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by Andrea Charron
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CGAI PRIMER

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On June 17, 2020, the UN General Assembly will vote for five new elected, non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). This is a big deal for three reasons. First, the UNSC is, in theory, the most powerful body in the world with the ability to make instantaneous international law via Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Second, it will be the first time that this secret ballot voting will take place in a social-distanced format requiring delegates to vote at designated times, thus curtailing last-minute lobbying by candidates. And third, for Canada, competing against Norway and Ireland for one of two seats, this will set off a series of speculative editorials on what this portends for Canada's place in the world.

Since 1965, the Security Council's membership consists of the five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – the Permanent 5 or P5) and 10 elected non-permanent members, five of which are elected every year so as to stagger the new members. The elected members represent [five geographic regions](#). New members will begin their two-year term on Jan. 1, 2021 to allow time for [training on UNSC working processes between the election and the start date](#).

On June 17, one seat for the Africa Group, one seat for the Asia-Pacific Group, one for Latin America and the Caribbean Group (GRULAC) and two seats for the Western Europe and Others Group (WEOG) must be decided. Estonia (representing the Eastern European Group), Niger, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tunisia and Vietnam will stay on through to 31 December 2021. Regardless of whether an election is contested, a country must obtain the votes of 2/3 of the member states (129 of 193) present voting at the General Assembly session to secure a seat on the Council. Voting can continue for dozens of rounds until a winner is declared in the case of contested seats. Only on the rarest occasion, as was the case in 2016, do two states agree to split the two-year term as did [Italy and the Netherlands for their 2017-2018 term](#).

Canada is up against stiff competition. Both Norway and Ireland have had active public campaigns and a large presence on social media. They are well liked by the international community – importantly Africa, which blocks votes, representing 54 of the 123 required votes. If there were an award for the most inspiring election video montage, Ireland would [win easily](#). Norway has sunk [US\\$1.7 million](#) in 2019 alone to campaign for its seat. Canada's campaign, by contrast, was late to the starting gate. Found on the [Global Affairs' website](#), it lacks imagination and could incite narcolepsy. But as Adam Chapnick reminds us in his excellent new book, [Canada on the United Nations Security Council](#), most of the campaigning for a UNSC seat is not for public consumption – it is hours of glad-handing and horse-trading behind closed doors.

While more than 50 states have never had a seat on the Council, it is clearly desired. The president of the UNSC rotates monthly by English spelling of the state name. France, for example, is president in June 2020. Being president gives you some say in terms of the UNSC agenda although much of it is taken up by the dozens and dozens of bring-forward topics, such as renewing UN missions. But even without that perk of presidency, non-permanent members chair the numerous UNSC committees (from working processes to sanctions) which can have



considerable influence. [This was certainly the case for Canada as chair of the sanctions committee against UNITA \(Angola\)](#). And, so long as permanent members do not threaten a veto, the elected members can outvote the P5; only nine affirmative votes are needed to adopt a resolution according to [Article 27 of the UN Charter](#).

A review of Canada's last six terms on the UNSC (1948-1949, 1958-1959, 1967-1968, 1977-1978, 1989-1990 and 1999-2000) suggests it voted "yes" for most of the resolutions which outline UNSC action required of member states. A review of every vote by Canada while on the [Council reveals that of the 318 votes it has cast](#), all but 11 were "yes" or "for" the resolution drafted, which was nearly always drafted by Western-aligned states – especially the U.S. It has been in Canada's national interest to support its allies: the U.S., the U.K., and to some extent, France, via its voting on the UNSC, but would this be the case in 2021-2022?

The UNSC in 2020 is very different from the last time Canada was on the Council in 2000.

Great power politics are back and now the world is suffering a pandemic. The voices of globalists seeking international, collective action are few and weak against nationalists seeking individual state advantage. While Russia and China cast the only vetoes in 2019, the U.S. approach to the UNSC has become more transactional – [a resolution calling for a ceasefire during the pandemic](#) (supported by China and Russia) was rejected by the U.S. because of the reference to the WHO. Nevertheless, the UNSC agenda will be consumed by COVID-related concerns and fallout but the P5 have not been in such disunion since the Cold War. A think tank, the [Security Council Report](#), notes that the numbers of vetoes and non-consensus votes are on the rise. The P3 – the U.S., the U.K. and France – are increasingly at odds. The U.S. is disinclined to take a lead role on many issues, while China and Russia are increasingly assertive. Some space has been left for the elected members to coalesce around (especially) human security issues, such as children and armed conflict. Canada's real mark on the UNSC has been in niche areas that pertain more to the governance function of the UNSC and fall into two categories: first, to take initiatives that speak to the Canadian value of respect for human rights; and second, to address machinery-of-government issues.¹

It is not certain in 2021, however, that the U.S., Russia and China are interested in working processes and transparency. Indeed, there is a distinct advantage to be gained by keeping decision-making opaque. This niche area of value added may not be available to Canada or the other elected members given the level of discord. While Canada, or Ireland or Norway and Estonia are allies and like-minded, they would need to convince the other elected members to hang together. This includes Niger, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tunisia and Vietnam (returning members) with India (uncontested as Afghanistan dropped out), Kenya or Djibouti, and Mexico (uncontested) representing a very interesting mix of interests and national priorities.² Canada's campaign priorities to sustain peace, address climate change, promote

¹ Andrea Charron, "Justin Trudeau's Quest for a Seat on the Security Council," in Philippe Lagassé and Norman Hillmer (eds.), *Justin Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy, Canada Among Nations* 2018: 247-260.

² India has served seven times (1950-1951, 1967-1968, 1972-1973, 1977-1978, 1984-1985, 1991-1992 and 2011-2012); Mexico has served four times (1946, 1980-1981, 2002-2003 and 2009-2010); Norway has served four times (1949-1950, 1963-1964, 1979-1980 and 2001-2002); Ireland



economic security, advance gender equality and strengthen multilateralism³ will resonate with some but not others. The trick is picking one that at least nine will promote to have the votes while not losing sight of what David Bosco, author of *Five to Rule Them All*,⁴ argues is the real purpose of the UNSC: to prevent war from breaking out between or among members of the P5.

While many have already concluded Canada is unlikely to win,⁵ much can happen in the days ahead. They are secret votes, after all, and we are not sure what the new, staggered style of voting will do to outcomes. Might the inconvenience of set timings create impetus to forgo endless rounds of voting which could benefit (or harm) Canada? Might an international event happen days before that changes minds? And might economic security, one of Canada's priorities, resonate more now that the world is suffering COVID-19 economic meltdowns?

This vote will be historic for many reasons, but it is not *the* determinant of Canada's place in the world – whatever that actually means. It is but one organization (albeit an extremely important one). Canada has won six times, and lost twice in the past. It is not the election per se that is important, but how we move on from the results – whether a win, a loss or perhaps even a split term.

Canada's Attempts and Terms on the UNSC

Terms	Prime Minister in Power	Permanent Representative of Canada to the UN	Other Non-Permanent Members
Jan. 12, 1946	William Lyon Mackenzie King	Failed to be elected. Canada withdrew its candidacy after the third round of voting. Australia took the seat.	Australia, Brazil and Poland served for two terms until September 1947. Egypt, Mexico and the Netherlands served until September 1946.
1948-1949	William Lyon Mackenzie King Louis St-Laurent	Gen. Andrew G.L. McNaughton	1948: Argentina, Belgium, Colombia, Syrian Arab Republic and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic 1949: Argentina, Cuba, Egypt, Norway and Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic
1958-1959	John Diefenbaker	Charles S.A. Ritchie	1958: Colombia, Iraq, Japan, Panama and Sweden 1959: Algeria, Brazil, Denmark, Ethiopia, Hungary, India, Pakistan, Paraguay and Senegal

has served three times (1962, 1981-1982 and 2001-2002); Kenya has served twice (1973-1974 and 1997-1998); and Djibouti has served once (1993-1994).

³ <https://www.international.gc.ca/campaign-campagne/unsc-csnu/index.aspx?lang=eng>

⁴ Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/canadas-efforts-to-get-on-the-un-security-council-will-likely-end-in-failure-139242>



Terms	Prime Minister in Power	Permanent Representative of Canada to the UN	Other Non-Permanent Members
1967-1968	Lester Pearson/Pierre Trudeau	George Ignatieff	1967: Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Denmark, Ethiopia, India, Japan, Mali and Nigeria 1968: Algeria, Brazil, Denmark, Ethiopia, Hungary, India, Pakistan, Paraguay and Senegal
1977-1978	Pierre Elliott Trudeau	William H. Barton	1977: Benin, Germany, India, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritius, Pakistan, Panama, Romania and Venezuela 1978: Bolivia, Czechoslovakia, Gabon, Germany, India, Kuwait, Mauritius, Nigeria and Venezuela
1989-1990	Brian Mulroney	Yves Fortier	1989: Algeria, Brazil, Colombia, Ethiopia, Finland, Malaysia, Nepal, Senegal and Yugoslavia 1990: Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Ethiopia, Finland, Malaysia, Romania, Yemen and Zaire
1999-2000	Jean Chrétien	Robert Fowler/Paul Heinbecker	1999: Argentina, Bahrain, Brazil, Gabon, Gambia, Malaysia, Namibia, the Netherlands and Slovenia 2000: Argentina, Bangladesh, Jamaica, Malaysia, Mali, Namibia, the Netherlands, Tunisia and Ukraine
Unsuccessful campaign for 2011-2012	Stephen Harper (Canada withdrew after the second round of voting). Germany and Portugal were elected.	John McNee	2011: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Colombia, Gabon, Germany, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Portugal, and South Africa 2012: Azerbaijan, Colombia, Germany, Guatemala, India, Morocco, Pakistan, Portugal, South Africa and Togo
Campaigning			
2021-2022	Justin Trudeau (declared candidacy on March 16, 2016 in New York).	Competition for two seats in Western European and Others Group (WEOG) includes Norway and Ireland. San Marino dropped out.	2021: Estonia, Niger, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tunisia and Vietnam, India, Kenya or Djibouti, and Mexico + two WEOG

► About the Author

Andrea Charron holds a PhD from the Royal Military College of Canada (Department of War Studies). She obtained a Masters in International Relations from Webster University, Leiden, The Netherlands, a Master's of Public Administration from Dalhousie University and a Bachelor of Science (Honours) from Queen's University. Her research and teaching areas include NORAD, the Arctic, foreign and defence policy and sanctions. She serves on the DND's Defence Advisory Board and has published in numerous peer-reviewed journals. Dr. Charron worked for various federal departments including the Privy Council Office in the Security and Intelligence Secretariat and Canada's Revenue Agency. She is now Director of the University of Manitoba's Centre for Defence and Security Studies and Associate Professor in Political Studies.

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