Abstract


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After the atrocities of World War II, the international community came together in 1946 to establish the UN Commission for Human Rights. Over the course of its sixty years, the Commission was riddled with politicization and often criticized for being counterproductive in its efforts to protect and promote human rights. While the institution had its fair share of accomplishments, it was abolished in 2006 and subsequently replaced by the UN Human Rights Council. This institutional change is worthy of discussion because, as this thesis will demonstrate, it is an institutional improvement that positively influenced human rights work. Additionally, this change demonstrates the institutional capacity and value of the United Nations for dealing with human rights.

This thesis proceeds first by examining and comparing the institutions. The main differences can be divided into the following categories, pertaining to: status, membership, action (meetings, voting procedures), and institutional mechanisms. While all of these differences bear significance, specific emphasis will be placed on the changes to membership. Using the Cingranelli and Richards Index Human Rights Data Project, the methodology incorporates human rights statistics to evaluate the human rights records of either institution’s corresponding membership.

By demonstrating that the replacement of the Commission with the Council is, in fact, an institutional improvement in a variety of ways, I argue not only that institutions are useful for promoting and protecting human rights, but also that they are necessary for doing so. While denigration of the United Nations is common, many of the opportunities and mechanisms embedded in this international institution are overlooked or undervalued. Though the United Nations is by no means perfect, the story of the adoption of Resolution 60/251 will demonstrate why this institution is a worthwhile investment, and that it is capable of changing for the better.