UN Security Council, "representation" has been used in place of "distribution," including in the 1963 General Assembly Resolution that expanded the membership of the Security Council and ECOSOC.¹⁰ In his work for the UN University's 1999 seminar on geographic representation, Samuel Daws argues that while the terms are at times used synonymously, the use of the term "representation" represents a shift towards focusing on states that were excluded from certain bodies.¹¹ For the same seminar, Agam wrote on the same semantic issue, noting that use of the word "representation" privileges the holding of a seat on a UN body as one of the primary ways to contribute to the system, excluding a more general conception of the distribution of power among the member states.¹²

⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Committee of the Whole: Record of the Second Meeting," GC(65)/COM.5/OR.2, 21 September, 2021, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc65com5or2_prl.pdf

⁵ Charter of the United Nations, June 26, 1945, XV *UNCIO* 335, amendments in 557 *UNTS* 143, 638 *UNTS* 308 and 892 *UNTS* 119, Art. 23

⁶ Constitution of the International Telecommunications Union, December 22, 1992, 1825 *UNTS* 331, Art. 9.

⁷ Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, September 3, 1992, 1975 *UNTS* 45, Art 28

⁸ UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, December 10, 1982, 1833 *UNTS* 3, Art. 160

⁹ For further details on constituent treaties of international organizations and their justification for the establishment of regional grouping systems, please see Table II

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 1991 XVIII, "Question of equitable representation on the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council," A/RES/1991(XVIII), December 17, 1963, [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1991\(XVIII\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1991(XVIII))

¹¹ Sam Daws, "The Origins and Development of UN Electoral Groups," in *What is Equitable Geographic Representation in the 21st Century*, by Ramesh Thakur (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1999), 16.

¹² Hasmy Agam, "Equitable Geographic Representation in the Twenty-first Century," in Thakur, 42.

This analysis will refer to both distribution and representation, as their semantic differences highlight distinct injustices in the implementation of regional grouping systems. To be sure, there are myriad ways for states to contribute to multilateral organizations beyond simply holding seats on boards and councils, and an over-focus on representation can turn attention away from these other contributions; that said, as this analysis is particularly concerned with the failings of regional grouping systems to treat all Member States of international organizations fairly and equally, the matter of representation is of greater concern. The fact that the distribution of seats on the Board of Governors across regional groups at the IAEA includes seats for Asian states does not change the fact that, until 2026, it was impossible for Kazakhstan to be represented on the Board, by virtue of its exclusion from the regional groupings system.

Conversely, when considering injustices brought about by the relative sizes of the groups and the number of seats provided to them, this is a matter of distribution rather than representation. For example, in the United Nations, the group of Asia-Pacific States—which currently consists of 51 members¹³—and the Western Europe and Others Group—which currently consists of 26 members¹⁴—are each allocated 2 non-permanent seats on the Security Council; all states involved are technically represented on the Security Council. It is rather the equal distribution of those seats across regional groups of unequal size which leads some states to have far greater opportunities than others to participate in bodies of limited membership. In the particular example given above, if we assume equal sharing of seats among the states in each group,¹⁵ states in the Western Europe and Others Group have nearly twice the opportunity to participate in the Security Council as states in the Asia-Pacific Group. This inequality is one of distribution, not of representation.

¹³ Excluding China, which holds a permanent seat on the Security Council, and Türkiye, which is a member of the Asia-Pacific Group and WEOG, but is solely a member of WEOG for voting purposes

¹⁴ Excluding the United Kingdom and France, which hold permanent seats on the Security Council, and the United States and the Holy See, which are observers to the group

¹⁵ In practice, seats on bodies of limited membership are not usually split equally among member states of each regional group. The group of African states is noted by O'Brian (1999) at pp. 31 for having particularly strong rotational discipline within its group, giving all of its members relatively equal opportunity to sit on the Security Council by rotating the seats evenly among them. However, other groups, especially the Western Europe and Others group, is noted for having frequent contestations for seats on the Security Council, allowing factors like level of contribution and power to play a more significant role in affecting individual states' likelihood of sitting on the Council.

Given this distinction, and the fact that injustice and inequality in how member states participate in the policymaking processes of international organizations can come about through failures of both representative and distributional equity, this analysis will treat the terms as two distinct phenomena, rather than using them as synonyms for one another or selecting simply one of the terms to favour. Distributional injustices arise through unequal allocation of procedural decision-making powers, usually in the form of seats on an executive body. Representational injustices arise through the exclusion of particular states from equal participation in the selection process for those seats. Both issues are important to understanding how regional grouping systems can contribute in inequalities between states in international organizations. This analysis is especially concerned with inequalities relating to representation rather than distribution, but particularly in the discussion of reform efforts across different international organizations, will discuss both.

Regional Grouping Systems

The electoral regional groups that constitute a regional grouping system are distinct from voting blocs or political caucuses, though these often also exist within international organizations. For example, within the United Nations system, groups such as the European Union, ASEAN, the Non-Aligned Movement, the G-77, the Caribbean Community, the League of Arab States, and other groupings of states often negotiate together and even deliver joint statements before bodies such as the General Assembly. While these are politically influential groupings of states that are often formed along regional lines, they differ from the regional grouping systems that this thesis is concerned with in that they are not constructed to facilitate the allocation of scarce political representative positions across various geographic regions. I will use the term “regional grouping system” to describe the manner in which states are divided into groups based on geographic region for such purposes within a given international organization, and will use the terms “regional groups” and “electoral groups” to describe these geographically-based assemblages of states.

Literature Review

While regional groups have been a largely overlooked aspect of research into the structures of international organizations, there have been some investigations into their structures, history, and impact on multilateral politics. These works have mostly focused

on the United Nations and its subsidiary bodies rather than other international organizations and furthermore have focused especially on the Security Council over other UN organs.

This focus on the United Nations over other international organizations in the existing research is in part because the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council makes the inequalities in how different states participate in its policymaking more pronounced. As a result, most of the literature concerning unequal representation in international organizations is specifically concerned with voting behaviour at the UN Security Council and the impact of the permanent members' veto on the Council's policy outcomes. Although the regional distribution of the permanent members on the Security Council may contribute to geographical inequities in representation on the Council, the electoral regional grouping system at the United Nations is fundamentally concerned with the non-permanent members of the Security Council. Research into voting behaviour of permanent members and the impact of their veto is therefore largely uninformative on this subject.

While focus on the permanent members veto predominates in the literature, there has nonetheless been some notable work on the impact of regional groups of states at the United Nations. Thomas Hovet Jr.'s 1960 text on bloc politics at the United Nations, investigating the beginnings of coalitions, blocs, and groups of member states at the UN, is a foundational text on the matter and provides valuable historical insight into the initial formations of these groupings.¹⁶ He specifically examines early regional groups and their caucusing patterns, including the Arab group, the Scandinavian group, the Benelux group, and the Asian-African group. However, his text predates the UN General Assembly Resolution that formalized the regional grouping system for the Security Council and enlarged its number of seats by three years. As such, while it provides valuable historical context and an extremely in-depth analysis of early bloc politics within the United Nations system, its utility in explaining the current regional grouping system of the UN is limited.

More recent literature on the subject has been closely connected with other efforts to reform the UN Security Council. For example, as a part of a seminar hosted by the

¹⁶ Thomas Hovet Jr., *Bloc Politics in the United Nations*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

United Nations University in 1999, Daws, O'Brian, Thakur, and Agam each contributed analyses on current issues in equitable geographical representation in the United Nations system, focusing primarily on the UN electoral groupings system, its history, and efforts at reform.¹⁷ It is in their materials published in affiliation with the UNU seminar that the distinction between equitable geographical representation and distribution is most clearly articulated.

Additionally, in their detailed description and analysis of the procedure of the UN Security Council, Daws and Sievers include a section on the regional groups, in which they highlight in particular the sense of shared interests that led states to coalesce into regional groups even prior to their formal institutionalization in the 1960s. They also track the gradual “hardening” of norms surrounding regional groups at the UN, such as the introduction of their rotating monthly chairmanships, which were published officially by the UN Journal beginning in 1971.¹⁸

Other works on international institutional law and the structure of the UN system, such as Talmon¹⁹ and Schermers and Blokker²⁰ also offer more modern analyses of the UN regional grouping system. While they provide useful insights into this particular system, and many of their analyses have some broader implications for regional grouping systems in general, their research is ultimately restricted to the United Nations system, and to its regional grouping system that is applicable to the selection of seats on the Security Council and on ECOSOC.

Existing research on the United Nations is particularly useful in light of the limitations on access to much information on the internal processes of other international organizations. For example, the practice of IAEA Board of Governors meetings being held in private—closed to both the public and the press unless specifically voted otherwise by the Board—and the documents it produces being kept in restricted access compounds this utility of UN-related research. However, keeping in mind that this

¹⁷ Ramesh Thakur, *What is Equitable Geographic Representation in the 21st Century* (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1999).

¹⁸ Loraine Sievers and Sam Daws, *The Procedure of the UN Security Council*, 4th (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 142-148.

¹⁹ Stefan Talmon, “Participation of UN Member States in the Work of the Organization: A Multicultural Alternative to Present-Day Regionalism?” in *Multiculturalism and International Law*, edited by Sienho Yee and Jacques-Yvan Morin (Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008), 221-257.

²⁰ Henry G Schermers and Niels M Blokker, *International Institutional Law: Unity within Diversity*, 6th revised (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2018), 238.

analysis will consider all major international organizations of a universal character, of which the United Nations is but one, it will be necessary to consider the parallel systems that exist in such organizations. While there is very limited literature on regional groupings in organizations other than the United Nations, this analysis will investigate regional groupings in other organizations primarily through doctrinal legal analysis, considering primarily the constituent treaties of the organizations, but also resolutions, statements, and other agreements which have shaped or informed the development of regional grouping systems in each organization.

Additionally, in order to effectively compare the origins, development, and practices of different international organizations' regional grouping systems, the analysis will rely on historical documentation tracking the process through which these systems were installed. These sources will serve to supplement the evidence from the constituent treaties themselves and will be especially essential for the systems that have regional grouping systems that have emerged as norms of best practice rather than those prescribed by treaty, such as the regional allocation of ICJ judgeships.

Overall, this thesis will expand upon existing literature, which centres primarily on the United Nations, to consider the broader impacts of regional grouping systems across the multilateral system. Furthermore, expanding upon the distinction between equitable geographic representation and distribution discussed by Daws and Agam, this thesis will show these to be distinct types of failures of the principle of geographical equity, and will highlight the requirements for reform efforts to successfully address both factors.

Importance of Geographic Equity

Geographic equity represents a core complication of the organization of universal international organizations, as opposed to regional organizations. As they are composed of member states from across the globe, in order to ensure that the interests of all member states are represented in their decision-making processes, it is necessary for these organizations to attempt to offer equitable representation in those policymaking organs which have limited membership.

In order to facilitate the agreement and execution of policy within an international organization, all international organizations require a secretariat and at least one decision-

making body. The secretariat of an organisation comprises its professional staff, which enacts the decisions agreed by the member states. Decision-making bodies, or organs, can be distinguished into plenary and non-plenary bodies. Plenary bodies have all member states represented, while non-plenary bodies have limited membership.²¹ While there is no standard structure for international organizations, it is common for them to have a plenary organ which serves a parliamentary function and a non-plenary organ which serves an executive function and meets more frequently than the plenary organ. As examples of organizations that divide decision-making into a plenary and a non-plenary organ, the OPCW has the Conference of the States Parties to the CWC and an Executive Council; the IAEA has its General Conference and Board of Governors; the WMO has the World Meteorological Congress and an Executive Council, etc.

It is not unusual for an international organization to have multiple non-plenary organs, particularly if its mandate covers multiple policy areas, which may in turn be split among multiple executive bodies. This can be seen in the UN system, for example, wherein the General Assembly serves as the plenary organ and both the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council are non-plenary decision-making organs.²² The Universal Postal Union similarly has two non-plenary bodies, a Postal Operations Council and a Council of Administration.²³

Some international organisations lack a non-plenary decision-making body, such as the International Organization for Migration, which has only two organs: a plenary organ, the “Council,” and a secretariat, the “Administration.”²⁴ Such organizations are unaffected by electoral regional grouping systems, as there is no body of member state representatives with limited membership. While these organizations may nonetheless aim to pursue geographical equity in other areas, such as professional staff recruitment or appointment of high-level senior staff, they have no need of regional grouping systems to allocate limited seats on decision-making bodies to member states.

For international organizations that do possess executive organs with limited membership, however, their existence introduces the issue of how the limited seats on

²¹ Blokker, Niels M, “International Organizations or Institutions, Decision-Making Bodies,” *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law* (Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, December 2021).

²² Charter of the United Nations, Art. 23, 61.

²³ Constitution of the Universal Postal Union, July 10, 1964, 611 UNTS 7.

²⁴ Constitution of the International Organization for Migration, October 19, 1953, 207 UNTS 189.

these bodies are allocated among the member states. There are many distinctions among member states that could serve to influence this allocation: expertise in the relevant field for the organization's functions, population, financial contributions to the organization. While to varying degrees such factors may play a role in selection, through both direct and indirect channels,²⁵ one factor which has the potential to unfairly privilege certain states above others is the regional makeup of the executive organ.

In discussing the regional groupings system at the United Nations, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer wrote:

“The regional groupings were established to ensure that there was fair and equitable representation of the membership in the various UN bodies, so that all members who desired the opportunity to make a contribution to the decision-making of the UN could do so”²⁶

While his commentary is aimed at the UN system in particular, Downer clearly identifies the purpose of international organizations incorporating structures that aim to ensure equitable geographic representation: to ensure that all member states have the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process. By specifically seeking to avoid discrimination on the basis of regional alignment, statutory requirements to allocate seats on non-plenary organs equitably across geographical regions serve to allow member states to participate in the decision-making process of the organization on a more equal footing. Since non-plenary organs are by nature exclusionary, the incorporation of such allocative measures make these organs, and the organizations themselves, more fair in their distribution of decision-making power.

In addition to the value that international organizations place on geographic equity on normative grounds—that is to say, because it upholds the sovereign equality of member states and enables them to engage with the organization on equal terms as other states—there are also certain functional benefits that are worth noting, as they may shape the manner in and degree to which international organizations implement regional

²⁵ While expertise or advancement in a certain field is often a criterium for selection to executive organs of international organizations, as discussed later in the paper, more populous and more economically successful states are both also more likely to have some level of advancement in more technical fields that might contribute to selection on these grounds.

²⁶ Alexander Downer, “Foreword,” in *What is Equitable Geographic Representation in the 21st Century*, by Ramesh Thakur (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1999), v

groupings systems. For example, particularly for judicial organs, inclusion of representatives from a variety of member states is likely to improve judicial impartiality, as exemplified by the International Court of Justice's practice of allowing parties to a case to appoint an ad hoc judge to the court if they do not already have a national judge on the court.²⁷ As an extension of this, the allocation of seats in an executive organ of an international organisation to member states from across all major regions involved in the organization is likely to reduce the impact of political biases or local disputes on the decisions of the organization. If a certain region were disproportionately over-represented, it might be possible for the states representing that region to promote the interests of their region over others, such as by increasing funding or investment in that area of operations. Additionally, to the extent that state representatives are biased in favour of their own state or region, inclusion of as diverse array of member states in a non-plenary body helps to ensure that the body's decisions are as impartial as possible. For example, a preliminary analysis of the impact of the nationality of judges on the International Criminal Court suggested that a judge's geographic background does have the capacity to influence the manner in which they decide cases,²⁸ which would support the benefit to non-plenary bodies of recruiting geographically diverse member state representatives.

Inclusion of a geographically diverse set of member states also serves to expand the expertise of the body; even within an international organization with a very specific functional mandate, the interests, priorities, and specializations of the member states vary widely. While the IAEA, for example, specifically seeks the involvement of states that are advanced in the nuclear field, the question is left somewhat open as to what qualifies as a part of the nuclear field.²⁹ The production of atomic energy is a complex, technical, and multi-step process that often takes place across multiple countries, from mining to enrichment to energy generation to decommissioning and potentially fuel reprocessing. Expertise in any of these areas would be of a benefit to the Board, notwithstanding expertise in non-power peaceful uses of nuclear technology. A more diverse membership

²⁷ Statute of the International Court of Justice, June 26, 1945, XV *UNCIO* 355, Art. 31

²⁸ Abhinav Chandrachud, "Diversity and the International Criminal Court: Does Geographic Background Impact Decision Making?", *Brooklyn Journal of International Law* 38, no. 2 (2013): 519, available at: <https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/bjil/vol38/iss2/1>.

²⁹ The IAEA Statute specifically allocates positions on the Board of Governors to those states "most advanced in the technology of atomic energy including the production of source material."

on non-plenary executive organs therefore has the potential to generate more informed policy outcomes.

Finally, for organizations whose operations are truly global, having representation from across all regions of its membership serves to ensure that it is responding equally to relevant issues across the globe. Particularly for organizations such as the WMO or the CTBTO, which operate worldwide networks of data collecting stations, inclusion of an equitably regionally distributed group of states in the executive organs helps to ensure that the organ's focus is spread across all parts of the networks and therefore responsive to issues with any part of the network. Similarly, for organizations which serve a crisis response role, such as the IAEA, OPCW, and the UN, having representatives from across the world's regions helps to ensure responsiveness and impartiality in the face of international crises.

In addition to these more broadly beneficial factors, it bears noting that these systems were often initially introduced as a means of ensuring a balance between the great powers and their allies within the organizations. This is especially true of the United Nations, where the initial system of regional groupings was introduced in 1946 through a gentlemen's agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, who were seeking to determine a mutually agreeable way to allocate seats on the UN Security Council.³⁰

As the case studies and broader comparative analysis will reveal, the existing regional grouping systems in international organizations are falling short of their promise across both the idealistic and pragmatic justifications for equitable geographical representation. They are unequally allocating seats across regions and excluding states from regional groupings, and therefore failing to allow all member states the opportunity to contribute to decision making in the very organizations of which they are members. This is not only to the detriment of those disadvantaged member states, but to the operations of the international organizations themselves.

³⁰ Mathias Forteau, "International Organizations or Institutions, Regional Groups," *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law* (Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, January 2008).

Counterbalancing factors

Although geographic equity is an important value for international organizations and serves essential legitimating and functional purposes as described above, there are certain countervailing factors that may run contrary to this interest. For example, for organizations with a more specialized or technical function, such as the International Telecommunications Union, the IAEA, or the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization, there is often a large disparity in the expertise or capacity that different countries possess in that functional area. Using the IAEA as an example, only 31 countries currently operate nuclear power plants³¹ and only 72 states have ever had or have plans to have research reactors on their territory,³² while the Agency itself has 181 member states as of 2025.³³ While states may have reason to be highly involved in policy at the IAEA beyond a direct interest in nuclear energy—for example, the IAEA also oversees the implementation of safeguards related to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons—there is nonetheless a potential interest in allowing states with more involvement and expertise in the nuclear sector to be more involved in the policies of the organization. This interest is reflected in the IAEA Statute, which allocates certain seats on the Board of Governors not based on regional group elections, but based on which member states are “most advanced in the technology of atomic energy including the production of source materials.”³⁴ Therefore, while the structure of the IAEA Board of Governors incorporates a regional grouping system with the aim of promoting equitable geographic representation of member states, it also prioritizes the involvement of states with greater technical capacity over the optimally equitable distribution of seats on the Board across geographic regions. Similar practices are enshrined in the Chemical Weapons Convention, which required due regard to be paid to “equitable geographical distribution” as well as “the importance of chemical industry,”³⁵

Likewise, within the UN system, the Security Council is not composed solely of seats allocated on the basis of regional groups, but also of the seats allocated to the five

³¹ World Nuclear Network, “Nuclear Power in the World Today,” Current and Future Generation (World Nuclear Network Information Library, April 21, 2026), <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/current-and-future-generation/nuclear-power-in-the-world-today>.

³² International Atomic Energy Agency, “IAEA Research Reactor Database,” <https://nucleus.iaea.org/rddb/home>.

³³ International Atomic Energy Agency, “List of Member States,” <https://www.iaea.org/about/governance/list-of-member-states>.

³⁴ ICJ Statute, Art. VI (A)(1)

³⁵ Chemical Weapons Convention, Art. 23

permanent members, each of which, unlike the non-permanent members, has the right to veto any resolution of the Council.³⁶ This veto power is officially given to the five permanent members on the basis of their key roles in establishing the United Nations system as well as their important roles in maintaining international peace and security.³⁷ However, these permanent seats are not equally geographically distributed, and unlike the IAEA Statute—which seeks to partially correct for this issue by allocating the total number of seats across all regions—the system of elections to the Security Council does not correct for this. Two of the permanent members are located physically in Western Europe and another in Eastern Europe, while neither Latin America nor Africa have any permanent members of the Security Council from their regions. While there have been calls for reform to remedy this, in relation to the issue of regional grouping systems, the inclusion of unequally distributed permanent seats on the Security Council is primarily of interest because it signifies that there are other factors and priorities that outweigh the interest in promoting geographical equity, even in the original design of the institutions of certain international organizations. Nonetheless, while these factors may at times weigh against the interests of equitable geographic representation and distribution, they do not eliminate them as interests of the organization. Rather, it is up to the organizations to seek to implement equitable geographic representation in spite of these countervailing factors, as all of the organizations concerned in this analysis have the mandate to do so in their constituent treaties.

Practices

While the aim of this thesis is to investigate in particular the impacts of electoral geographical groupings of states on the internal politics of international organizations, these groupings are not the only method by which international organizations seek to ensure equitable geographic representation. Other areas, including the recruitment of professional staff, the appointment or election of executive staff, and the establishment of temporary bodies—such as open-ended working groups, committees, and groups of governmental experts—also generally aim to achieve a balanced, fair distribution of national origin. Understanding of these parallel initiatives aimed at ensuring equitable geographic representation is necessary background for the analysis of reform efforts and

³⁶ Michael Wood, “United Nations, Security Council,” *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law* (Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, July 2007).

³⁷ See: <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/voting-system>

impacts of such systems later in this thesis. As such, this section offers an overview of the general practices of international organizations with regard to the establishment and functioning of regional grouping systems, as well as their practices for ensuring geographical equity in other aspects.

Electoral Groupings of States

As a result of their interest in ensuring equitable geographical representation, universal international organizations have a tendency to incorporate into their constituent treaties, statutes, and practices certain standards to ensure the representation of states from all regions of the world. This has led to geographic origin serving as a standard for the election of certain states to organs of international organizations.

In order for such a system to work, Member States must be somehow placed into or assigned a regional designation. There must also be, at the institutional level, some determination of how many seats will be allocated to each regional group. Finally, for every election or appointment of member states to the limited number of seats in the organ—ordinarily, such organs of limited membership have set term lengths for members to hold seats—each regional group must determine which members of that group will be put forth as the candidates for the regional group's assigned number of seats.

This general outline still leaves many gaps to be filled: the number of regions; the number of member states per group; the method of allocating seats within and between the groups; the method of assigning the member states to their regional groups. All of these aspects of the practice of regional groups serve to shape their efficacy and their ability to effectively promote geographic equity. For example, if member states are automatically or centrally assigned to groups or a concrete listing of groups is voted upon, this may ensure that no states are excluded from the regional groupings system. However, reaching such a consensus may be extremely complicated, particularly if there are states that have objections from multiple groups that do not wish them to join. This was the issue for Israel, for example, at the United Nations until it successfully petitioned to join the Western Europe and Others group on a temporary basis in 2000, and was later admitted on a more permanent basis; although from a purely geographic standpoint, it would make the most sense for Israel to join the Asia-Pacific group, there were numerous states within that group that objected strongly to Israel's admission, and so it has been

unable to successfully join.³⁸ This experience has been mirrored in other international organizations, as the attitude toward Israel within its own geographic area is largely hostile, leading it to be excluded from the expected regional group in other international organizations such as the IAEA, where it is not a member of any geographic group, as well as other organizations that employ the United Nations system of regional groupings, such as the International Seabed Authority.

Staff Recruitment

In addition to efforts to allocate seats on certain organs with regard to equitable geographical representation, many international organizations have explicit mandates to seek equitable representation of member states across their professional workforce.³⁹ For example, in the Statute of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Member States call for “due regard” to be paid to “the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible.”⁴⁰ The Charter of the United Nations includes extremely similar language, stating that “Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible.”⁴¹ The text of the UN Charter with regard to recruiting a geographically diverse staff has been copied by the constituent treaties of numerous other organizations, such as the World Health Organization,⁴² the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization,⁴³ the International Telecommunications Union,⁴⁴ and the World Intellectual Property Organization.⁴⁵

In many cases, the regions that are used to implement these mandates for a geographically diverse staff differ from those used for the allocation of seats on bodies of limited membership, thereby highlighting the highly political nature of these regional groupings. The UN Secretariat, as an example, uses a different system of regional groups to categorize staff than is used by the UN member states for the allocation of seats in UN

³⁸ Hovet, 86

³⁹ For a detailed analysis of the different methods of calculating representation among staff members of international organizations in the United Nations System, please see Fatih Bouayad-Agha and Homero L. Hernández, *Comparison of Methods of Calculating Equitable Geographical Distribution within the United Nations Common System* (Geneva: United Nations Joint Inspection Unit, 1996).

⁴⁰ IAEA Statute, Art. VII (D)

⁴¹ Charter of the United Nations, Art. 101

⁴² Constitution of the World Health Organization, July 22, 1946, 14 *UNTS* 185, Art. 35

⁴³ CTBT, Art. 50

⁴⁴ Constitution of the ITU, Art. 27(2)

⁴⁵ Convention establishing the World Intellectual Property Organization, July 14, 1967, 828 *UNTS* 3, Art. 9(7)

bodies. The system used for evaluating the diversity of staff by the UN Joint Inspection Unit, the responsible oversight body for the UN Secretariat, distinguishes staff on a purely geographic basis into eight groups: Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America and the Caribbean, and Other.⁴⁶ This is contrasted with the UN system of electoral groups, which distinguishes countries primarily, but not solely, on geographical grounds.

While the issue of recruiting geographically diverse staff may have other values, such as normative importance, limiting bias in the implementation of policies, spreading capacity-building across all regions where the organization is active, and maintaining diverse expertise among staff, the staff of an international organization's secretariat are not representatives of their member state and do not engage in the deliberative policy-making process of the organization. A geographically diverse staff, therefore, cannot be considered a substitute for equitable geographic distribution on decision-making bodies of the organization.

Appointment of Senior Staff

While distinct from other examples in that it involves a system of rotation as opposed to concurrent terms on a representative board, similar efforts toward equitable geographic representation have been made for high-ranking posts in international organizations, such as the UN Secretary General elections, in which an informal normative practice has developed of selecting the Secretary General from a rotation of the UN regional groups.⁴⁷ For the 2026 elections, for example, it was widely anticipated that a candidate from Latin America and the Caribbean would be in a favourable position to be selected, based on the sequence of regions from which previous Secretaries General had been selected. This practice is not always strictly adhered to, however. For example, in the 2026 elections, despite the informal norm of regional rotation, former Senegalese president Macky Sall entered into the race after being nominated by Burundi. All three other candidates that were formally in the race by April 2026 were nominated by Latin American states, in accordance with the norm of rotating among the different geographic regions. Overall, such practices and norms serve to reinforce the value of equitable

⁴⁶ Bouayad-Agha and Hernández, 12

⁴⁷ Pia Riggirozzi, "The Next UN Secretary-General? Latin America, Gender Equity, and the Fault Lines of Global Governance," *Connecting Ideas*, May 16, 2025, <https://unu.edu/cris/blog-post/next-un-secretary-general-latin-america-gender-equity-and-fault-lines-global>.

geographic representation in international organizations; however, unlike when state representatives serve in decision-making bodies of international organizations, senior members of the secretariat work for their organization at large and are not serving as representatives of their state or geographic region, just like ordinary staff of the secretariat. Therefore, while efforts to rotate high-ranking positions across regions may contribute to broader aims of geographic equity in international organizations, it is ultimately more symbolic and holds less influence on the decision-making of the organization than do regional electoral groupings.

Legal Frameworks for Regional Groupings

Regional groupings systems in international organizations vary widely in their style and strength of legal foundations. For some organizations, it is a purely normative system with weak institutionalization, while for others the regional groupings framework is explicitly laid out by statute.

On the more formalized end of the spectrum lie organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which in its Statute specified the number and names of the eight regional groups, as well as the number of seats allocated to each on the Board of Governors.⁴⁸ However, the IAEA still deviates from a completely formalized system in that it does not prescribe or codify a particular division of member states into regional groupings, although the establishment of such a full, complete, and exhaustive distribution of states has been proposed as a part of the Amendment to Article VI that was approved by the General Conference in 1999.⁴⁹

As an intermediate case, the UN system of regional groupings was initially an informal, normative framework that was agreed on by the United States and Soviet Union to allocate seats on the Security Council; with time, however, this system was formalized and later modified by resolutions in the UN General Assembly, allowing for the number of seats to be expanded and the allocation of seats to different regions to be modified. The structure of the UN regional groupings system is therefore codified by the GA, but it is theoretically easier to modify than if it were laid out in the UN Charter. Nonetheless, while it does not lay out a full framework for elections based on regional diversity, the

⁴⁸ IAEA Statute, Art. 6.

⁴⁹ International Atomic Energy Agency, Amendment to Article VI of the Statute, GC(43)/RES/19 (Vienna: IAEA, 1 October, 1999), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc43-res19.pdf>.

UN Charter does specify in its mandate for the composition of the Security Council for “due regard being specially paid [...] to equitable geographical distribution.”⁵⁰ The Charter also, however, places the interest of equitable geographical distribution subordinate to the interest of selecting states based on their contributions to international peace and security, indicating that while geographical equity is a priority, it is not the ultimate determining factor for membership.

Practices to ensure equitable geographic representation of all member states are not always so strict or explicit. For example, throughout the history of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), an informal norm has developed which shaped the distribution of the nationalities of judges on the court. While a general reference to the geographic representativeness of the judges is included in the ICJ Statute,⁵¹ there is no explicitly agreed upon system for distributing the judges across geographic regions and no consistent rules for it have been written down. Despite this very limited reference to equitable geographic representation and the lack of formally codified rules for ensuring it, the ICJ has developed strong norms relating to the selection of judges from different regions and from certain key states to promote the inclusion of a geographically diverse selection of judges. The ICJ’s system of geographic representation could therefore be described as having relatively limited legal foundations, but nonetheless developed on the basis of norms and consistent practice.

Functional Uses of Regional Groups

While regional groupings often have explicit purposes outlined in the constituent treaties of their respective international organizations, they also at times serve additional purposes within the operations of the organizations in which they operate. For example, while regional groups may be established for the explicit purpose of allocating seats on a certain body, it may gradually develop other informal purposes, such as serving as a forum for policy coordination, intra-regional debate and discussion, and negotiations. Depending on the mechanism by which seats are allocated, the legal purpose of these regional grouping systems may be significantly shaped or supplemented by other roles that the groups take on.

⁵⁰ Charter of the United Nations, Art. 23(1).

⁵¹ ICJ Statute, Art. 9.

In considering the impact of regional groups, it is therefore also important to evaluate their role outside the scope of their explicit legal purpose. As an illustrative example of the need to consider these other roles, let us consider the circumstances in the Middle East group in the early years of the United Nations system. Numerous members of the Middle East group were not members of the Arab League, including Turkey, Ethiopia, Iran, and Liberia; Morocco and Tunisia were also not members of the Arab League when they initially joined the United Nations.⁵² Despite the relatively diverse membership of the Middle East group, the Arab League dominated as a caucus and limited the ability of non-member states to achieve electoral success within the regional group; this was true even for Morocco and Tunisia, which would later join the Arab League. While this dominance of the Middle East group by the Arab League ended with the group's dissolution by GA Resolution in 1957⁵³, the Arab League continued to be a highly influential political caucus within its successor group, the Asia-Africa regional group. Therefore, while in its formal structure the group did not exclude member states from the electoral process—in contrast to Israel's active exclusion from the Asia-Pacific group of the modern day, non-members of the Arab League were permitted to join the Middle East group—other functional aspects of the group, in this case the influence of a political caucus, nonetheless caused it to be an instrument of political and electoral exclusion. The group might have been intended to assist in the fair allocation of seats, but in practice it was also serving as a forum for political coordination among the member states of the Arab League.

Rather than considering these formal and informal functions alongside one another, Daws argues that a distinction should be made between UN electoral groups and caucus groups, identifying electoral groups as those that exist specifically for the purpose of allocating seats on certain UN bodies and caucus groups as those that exist to coordinate action on both substantive and procedural matters.⁵⁴ Despite this distinction, he notes that for many regions, the membership of the electoral group and the membership of the regional caucus group are identical, blurring the distinction between the group's legally mandated electoral purposes and their work in coordinating voting

⁵² Daws, 18.

⁵³ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 1192 XII, "Composition of the General Committee of the General Assembly," A/RES/1192(XII) (New York: UN, December 12, 1957), [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1192\(XII\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1192(XII)).

⁵⁴ Daws, 12.

behaviour as a caucus. Additionally, as in the case with the old UN Middle East group, even a political caucus or bloc that exists within a regional group has the potential to severely impact its ability to act as a fair distribution mechanism for representative seats on a body of limited membership. As such, while the formal electoral functions of regional groups are certainly distinct from any caucusing or political coordination purposes that they might serve, those other functions nonetheless influence the overall effectiveness of a regional grouping system at pursuing equitable geographic representation. In both the case studies and the overall comparative analysis, therefore, functional aspects of the regional grouping systems will be considered alongside their procedural, formal role.

Case Studies

In exploring the breadth of the spectrum of how regional grouping systems are institutionalized in different international organizations above, I discussed several different organizations with varying degrees of formalization of their practices with regard to promoting equitable geographic representation. The statutes and practices of these organizations—the IAEA, the UN, the ICJ, and the WMO—with respect to their regional grouping systems will be considered in more detail as individual case studies, so that the impact of these different degrees of institutionalization on geographic representation can be evaluated.

Case Study: IAEA and the Arealess States Problem

The IAEA's regional groupings system offers a useful case study in that it illustrates a hard case of a non-exhaustive set of regional groups—that is, a regional groupings system that actively disenfranchises certain member states. It is relatively strong in its institutionalization of regional groupings, with the eight regional groups prescribed explicitly in the IAEA Statute,⁵⁵ making it an effective contrast to systems that are more norms based or less explicitly legally prescribed.

The International Atomic Energy Agency was established in 1957; its slogan, “Atoms for Peace and Development,” encapsulates its mission of promoting peaceful uses of nuclear technology, including nuclear energy, as well as supporting the safety and security of nuclear material around the world. The IAEA has three primary organs: the

⁵⁵ IAEA Statute, Art. VI.

General Conference meets annually and has voting representatives from all member states; the Secretariat, which constitutes the professional staff of the Agency that carry out its programs and administration; and the Board of Governors, which has representatives from 35 member states at a time and meets several times each year to implement the policies that have been voted on by the General Conference.⁵⁶ While the General Conference by design has equal representation of all member states and the Secretariat—though not a policymaking organ—aims for proportional representation of all member states among its employees, the Board of Governors is unique in its exclusion of certain member states from participating in its work. This is partially due to its nature as a non-plenary representative organ, but it is also due to the IAEA's use of a non-exhaustive regional grouping system to assign seats on the Board, which currently excludes sixteen member states from being elected to the twenty-two board seats that are assigned by geographic distribution.⁵⁷ This system is set out in Article VI of the IAEA Statute.

Prior to November 2025, the Republic of Kazakhstan was one of the most vocal proponents of Article VI reform. Up until that point, Kazakhstan had been excluded from the regional groupings system that facilitates election to the IAEA Board of Governors. In other words, because none of the regional groups were previously willing to admit Kazakhstan as a member, it was not possible for Kazakhstan to stand for election to the Board. As the foremost producer of uranium in the world and one of few countries to have possessed and fully relinquished a nuclear weapons stockpile, Kazakhstan's exclusion was particularly notable in light of the purpose of the IAEA, but there are other states that are excluded from the regional groups, including Israel, Bahrain, and Nepal. Although no longer itself excluded from candidature for the Board of Governors, Kazakhstan has expressed its continued belief in the need for reform to ensure the sovereign equality of all member states.⁵⁸ Many other countries have similarly advocated for reform to the structure of the Board of Governors, forming the Group of Friends of Arealess States to promote the rights of excluded states to engage in the decision-making processes of the IAEA.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ The members states of the IAEA which are currently not a part of any regional group are Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Brunei, Cambodia, Eritrea, Fiji, Laos, Marshall Islands, Nepal, Oman, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.

⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Kazakhstan Achieves a Significant Diplomatic Breakthrough in the IAEA," 2025.

The problem of so-called “arealess states” at the IAEA serves to undermine the guarantees of sovereign equality that are enshrined in the organization’s statute.⁵⁹ Certain states are not simply under-represented, but in practice they are not represented whatsoever, as the system of elections to the Board of Governors is designed to allocate seats to states on the basis of their regional alignment. The reason certain states are excluded is because admittance of a country to one of the regional groups requires the assent of that group’s members. Since the groups and their allocation of seats are prescribed by the IAEA Statute, the arealess states have no recourse but attempting to join one of the existing groups. By requiring the consent of each group’s members to admit new members, the current system has allowed the states that are excluded from the regional groups to be bound by the decisions of the Board of Governors without the capacity to participate in the Board’s deliberations or even in the election of representatives to the Board. For example, Kazakhstan’s prominence in the nuclear field made it a prospective rival to the states in any group it wished to join, which discouraged groups from allowing Kazakhstan to join for many years. This prevented it from participating in budget deliberations and the appointment of the Director-General, as well as the other enumerated duties of the Board of Governors.

The example of the IAEA Board of Governors highlights not only the need for a regional distribution of states to be exhaustive and the potential for severe disenfranchisement on the grounds of geography, but also the difficulties associated with reforming regional groupings systems once they are established. The IAEA General Conference approved an amendment to Article VI of the statute in 1999, which would have required the regional grouping system to assign groups to all member states, among other changes. However, in part due to the high barriers to modifying the statute and in part due to the stringent requirements imposed by the text of the amendment for a revised regional grouping system, pushing for the entry into force of the amendment have been unsuccessful. Overall, the IAEA Board of Governors and its regional grouping system serves as a key example of member states being disenfranchised from a non-plenary body as well as the particular challenges posed by a strongly institutionalized regional distribution of member states.

⁵⁹ IAEA Statute, Art. IV.

Case Study: UN Regions

The division of the Member States into regional groupings within the United Nations system is likely the most influential of all regional grouping systems, on account of the application of these groupings to many UN agencies, organs, and subsidiary bodies. It is also a useful case study because, of all of the regional grouping systems in international organizations, its development and the allocation of states to groups have the best public documentation. It stands as an approximate midpoint in the spectrum of regional grouping systems in its degree of formalization. The Charter of the United Nations does include an explicit provision calling for equitable geographic representation of Member States on the Security Council, but unlike the IAEA Statute, it does not prescribe the precise groupings and allocation of seats. These have rather been established by a combination UN General Assembly Resolutions and historical practice, making them—at least in a procedural sense—easier to modify than in organizations like the IAEA, where the regional grouping system is fixed through the text of its constituent treaty.

The United Nations was established in 1945, and discussions about the allocation of seats on non-plenary bodies followed soon after. As mentioned above, the regional groupings system currently in use within the United Nations system was first instantiated as a series of gentlemen's agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. Even after these initial agreements, slates of candidates for seats on UN bodies such as the Security Council and ECOSOC were decided primarily by informal consultation throughout the early years of the United Nations. However, the regional electoral groupings at this time were very loosely institutionalized, and there was no collective agreement about which states belonged to which group.⁶⁰

The electoral groupings system was first properly codified by resolution in the UN General Assembly in 1957. Resolution 1192 allocated seats across four groups: Eastern Europe, Asian-African, Latin American, and Western Europe and Others.⁶¹ This grouping system would later be modified to allocate seats separately to Asian and African countries throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the accession of many additional Asian states to the UN led the group's elections to be dominated by states from that region. The

⁶⁰ Daws.

⁶¹ Daws, 17.

ECOSOC first officially distinguished between the two groups in 1966,⁶² and the General Assembly passed a resolution in 1971 which formally recognized the Asian and African groups as distinct.⁶³ The Asia group changed its name to the Asia-Pacific Group in 2011 in recognition of the numerous Pacific Islands states that are members of the group.⁶⁴ Like the IAEA, the UN system has faced difficulties with states being excluded from regional groups. In some cases, small states have simply chosen not to align with any regional group, as was the case for Kiribati for many years before it finally joined the Asia-Pacific Group in 2024. However, in other cases, this can be more detrimental to a state's participation in the UN's electoral processes, such as in the case of Israel's exclusion from the Asia-Pacific Group and subsequent admission to the Western Europe and Others group, as discussed above.

In addition to the electoral purposes that these groupings serve, namely the appointment of member states to seats in the non-plenary bodies of the ECOSOC and the Security Council, they have gradually become more institutionalized in other aspects of the UN system. For example, Daws observes that “In many UN bodies the application of geographical representation has grown stronger, and the formal institutionalization of the five regional electoral categories can be seen in bodies as diverse as the UN Commission on International Trade Law and the Committee on Conferences.”⁶⁵ In both of the cases that Daws refers to, the regional groups designed for the allocation of seats to the ECOSOC and the Security Council are used for the allocation of seats on other limited membership bodies; UNCITRAL⁶⁶ and the Committee on Conferences⁶⁷ use the same five regional groups to assign their seats as the Security Council and ECOSOC do. Numerous other organizations that fall within the UN system, such as the International

⁶² Talmon.

⁶³ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 2847 XXVI, “Enlargement of the Economic and Social Council,” A/RES/2847(XXVI) (New York: UN, December 20, 1971), [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/2847\(XXVI\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/2847(XXVI)).

⁶⁴ International Institute for Sustainable Development, “UN Asia Group Changes Name to Asia Pacific Group” (SDG Knowledge Hub, September 6, 2011), <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/un-asia-group-changes-name-to-asia-pacific-group/>.

⁶⁵ Daws, 26.

⁶⁶ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 2205 XXI, “Establishment of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law,” A/RES/2205(XXI) (New York: UN, December 17, 1966), [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/2205\(XXI\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/2205(XXI)).

⁶⁷ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 43/222, “Pattern of Conferences,” A/RES/43/222 (New York: UN, December 21, 1988), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/43/222>.

Seabed Authority and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, have adopted the same system of regional groups as well.

Where the IAEA regional grouping system is entrenched by virtue of its basis in the organization's constituent treaty—a document that is difficult to amend and legally binding—the UN regional grouping system has solidified and become institutionalized over time primarily through organizational practice. However, even as the grouping system has expanded and been applied to an increasing number of UN bodies as a matter of practice, the mandate for geographic representation has been explicitly codified by General Assembly resolutions. Such resolutions may lack the weight of the text of the UN Charter, but they nonetheless serve to formally codify the grouping system and its application across UN bodies. This is the case not only for the resolutions that established the regional groups and applied them to the ECOSOC and the Security Council, but also for those establishing further subsidiary bodies. The resolution establishing UNCITRAL explicitly defines the number of seats allocated on the Commission for each of the five UN regional groups,⁶⁸ as does the one establishing the Committee on Conferences⁶⁹; inclusion of a distribution of seats across the five regional groups has become a standard part of General Assembly resolutions establishing subsidiary bodies. The regional grouping system is therefore baked into the legislative processes of the UN and the operations of its various bodies by its inclusion and codification in GA resolutions. The UN regional grouping system thus shows another path to a regional grouping system becoming institutionalized, one where it is codified in the written decisions of the organization rather than its constituent treaty. This makes the system somewhat more flexible but also allows the system to be implemented in a consistent manner across the many bodies that have come to use it. Its level of flexibility should not be overstated, however—while it may be less strictly codified than the IAEA system, the UN regional grouping system has proven highly resistant to reform efforts.

Case Study: International Court of Justice

Where the other case studies deal with entire international organizations, the International Court of Justice is not an independent organization, but rather an organ of the United Nations. However, it offers an instance of a more flexible and norms-based

⁶⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 2205 XXI.

⁶⁹ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 43/222.

approach to the promotion of equitable geographic representation in an organ of limited membership. Although they are a part of the same organization, the allocation of seats on the ICJ is conducted very differently from the allocation of seats on the ECOSOC and Security Council.

The geographic distribution of judges in the International Court of Justice deviates from the previous two examples in that it does not involve a formally institutionalized allocation of seats based on regional groupings. Rather, the allocation of judgeships has historically been governed by norms of equitable geographic distribution. This is prescribed in a very general way by the ICJ Statute, which in Article 9 calls for the electors of the judges to bear in mind that “in the body as a whole the representation of the main forms of civilization and of the principal legal systems of the world should be assured.” Supplementarily, the statute also precludes the possibility of multiple judges of the same nationality sitting on the court at once.⁷⁰ As a means of fulfilling the requirement for geographic representation, behavioural norms have developed that serve to maintain a relatively consistent geographic distribution of the judges. In practice, for most of the court’s history, the allocation of seats on the ICJ roughly corresponded to the allocation of seats on the Security Council. Each of the permanent members of the Security Council—the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, China, and France—generally have a seat on the court, and the remaining ten seats are distributed among the five UN regions.⁷¹ The distribution of the total 15 seats tends to allocate three each to the African and Asian groups, two each to the Latin American and Eastern European groups, and 5 seats to the Western Europe and Others group.⁷² In the absence of a formal regulation describing such a distribution, the strength of the norms ensuring an equitable geographic distribution are best shown by tracking the historical distribution of seats on the court.⁷³

⁷⁰ ICJ Statute, Art. 3.

⁷¹ Security Council Report, Monthly Forecast: November 2017 (*Monthly Forecast*, Security Council Report, 2017), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/2017_11_forecast.pdf.

⁷² Security Council Report, Monthly Forecast: November 2020 (*Monthly Forecast*, Security Council Report, 2020), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/2020_11_forecast.pdf.

⁷³ As the current five-region set of electoral groups used by the United Nations was only introduced in 1971, with the separation of the Asia and Africa Groups, I trace this distribution back to the early 1970s. In that time, the only deviations are those described below.

This system is naturally less stringent than one codified by treaty, as the IAEA system, or by plenary resolutions, as the UN system for the ECOSOC and Security Council, as the norms for the selection of judges are not written down a formal requirement, merely a generally adhered to practice. The flexibility of this system was highlighted in 2017, when the United Kingdom lost its seat on the court for the first time in the court's history; although the UK had put up a candidate for the court, the General Assembly selected a candidate from India instead.⁷⁴ More recently, the Russian candidate for a seat failed to receive the necessary votes in the 2023 elections,⁷⁵ making it the first time the Court lacked a Russian judge and pushing the tally to permanent members of the Security Council that did not hold seats on the ICJ. While these elections marked the first cases of exclusion from the Court for Russia and the United Kingdom—and were noteworthy in that the candidates put forth by the permanent members of the Security Council lost their elections—they did not mark the first occasions when a member of the P5 lacked a seat on the Council. From 1967-1985, there was no Chinese judge on the Court, although this was because no Chinese candidate stood for election during those years.^{76,77} The recent case with the United Kingdom in the 2017 election also slightly altered the geographic composition of the court—since the UK judge was replaced with the judge put forth by India, these elections effectively reallocated one of the seats from the Western Europe and Others group to the Asia-Pacific group.⁷⁸

These failures of permanent members of the Security Council to secure contested judgeships could be interpreted as a violation of the norms which historically have allocated them seats on the ICJ; however, it could also be interpreted as the norms which govern the selection of judges evolving. Unlike the codified systems for other international bodies of limited membership, the informal, norms-based system of the ICJ means that modification of that system would happen gradually and be indicated solely by shifts in practice. In this case, the gradual exclusion of the permanent members of the

⁷⁴ James Landale, "International Court of Justice: UK abandons bid for seat on UN bench" (*British Broadcasting Corporation*, November 21, 2017), <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-42061028>.

⁷⁵ The Moscow Times, "In First, Russian Judge Loses UN World Court Seat" (*The Moscow Times*, November 10, 2023), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/11/10/in-first-russian-judge-loses-un-world-court-seat-a83065>.

⁷⁶ Security Council Report, Monthly Forecast: November 2020.

⁷⁷ Dapo Akande, "ICJ Elections 2017: UN General Assembly and Security Council Elect Four Judges to the ICJ But fail to Agree on a Fifth, yet again!" (*EJIL: Talk!*, November 11, 2017).

⁷⁸ In the 2023 elections, Russia's Kirill Gevorgian was replaced by Bogdan Aurescu of Romania, maintaining the preexisting distribution of seats by keeping Gevorgian's seat within the Eastern Europe group.

Security Council may be an indication of a transition to a practice that is focused more on geographical representation than it is on reflecting the composition of the Security Council.

Regardless, these recent circumstances highlight a key feature of the methods employed by the ICJ to ensure equitable geographic representation: their adaptability. Efforts to reform more formally codified systems of regional groups often struggle to reach the necessary level of support from member states, particularly as it often involves intensive debate about the precise language proposed in the amendments and member states that may be advantaged by the existing system are often reticent to vote in favour of modifications to that system, as will be further discussed in the section on reform efforts. These recent developments in the ICJ, however, show a capacity to respond to shifting institutional preferences among the member states.

In addition to this historical pattern of reserving seats on the ICJ for the P5, the number of seats allocated on the ICJ by custom for each region has until recently aligned exactly with the number of seats that each region holds on the Security Council. The effective reallocation of one seat from the WEOG to the Asia-Pacific Group in the 2017 elections marked the first significant departure from this. It remains to be seen if the recent shifts in composition will hold in future elections, but if they do, they could be early evidence in favour of such a norms-based approach to geographic representation offering greater flexibility and responsiveness to shifting views among member states than the codified systems of other UN bodies, like the ECOSOC and Security Council.

Case Study: World Meteorological Organization

The previous three case studies differed significantly from one another along one dimension—the degree of formalization or institutionalization of a regional grouping system. The World Meteorological Organization is a relatively moderate case in regard to its level of institutionalization but distinguishes itself because of the functional purpose of the regional grouping system, which extends beyond a merely procedural/electoral role.

In contrast to the previously discussed organizations, regional groupings—or regional associations, as they are referred to in the World Meteorological Organization's constituent treaty—play an important functional role in the organization's operations. As the international organization charged with establishing and maintaining an international

network of stations for meteorological observation, the WMO has operations across all regions of the world. The regional associations therefore serve not merely as electoral groups, as the UN regional groups do, but rather serve an additional functional role as a forum for discussion of WMO operations within that region. This purpose is reaffirmed by the WMO Convention's stipulation that non-members of regional associations are still entitled to attend their meetings and to speak on matters that affect them directly, even if they cannot vote.⁷⁹ The regional associations therefore do not serve a solely electoral purpose, but they are also explicitly charged with discussing policy, coordinating the activities of their members, and providing a space for inter-regional meetings. The WMO has six regional associations: Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, Southwest Pacific, and North America, Central America, and Caribbean.

However, the WMO's regional associations also serve to allocate seats on the Executive Council. Under the convention, all presidents of the regional associations by default have seats on the Executive Council, which is the non-plenary body of the WMO which serves to coordinate and implement the organization's policies. In addition to this inclusion of the presidents of the regional associations, who by virtue of their role and the existence of the regional associations as separate discussion fora serve explicitly as representatives of their region, the WMO provides for the remaining seats on the Executive Council to be filled by the heads of meteorological services from Member States. Rather than setting an explicit quota for each of the regions, the Convention merely requires that among the total 36 seats on the Executive Council, each region holds between four and nine seats.⁸⁰ While this differs from the system employed by the ICJ, in that it does not prescribe specific numbers of seats for each of the groups, both systems similarly have some amount of built-in flexibility which allows the representative allocation of seats to shift over time. This interest in flexibility and adaptability is balanced against the natural concern that a particular region of states might dominate the policy of an organization if it is given the opportunity to assume a larger number of seats than the others—a risk that is protected against on the one hand by the ICJ's general, but no longer strict adherence to the numbers of seats allocated by the Security Council and on the other hand by the WMO Convention offering a closed range in number of seats that a single region may hold at any given time. Furthermore, while this more flexible

⁷⁹ Convention of the World Meteorological Organization, October 11, 1947, 77 UNTS 143, Art. 18 (b).

⁸⁰ Convention of the World Meteorological Organization, Art. 13 (c) (ii).

structure does theoretically present the risk that a single region would seek to dominate the organization, that same flexibility also provides other member state with the capacity to combat such an eventuality. On the other hand, highly prescriptive systems such as those of the IAEA and UN also have the risk of falling into equilibria where one or more regions dominate, or at least have a disproportionate influence on, the policies of the international organization. However, where a more flexible system would give disadvantaged or underrepresented regions the opportunity to seek a change in the allocation of seats without necessitating a formal rule modification, such a process is necessary when the manner in which seats are allocated to regional groups is codified by treaty or statute—either through an amendment to the constituent treaty or through the passage of legislation in the plenary policymaking body. This makes adjustment to shifting populations or numbers of member states far easier, or at least less procedurally cumbersome, in a more flexible system. Such adjustment is a necessary component to ensuring that there is an equitable geographic distribution of seats among the regional groups. As more states from various regions join an organization, the number of member states in each region is wont to fluctuate, meaning that a treaty or a resolution that codifies a specific allocation of seats across member states is prone to eventually becoming antiquated and in need of updating. On this count, the WMO has the potential to create issues of distributive equity, as its restrictions on the allocation of seats are equivalent for all regions regardless of their number of members.

Additionally, unlike other organizations, such as the UN and IAEA, the WMO gives all member states the right to belong to a Regional Association as long as it conducts meteorological monitoring activities within the region—which is to say, if a state conducts domestic meteorological monitoring activities and its territory lies within the defined geographic region, then it may join that Regional Association. Because the six regions are globally geographically exhaustive—every physical location on the globe falls within one of the six regions—this means that any state that participates in meteorological monitoring activities and is a member of the WMO has the right to belong to one of its Regional Associations. All member states and territories of the WMO are a part of at least one Regional Association.⁸¹ On the matter of equitable geographic representation,

⁸¹ See community.wmo.int/site/knowledge-hub/governance/regional-association; some WMO member states participate in multiple Regional Associations due to interests or meteorological monitoring activities that span multiple geographic regions. These include France, which has overseas territories in multiple regions, and Russia, which participates in both the Asia and Europe Regional Associations. Additionally,

therefore, the WMO ensures that all Member States are represented through Regional Associations and that all regions are represented in a fairly balanced manner on the Executive Council, thereby providing a strong framework for representing all member states, regardless of geographic location.

Across International Organizations: Disenfranchisement through regional groupings

The example of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and other arealess states, being excluded from candidature for seats on the IAEA Board of Governors highlights a clear hard case of the potential consequences of a poorly configured system of regional groupings. The United Nations system, while it does currently include all Member States in at least one regional group, has similarly had a history of excluding individual states from the system of regional groups, most recently Israel, whose entry into either the WEOG or the Asia-Pacific group was hotly contested by the members of both groups.

The very existence of the Western Europe and Others group points at the failure of the UN system to adequately establish a system of electoral groups that is genuinely aimed at promoting equitable geographic representation. Unlike every other group in the UN system of regional groups, the WEOG incorporates states—notably Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and Israel—which are to no extent located in the geographic region which the group purports to represent. While this in part has its origins in the early alignment of Commonwealth countries into an informal electoral group and political caucus in the initial years of the United Nations,⁸² the electoral group system has developed into an otherwise purely geographically based system. The Commonwealth group's legacy led a situation wherein non-Western European countries, particularly Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, were initially grouped with the states of Western Europe.

There were further patterns of disenfranchisement in the early UN system. At the first elections to the Security Council, the entire Asian region was neglected barring

numerous countries which conduct research in the Arctic region participate in the WMO's Arctic Regional Climate Centre Network, which while not a distinct Regional Association, serves to coordinate policy in the Arctic region.

⁸² As early as 1945, the British Commonwealth was being treated as a geographic electoral group, with the 1945 proposal by the British to distribute the seats of the Security Council among regional groups suggesting the allocation of one seat to the British Commonwealth. See Daws, 14.

China's permanent seat,⁸³ a state which the Chinese delegate specifically decried after the election, commenting,

“If it be interpreted that any vacancy created by the retirement from the Council of a member belonging to a given group or region should always be filled by another member of the same group or region, the consequence would be that states which are not members of that group or region would always be excluded from obtaining a place on the Council. Such a situation would obviously be contrary to the spirit of the principle of equitable geographical representation.”⁸⁴

The point raised by the Chinese delegate—that a system in which each region is allocated a set number of seats will by nature be exclusionary toward states and regions that are excluded from the initial allocation—neatly summarizes the risk associated with formal, codified allocations of seats on bodies of limited membership that they will both disenfranchise certain members and furthermore that the formalization of that system makes it more difficult for those states or regions that have been excluded to seek a remedy. In other systems, such as the norms-based system of the ICJ or the flexible allocation employed by the WMO, this risk is reduced.

The above failures primarily indicate failures in ensuring equitable representation—certain states are excluded from the groups that would naturally be appropriate given their geographic location, are functionally blocked from candidacy from within their group, or are even excluded from the regional grouping system entirely. For example, the situation referred to by the Chinese delegate dealt with the fact that there were no seats at all allocated to the Asian states; however, an under- or over-allocation of seats to a certain region also has the potential to introduce inequity between regions through distribution. That is to say, even when states are represented, certain systems of regional groupings may cause them to be underrepresented.

Historically such failures have provided indication that a system of electoral groups has atrophied and needs to be updated to reflect changing geopolitical realities or

⁸³ One state was elected to a non-permanent seat that is geographically located in the Asia-Pacific Region: Australia was elected to the British Commonwealth seat on the basis that there should be some representation of the Pacific region. Australia is, as previously noted, not a member of the Asia-Pacific regional group at United Nations. See Daws, 14.

⁸⁴ General Assembly Official Records, 1st Session, 5th Plenary meeting, 12 January 1946, 75–76, quoted in Daws, 15.

shifts in the membership of the organization. For example, in 1946, the year of the first election of states to the UN Security Council, the United Nations had just 55 member states. By 1964, when the first reforms to the UN regional grouping system were passed by the General Assembly, the United Nations had 115 member states. As of 2026, the UN has 193 member states—a number which has remained unchanged since the accession of South Sudan in 2011 and an increase of 78 since the reforms of the 1960s.⁸⁵ Furthermore, this growth in the size of the organization is not proportional across the different regional groups. Table I shows the growth in size of each of the UN regional groups, both in absolute terms and relative to the number of seats that each group is allocated on the Security Council.

Table I					
Regional Group	Number of Seats on Security Council	Number of Members in 1967	Members per Seat on the Security Council in 1967	Number of Members in 2026	Members per Seat on the Security Council in 2026
Western Europe and Others Group	5	21	4.20	29	5.80
Asia-Pacific	3	27	9.00	52	17.33
Africa	3	40	13.33	53	17.67
Eastern Europe	2	10	5.00	23	11.50
Latin America and Caribbean	2	23	11.50	33	16.50

With regard to the UN system, Terrance O'Brian argues that this failure to adjust the entitlements of each group has compromised the equity between the groups, and notes that more specifically, the shifts in membership across the regions have generally advantaged the smaller groups over the larger ones. These inequities in allocation are exacerbated by the regional alignment of the permanent seat-holders—as shown above, the states in WEOG receive proportionally more representation on the Security Council relative to the Asia-Pacific group when the permanent members are excluded, but the

⁸⁵ United Nations, “Growth in United Nations membership,” <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/growth-in-un-membership#2000-Present>.

WEOG also has three permanent members of the body within the region to the Asia-Pacific group's one.

Other international organizations have suffered from similar shifts over time. For example, the IAEA had 65 member states in 1957, when its Statute entered into force; in 2026, it had 181 member states.⁸⁶ Such shifts in the number of states from each region are natural as organizations develop and have more states accede, but organizations such as the IAEA, which as discussed above has a particularly rigid structure of its regional grouping system, are particularly susceptible to their system atrophying and maintaining imbalanced group entitlements.

Comparative Analysis

Having now highlighted the major types of failures that take place through case studies, I will now turn to a larger-scale comparative analysis of international organizations. This is necessary to identify trends and patterns in the treatment of geographical equity across international organizations in general. While the case studies discussed above provide useful hard cases for certain phenomena of regional groupings systems—such as their degree of flexibility and potential points of failure—this analysis also seeks to examine how widespread such phenomena are and how they impact the effectiveness of regional groupings and the organs that they are applied to. As such, to complement the insights of the above case studies, I have included a comprehensive taxonomy of regional groupings systems across other international organizations that employ such a system.

Comparing representation across all relevant international organizations—that is, the degree to which all states are included within regional groupings systems—is more difficult. While there are some standout cases, such as the IAEA, where numerous states are left excluded from the regional groupings system, the total exclusion of states from systems of regional groupings is relatively rare. Furthermore, the circumstances leading to a state's exclusion can differ widely. While on the one hand there are cases such as Kazakhstan's at the IAEA, where it was seeking to join a regional group for over 30 years

⁸⁶ International Atomic Energy Agency, "List of Member States," <https://www.iaea.org/about/governance/list-of-member-states>

without success,⁸⁷ there are also cases such as that of Kiribati at the United Nations, which was not a member of any regional group for its first 25 years of UN membership, but for which there is no evidence of intentional exclusion from any of the regional groups. This variability in circumstances of exclusion from regional grouping systems makes it particularly difficult to compare them across organisations; nonetheless, the examples of the modern IAEA and the historic examples from the United Nations system underscore the severity of the consequences of allowing such restrictions on member states' representation on non-plenary bodies to go unchecked.

Equitable distribution, on the other hand, is much easier to compare across international organizations, in part because it is based on the equity of the allocation of seats across regional groups. This means that it is possible for it to be measured and directly compared; the different regions can be compared by the number of member states that each includes and the number of seats on a given body that each region is allocated, and the degree to which certain regions are over- or underrepresented can be quantified. The extent to which a group is represented may also be affected by other factors, though, such as if some states have permanent membership on a body or have access to a seat on grounds other than being elected. For example, the UN Security Council has five permanent members,⁸⁸ and the IAEA Board of Governors allocates ten of its seats to the ten most advanced states in the field of nuclear energy, regardless of their regional alignment.⁸⁹ These mixed methods of apportioning seats can at times obfuscate the true distribution of seats; as discussed above, in the UN Security Council the WEOG is allocated 2 non-permanent seats, as is the Asia-Pacific group. However, the WEOG also holds three permanent seats on the Security Council where the Asia-Pacific group holds only one, making the existing disproportionality of their representation—there are 52 states in the Asia-Pacific group and just 29 in the WEOG—even more pronounced. Where states are afforded a permanent seat on a body, this is included in the analysis, as those states still contribute to the overall geographic balance of an organization's non-plenary body. However, certain international organizations with more complex and dynamic regulations for allocating seats to states and regions, such as the IAEA's rules

⁸⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Committee of the Whole: Record of the Second Meeting," GC(68)/OR.10 (Vienna: IAEA, 20 September, 2024), https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc68or10_prl_0.pdf

⁸⁸ Charter of the United Nations, Art. 23.

⁸⁹ IAEA Statute, Art. VI (A) (1).

about the inclusion of states advanced in nuclear technology, are excluded from the analysis as these procedures can make the regional distribution of seats variable from election to election.

Table II outlines the regional grouping systems from twelve different universal international organizations. Excluded from the analysis are regional organizations and international organizations such as the International Criminal Court and World Trade Organization, which do not have formal systems of regional groups.⁹⁰ It does include, however, organizations with an exact allocation of seats to each region, as well as organizations with more flexible parameters on each. The legal basis for the regional grouping system is given, although some organizations describe the structure in more detail in internal documents and resolutions, as is the current number of total member states and the duration of the organization's existence.

⁹⁰ As noted above in the discussion of the International Court of Justice, a formally codified regional grouping system is not a necessary condition for an organization to effectively employ such a system. However, the lack of formalization means that it lacks a definitive distribution of seats and states among regional groups.

Organization	Constituent Treaty	Legal Basis	Number of Groups	Non-Plenary Organ	Manner of Group Representation	Year treaty entered into force	Membership in year of entry into force	Membership in 2026
United Nations	Charter of the United Nations	UNGA Res. 1192	5 (UN)	ECOSOC & Security Council	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1945	51	193
Food and Agriculture Organization	Constitution of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization	Art. 5	6	The Council	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1945	42	197
World Health Organization	Constitution of the World Health Organization	Article 24, 44	6	Executive Board	Each group receives a minimum number of seats	1948	55	194
World Meteorological Organization	Convention of the World Meteorological Organization	Article 18	6	Executive Council	Each group receives a minimum number of seats	1950	66	193
International Atomic Energy Agency	Statute of the International Atomic Energy Agency	Article VI	8	Board of Governors	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1957	65	181
Universal Postal Union	Constitution of the Universal Postal Union	Art. 106, 112 (UPU General Regulations)	6	Postal Operations Council & Council of Administration	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1966	133	192
United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization	Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage	Art. 8(2)	5	The World Heritage Committee	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1975	136	194
United Nations Industrial Development Organization	Constitution of the UN Industrial Development Organization	Art. 9	4	The Industrial Development Board	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1985	139	173
International Telecommunications Union	Constitution of the International Telecommunications Union	Art. 9	5	The Council	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1994	184	194
International Seabed Authority	UN Convention on the Law of the Sea	Art. 161(1)(e)	5 (UN)	The Council	Each group receives a minimum number of seats	1994	66	171
Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons	Chemical Weapons Convention	Article VIII (21)	5 (UN)	Executive Council	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	1997	105	193
Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization	Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty	Art. 28	6	Executive Council	Each group is assigned a set number of seats	N/A	71*	196

*the CTBTO opened for signature on September 24, 1996. In the absence of a date for entry into force, the membership in 1996 is given.

As comparing the different organizations reveals, international organizations that employ regional grouping systems either set a precise number of seats on their non-plenary bodies for each group or set a minimum number of seats that all groups must have access to. The practice of setting a minimum number of seats aligns most closely with the system examined in the WMO, although the WMO Convention uniquely also sets a maximum number of seats that can be held by a single region.⁹¹ There isn't a particular chronological trend with regard to these two options, although the allocation of a specific number of seats is significantly more popular, with only three of the twelve international organizations setting a minimum instead. While the UN regional grouping system is

⁹¹ Convention of the World Meteorological Organization, Art. 13 (c) (ii).

applied to some other organizations, such as the OPCW and the ISA, it is not universal even within the UN system, with even UN specialized agencies such as UNIDO and UNESCO using their own systems of regional groups, distinct from that of the UN Security Council and ECOSOC. While this table enables the comparison of the style of allocation across different organizations, it does not reveal whether the regional grouping systems actually limit the equity of the geographical distribution of states; this requires a comparison of the sizes of different regional groups within each organization and how many seats they are each allocated.

Table III shows the variation in how many member states are represented by each seat on a body of limited membership. As a result, this includes only those international organizations which employ a specific allocation of seats across their regional groups, as noted in Table II. The table also includes for each non-plenary body the arithmetic mean across the groups of the proportion of member states to seats, the range between the maximum and minimum proportions of member states to seats, and the ratio between the maximum and minimum proportions of member states to seats. These offer an indication of the degree to which regions are represented proportionally to their share of the body of member states. Additionally, the ratio given in the rightmost column, as it compares the maximum and minimum as a ratio rather than a difference, is not susceptible to distortion based on the size of the body, as the range is.⁹² Some organizations, such as the IAEA and ICAO, that use mixed methods of allocation are excluded as the precise number of seats allocated on a geographical basis is variable depending on how the other seats—reserved for the most advanced states in the relevant field—are allocated across the groups.

⁹²In bodies of a smaller size, such as the UN Security Council, the smaller number of seats leads to a higher proportion of member states per seat on the body. This means that when an arithmetic difference is taken between the maximum and the minimum proportion to calculate the range, the number will be larger in an absolute sense, even if the relative proportion of the seats that each group holds is not dissimilar to those in another organization. This can be seen by comparing the range given for the FAO and the UN Security Council—the Security Council has fewer seats in absolute terms, making its range higher, even though the relative difference in proportionality between the most and least represented regional group—given in the rightmost column—is actually less extreme than that seen in the FAO.

Table III							
International Organization	Region	Number of Seats	Number of Member States	Members per seat	Mean Members per seat	Range of Members per seat	Ratio of Maximum to Minimum Members per seat
FAO	Africa	12	49	4.08	3.29	3.80	4.80
	Asia	9	25	2.78			
	Europe	10	48	4.80			
	Latin America and the Caribbean	9	32	3.56			
	Near East	6	21	3.50			
	North America	2	2	1.00			
UNSC	Africa	3	53	17.67	13.76	11.87	3.05
	Asia	3	52	17.33			
	Eastern Europe	2	23	11.50			
	Latin America and the Caribbean	2	33	16.50			
	WEOG	5	29	5.80			
UNECOSOC	Africa	14	53	3.79	3.58	2.50	2.12
	Asia	11	52	4.73			
	Eastern Europe	6	23	3.83			
	Latin America and the Caribbean	10	33	3.30			
	WEOG	13	29	2.23			
OPCW	Africa	9	52	5.78	4.83	3.43	2.18
	Asia	9	57	6.33			
	Eastern Europe	5	22	4.40			
	Latin America and the Caribbean	7	33	4.71			
	WEOG	10	29	2.90			
CTBTO	Africa	10	52	5.20	3.82	2.40	1.86
	Eastern Europe	7	23	3.29			
	Latin America and the Caribbean	9	33	3.67			
	Middle East and South Asia	7	26	3.71			
	North America and Western Europe	10	28	2.80			
	Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and the Far East	8	34	4.25			
UPU (CoA)	Western Hemisphere	8	36	4.50	4.80	0.50	1.11
	Eastern Europe and Northern Asia	5	25	5.00			
	Western Europe	6	28	4.67			
	Southern Asia and Oceania	10	49	4.90			
	Africa	11	54	4.91			
UPU (POC)	Western Hemisphere	8	36	4.50	4.07	2.58	2.10
	Eastern Europe and Northern Asia	6	25	4.17			
	Western Europe	12	28	2.33			
	Southern Asia and Oceania	11	49	4.45			
	Africa	11	54	4.91			
ITU	Americas	9	35	3.89	4.06	0.31	1.08
	Western Europe	8	33	4.13			
	Eastern Europe and Northern Asia	5	21	4.20			
	Africa	13	54	4.15			
	Asia and Australasia	13	51	3.92			
UNIDO	Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean	33	137	4.15	3.03	3.02	3.66
	Western Europe and Others	15	17	1.13			
	Eastern Europe	5	19	3.80			

As this comparison reveals, the majority of organizations that prescribe the number of seats for each regional group on a non-plenary body have a significant discrepancy in the proportionality of representation across regions. While some bodies—notably the ITU Council and the UPU Council of Administration—have highly

proportional representation across regional groups, as shown by their ratio of maximum to minimum members per seat that is very close to 1, other organizations have much less consistent equity in their geographical distribution of seats.⁹³ The Food and Agriculture Organization, for example, has the greatest disparity within the sample; each seat allocated to the Western European group represents 4.8 times as many countries as each seat allocated to the North American group, although this is a highly unusual case in that the FAO allocates a seat for each of the two countries in the North American group. However, other organizations reveal similarly significant, though not as extreme, discrepancies in the proportion between the number of member states in a regional group and the number of seats that it is allocated. Overall, this comparison affirms that, rather than promoting geographical equity, the strictly codified distribution of seats among regional groups often serves to ensure that certain groups are significantly underrepresented relative to others.

Efforts at Reform

While the barriers to equitable representation posed by regional grouping systems are often overlooked, they have not gone completely without notice. The IAEA, for example, has seen significant pushes in recent years to resolve the sovereign equality issue. Although the proposed amendment to Article VI was accepted by the General Conference in 1999 and remains the cornerstone of reform efforts, the text of the amendment includes elements that pose a major obstacle to its success.⁹⁴ Specifically, the procedural requirements for the amendment to be accepted by two-thirds of the member states and for the General Conference and Board of Governors to both agree to a list allocating all states to a regional group by a supermajority of ninety percent in each body have proven significant hurdles to the amendment's passage.

The United Nations similarly has made efforts to ensure equitable geographical representation, particularly on the Security Council, but has seen little progress. In 1993, an open-ended working group was established with the mandate of investigating, under the agenda item "Question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership

⁹³ A theoretically perfectly proportional system of representation would have a ratio of exactly 1, with every region having the exact same fraction of representatives as they are a fraction of the total body of member states.

⁹⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Amendment to Article VI of the Statute," GC(43)/RES/19.

of the Security Council.”⁹⁵ However, proposals for reform to the structure of the Security Council have seen substantial opposition, particularly from the permanent members of the body, as many calls for reform have been centred on the equitable distribution of the veto rather than equitable distribution of non-permanent seats.

Early on in the history of modern international organizations, the structure of regional electoral groups was a significant concern of states that sought to achieve greater equity in the nascent organizations. However, in many organizations, the existing regional grouping system has crystallized and it has been excluded as a topic of concern for reformists. Concerns and discussions about a lack of equity in the ability of states to participate in the multilateral system are almost always focused on the permanent members of the UN Security Council and their veto. There can be no doubt that this system is unequal, and that the states with access to the veto are not equitably geographically distributed. The aim of this thesis is not to comment on the veto in the Security Council or its impact on equitable geographic representation and distribution. Rather, as the broad-reaching comparative analysis of different regional grouping systems reveals, it is to note that reforming the structure of elections to non-plenary bodies across international organizations—both by reallocating seats and by modifying the division of states into regional groups—has the potential to significantly improve the geographical equity of states’ participation in the organizations.

Attempts to reform these regional groupings systems should therefore aim to achieve both distributional and representational geographical equity. On the matter of representation, this would naturally entail designing a system that does not allow for states to be excluded from the regional groupings system, as many currently are in the IAEA system and as Morocco and Tunisia were in the early days of the UN system. Inspiration to this end could potentially be taken from the proposed amendment to Article VI of the IAEA Statute, which in addition to expanding the number of seats on the Board of Governors and clarifying the distribution of seats among the regional groups, also required the agreement of a list of Member States which allocated each Member State to one of the prescribed regional groups, thus ensuring that the regional grouping system

⁹⁵ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 48/26, “Question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership of the Security Council,” A/RES/48/26 (New York: UN, December 3, 1993), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/48/26>.

would be exhaustive.⁹⁶ Alternatively, the WMO divides its member states across strict geographical guidelines, rather than having all member states explicitly agree on a list dividing states into regional groups. Regardless, key to the principle of equitable geographic representation is the idea that no state be excluded from the regional grouping system and thus from being represented on an international organization's non-plenary bodies.

With regard to distribution, any attempt to resolve existing inequity of the distribution of seats on bodies of limited membership will require states to acknowledge that the membership of most international organizations has shifted dramatically since most of them were founded in the mid-20th century. Any reform on this front will likely come with significant opposition. Due to the shifts in membership of international organizations, some regional groups that originally represented a greater proportion of the Member States have seen that share diminished; for those states, realigning the distribution of seats to more accurately reflect the current membership would require them to correspondingly give up a relative share of their political power to other regions. Even if the membership of these bodies—the UN Security Council, the IAEA Board of Governors, the UN Economic and Social Council—is expanded to provide more seats to those groups which have seen their membership expand, states whose regional groups have grown less or remained stagnant in membership would still see their relative influence in those bodies decrease, a change which they would likely be resistant to. As has been the case with the proposed amendment to Article VI of the IAEA Statute, this resistance has the potential to cause gridlock for any reform efforts. Furthermore, as even in organs such as the WMO Executive Council and the ICJ, whose allocation of seats is not prescribed by treaty or resolution, the total number of seats on the body is formally codified, rendering any efforts to reform the body by adding seats laden with the same legal obstacles as other attempts to use formal amendment processes to resolve issues with regional grouping systems.

One method to prevent such conflicts in the future would be for any reform efforts to this end to include an automatic, periodic re-evaluation of the distribution of seats across regional groups in bodies of limited membership. The statutory amendments can outline the specific terms for the reallocation of seats on the basis of the number of states

⁹⁶ International Atomic Energy Agency. "Amendment to Article VI of the Statute," GC(43)/RES/19.

in each group or alternatively could set a threshold for a change in the relative number of states in a group that would trigger the reallocation process. The number of states in the Asia-Pacific regional group in the United Nations has nearly doubled since the 1960s, and yet it continues to be allocated the same number of seats on the Security Council.

However, the structure of other bodies, such as the International Court of Justice—where rules on geographical distribution of seats are less stringent or rooted in norms rather than prescribed by statute—shows that such periodic reallocations may not be necessary.

Rather than codifying a more formal, amendment system for the future, designing a more flexible system and developing norms of best practice would create a set of regional groups that is more durable and more effective at its stated goal of promoting geographic equity.

Conclusion

Across international organizations of a universal character, it has become common practice to hold a mandate to promote equitable geographic representation within the organization and furthermore to include a system of geographically determined regional groups to help ensure that all regions within the organization are fairly represented within the non-plenary bodies of the organization. While these regional grouping systems are an important tool to promote the twin goals of equitable geographic representation and distribution, their design and the manner in which they are implemented can often make them an obstacle to these goals instead. The maintenance of outdated and inequitable systems allows for states to be underrepresented and even wholly excluded from the non-plenary bodies of international organizations of which they are members.

While there have been scattered reform efforts across some international organizations aimed at changing these regional grouping systems, regional groups and the allocation of seats on non-plenary bodies to those groups has shifted into the background of institutional reform efforts in international organizations. Patterns of changing membership distributions combined with stagnant regional grouping systems have caused certain regions and states to become relatively less represented on non-plenary bodies. However, comparative analysis across international organizations reveals that many international organizations have implemented more flexible, adaptable systems of regional groups which enable the promotion of equitable geographic representation while also ensuring that the system is not excessively rigid in the face of a changing body of

member states. This analysis also affirms that problems of inequity arising from regional grouping systems are not limited to any one organization but are rather a common thread across the many international organizations that employ such systems. Furthermore, the case studies affirm that organizations with more flexibility in the structure of their regional grouping system are more able to respond to problems of both geographic equity in both the representation of member states and the distribution of seats among those member states. This feature of flexible and norm-based systems may be of interest to those seeking to reform more rigid regional grouping systems and remedy the disenfranchisement of member states in some organisations.

In order for regional grouping systems to support geographic equity, they should ensure that no state is excluded from candidature and that no region is underrepresented. While regional grouping systems are designed to promote equity among member states, they often serve to diminish it and privilege certain geographic regions of states above others. Remedying this issue is not simply a matter of Kazakhstan gaining admittance to a regional group at the IAEA, as it did in November of 2025, but rather requires more complex reforms across many international organizations to make sure that all member states of an organization are equitably and proportionally represented in its decision-making bodies.

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