

Globalization and Border Anxiety in International Discourse

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Abstract:

International borders have become a growing security concern in many parts of the world. We theorize borders as geographical spaces that become symbols for a host of external threats that in turn produce anxiety and potentially inform policy decisions about border security. We uncover evidence of perceptions of such threats in patterns of global official discourse and show that border-related discourse has become more frequent, localized, non-state centric, and negative over time. Specifically, emotional anxiety is distinctly on the rise in such discourse in recent years. Some evidence suggests that negative border discourse is contagious among national leaders, it is also associated with concrete policy decisions to harden international borders, raising the possibility that the fortification trend noted in the border studies literature has not only a material but an emotional basis. We call for a research agenda that incorporates border discourse more centrally into international and comparative politics.

I. Introduction

Over the last several decades, international borders have receded as a contested interstate matter. For example, territorial disputes have declined markedly since 1945, and have leveled off since the 1970s (Frederick, et al. 2017, 102). Approximately 90 percent of interstate borders today are defined by *de jure* international agreements (Owsiak, et al. 2018). Whether due to international norms (Zacher 2001) or formal border agreements (Huth, et al. 2012, Goemans and Schultz 2016, Carter, et al. 2019), state territorial conquests – including small-scale *faits accomplis* – have fallen almost continuously over the past fifty years (Altman 2020).

And yet, it seems unlikely that border problems are steadily resolving. On the contrary, borders have become highly salient political issues. For example, over 35 days from 2018-2019 the United States endured the longest government shutdown in its history over the largely symbolic issue of border wall funding. The terms of Brexit and the future of the European Union have foundered in no small part on reconstituting state presence at the Northern Ireland border. Border fortifications in the once-physically open Middle East and Africa have been constructed, violently challenged by the Islamic “State” (ISIS), and reinforced. During the COVID-19 pandemic, border closures were implemented on a broad scale (Kenwick and Simmons 2020). Borders and border crossings world-wide are increasingly sites in which states have invested in displays of their authority (Simmons and Kenwick forthcoming).

We explore the irony of reduced interstate conflict but a growing sense of border insecurity with a systematic examination of global official discourse on border issues in the United Nations General Assembly. States have always been concerned about their borders. However, over the past 50 years, official state attention to interstate borders is (1) demonstrably on the rise; (2) increasingly localized; (3) increasingly associated with concerns about non-state

actors and threats, and (4) marked by negative sentiments and emotions. This discourse pattern suggests that states are worried not so much to the distribution of territory among states as to the legitimacy of the state itself vis-à-vis a suite of external threats (Brown 2010). We argue that anxiety in official discourse around international borders may be amplified by emotive socialization, or the idea that global leaders can influence one another's sentiments and emotions through social interaction. Nonetheless, such discourse is not meaningless: we show it is associated with the construction of border barriers, which burgeoning research shows may not always have the intended consequences (Blair 2020, Carter and Poast 2020, Schon and Leblang forthcoming).

The paper proceeds as follows. Section II situates border anxiety and its rise in the context of globalized non-state developments, including market integration, human mobility, terrorism and transnational crime. Section III documents four tell-tale (though non-linear) shifts in states' border discourse over the past fifty years: it is becoming more *frequent*, *localized*, focused on *non-state threat*, and increasingly *emotionally negative*. This discourse pattern is somewhat surprising in a system marked by reduced interstate conflict around interstate borders. It is consistent, however, with a sense of external challenge to state authority to ensure security, prosperity and a stable national identity within its territorial jurisdiction.

Section IV tests the proposition that border anxiety can be linked with material security conditions and exposure to "globalization." We find evidence of the former, but surprisingly little evidence of the latter, with the important exception of net migration flows into democratic countries. Even more surprisingly, border sentiments evidence contagion among state representatives. Section V shows that negative sentiments generally, and anxiety specifically, inform policies on the ground: negative sentiments and border anxiety presage the building of

border walls and fences, even when external threats and global exposure are controlled. This suggests that partially contagious negative sentiments per se may inform border policy decisions, independently from facts on the ground.

II. Border anxiety in an era of globalization

Territorialism, globalization and state authority: the salience of international borders

Bordered territorial states are institutions that order political and social life. The post-World War II international order institutionalized territorial sovereignty delimited by international borders as the non-negotiable bedrock of the international order, initiated in the days of the League of Nations,¹ and solidified with the formation of the United Nations.² Bordered territoriality was so sacrosanct that any debate over its central position barely rates a mention in the *travaux préparatoires* of the UN Charter (El Ouali 2006, 631-32). Alliances were constructed to defend territorial agreements (Gibler 1999). Decolonization merged nationalism and territorialism in India and elsewhere, strengthening the stake in the legitimacy of the bounded territorial state. The idea of bounded territorial sovereignty made any other post-colonial fate nearly unthinkable – a fact that continues to reinforce the norm to this day (Abraham 2020, 20).

In tension with the territorial order, a liberal international order for trade, capital and information was essentially grafted in succeeding years onto this state system (Simmons and Goemans 2021). New practices and technologies have given rise to integrated markets, expanded security communities, and instant global communications flows, challenging the institution of bounded territoriality (Branch 2017, 132). The confluence of territorial norms and transnational forces are hard to square with the modern sovereign state. While state legitimacy had historically

¹ Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 10.

² Charter of the United Nations, Article 2(4).

been tied to the state's ability to govern territorially (Herz 1957), globalization was driving the territorial "unbundling" of the state in favor of common markets and functional regimes (Ruggie 1993). Moreover, some aspects of transnational integration were clearly not viewed as desirable: human mobility (Kinnvall and Svensson 2015) and the transnationalization of crime and terrorism (Andreas 2002) arguably make it difficult for the modern state to consistently deliver security, prosperity, and effective local governance. Wendy Brown (2010, 23) writes of sovereignty itself as "migrating from the nation state to the unrelieved domination of capital and God-sanctioned political violence."

A "borderless" or "networked" world (Ohmae 1990, Castells 2000) presents profound challenges to states' political authority. James W. Scott (2020, 4) characterizes borders as "co-constitutive of political agency," suggesting that border elision is corrosive of that agency. This erosion may also threaten people's ontological security, or their sense of stable identity (Giddens 1991). Such psychological insecurity, often expressed in national political discourse, has prompted states to reassert "neo-Westphalian" projects in response (Mitzen 2018).

Evidence suggests that some national discourses already reflect this tension between secure national borders and a borderless world. Google's collection of published text in American English displays a suggestive trend over time: references to a "borderless" world explode over the course of the 1990s, soon to be followed (and nearly surpassed) by references to architectures of border security (see Appendix A). Border security is a highly partisan domestic issue in many countries, and has become a political resource for right-wing parties and anti-democratic interests in Europe, North America, South Asia and beyond (Jones 2009, Salter and Piché 2011, Lamour and Varga 2020). These discourses in turn pique anxieties that connect to attitudes about international trade (Mansfield and Mutz 2009) immigration (Marcus and MacKuen 1993), and

transnational terrorism (Huddy, et al. 2005). In the hands of deft politicians, border discourse can prompt insecurities that such politicians then strategically position themselves to address (Neumann 2017).

In conversation with interdisciplinary literatures embracing philosophy, cultural studies, and geography (Almond 2016, Bissonnette and Vallet 2020) we use the term *border anxiety* to refer to a heightened sense of instability or vulnerability perceived to be linked with borders and cross-border phenomena. Anxiety involves uncertainty about danger. Border anxiety can arise from a sense of vulnerability to attack, crime, violence, cultural shifts, or economic competition which have become associated with “open borders.” Research reveals that some of the most anxious discourse in national deliberative bodies reflects concerns about “the other” (Rheault 2016). Theoretically, we expect evidence of border anxiety in the discourse of states most exposed to economic globalization and the threat of external violence. To the extent that perceived threats from globalization are repeated and amplified by national leaders in international settings, we expect such concerns to diffuse in the official discourse of states on a broad scale.

The United Nations and Global Official Discourse

Global official discourse is a record of the concerns and attitudes that states have about the world. This is important because such concerns may become part of a widespread narrative which in turn affects the policies that states adopt, individually and collectively. We hypothesize that how states articulate their concerns internationally is as important as what they say. When states raise and debate issues in a global forum, they make specific choices about the issues that they bring to collective attention and language used to describe such issues. Their official discourse is

a record of the salience of an issue. The sentiments and emotions that characterize such speech are persuasive efforts to convince other states (and domestic audiences) to assume the speaker's assessments of global risks and opportunities.

The premier site for global state discourse is the General Assembly of the United Nations. UNGA debates have been recognized as “a barometer” of world opinion (Smith 2006, 153) on issues of significance in international politics (Mingst and Karns 2016). Arguably, the debates have grown in practical importance since ideology has declined and incentives to speak frankly may be stronger with the end of the Cold War. UNGA debates inform international agreements and foreign aid commitments (Hecht 2016, Watkins 2017). They help to frame international issues, develop consensus, legitimate collective decisions, inform debates in the Security Council, and even influence major powers (Bearce and Bondanella 2007). Even derisive assessments of the United Nations as a “talk shop” underscore its usefulness for our purposes: this is where the nations of the world gather to talk.

Speeches on the floor of the UN almost certainly address domestic as well as international audiences. They are carried by major media outlets: UN coverage by the New York Times for example spikes sharply upward in September each year when the UNGA debates take place (see Appendix A). Clearly, the yearly UNGA General Debates have some limitations. These speeches are unfiltered, but they are hardly free from political influences (a possibility we explore below). Official utterances may or may not reflect (or influence) mass opinion. And of course, not all become actionable multilaterally. They are nearly ideal, however, for our purpose, which is to analyze official border concerns, sentiments and emotions. While better sources on policy

salience and preferences may be available for individual countries,³ or for specific issues,⁴ there is no better source for exploring official global border discourse.

For this reason, a small but growing set of scholars have used UNGA speeches to explore international politics and priorities, both through unsupervised approaches (Baturu and Dasandi 2017) and traditional hand-coding approaches (Hecht 2016, Watts 2019, Watanabe and Zhou 2020), Kentikelenis and Voeten (2020) have used the UNGA corpus to study resistance to global norms. Using similarity detection methods, the UNGA debates have been used to study political influence (Carmody, et al. 2020); state socialization (Chelotti, et al. 2019); and the diplomatic similarities that underlie conflict behavior (Pomeroy, et al. 2019).

The UNGA General Debates (collected by Baturu, et al. 2017) offer an ideal corpus for our purposes. Usually delivered by the head of government or chief foreign minister, General Debate speeches represent an annual opportunity for every UN member to articulate priorities free from media and other filtering (Binder and Heupel 2015, Kentikelenis and Voeten 2020). Speech text is much better suited for detecting border anxiety than is simple up-or-down roll-call voting, which is neither justificatory nor unbiased (Häge and Hug 2016). Since states rarely decline the opportunity to provide remarks in the General Debates (see Figure 1), these speeches represent the only global, temporally consistent source of state priorities and policy statements of which we are aware.

³ National deliberative bodies that have been the focus of much discourse research. See for example Owen (2017) and Abercrombie and Batista-Navarro (2020).

⁴ Some studies for example have used specialized agency transcripts on specific topics, such as outer space policy (Pomeroy 2017) or nuclear non-proliferation (Barnum and Lo 2020) to explore specific policy concerns. Organizations' press releases have been scoured for bureaucratic agendas (Bayerlein, et al. 2020). Security Council texts have been used to study the use of specific rhetorical themes, interstate coalitions and comparative policy agendas (Schönfeld, et al. 2018, Arias and Shaffer 2020, Fall 2020).

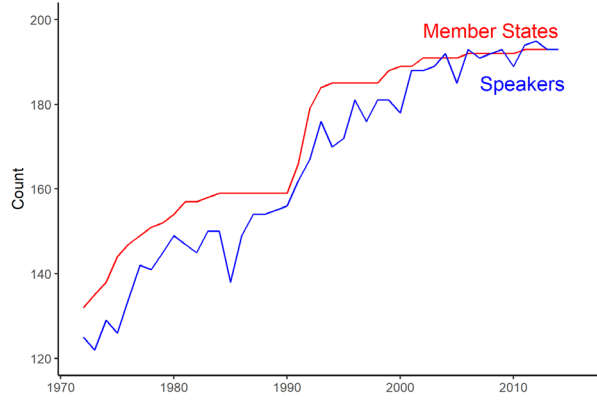


Figure 1: UNGA Speeches and UN member states, by year. Occasionally speakers exceed the number of member states because non-UN members, such as the European Union and Palestine, are permitted to speak.

Identifying border-relevant discourse

The most significant challenge using UNGA texts for studying discourse is how to convert it to meaningful information that can be analyzed systematically. Since our goal is to isolate language addressing a known theme – border-related discourse – from a heterogeneous corpus, unsupervised topic models such as those explored by Baturo and Dasandi (2017) are unsuited for our purpose. Moreover, “borders” (unlike “human rights,” “development” and “security”) are not a traditional UN category with its own sub-organizational bureaucracy (compare topics in Watanabe and Zhou 2020). Border concerns cross-cut UN structures and touch a broad range of issues, from military defense/security to development to immigration to transnational crime to human rights.

Our first contribution is to convert the corpus into conceptually useful information for studying international borders. To do so, we segment all speech transcripts into semantically coherent “pseudo-paragraphs” ($n = 135,292$) using Hearst’s (1997) TextTiling algorithm. Next, we identified all border-relevant pseudo-paragraphs. We define a paragraph as *relevant* to international borders if it (1) discusses a specific physical, non-metaphorical international border

or collection of borders (e.g. a regional border compact), *or* (2) discusses a concrete policy area with a clear impact on a physical, non-metaphorical international border. To identify discourse meeting our definition, we first tasked human annotators to code a portion of our dataset. We then used their coding decisions to train a supervised learning model to predict border relevance on the remainder, which resulted in an original dataset of 4,215 border-relevant pseudo-paragraphs (see Appendix B).

About 4% of all pseudo-paragraphs are border-relevant in most years. This percentage is impressive. First, since there are 40 countries in the world that have no land borders at all, approximately 20% of current UN members have no immediate interest in land borders. Second, UNGA speeches contain a good amount of diplomatic froth relative to substantive policy discussion. That froth remains in the denominator. Third, border relevant paragraphs are relatively significant, compared to other topics that are justifiably considered “important.” For example, issues of crime and immigration are about as common when *combined in* US State of the Union Addresses (Rule, et al. 2015). Mitrani’s (2017, 22) study of topics in the UNGA corpus under the rubric of “international community” found that some 8-15% of such references related to social and economic issues, putting the density of border relevant paragraphs on a rough par with some of the most important issues to the international community.⁵ Finally, we are more interested in change over time than we are in static averages. Even if 4% seems like a small share of all paragraphs, we demonstrate how much the quantity, content and affect of these paragraphs have shifted over time.

⁵ The comparison is not exact, however, because it relates only to passages mentioning the “international community.”

Trends in border discourse: descriptive evidence of border anxiety

This novel dataset of border-relevant official discourse reveals important information about shifting state policy priorities and sentiments. Almost certainly, states have always been concerned with their international borders, since borders reflect the essence of the territorial state. But there is growing evidence of border anxiety in the frequency, topics and language states use. Global official discourse about international borders is increasingly (1) frequent; (2) spatially proximate; (3) associated with non-state concerns; and (4) expressed by negative sentiments and emotions.

Frequency. Identification of border-relevant paragraphs reveals an insistent pattern: states are increasingly talking about specific international borders as a proportion of all communication in the annual General Debates (Figure 2). The uptick during the 1970s and 1980s and since the mid-2000s is especially strong. Note that this rise is nearly the inverse of a count of interstate territorial conquest attempts in a recent study (Altman 2020).

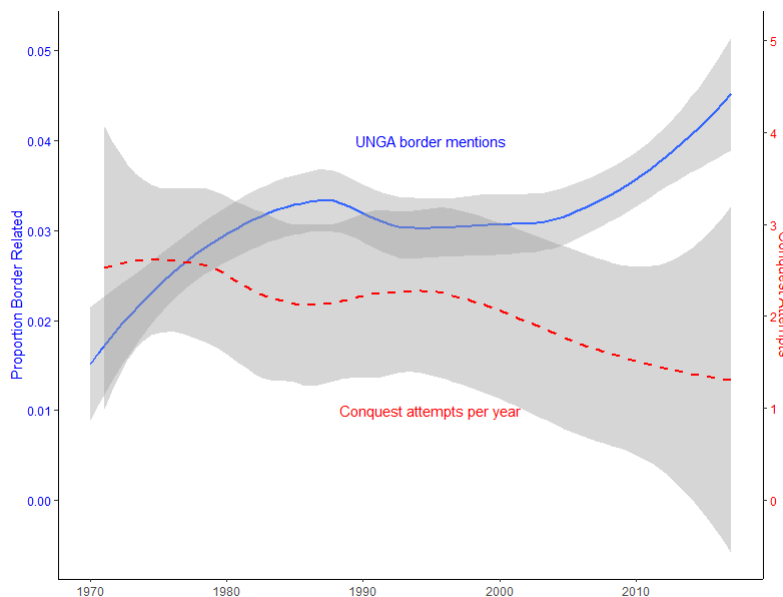


Figure 2: Proportion of border-relevant pseudo-paragraphs in the UNGA General Debate compared to territorial conquests attempted each year. Denominator for “UNGA border mentions” is the total number of pseudo-paragraphs yearly. Shading represents 95% confidence intervals.

Spatial Proximity. Of course, not all areas of the world are mentioned in global border discourse. If border mentions reflect a deep-seated concern that external forces pose an (ill-defined) threat, then we should expect increasing attention to each state's own borders, or those of near neighbors, rather than to distant conflicts around the world. To explore this possibility, we extracted mentions of all specific locations (e.g. countries, federal units, geographic locations, or cities) from our corpus of border-relevant texts using a machine-assisted workflow, and linked these location mentions with country and location metadata (see Appendix C for details).

Figure 3 distinguishes the density of references to one's own borders and those of contiguous states from references elsewhere in the world. During the 1970s and 1980s, approximately two-thirds of places named by states in border-related discourse were beyond the speaker's contiguous neighborhood. But beginning in the 1990s, states shifted towards discussing places closer to home. By the turn of the 21st century, nearly half of all geographic border-related discourse mentioned a state's own borders or those of its immediate neighbors. This pattern suggests growing attention to "doorstep" issues that penetrate borders broadly. Arguably, localized transborder threats are understood to be spreading and generalizing, bringing global forces to (and across) more states' thresholds.

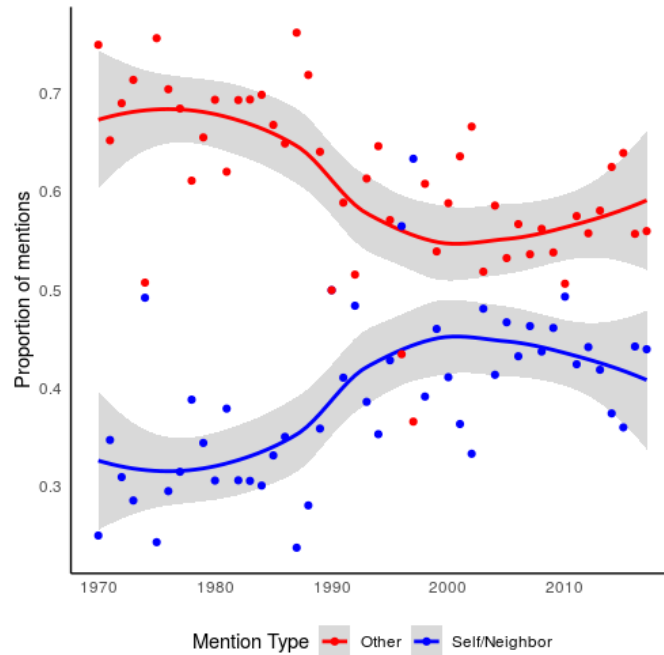


Figure 3: Proportion of location mentions that reference a country’s own territory or that of its neighbors in UNGA General Debate speeches. Denominator is the total number of locations mentions per year. Shading represents 95% confidence intervals.

Content. As the frequency of border discourse has shifted and its geography has telescoped, its contents is increasingly focused on non-state threats. To illustrate, we identified a set of word stems associated with key border-related policy concerns and tracked their prevalence in border-relevant pseudo-paragraphs relative to a set of standard international relations terms (Appendix D). As shown in Figure 4 (left column), since 1970 terms associated with a variety of non-state threats are largely on the rise. Unsurprisingly, “terrorism” increases markedly in usage following the 9/11 attacks, while “migration” became substantially more common following the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, and “disease words” show a steady upward climb with spikes for the SARS epidemic of the mid-2000s and the Ebola outbreak of 2014. However, traditional international relations words, such as “demarcation” or “state,” are more frequent overall but are broadly constant or even somewhat in decline in relative usage over the same time-period (Figure

4, right column). Border concerns are decreasingly about locating the jurisdictional line and instead represent serious governing challenges for sovereign states (Simmons 2019).

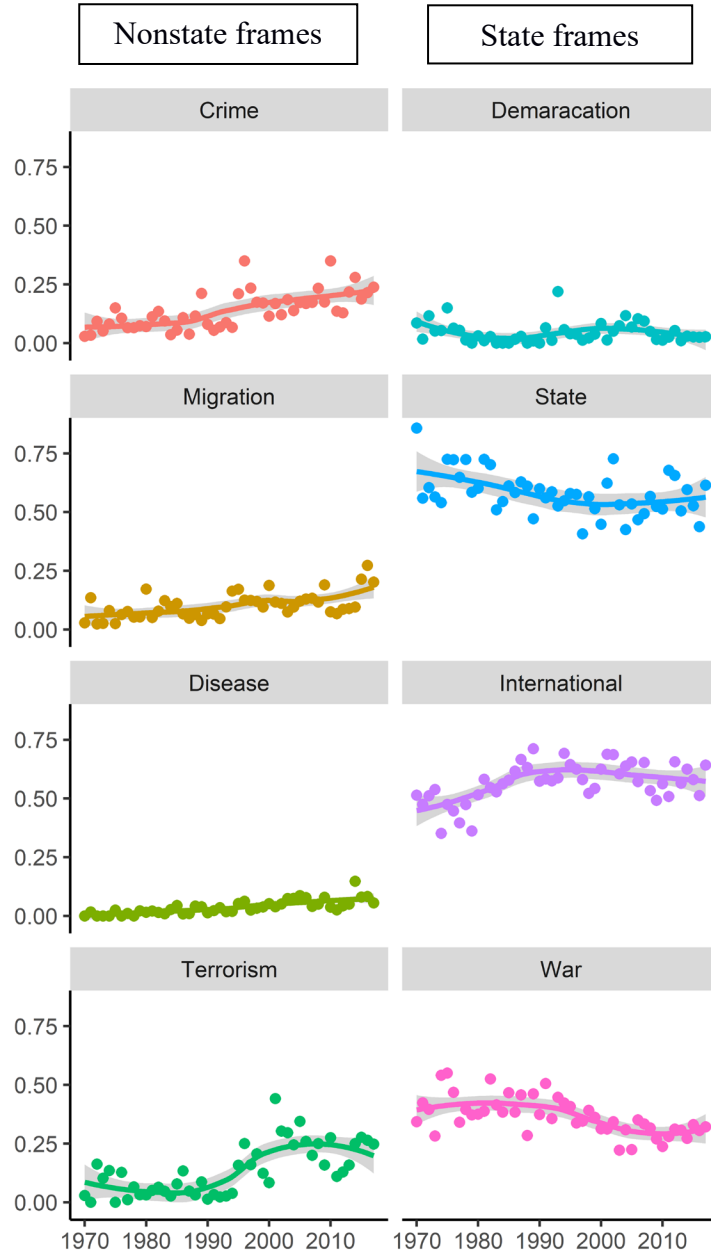


Figure 4: Proportion of border-relevant pseudo-paragraphs that mention specified issues, 1970-2017. The left column highlights growth in problem frames that tend to involve non-state actors, while the right column suggests state-to-state relationships.

Affect: sentiments and emotions. Finally, border discourse can reveal important shifts in affect surrounding international borders. As the political psychology literature suggests, politics is partly shaped by the way people communicate ideas, express emotions, and frame issues. One way to explore this phenomenon is to examine the sentiment, or the positive or negative “tone” of border-related discourse. Scholars often research sentiment patterns using dictionaries of positive or negative words (Young and Soroka 2012) or general-purpose algorithms trained on “emotive” documents like movie or restaurant reviews.⁶ We use a Google AI-generated measure to compare sentiment in border-relevant paragraphs to the entire corpus of UNGA speeches.⁷ The results are striking. Between 1970 and 2010, border-relevant paragraphs are often less positive than are sentiment scores for the overall corpus (Figure 5), but they tend to track each other closely. After 2010, border sentiments deteriorate drastically while sentiments associated with the rest of the

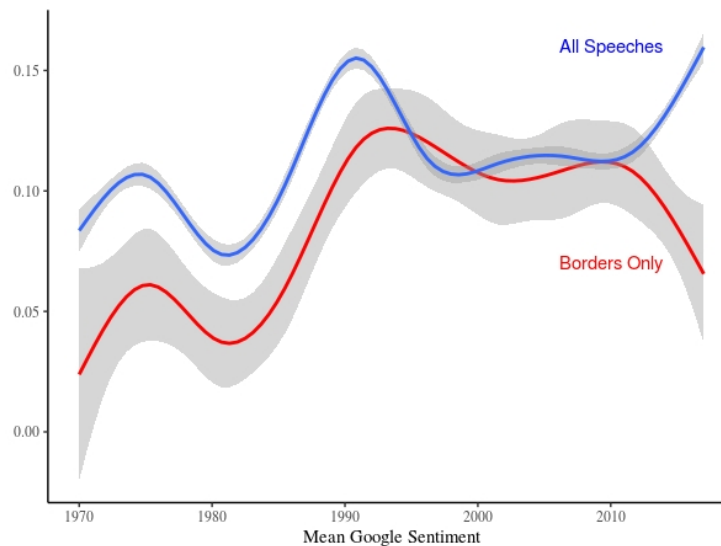


Figure 5: Google sentiments scores, aggregated by year and country, comparing sentiments associated with border relevant paragraphs with all other paragraphs in UNGA General Debates. Shading represents 95% confidence intervals. Higher values represent more positive sentiment scores.

⁶ For example, the Google Sentiment tool available through the [Google AI API](#).

⁷ Unfortunately, our custom-built sentiment measure cannot be applied to the broader corpus of UNGA documents, since it is trained exclusively on border-relevant discourse. As we show in Appendix E, the Google AI sentiment measure has approximately a 0.5 correlation with human-generated sentiment scores in border-relevant discourse.

corpus trend suddenly positive. Though UNGA speeches are becoming more positive overall, border topics in the past decade are an exception.

However, ready-made dictionaries are not ideal for diplomatic contexts. Unlike ordinary language, diplomatic language is coded, moderate, and biased toward positive sentiment, since it “promotes mutual cooperation over conflict and divisiveness” (Burhanudeen 2006). To generate more accurate sentiment scores for the border-relevant portion of our corpus, we recruited human coders on Amazon Mechanical Turk to score positive and negative sentiments for approximately 40% of border-relevant pseudo-paragraphs ($n = 2293$). We then used a Bayesian latent variable model based on pairwise comparisons of texts (Carlson and Montgomery 2017) to infer a continuous sentiment score for each individual border-relevant pseudo-paragraph, which we then used to train a supervised machine learning model to predict sentiment scores for the remainder of our dataset (see Appendix E).

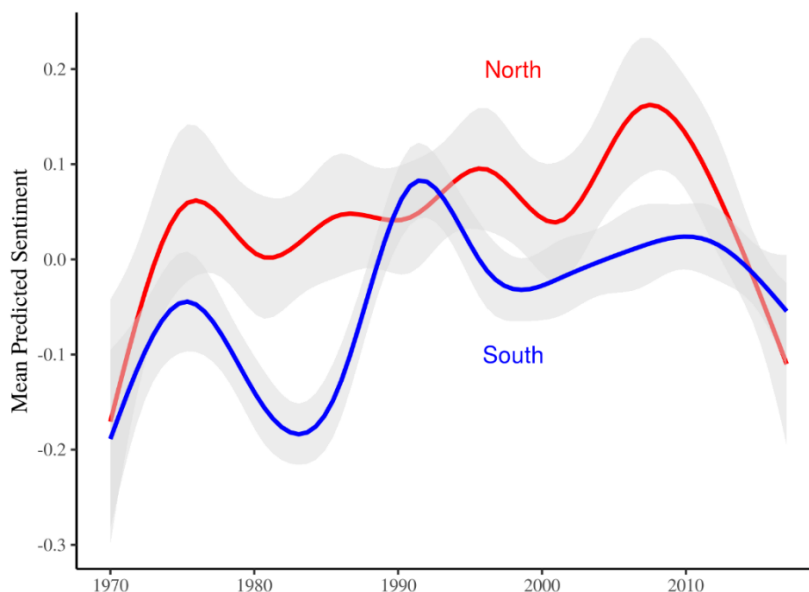


Figure 6: Model-predicted sentiment, aggregated by year and country and split by Global North/South. Shading represents 95% confidence intervals. Higher values represent more positive sentiment scores.

The results are shown in Figure 6, which distinguishes sentiment of the Global North from the Global South. This customized measure confirms that sentiments associated with borders have generally improved worldwide since 1970. In particular, the 1980s saw steeply improving sentiments in the Global South, possibly associated with decolonization, which then dipped in the 1990s. Sentiments in the Global North trend positive for most of the period. However, starting in the late 2000s, this pattern reversed, with a noticeable decline from approximately 2010 to the present. This decline was sharp and sudden in the Global North, which coincides with increased anxiety regarding economic recession, immigration, and the rise of far-right populist movements in the United States, Europe and elsewhere during the period.

Beyond measuring positive/negative sentiment, we also identify issue-relevant emotions. In particular, we focus on *border anxiety*, a key emotion identified in the existing border literature (Almond 2016, Bissonnette and Vallet 2020). To measure anxiety in UNGA speeches, we rely on a modified version of Rheault (2016)’s workflow. We begin with a set of high-anxiety seed words (e.g. “risk”, “threat”, “concern”) and low-anxiety (e.g. “safety”, “protection”, “trust”) identified by Rheault (2016). Next, we extract pre-trained GloVe embedding vectors (Pennington et al. 2014) for each word in our seed list.⁸ GloVe is a latent variable approach that seeks to represent words as semantically meaningful numeric vectors, which allows for similarity comparisons between words. We exploit this property to calculate anxiety scores for all other words in our dataset. Specifically, for each word, we calculate the cosine similarity between that word’s embedding vector and the vector of each word in the seed list. We then sum the similarity scores in the high- and low-anxiety seed groups, subtract the sums, and rescale the difference to fall

⁸ Specifically, 300-dimensional embeddings trained using the Wikipedia 2014 and the Gigaword 5 corpora. Available at <https://nlp.stanford.edu/projects/glove/>.

between $[-1, 1]$. This process yields a score for each word, with 1 referring to the highest-anxiety words and -1 referring to the lowest-anxiety words. Finally, we average these per-word scores for each pseudoparagraph, which yields an anxiety score for all pseudoparagraphs in our dataset.

Our estimate of the prevalence of anxiety in United Nations discourse is displayed in Figure 7. Expressions associated with anxiety have been distinctly higher in border relevant paragraphs than in all other UNGA speech since the 1970s. However, the gap between estimates for border relevant paragraphs and all other speech has grown consistently every year since. Furthermore, there is a dramatic upswing in border related anxiety discourse since at least the mid-2000s. This upswing coincides with the patterns in frequency and proximity documented above.

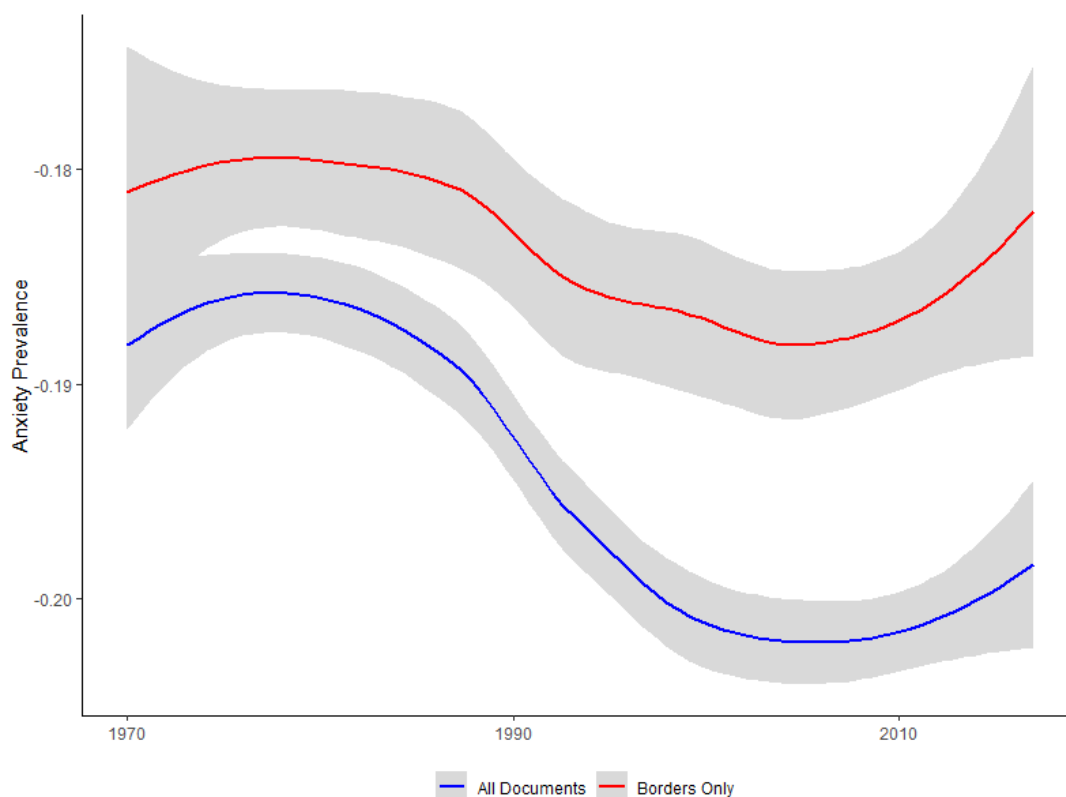


Figure 7: Averaged word-level anxiety scores, for all pseudoparagraphs and all border-relevant pseudoparagraphs. Word-level anxiety scores are produced using the procedure described by Rheault (2016) and averaged to form pseudoparagraph-level scores.

Since the 1990s, and especially since 2010, sentiments connected with border discourse have turned sharply negative, especially among speakers from the Global North. Expressions that reflect emotional anxiety are stronger for border relevant issues than all other paragraphs, and the gap between border and non-border discourse has grown over time. Combined with evidence on frequency, proximity, and nonstate content, discourse analysis suggests heightened negative affect – specifically, border anxiety – in border-related global official discourse.

IV. Explaining Border Anxiety

Border-relevant paragraphs are increasingly frequent, locally referential, feature non-state issues, and negative. These patterns seem to suggest that state representatives are increasingly concerned with transnational forces, entities and actors that challenge territorial state authority (Brown 2010). Are these rhetorical patterns linked to traditional security threats, globalization pressures, or is an international narrative building independently of these developments? And is such anxiety justified, or is it at least somewhat exaggerated through emotional contagion? If a narrative of threatening borders is diffusing in international discourse, this raises questions about what the consequences may be for policies on the ground.

One possibility is that globalization pressures underly expressed concerns. An extensive literature examines the structural impact that global markets and human mobility have had on a broad range of political behavior. One dominant narrative is that electoral pressures and dynamics have contributed to populist/nationalist parties, at least in the advanced democracies, and have had significant effects on political rhetoric and policies (Norris and Inglehart 2019). A growing body of research suggests that structural changes at the subnational (regional) level are associated with geographically specific forms of anti-globalization backlash, in particular support for right-

wing political parties (for a review, see Walter 2021). Formal party platforms reflect growing negativity about globalization since the 1980s (Walter 2021, 425). The voice that right-wing parties have given to anti-globalization rhetoric may account for the sharp negative shift in border sentiments in the speeches of the states in the global north (Figure 6). If so we would expect globalization to be correlated with border mentions and negative border sentiments.

States may also be concerned about traditional territorial integrity concerns – the fear of a military or other violent attack across their borders. We would expect such an emphasis in the United Nations, where international peace and security is a primary preoccupation. States that have interstate disputes with their neighbors, or who border states battling non-state violence or civil war are likely to express more frequent border concerns, and to display more negative sentiments in so doing.

Border Mentions

Taking *border mentions* as the dependent variable, we explore how a country's context influences the probability that its General Debate speech in a given year contains at least one border-relevant pseudo-paragraph. The framework developed above suggests that economic and political globalization,⁹ net migration,¹⁰ and security threats such as ongoing civil and interstate disputes,¹¹ would spark border mentions. In addition, democratic governance may well affect the expression of opposition to global economic vulnerabilities.¹² Since net migration is likely to be a

⁹ We use the de-facto globalization scores in the KOF Globalization Index, available at <https://kof.ethz.ch/en/forecasts-and-indicators/indicators/kof-globalisation-index.html>. Rescaled to a 0-10 scale for visual purposes.

¹⁰ Measured in percentage points and normalized by country population, using estimated net migration flows drawn from the [World Bank](#). Since estimates are only available at five year intervals, we linearly interpolated migration values for off-years.

¹¹ As measured by the Polity IV project (Marshall et al. 2002).

¹² As measured by the Polity IV project (Marshall et al. 2002).

particular concern for democracies – who are more permissive with respect to restrictions on freedom of movement – we also interact net migration with democratic governance (full results are reported in Appendix F). We model border mentions using a linear probability model, which (unlike comparable maximum likelihood specifications) is both directly interpretable and allows for year and country fixed effects to control for time- and country-invariant unobserved confounders and clustered standard errors by country and year (Cameron, et al. 2011). To explore the stability of our estimates over time, we calculate separate models with 0 (current year) to 3-year lagged versions of each of our predictor variables.

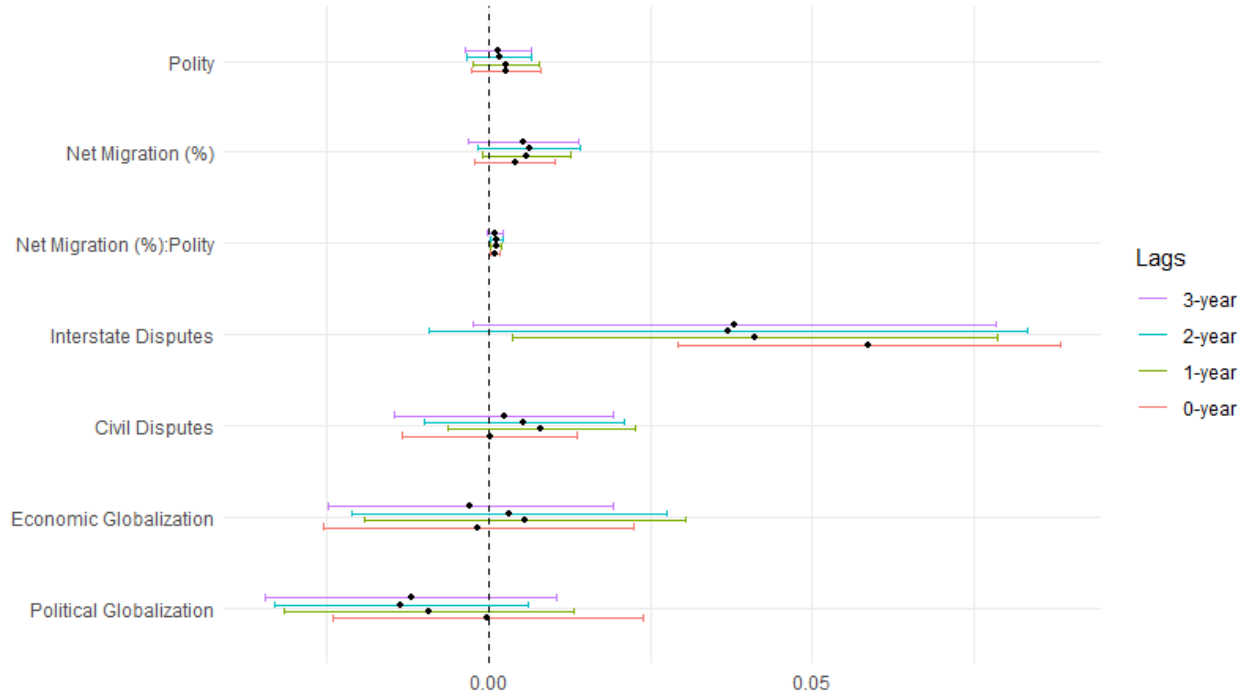


Figure 8: Mentions model. Dependent variable is an indicator variable describing whether a given country’s UNGA speech contained at least one border-relevant paragraph in a given year. Linear probability model, with country- and year-fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country and year.

Unsurprisingly, involvement in an interstate dispute is strongly, positively correlated with border mentions. Interstate disputes often involve border-related discussion, even if interstate borders are incidental to the conflict. This result attenuates with higher lags, which suggest that

dispute-driven border mentions are likely focused on current rather than historical events. Surprisingly, however, we found an insignificant relationship with a civil conflict¹³ in the speaker's country, which may reflect the interstate focus of United Nations discourse. Borders mentions were not convincingly linked to economic or political globalization, logged GDP per capita, or population, which may suggest that the effects of these variables are largely consumed by country and year fixed effects.

A more interesting explanation for border mentions, however, is the conditional role of net migration in the speaking country. We interacted net migration with regime type to capture the idea that democracies may be more sensitive to net inward migration, as some of the border anxiety literature suggests (Goldstone and Diamond 2020). The interaction term is indeed positive and significant up to the 3-year lagged model, though the effect size attenuates slightly with larger lags. Figure 9 illustrates this interaction term from the current-year version of our model. As Figure 9 shows, increases in net migration in democracies are associated with a statistically significant increase in the probability of a border mention. For countries with the highest levels of democratic consolidation, the size of this effect is substantial. For example, in Norway – a country with the highest polity score (10) – a one standard-deviation change in year-on-year net migration is associated with an increase in the probability of at least one border mention. That effect is about 32% of the magnitude of the corresponding increase associated with an additional interstate conflict. For the United States (with a score of 8 on the -10 to 10 Polity scale), a corresponding size is about 10% of the predicted effect for a militarized dispute. Given the attention to interstate disputes in international relations, this conditional effect of migration in democracies is substantial. In addition, international borders become an issue for autocracies

¹³ Data on civil conflict are from <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/MEPVcodebook2018.pdf>, <https://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html>

when they experience net migration outflows; that is, when they are losing population (Figure 9). These results suggest that human mobility interacts with regime type to influence border mentions on the world stage.

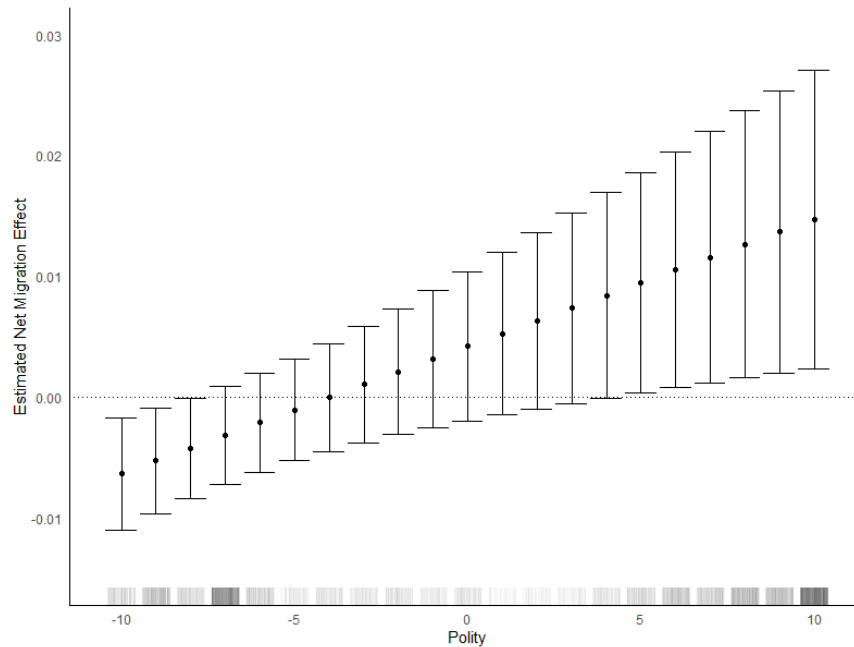


Figure 9: Correlates of border mentions (based on current-year model in Figure 8). Illustrating the interaction between net migration flows and regime type in explaining the likelihood of a border mention at the UNGA. The figure suggests a sensitivity of autocracies to outflows and a sensitivity of democracies to inflows. Hash marks along the X-axis indicate the density of the data for each polity score. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Negative Sentiments

Backlash to globalization and traditional security concerns likely play an important role in global official discourse, but they may not be the whole story. Discourse is a social activity involving efforts to persuade, frame, and communicate and thus also to be persuaded, to learn, and to absorb or resist the discourse of others (Risse 2000). Under certain circumstances, sentiments and emotions reflected in a nascent discourse become a “model” for how to talk, how

to feel, what to fear, and how to frame a problem. Sentiments reflected in discourse may be contagious – adopted and repeated by other actors – under certain circumstances. We refer to these processes as *emotive socialization* and to the sentiments and emotions that diffuse through these processes as *emotive norms*.

Emotive socialization essentially means that actors can influence one another's sentiments and emotions through various kinds of social interaction, of which persuasive speaking is one. As a baseline to theorize such effects, psychologists have shown that, whether through mechanisms of mimicry or feedback, emotions themselves are potentially contagious (Hatfield, et al. 1993, Kramer, et al. 2014). Emotional contagion can be enhanced by specific efforts to influence sentiments. Neta Crawford (2014, 544) theorizes that an emotional response “can be enhanced or diminished by social cues, social practices, and the arrangements of organizations.” John Mercer (2014, 530) similarly writes that “group members share, validate, and police each other's feelings; and these feelings structure relations” within and between groups in international politics. Passive emotional diffusion may be supplemented with intentional efforts to cultivate a specific sentimental response.

Emotive socialization is likely to take place under specific circumstances. First, it is likely among entities that have a shared identity. This is because emotional transfers tend to be stronger within rather than across groups or among atomistic individuals. Group identities solidify assumptions of common values and interests which facilitate the conclusion that an emotion such as anxiety is, as John Mercer (2014, 526) puts it, “not my feeling. It is our feeling.” The fact that a feeling is validated by a group constitutes validation about the appropriateness of a sentiment (Smith, et al. 2007).

State identities are starkly triggered at the United Nations. When delegations meet in their capacity as state leaders, they do so as sovereign representatives of territorially bounded space. States may have very different understandings of threat and opportunity, but they have in common a shared identity that depends ultimately on sovereign territorial jurisdiction. The greater the challenge of globalization to territorial political organization and its bordering principles, the stronger is this shared identity: what we as states share in common is loss of control to non-state threats.

Second, emotive socialization is much more likely when persons with a common identity interact with each other, as they do in the context of UNGA debates. Emotive socialization has much in common with normative socialization prominent in the international relations literature (Johnston 2001). UNGA speeches are subject to all sorts of social cues, from applause to approving body language to occasional audible ridicule. There is reason to believe that similar sentiments are discussed in hallway and bar room interactions as well. If international organizations structure normative socialization as the literature suggests, they are likely to facilitate emotive socialization as well.

In short, discourse may be as communicable as it is communicative. We would expect negative sentiments in border-relevant discourse to correlate with:

H1. conflict in a state's security environment

H2: state exposure to globalization

H3: prevailing global and regional sentiments on the same topic.

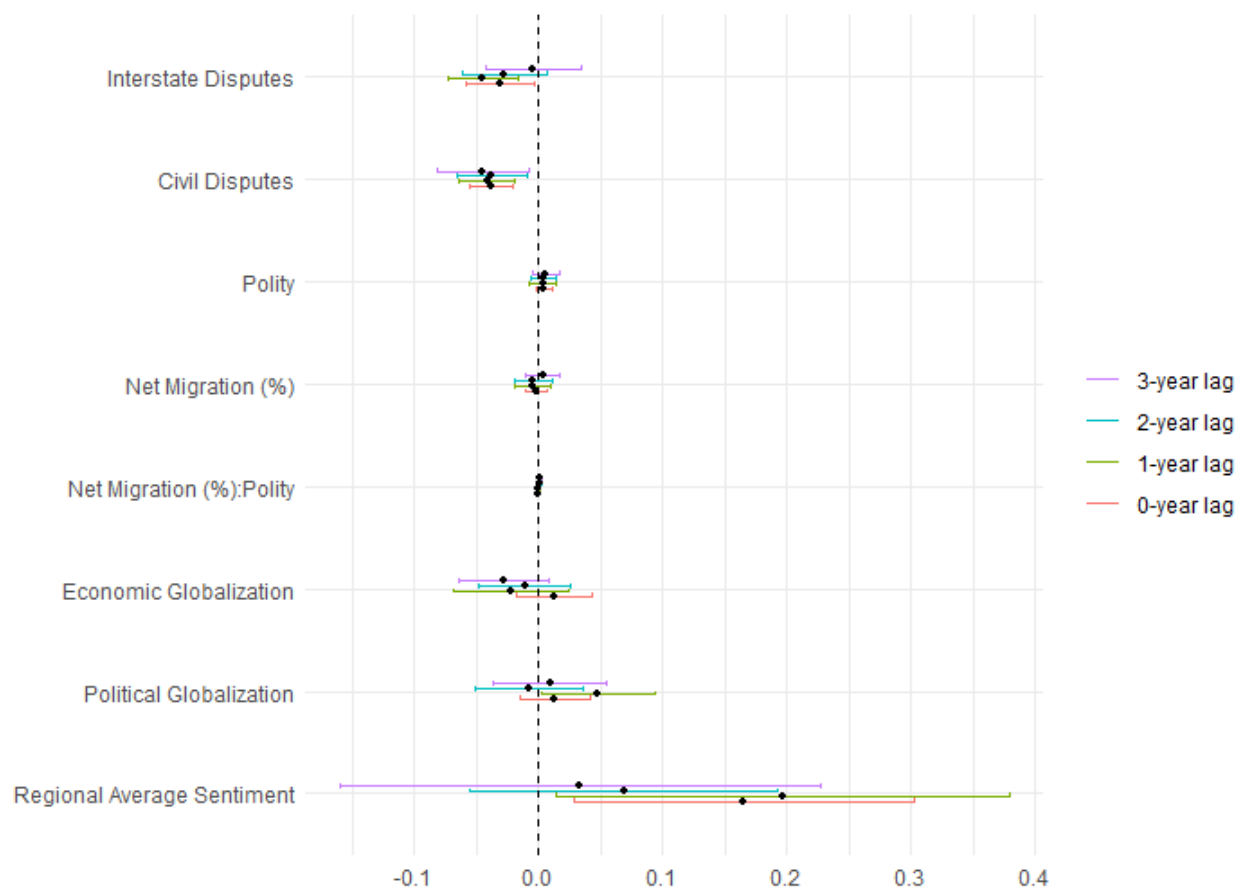


Figure 10: Sentiment Predictors. Dependent variable is predicted country-year sentiment in border-relevant paragraphs in UNGA annual speeches. Country-year observations with no border-relevant language are coded as missing. $\log(\text{GDP/Capita})$ and $\log(\text{Population})$ are included as control variables but omitted for readability (see Appendix F for full results).

Tests of these relationships are reported in Figure 10. The dependent variable is the customized sentiment score for each country-year for states that have addressed border issues. The results are from a linear probability model with country-year as the unit of analysis, and two-way fixed effects to control for yearly shocks and country specific conditions. To explore the temporal stability of our results, we fit four separate models with all predictor variables lagged by 0 years (current-year data) to 3 years relative to the dependent variable.

There is significant support, as expected for Hypothesis 1: sentiment in border relevant discourse is strongly negative for states involved in an interstate or civil dispute. Violent conflicts have a strong negative correlation with negative sentiments in border-relevant discourse. This

relationship persists across most lag structures we examine, for both types of disputes. Somewhat surprisingly, there is only scant evidence in support of the exposure to globalization hypothesis. Economic globalization, an index combining trade and financial globalization,¹⁴ is essentially unassociated with sentiments regarding interstate borders. Political globalization (state involvement in international organizations) is positively and significantly associated with border sentiment in the one-year lag model but has a null relationship otherwise. Surprisingly, and in contrast to our findings on mentions, there is no relationship between net migration – whether interacted with regime type or not – and sentiments in border relevant paragraphs. Overall, there is not much clear support for Hypothesis 2, or the idea that exposure to economic globalization accounts for negative border sentiments in global official discourse.

There is evidence, however, that sentiments about borders are influenced by non-material factors. Negative sentiments in official discourse do seem to spread from the group to individual state representatives. To capture this idea, we averaged the sentiment scores for the region in which the state is situated.¹⁵ Even when controlling for year and country fixed effects, regional average sentiments correlate with the expressive language of the speaker. We find similar results with world average sentiment scores substituted for regional scores (Appendix G). This relationship begins to fade after two lag periods. Nevertheless, this is a powerful relationship, given the inclusion of controls for states' security environment, global economic exposure, and for other controls such as regime type (weak positive association), and the size of the state's population and economy (no relationship).

V. Consequences of Anxiety: Borders Barriers

¹⁴ Data are described here:

¹⁵ Using the [UN grouping scheme](#).

Discourse analysis is mostly interpretive work intended to understand how the speaker is feeling and framing issues. But does it have policy consequences? We might expect that negative border sentiments would be associated with a state's effort to try to secure their international borders. Against exactly what need not be clear. Anxiety signifies an aversive state, often based on uncertain dangers over which there is perceived to be little control (Eysenck 1992, Gadarian and Albertson 2014). It has been found to heighten attention to evidence of threat (Huddy, et al. 2008), and induces pessimism and risk aversion (Druckman and McDermott 2008, 300). Joffe (2007) associates anxiety with blaming and othering. Border anxiety, then, might well bias leaders toward defensive border securitization as a response. Moreover, sentiments and emotions expressed by charismatic leaders affect the emotions and sentiments of their followers (Bono and Ilies 2006), who then echo concerns reflected in prevailing discourse. If discourse affects decisions, then negative border sentiments such as anxiety could well influence border policies, even when controlling for "objective" conditions on the ground.

To test these predictions, we fit a pair of models similar to those used in the previous section. Our dependent variable is an indicator variable representing whether a country is currently constructing a border wall in a given year. We use a highly detailed dataset that records the start of construction for any segment of a border wall or fence through 2019 (Kenwick, et al. 2021). As predictor variables, we include those in the previous sections: namely, interstate/civil dispute indicators, Polity score interacted with net migration, economic/political globalization, and GDP per capita. We augment these controls with a country's *sentiment* and *anxiety* scores for border relevant UNGA speech paragraphs in a given year, with independent models for each

predictor variable.¹⁶ We expect that higher anxiety and lower sentiment scores will be associated with policies to fortify the border. As above, we model wall construction with a linear probability model, with country- and year-fixed effects, standard errors clustered by country and year, and lags from zero to three years.

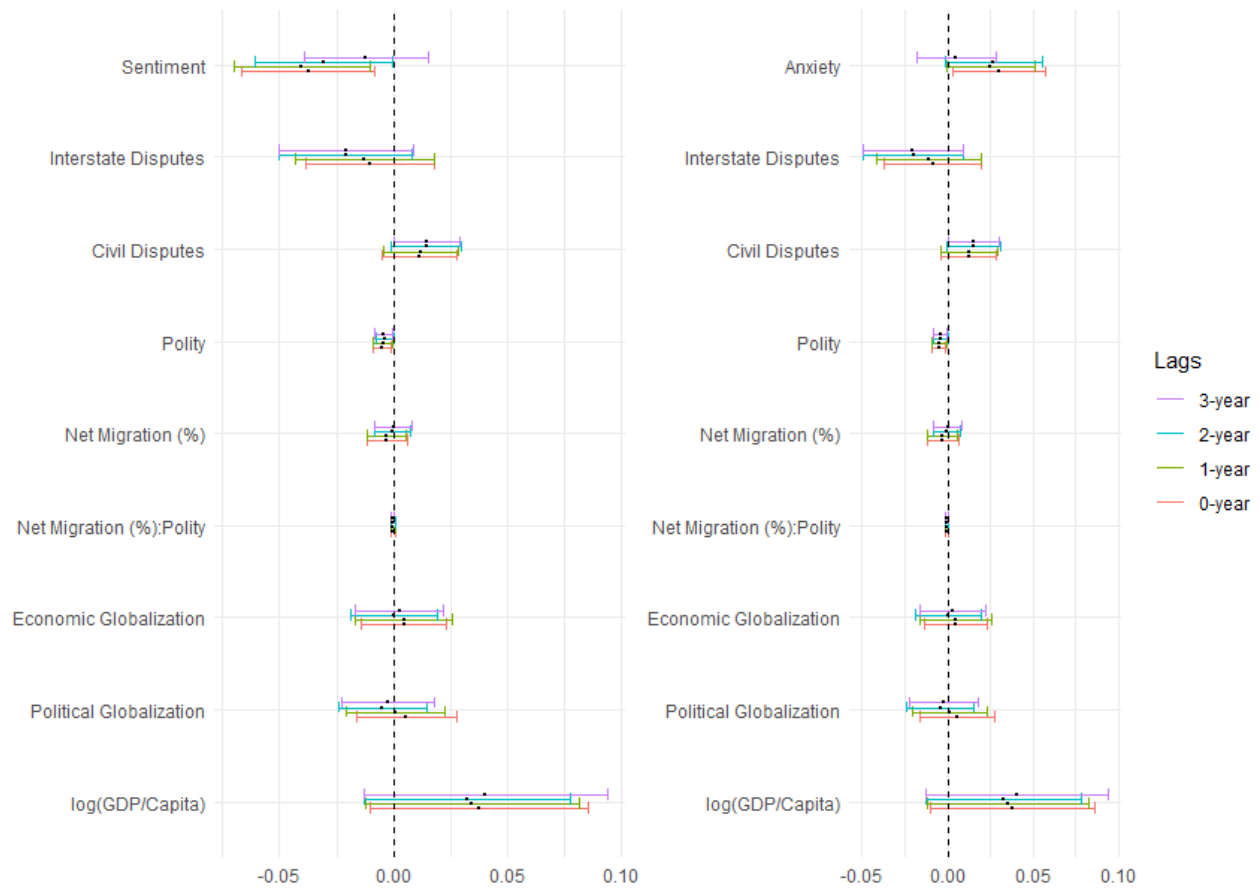


Figure 11: Wall construction. Linear probability model, with country- and year-fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country and year. Independent models fit for lagged dependent variables at 0 (current year) to 3-year lags, and for sentiment and anxiety predictor variables.

Sentiments and anxiety have a clear relationship with states' decisions to fortify their international borders with walls (Figure 11). Negative sentiments are associated with border wall

¹⁶ As before, countries whose UNGA speeches do not reference borders in a given year are coded as missing. In robustness checks, we impute values for missing country-year observations, and report similar results to those in this section.

construction within the next three years, while greater expressed anxiety is associated with border wall construction up to three years prior to commencement. This suggests that discourse is a leading indicator of policy, and highly relevant for understanding investments in border barriers. The correlation helps to validate discourse as worthy of study. It also suggests that consequential policy choices are likely influenced at least in part by emotive norms that develop in social settings such as international organizations.

By contrast, and quite surprisingly, the links between most other predictor variables and wall construction are more limited. Like Carter and Poast (2015) and Simmons and Kenwick (forthcoming) who include policing and border crossing infrastructure to measure “border orientation,” we find that state wealth is associated positively with border security investments, though the coefficient estimate on GDP/capita is not statistically significant in most cases. Interstate disputes and civil disputes are negatively and positively associated with wall construction, respectively, though the estimates in this case are also not significant in most specifications. Neither political nor economic globalization measures predict that states will commence walling projects on their borders. Importantly, measures of exposure to net migration has no direct relationship to wall building, even in democracies. These findings suggest that border walls may reflect national mood and anxiety as much or more than measurable on-the-ground conditions that leaders often use as justification for border fortification.

VI. Conclusions

Over the past several decades, a growing and diverse set of states has devoted time on the world stage to international borders. Their speeches are not merely abstract references to “inviolable borders” or other general principles; they signify a concern with perceived policy

problems with clear geospatial referents. This finding alone is important: the so-called age of globalization has demonstrably been accompanied by a discourse of border (in)security. It is especially noteworthy to see border salience (e.g., mentions) soaring over the past fifty years, just as attempts at territorial conquests have been on the decline (Altman 2020). International relations and comparative politics research should grapple with these paradoxes. Border management should rival border disputes as a central research concern. This article is an attempt to shift the research focus by examining border-relevant global official discourse over the past fifty years.

Examining UN transcripts reveals changing patterns in states' priorities and concerns. Border references have shifted from distant border matters, and toward a state's own neighborhood. Global official discourse on borders has become increasingly focused on non-state issues, including migration, transnational crime, terrorism, and communicable disease. Sentiments and emotions associated with international borders have become demonstrably pessimistic, especially since 2010 – a period that included a major recession in much of the developed world, multiple crises of human mobility, and the rise of right wing politicians in democratic states. Other research has shown that populist leaders can gain from the resultant anxieties, sometimes using border discourse as a domestic political tool to garner support (Lamour and Varga 2020).

These findings about border sentiments are all the more striking for their distinctiveness. While border-relevant language is generally more negative than that on other topics, state officials have not always been so negative about borders as they have been in the past decade: positive discourse around international borders soared in the 1980s and plateaued temporarily in the 1990s. The intensity of border discourse has turned sharply negative since the mid 2000s, even though overall global official discourse – excluding border relevant passages – has recently

become more positive. The *difference* in emotional anxiety between border and non-border relevant paragraphs has widened practically every year of this study (1970 to 2020).

A new and important finding of research is that emotions and sentiment surrounding international borders are only partially related to standard measures of states' exposure to threat and conflict. While interstate disputes and neighboring civil conflicts are associated with negative border sentiments (as one would expect), exposure to globalization does not seem to correlate with negative sentiments. Democracies do seem somewhat more likely to mention borders when they experience higher net migration flows, suggesting a rise in border salience, but neither migration, exposure to the global economy, nor regime type explain negative border sentiments generally. Instead, one of the most significant predictors of negative border discourse is the border sentiments of one's neighbors, region, and the rest of the world. While more work should probe this mechanism, our findings raise the possibility that global narratives about border threats are susceptible to contagion – and potentially over-reaction – internationally.

Recently, scholars have puzzled over the border wall building frenzy around the world (Carter and Poast 2015). Our research suggests that at least some of this building may be more linked to contagious border anxiety than to concrete developments on the ground. Analyzing border discourse (Kolossoff 2005, Bissonnette and Vallet 2020, 4) is a fruitful way to understand these trends. Our contribution shows that to do so systematically and globally uncovers a puzzling disconnect between border discourse and traditional measures of risk and exposure that calls for an explanation. While we do not deny that some border issues and locations do pose very real threats, this research suggests that explanations for building border barriers may not always be as simple as “globalization” or “security.” We have made use of the social psychology literature to suggest a mechanism for the apparent spread of border anxiety: state leaders as a group may be

influenced by the sentiments, emotions and narratives they hear in global forums, and draw conclusions about border threats, real and exaggerated. It is of considerable note that such anxiety may account at least in part for sizeable investments in expensive border walls and fences. This is particularly important in light of recent research showing that the construction of border walls and fences can have unanticipated consequences for migration (Schon and Leblang forthcoming), trade (Carter and Poast 2020), counterinsurgency strategies (Blair 2020) and the environment (Peters 2018).

Our results suggests new opportunities for research concerning the politics of international borders. First, we welcome probes of the robustness of our claims about trends, causes and consequences of border anxiety, as well as to define scope conditions of our claims. Second, the politics of border management should assume an important place in international relations research alongside the politics of border disputes. This would complement attention to territorial disputes with attention to the cooperative management of nonstate threats, which our evidence suggests are of growing concern (Andreas 2003, Longo 2017). Third, our conclusions should inform debates about appropriate border security policy. They suggest a need for problematizing the emotion evident in discussions about how to deal with border threats. We do not think it is plausible for such emotions to be stripped away, but do welcome policy research that exposes potentially distorting discourse (e.g., Durand and Massey 2019). Fourth, we suggest research on international organizations as venues for emotive socialization – arenas where state leaders learn how to feel as well as what to do – along with more traditional normative socialization (Johnston 2001) and rational bargaining (Bearce, et al. 2009). Finally, there is much work to be done on how globally expressed border anxiety reverberates in national politics. Some leaders may use the world stage to steer the agenda toward cooperative problem-solving, while others may be more

interested in unilaterally shaping national identity and reinforcing their own legitimacy. A systematic analysis of global official discourse should be part of this expanding agenda in international and comparative politics.

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