

Article is forthcoming at *International Studies Quarterly*. For proper pagination in citations, please refer to the published version when available at ISQ. Comments welcomed:  
michelle.jurkovich@umb.edu

## THE POLITICS OF ASPIRATION

Martha Finnemore  
*The George Washington University*

Michelle Jurkovich  
*University of Massachusetts Boston*

Abstract: Aspiration is an essential component of politics. It articulates goals, affirms identities and values, and structures action at all levels of social life. Yet political scientists have spent little time theorizing aspiration-- what it is, how it relates to other concepts, and the kinds of effects it creates. In this paper, we develop the concept theoretically and argue that aspiration creates a distinct “aspirational politics” that differs from our international relations (IR) models of both norm-driven social activism and interest-driven rational choice. We identify three core features of aspiration that undergird its theoretical utility: lofty goals, change over time, and transformation through imagination. In the hands of skilled political actors, aspiration does essential work in both facilitating agreement and mobilizing social action that create change in the world. But aspiration also has a dark side and can be manipulated to dodge accountability, postpone action, and to serve private, rather than public, goals.

Aspiration is an essential component of political life. Aspiration structures political action. It articulates goals, affirms identities and values, generates motivation, and it can help to facilitate agreement in complex issue areas. Yet political scientists have spent little time theorizing aspiration--what it is, how it relates to other concepts, and the kinds of effects it creates. In this article, we develop the concept and argue that aspiration creates a distinct “aspirational politics” that differs from our international relations (IR) models of both norm-driven social activism and interest-driven rational choice. Aspiration is, by its nature, a transformational, future-oriented *process* in ways our other concepts are not. It is made of different “social stuff.” As a process, rather than an object or attribute, it creates different types of political rewards and incentives for actors. Effort, sincere intent, and progress toward

aspirational goals are central to aspiration's distinctive political dynamics and to judgments about success or political reward.

Developing the concept of aspiration is more than a theoretical exercise. Better understanding of aspiration as a distinct concept helps us make sense of what would otherwise be political puzzles. Why, for example, do states and other political actors routinely commit to fulfill goals they know they cannot reach? The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to eliminate poverty and hunger everywhere in the world by 2030 (SDGs 1&2) are one such example. Poverty and hunger are unlikely to disappear by 2030. If political leaders believe traditional concepts like reputation, promises, and credibility create consequences for noncompliance, then ambitious proclamations like the SDGs make little sense. And why would states painstakingly negotiate agreements to reduce temperature rise above “pre-industrial” levels, in the 2016 Paris Agreement without ever defining the baseline of “pre-industrial” temperatures?<sup>1</sup> Without a baseline against which to measure, the much-vaunted targets make little sense. Understanding the political work aspiration does can help us make sense of such episodes.

Better understanding of aspiration's character and role also helps us understand foundational political structures we inhabit, nearly all of which are built on grand aspirations.

---

**Author's Note:** The authors are grateful to Bentley Allan, Sammy Barkin, Janina Dill, Caroline Dunton, Dan Honig, Amoz Hor, Jim Johnson, Yon Lupu, Melissa Lee, Giovanni Mantilla, Rose McDermott, Attila Mráz, Shannon Peterson, Mara Pillinger, Mathias Poertner, Sunil Sharma, Dillon Stone Tatum and three anonymous reviewers for helpful conversations and comments. Earlier versions of the article benefited from feedback received when presented at Temple University, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, as well as at the ISA-Northeast (2018) annual conference, and the annual meetings of the International Studies Association (2019) and the American Political Science Association (2017, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Under the Paris Agreement, states commit to no more than a 2 degree Celsius increase (with a goal of no more than a 1.5 degree increase) in global temperature over the baseline of the “pre-industrial” temperature, but precise definition of the “pre-industrial” temperature baseline was not specified. We thank Sammy Barkin for drawing our attention to this example. For one effort by scientists to construct a ‘pre-industrial’ baseline post Paris Agreement, see Hawkins et al (2017).

National constitutions are laden with aspirational goals of justice, prosperity, and equality under the law. The United Nations was constructed to realize the aspirational goal of preventing war. States regularly become party to conventions aspiring to such ambitious goals as the end of racial discrimination (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) and discrimination against women (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Measurable progress on any of these goals seems loosely linked to the legitimacy of these institutions. Failure to eliminate war has not caused states to abandon the UN and rises in racism and misogyny do not provoke calls for withdraw from those agreements. Understanding the politics of aspirational endeavors can help us differentiate these performance gaps we see in politics from simple incompetence, hypocrisy, and moral failure.

We begin our discussion by developing the concept of aspiration and identifying core features of aspiration's work in politics. Following Gerring (1999), we understand good conceptual development as essential to theorizing and intertwined with it (364). We identify three core features of aspiration that undergird its theoretical utility: lofty goals, change over time, and transformation through imagination. Also important for aspiration's conceptual development is the need to carefully differentiate it from other concepts to facilitate and demonstrate its theoretical utility.<sup>2</sup> To meet this objective, we situate aspiration in relation to more familiar concepts in political science such as focal points, credibility, reputation, cheap talk, promises, and norms. Following this discussion, we turn our focus to why and how political actors use aspirations as a tool, assessing potential benefits and costs, and examining some effects of this politics. Mobilization is, perhaps, the most obvious reason to deploy aspirational talk and claims. Aspiration is inspiring and can be useful in galvanizing supporters to join a

---

<sup>2</sup>For a helpful overview of approaches to conceptual work in both political science and political theory, see Gerring (1999), List and Valentini (2016), Berenskoetter (2016), and Ish-Shalom (2016).

cause. Aspiration can also help political actors broker agreements among diverse or disagreeing parties. Articulating shared goals and visions that draw on common values and identities can increase patience and flexibility among negotiating parties. Aspirations thus connect directly to an array of IR research concerns and we illustrate with discussions of their role in norm construction, activism, audience costs, negotiation and bargaining and empirical topics including the SDGs and climate change.

Political uses of aspiration, however, have a dark side and we discuss four potential risks. Aspirations do not provide easy accountability mechanisms. Lauding aspirations, and rewarding effort and sincere intent may lower the performance bar and let leaders off the hook for meaningful performance of crucial responsibilities. Aspiration fatigue is another potential danger. The concern here is that audiences will become cynical or discouraged and eventually disregard aspirational goals that repeatedly go unmet. A third risk is that aspirational talk becomes a substitute for actually acting to solve problems. Fourth, aspirations can be manipulated for private gain and co-opted to justify bad behavior. Like other political tools, aspiration can be used for good or ill.

### **What is aspiration?**

Most theories of politics understand actors as goal oriented but aspiration is distinct in several ways. Building on legal scholar Kermit Roosevelt III, we understand an aspiration to be a lofty goal “that exists without being fully realized, and towards which one progresses by means of change” (Roosevelt 2012, 2). Three features of this definition merit discussion. First, it refers to goals of a particular type, goals that are lofty. We might want a sandwich, but we do not aspire to one. Aspiration implies determination and the desire to attain goals that are difficult to

achieve. Aspirations need not be normatively good to be politically consequential. Hitler, after all, articulated big aspirations to great political effect. It is the value aspirants place on these lofty goals that gives the goals power and shapes politics. For this analysis, we also differentiate aspiration from personal ambition. We are interested in aspiration as a social and political phenomenon--aspirations that are broadly shared. Personal ambitions for accomplishment or self-improvement-- to climb a mountain or gain a promotion at work-- are not our focus here.

Second, aspiration has a temporal or process element. It is dynamic in ways that distinguish it from other social science concepts. It is future-oriented and emphasizes the journey to goals as much as the goals themselves. Aspirations are not simply transactional and pursuing them is not simply a matter of bargaining to get what one wants or complying with norms in the moment. Pursuing an aspiration is a process that requires both time and effort. Eliminating racism and gender discrimination are struggles carried out over time using diverse, often transformative, strategies of change.

This transformational character of aspiration is its third essential feature. Aspiration engages our imagination, our ability to imagine a world other than as it is. It requires us to envision novel possibilities for ourselves and for the society around us. We can think of transformation on a continuum involving various degrees of imaginative ambition (Rorty 1983, 811). At the more modest end, broadening our imagination may be simply a matter of new information and exposure to new people and situations in the world. Internships and mentoring for youth are intended, in part, to broaden horizons and help young people envision themselves in new places or circumstances or jobs. Exposure to new ideas and experiences educates us. It alerts us to new

possibilities. It refines and reshapes our aspirations. And, of course, in the pursuit of aspirations we refine them and redefine what they entail. It is only through the knowledge gained by trying and failing or trying and partially succeeding that we better understand the contours of what the education, justice, health, or prosperity we aspire to really looks like.<sup>3</sup>

Conversely, the absence of such opportunities dampens aspiration. Development economists have explored “aspirations failure” (Ray 2006, 411) of this type among those living in poverty, in which people cannot and do not see economic possibilities for themselves. They suggest policies to change “social contexts” for those living in poverty by connecting them with better positioned peers to share experiences and information. Seeing peers succeed with better education and better jobs opens “cognitive windows” for people, allowing them to imagine goals and entertain aspirations in new ways (Ray 2006, 413; Genicot and Ray 2017, 490). But this type of aspiration is only new locally, at a micro level for individuals exposed to new contexts. It aims to broaden the imagination of those in poverty so they can better aspire to, ergo better pursue, known successful strategies to escape poverty. This may be important change, but conceptually the model of aspiration here is one of mimicry, diffusion, and Bayesian updating: aspirations are new information that needs to be communicated effectively to those who do not have it (those in poverty) so that they can update their preferences. The ideas and goals, themselves, are not new, just their application.

---

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum’s (1994) “therapeutic philosophy,” drawing on Hellenistic ethics of the ancient develops some of these ideas in much more detail. See especially Chapter 1. Callard’s (2018, 5) understanding of aspiration similarly emphasizes its transformational and process characteristics but develops a more specialized notion of aspiration as “the distinctive form of agency directed at the acquisition of values.”

Farther along the continuum, such imagining may involve combining existing notions in new ways, along the lines of the Levi-Straus's (1966) *bricoleur* or the "creative syncretism" described by Berk and Galvin (2009). It may take extant goals or values and reinterpret them such that the resulting aspiration has been transformed into something new. The US Constitution's aspiration to provide "equal protection under the law" has been transformed in this way: who is "equal" and what constitutes adequate "protection" have both been reconceived and expanded dramatically. This form of "deliberative creativity," Berk and Galvan argue, is both social, ergo for our purposes political, and temporal. It is social in the sense that our imaginings of alternative futures come from "a socially shared repertoire of relevant impulses and habits" (2009, 555). By combining and recombining changing social resources--new understandings of equality and protection--we can construct new aspirations for ourselves. Women and minorities of many kinds can aspire to legal protection previously denied them. This kind of creativity is also temporal in the sense that neither the new understandings nor action predicated on those understandings appears instantaneously. We deliberate about it, often collectively, to construct plans about "lines of action" by which our aspirations can be achieved (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 7).

At the far end of the continuum would be wholly new goals, not part of the existing social toolkit or, at least, buried so deep that their appearance seems revolutionary. The ideas underlying the Protestant Reformation or the publication of Marx's *Communist Manifesto* might be examples here. These entail aspirations for futures that are not just different from the present but different from anything we have seen before, perhaps never before imagined. Political theorists, particularly those interested in theories of justice, have been concerned about feasibility of such

novel aspirations since requiring the impossible may be normatively problematic (Estlund 2014; Stemplowska and Swift 2012; Rawls 2001). From the standpoint of understanding political behavior, however, the feasibility of an aspiration may be only loosely tied to the aspiration's political effects. Even aspirations we perceive to be impossible, or nearly so, may motivate and steer behavior. And, indeed, it may be that the closer we get to our goals, the more difficult we understand them to be. We might aspire to be a humane and just society but the better we become the more we are able to discern additional sources of inhumanity and injustice, which moves attainment of the aspiration to some still-more distant place. Thus, there may be an asymptotic character to aspiration: the closer we get, the better we see what is lacking.

A more common and very practical difficulty with any feasibility criterion for aspiration is simply uncertainty. Often, we do not and cannot know what is possible. People once thought going to the moon was impossible. Indeed, many people thought it was impossible when President John F. Kennedy articulated the aspiration. Assessing what is feasible often takes time and some experience working toward the goal before judgments can be made. And as Nussbaum points out (2016, 302), when discussing whether national constitutions ought to set aspirations that they will almost certainly fail to fully realize, “we do not know what we can do until we try our best to do it.”

### **Aspiration's work in politics**

Aspiration is central to at least two broad categories of foundational work in political life. Most obviously, aspiration shapes the *articulation of goals* for political and social enterprises of all



types. Governments, political parties, NGOs, business firms, and civic organizations all proclaim aspirational goals in their core documents and often in their daily practices. The platforms of both the Democratic and Republican parties in the US publically aspire to a thriving economy, ensuring civil rights, and expanding the middle class. Corporations like Nike and Apple have adopted policies of corporate social responsibility, aspiring to environmentally sustainable supply chains (Nike 2017; Apple 2018). Nongovernmental organizations like Amnesty International aspire to the complete fulfillment of human rights for all people (Amnesty International 2018).

But the articulation of aspirational goals is about more than identifying endpoints in a program of work. Aspiration shapes the entire process of pursuing those goals. As we work together toward shared goals, we learn, we share experiences and ideas. Aspiring with others toward a goal of eliminating homelessness allows for me to envision new lines of action for pursuing that aspiration but also new understandings of our goal. Shared action may spark imagination and broaden my thinking, as discussed earlier, from emulating others and adopting their ideas to mixing my ideas with those of others involved in the work to create new goals. Aspirations thus expand and may become progressively refined as we work toward them together.

This momentum of aspiration drives us to push boundaries, unseating our original goals with more expansive or different ones that may previously have been inconceivable. Aspiration's dynamics thus push boundaries of the possible. Estlund (2014,118-119) notes that when we think of something as impossible, we should be careful to distinguish between what is technically impossible because we currently lack a skill set or technology to make something happen from

what is highly unlikely because prevailing social barriers forbid it even when it is technologically possible. Curing cancer today is impossible for the first reason; ending hunger today is impossible for the second reason. Aspiration pushes the boundaries on both of these tracks. It can push the boundary of what a society thinks is technologically possible and change society's understanding of what is politically or socially viable. In aspiring to putting a man on the moon (and succeeding), Americans were able to extend technical barriers of feasibility, facilitating greater aspirations for a trip to Mars. Aspiring to (and achieving) women's suffrage in America enabled a more expansive aspiration for women to hold elected office, including, one day, the presidency.

In addition to articulating goals, aspirations also serve as *affirmations of identity and values*. Statements voicing support for democracy, peace, and human rights may not be made with the aim of creating immediate consequences or progress. Voicing aspirations may be a statement about identity and values as much as a strategic plan of action. It is in stating our aspirations to a just and peaceful world that we convey (and in the process, construct) our own identity. As Charles Taylor put it (1989, 27): "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose." Setting aspirations and working towards them affirms the identity of the actors doing the aspiring--what they value, and what they believe is right and good. Emma Lazarus's now iconic poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty with the imperative: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," reflects an aspirational claim about the sort of country adherents want the United States to be. In reciting

this poem and reiterating it in schools and political speeches, this aspirational statement shapes both the understanding of who Americans are today and who they want to be tomorrow.

The interplay of aspiration's two roles--setting goals and articulating shared values and identities--is what makes aspirations such powerful motors for change. This is particularly true in public and political settings. Proclaiming lofty goals and organizing collective work toward them affirms the identities of actors, both in their own minds and to their larger community. It makes people feel good about themselves. Yes, people may join in a neighborhood cleanup of a park for purely instrumental reasons (they want a clean park), but they also do it because of psychic rewards and satisfaction such work brings. ("I am the kind of person who helps the community and cares about parks.") At the same time, connections to values and identity can underscore the loftiness of the goal, motivating people to pursue it. It can also broaden the reach of the goal implying that anyone who shares the stated values and identity should, of course, be working toward the goal. Civil rights activists, for example, have repeatedly pushed their claims for equal treatment of minorities, women, and other groups by arguing that discrimination is "un-American" and incompatible with central tenets of American identity and its commitment to equal treatment under the law. A goal people did not previously espouse can thus become important if activists can link it to the identities and values those people profess to espouse.

### **Aspiration compared to other concepts**

Aspirational politics is certainly intelligible to both rationalist and constructivist scholars of international relations, but it poses puzzles for both and the concept is not fully encompassed by research frameworks from either. It is not the case that rationalists focus on the goal-setting

aspect of aspiration and constructivists on the values and identity. Both frameworks need both elements of the aspiration concept to function. Without values or identity, rationalists have no source for interests and without goal setting, constructivism has no motor for social activism or change. Both frameworks thus highlight important features of aspiration's work but both also ignore crucial elements of aspiration's utility to political actors and its effects in the world.

Aspiration touches on an array of well-known social science concepts including focal points, credibility, reputation, cheap talk, promises, and norms, but it is distinct from all of these in important ways. At the same time, aspiration requires attention to some concepts IR scholars often neglect, notably effort. Trying hard, making a sincere and sustained effort (or not), is essential to way aspiration's politics unfold. Juxtaposing aspiration with concepts we know well and use freely helps us situate the concept theoretically. It also helps us pinpoint distinctive features of the concept and understand better what unique work aspiration might be doing.

Aspirations might, for example, serve as *focal points* for collective action, and thinking about them in this way has utility. Publicly proclaimed aspirations can focus attention on goals. Most political actors deploying aspirational talk are not shy. They spread information about their goals, emphasizing their social value, moral worth and urgency. Such talk gives goals prominence and salience. It can clarify what goals are and, depending on specificity of the aspiration, provide useful information about ways to achieve them and to measure success.

But aspirations can, and usually do, differ from focal points in their classic game theoretic sense. The focal point notion was developed to apply to coordination games where direct

communication was impossible (or severely limited). The two strangers attempting to rendezvous in Thomas Schelling's classic (1960/1980) example only need a focal point because they cannot communicate directly. Nothing about the aspiration concept inhibits communication. Usually, the opposite is true--people talk about lofty goals extensively. The important social problems for aspiration crop up, not around actors' inability to communicate and coordinate, but around their sincerity, capacity, and follow-through. Focal point characteristics may have facilitated coordination in the UN's "Delivering as One" campaign, but focal points do little to generate motivation and perseverance, which are core challenges to fulfilling aspirations.<sup>4</sup> Game theory, itself, also lacks a good explanation for the origin or construction of focal points, so to the extent one is interested in where focal points (or aspirations) come from or how to make them, one must look elsewhere.

*Credibility and reputation* provide another lens through which to examine the political logic of aspiration. If political actors routinely invoke aspirational goals, one might think that renegeing on commitments or failure to meet those goals would entail some costs. Violating international agreements, breaking electoral promises, or failing to deliver on public commitments are often thought to damage actors' reputation and credibility ergo their ability to succeed in future interactions.<sup>5</sup> On this logic, one might expect states to be wary of making pie-in-the-sky commitments they know they cannot keep; we also would expect costs to be levied on those who do not deliver.

---

<sup>4</sup> For the UN's synopsis of their "Delivering as One" pilot, see their website: <https://www.un.org/en/ga/deliveringasone/>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Martin 1993, 2000; Leeds 1999; Tomz 2007.

This is not what we see, however, in the politics surrounding many major aspirational projects. Often, in aspirational politics, goals and commitments are not met and costs for failure are not imposed. Further, few people expect these aspirational commitments to be met. For all its faults, failure to eliminate the scourge of war is rarely cited as a reason to cut funding to the UN. This may be the UN's primary mission, but no one really expects this goal to be achieved in the present. It is an aspiration. Similarly, when most Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were not fully met in 2015, states were not punished or shamed for failing to meet these goals.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the UN was lauded in the media for its performance in trying to achieve the MDGs at all and praised for its “worthy, high-minded effort” and for “doubling down” with the even more ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>7</sup>

Aspirational commitments that remain unfulfilled suggest some connection to what game theorists call *cheap talk* in bargaining games. In game theory, cheap talk is by definition costless, nonbinding, and nonverifiable communication which does not directly affect payoffs but can, nonetheless, affect outcomes (Farrell 1987, 34; Farrell and Rabin 1996, 116). In the words of Stein (1989, 33, emphasis added), “Cheap talk differs from information transmission via the costly signaling mechanism... in that it is free—*announcements can be made at no cost.*” Proclaiming aspirations would seem similar, but aspiration differs from cheap talk in important ways. Unlike cheap talk, “aspiration talk” is not about revealing private information; indeed, aspiration is more commonly the opposite--it is full of very public information. Aspirers could have incentives to lie about their sincerity in aspiring to high and lofty goals (i.e., lie about their

---

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the outcome of the MDGs, compare the United Nations (2015) *Millennium Development Goals Report* with the complete list of targets and the discussion of indicators at UNDP (2003) *Indicators for Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals: Definitions, Rationale, Concepts, and Sources.*

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, coverage by the Editorial Board, *New York Times* (2015).

aspirational type or intentions) but the fact that people lie about having lofty goals does not tell us much about people who actually do have such goals except that, for many audiences, such goals are admirable so successful dissimulation pays.

The more fundamental issue with a cheap talk treatment of aspiration is that aspiration talk is not “made at no cost” (Stein 1989). Aspirational talk must be coupled with at least some amount of demonstrated *effort* toward achieving goals to be credible and create effects; absent visible effort, aspiration talk may well elicit costs. Had states done nothing by the time the MDGs ended in 2015--made no progress at all in meeting their goals or, worse, had in fact slid backwards--we would expect social costs. The logic of aspirational politics does not require full achievement of goals to avoid sanctions but it does require, and indeed it rewards, effort toward realizing goals. Aspiration is an endeavor. It is a process, and central to that process is sustained attention and hard work. Effort matters in progressing towards aspirational goals and with visible effort reputation stays intact even when actors do not meet the goals they publically proclaim.

Aspiration’s relative immunity from judgment and sanction flows from the different “social stuff” of which it is made. Aspirations are not just any goals; they aim to achieve something lofty and great, something difficult. As a consequence, we make allowances for less than perfect performance both because of the difficulty of the endeavor and its social value. Similarly, failure to achieve aspirational goals rarely provokes the kind of wrath and shaming that norm violations do, nor does it damage credibility and reputation as broken commitments or promises can.

Aspirations are not norms or commitments. Those concepts are built on obligation; aspirations, by contrast, about intent and effort. Evaluation of performance by intent and effort rather than

task-completion distinguishes aspiration from the way political scientists usually understand expected social responses to other stated commitments. There is a social understanding that pursuit of these sorts of goals operates according to a different logic and that working towards achieving them is laudable in itself.

We can also see aspiration's distinct character when we compare aspirations to *promises*.

According to Searle (1964, 45) "promising is, by definition, an act of placing oneself under an obligation." MacCormick in MacCormick and Raz (1972, 64) offers a related definition:

"promises do, and are calculated to, induce their addressees to rely upon future performance by the promisor." The obligation and reliance intrinsic to promising differentiate it from aspiration in fundamental ways. The act of promising is governed by distinct social rules and expectations, most notably the expectation that the Promisor ought to follow through on whatever she has promised to do. There are some conditions under which societies allow individuals to break a promise (for example, self-defense, the threat of bodily harm, illegality) but absent a socially acceptable reason, we should expect some social cost if an individual breaks a promise. When President George H.W. Bush broke his (in)famous promise: "Read my lips, no new taxes!" he faced costs at the ballot box.

Promises are "statements of intention" where "in making [an] explicit promise one is...committed to doing what one promises" (Árdal 1968, 1). How a community reacts to a promise depends in part on the identity, character, and credibility of the Promisor. Rationalists have focused on the last of these, credibility, and have done extensive research on costly signals and other means to make commitments that facilitate cooperation. Credibility matters even to



rather impersonal actors like states and firms. Governments, for example, must be viewed as credible by the private sector for their promises to liberalize trade or initiate economic reforms to be believed. And if the government is *not* seen as credible, the result will be costly and inefficient interactions (North 1993; Rodrik 1989).

Why would societies expect fulfillment of promises, and punish non-compliance by imposing social and credibility costs, but not expect fulfillment of aspirational statements? Both promises and aspirational statements are just strings of words, after all. Searle (1964, 54-55) might answer this question by pointing out that one makes a promise only within the social institution of promising or what Craswell (1989, 496) calls the “rules of promising.” Wedding vows are nothing more than words, Searle reminds us, if not understood within the “system...of constitutive rules” that is marriage. Promising, similarly, relies on a specific constitutive rule, namely that “to make a promise is to undertake an obligation” (54-56).

Following Searle’s logic, promises and aspirations seem to be constituted by different social rules. One important difference may lie in the socially constructed notion of feasibility. Part of what makes a statement a promise and not an aspiration is whether the audience for the promise understands the Promisor as capable of fulfilling the undertaking. This depends both on the abilities (and willingness) of the Promiser but also on the difficulty of the task. A president’s stated intention to create peace in the Middle East will likely be viewed differently by publics than a stated intention to dismiss a Cabinet official or sign a piece of legislation. The latter two may be perceived as a promise since they are within a president’s power; the former may not be. The identity of the Promisor and context strongly shape the working of these social rules. One

implication of this is that the intention of actors proclaiming goals may be loosely connected to the politics that follow. Whether a statement is taken as a promise or an aspiration is ultimately determined by the audience that hears the goal, independent of the intention of the actor proclaiming it.

Finally, while aspirational goals may help to shape future norms, aspirations themselves are not *norms*. Norms scholars have long studied actors driven by aspirations and the kinds of politics they create. Norm entrepreneurs, themselves, are nothing if not aspirational (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Davies and True 2017; Staunton 2020). Most work hard, with great determination, to institutionalize norms that they believe will bring about social improvement, not just for themselves, but for others. Often, they invoke moral claims about the goodness or rightness of their cause to enhance its appeal and the laudable nature of their ambition. And for most, the process of norm promotion is never complete. Norms are commonly contested and the content of norms and identities may change over time in a relationship of co-constitution (Sandholtz and Stiles 2008; Krook and True 2012; Wiener 2004; Smith, Thomas, and McGarty 2015).<sup>8</sup> But while norm entrepreneurs may aspire and aspirations may shape their efforts, norms are not aspirations and the two do different political work.

Aspirations have at least two distinctive features that set them apart from norms and create a different kind of politics. First, norms apply to a specified actor type; aspirations are often expressed without a clear agent in mind. Norms are commonly defined in the IR literature as “collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity” (Katzenstein

---

<sup>8</sup> For recent work on norm robustness, see the January 2019 *Journal of Global Security Studies* special issue. On the diversity of approaches to social construction, see Srivastava (2019).

1996, 5, emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> They specify who should do what. Norms thus take the form “good militaries do not use landmines during conflict” or “good governments regulate elections to ensure they are free and fair.” They link specific types of actors with specific types of expected behaviors with sufficient clarity that it is possible to identify a violator of the norms (Jurkovich 2019, 2-5). Should an actor deviate from the prescribed behavior, we would expect a social response to this violation, often in the form of shaming or social sanctions.

Aspirations, by contrast, are often (though not always) stated in the passive voice. They articulate desired end-states or goals but may say little about who should do what to achieve these. President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1941 “Four Freedoms” speech, which proclaimed that people everywhere should enjoy freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear, articulated goals and aspirations. It did not articulate norms: it said nothing about who should do what to achieve these goals. Similarly, many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) take this aspirational form. “Zero Hunger” and “No Poverty” are aspirations; they are not norms.<sup>10</sup>

Second, norms apply in the present, often in a specified context; aspirations focus on the future. Norms apply all the time to specified types of actors (e.g. “Good governments ought to regulate elections to ensure they are free and fair”) or they may apply in specific time-contexts (e.g. “In times of war, militaries ought to protect historic artifacts”). Should the relevant context arise today, we should expect the norm to apply in full force. Aspirations, by contrast, are future oriented. They often do not come with clear expectations of appropriate behavior *today*, and

---

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on norm definition and the analytic benefits of this conception of a norm, see Jurkovich 2019, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “Zero Hunger” is SDG2. “No Poverty” is SDG1. See: UNDP (2017)

may have no clear statement about when action is expected for any particular actor or when the goal will be achieved. Economic and social rights often have this flavor. States are obliged in the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights to ensure economic and social rights with the understanding that they are to be “progressively realized” by some unspecified date. States are expected to make some effort and certainly not to undermine or thwart progress toward these goals. But we do not expect *today* that all citizens are housed, fed, or have access to adequate health care.

Reasons for promoting norms are obvious: promoting norms is a way to specify who should do what to solve a problem or move us toward a goal. Norm promotion holds actors’ feet to the fire. Norms specify behavior for particular actors. In so doing they create responsibility and, presumably, accountability. They also create urgency. Violating a norm means that actors are behaving badly right now and that behavior needs to change right now. Norms have no inherent notion of acceptable delay or gradual progress. By identifying responsible parties, norms create targets for urgent protest and focal points for agents of change. Aspirations, with their focus on the future, do not necessarily do this. So what role do aspirations play?

### **Political uses of aspiration**

Aspiration can be an important political tool which accounts for its pervasiveness, particularly in politics involving mass publics. Two common uses are facilitating agreements and mobilizing support.

*Facilitating agreement.* It may be easier to get agreement among diverse actors on aspirational goals than on norms or specific contractual agreements. Agreement on the desirability of a stable climate (the aspiration) is much easier to achieve than agreement on the distribution of emissions reductions (the who should do what--the norms) required to achieve that goal. Agreement on the desirability of a secure and stable internet may be easier than agreeing on specific responsibilities of states and businesses that might achieve this aspiration (Finnemore and Hollis 2016, 436; Sukumar 2017). Assigning specific actions to specific actors creates accountability and responsibility that actors may not want. It can impose costs and hardship on some for the sake of the shared aspiration which will benefit the many. But setting aside the difficult who-should-do-what decisions and focusing on what we all want can still be a crucial and fruitful first step in problem solving.

For diplomats and negotiators, even tenuous and low-level agreement on aspirations may have utility if it keeps everyone involved as conversations move forward. Such strategies and their utility are well-known. Aspirations are foundational to the classic functionalist arguments like David Mitrany's and to confidence-building measures in the present day (Mitrany 1943/1994, Desjardins 2014). The strategy in both cases is to find (or create) goals and tasks everyone can agree on first. As negotiations continue, trust may build up, "enmeshment" and "spillover" begin to change incentives and attitudes, making agreement on trickier issues more feasible over time. Among those more difficult issues may be articulation of norms or agreements that clarify roles and responsibilities going forward. Reaching agreement on a shared vision or aspiration may be hard, but it is often an essential first step toward agreeing on the specific responsibilities of a norm or agreement that will get us to the desired goal.

Aspirations can thus be building blocks in the construction of norms, political agreements, and concrete policies. They can be the proverbial camel's nose under the tent. Creating shared aspirations and publicly proclaiming them can be a crucial first step in social change since it provides both the justification for new norms and policies and the motivation for creating them. When faced with divisive political environments, aspirational statements may help facilitate not only present but future cooperation. The Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution is one such example. Bickel (1955, 61) argues that this amendment was written to reflect a compromise between Moderates and Radicals in Congress. The resulting language that no "State [shall] deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" (US Const. amend. XIV, §1) reflected the desire to have language that was "was sufficiently elastic to permit reasonable future advances" but at the same time did not immediately bind Congress to specific measures (like equal voting rights) on which there was an inability to reach a consensus at the time (Bickel 1955, 41-42, 60-62). In time, however, agreement on the core principle of equal protection would allow for future, far more specific progressive policies, such as overturning segregation in schools in *Brown v. Board*. Aspirational statements may allow actors to "get to yes" more easily by creating a space conducive to growth in consensus over time.

Of course, aspirational agreement does not always have this effect. Indeed, agreement may be deceptive and not much of an agreement at all. This is particularly true when aspirations are vague and meanings are not spelled out. States might agree to aspirational language but might have very different understandings of what those words mean and what realization of those

aspirations would entail in practice. States on both sides of the Cold War all agreed that they supported peace, human rights, and other aspirations proclaimed by the UN after WWII, but they often meant very different things by those terms. As a result, very different, even opposed behaviors could be justified as serving the shared aspiration. In more current events, consider the shared goal of “cybersecurity.” States can proclaim they are all in favor of “cybersecurity” but mean very different things by that term. For the West, cybersecurity means security of networks and data including, often, security from the state. For Russia and China, cybersecurity means “information security” and state control of content in ways that violate freedom of speech guarantees in the West. The words may be similar but the meanings are not. Even when parties do roughly agree on the desired end state, they may have different, even opposed, methods of achieving it. Protesters against wars in Vietnam and Iraq claimed they were acting in the name of “peace” but governments against which they protested often claimed that the war was the best or only way to deal with threats and to secure peace. Agreement on aspirational language does not solve all problems but skillfully harnessed, aspiration can focus attention on goals parties share in ways that might be useful.

*Mobilization.* Another powerful reason actors invoke aspiration is to mobilize support and motivate action. Aspiration plays on emotions and triggers desires.<sup>11</sup> It is a call to action in ways that can be socially powerful and politically consequential. Politicians understand this well and political rhetoric, particularly when aimed at mass publics, is heavily laced with aspirational claims. Claims about creating jobs, educating the young, and keeping the country safe, just, and prosperous are ubiquitous. Such talk is not only, or perhaps even primarily, about promise-keeping. It is not transactional. Aspirations voiced by leaders are often far too vague to be

---

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between emotion and imagination see Deloffre (2020).

understood as contractual obligations or firm commitments, and publics are often guarded, even cynical, in their expectations about politicians delivering on aspirational statements (Bowman 2016), despite the fact that politicians often do keep promises (Hill 2016).

The mobilizing power of aspirations is a crucial tool for social action in ways both rationalists and constructivists would recognize, albeit through different lenses. Rationalists might think of aspirational claims as signaling and be interested in the credibility of these signals, undergirded by reputation and past behavior. Proclaiming aspirations can provide important information about a direction for future policy and action that could be evaluated using information about past behavior. By articulating goals and accruing credibility, skilled leaders can mobilize support for their policies and themselves. Constructivists might take aspirational claims as statements about identity and values (what rationalists might interpret as “type”). Skilled politicians and leaders craft aspirations that serve shared identities and values of those they seek to lead. They use aspirations to create a “consonance” between themselves and their followers based on collective identities which in turn allows them to shape the goals of the group they lead (Reicher et al 2014, 155; Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 7). Particularly for aspirations that are difficult or impossible to achieve (e.g. peace, equality, justice), continued affirmation of the shared value can do important social work for the audience and important political work for the politician. Affirming the importance of justice can cement political coalitions and energize supporters feeling aggrieved by perceived injustice. Affirming the shared value of peace might appeal to and mobilize support for talks in a conflict situation. Conversely, failure to embrace the aspiration or being seen as insufficiently committed to it, can be politically consequential.



Climate change denial certainly has had this effect and has been widely read as abandonment of long-standing aspirations to good stewardship of the planet.

### **Potential Risks and Consequences of Aspiration**

Aspirations can be a powerful tool both for the actors deploying them and for societies that embrace aspirational goals. The use of aspiration is not without potential risk or negative consequences, however, and the dark side of aspiration presents both analytic and ethical challenges. In this section, we outline four primary concerns: 1) the difficulty of holding anyone accountable for aspirational goals 2) the risk of aspiration fatigue 3) the potential for aspiration talk to substitute for action 4) the susceptibility of aspirational goals to manipulation for political and private gain.

#### *Accountability*

Aspirations do not provide for easy accountability mechanisms. Here we see another aspect of aspirational politics that is not well accounted for in rationalist understandings of credible commitments or constructivist expectations for social accountability. Unlike commitments and norms, which create obligations ergo social expectations about behavior, aspirations create much looser performance demands. The SDGs raise this issue in stark ways. Consider the example of SDG2 “Zero Hunger.” When 2030 arrives and hunger has not been eliminated, which it almost certainly will not be, should we expect any political or social costs for failing to meet this aspirational goal? History is replete with missed goals pertaining to hunger reduction. The 1996 World Food Summit aimed to halve the *number* of hungry people in the world and the

Millennium Development Goal aimed to halve the *proportion* of hungry people. Despite improvement in hunger rates globally, neither goal was met, with no obvious consequences for failure to achieve those goals. One might therefore reasonably assume that no costs will be imposed when SDG2 is not met either, assuming there was apparent effort in achieving it. Why? And what consequences follow from cost-free failure?

One answer to these questions involves our understandings of success or what constitutes a good outcome. As analysts, we often think about goals as met or not, about promises and commitments as kept or not, but in the lives we live these outcomes are less binary. Similar to the construction of what is feasible, discussed above, what counts as success can be heavily dependent on context, audience, and expectations. Success (or failure) is often a matter of degree and kind. The distinguishing features of aspiration are relevant to these assessments. Effort and intent matter greatly in judgments of success or failure. Our judgments about people who aspire, work hard, and make progress in the desired direction are very different from our judgments about people who do nothing or hypocritically work against stated goals. If the goal is lofty some progress may be better than none and audiences or constituents judge accordingly. As long as there is effort towards less hunger, less poverty, more education, and lower infant mortality in 2030 than there was in 2015, the SDGs may be viewed positively, even if goals are not met. Accountability for total task completion may be less of a concern when any progress is good.

But other features of aspirational endeavors may be less benign. Part the challenge of constructing accountability mechanisms for aspirations lies in the often passive-voice nature of

these goals. Yes, we may all aspire to a stable climate, equality and dignity for all, and world peace, but when aspirations simply state goals, without specifying who should do what to achieve those goals, opportunities for shirking or simple confusion may frustrate progress and success. Unlike norms, which by definition articulate behaviors for specified types of actors, aspirations often lack such accountability mechanisms. Whom should we hold accountable when poverty is not eliminated or when homelessness remains pervasive? The desire to eliminate poverty or homelessness may be widely shared, but these aspirational goals themselves do not ascribe responsibility to any one actor. A moral principle that “People ought not be poor” or “people ought not be homeless” may be widely shared but lack any norm mandating problem-solving behavior by any particular actor.<sup>12</sup> This trait of norms, that specific expected behaviors are assigned to specific actors, is what permits societies to identify violators and makes norms a useful tool of accountability. But aspirations may not have this characteristic. Aspirations may generate motivation, but norms promote accountability.

This combination of “brownie points for effort” and the frequent passive-voice nature of aspirational statements can make it hard for activists, citizens, and other political actors to hold leaders accountable for aspirational statements even when these come with clear completion dates. How much effort is required before a leader could or should be shamed for lack of progress on an aspirational goal? When success is equated with progress made through effort over time rather than task completion, it can be hard to characterize political behavior or outcomes and to persuade others of those judgments. This poses challenges for both activists pushing for accountability and academics trying to make sense the politics surrounding aspirational statements. For activists, common tools of naming and shaming may be hard to

---

<sup>12</sup> On the difference between moral principles and norms, see Jurkovich 2019.

deploy when failure is not obvious and costs of non-performance are hard to impose. For academics, common analytic tools may not capture the subjective and context-dependent character of aspiration's political effects, making judgments and understanding elusive. Accountability, in this environment, is tricky business.

### *Aspiration fatigue*

Another potential risk of repeated use of unfulfilled aspirational claims might be aspiration fatigue. The issue here would be, how many times will audiences respond positively to aspirational appeals that repeatedly go unmet before they become cynical or discouraged? Do audiences simply stop believing aspirational claims after a while? The nature of the aspiration is obviously relevant here. We would expect more patience with goals that are more important, more valued and more difficult to achieve. Peace and social justice aspirations can probably draw on a much deeper reserve of patience with failure than can pledges to cut taxes or reduce the deficit. The latter shade into the character of a promise--something the promisor is capable of doing (or is perceived to be so)-- but aspirations to reduce the deficit might be less attainable in practice than audiences perceive.

Proclaiming dates by which aspirations will be met may also influence perceptions about them and patience with them. Such completion or fulfillment dates for an aspiration can be attractive and useful. Dates focus attention, they motivate, they create urgency around the shared aspirational project. But the useful motivation and urgency generated by dates may come at a cost. Adding dates also pushes what was once an open-ended aspiration into something that looks much more like a promise. Dates create a transparent schedule for deliverables; they create

clear moments of judgment and scrutiny. When the date rolls around and the aspiration has not been achieved, all involved in the project, and the many audiences for the project, will ask “what happened?” and “what next?” The value of the goal might simply lead to extensions and more dates, as when the UN rolled out the SDGs to replace the MDGs in 2015, but other dynamics are possible. Mixed results from the many five-year plans that governed economic development in the USSR and China for decades illustrate less happy alternative dynamics. To the extent dates are taken seriously and might have consequences, they create incentives to “game” the system--to manipulate metrics of progress, to create false impressions of success, or to simply suppress information about lack of progress. To the extent that due dates create incentives for opaque or dishonest governance, their prices might be high.

*Aspiration talk as a substitute for action*

An additional risk to invoking aspirations with little follow through is that such talk might perpetuate rather than mitigate social problems, especially deeply entrenched structural problems. We have good theoretical reasons to worry on this score. Nils Brunsson’s (1989) seminal work on hypocrisy in organizations shows us how and why *talking* about solving problems can function as a socially accepted substitute for *acting* to solve those problems. Talk is action, as Brunsson recognizes, but inside organizations the two have different properties.

Action takes place in the here and now, while talk and decisions are often associated with the future, particularly if they are to be inconsistent with existing production. Thus, the future can be exploited to compensate particular interests for an absence of production, or for products which favor other interests. (Brunsson 1989, 28)

Talking about desired goals and outcomes can be a way to displace them temporally, into the future. It allows organizations to satisfy (or appease) constituents who are not receiving the organizational outputs they want or expect.

Aspiration talk of this type need not be bad. Indeed, hypocrisy in Brunsson's understanding is an essential strategy for organizational survival. Most organizations, particularly large public organizations, experience contradictory, often impossible, demands from their environments; displacing some into the future with talk is a sensible, perhaps inescapable, reaction. And hypocrisy of this type may be a motor for social change. Christensen et al. (2013) show how organizations wrestling with demands for "corporate social responsibility" may "talk themselves into 'moral entrapment' and corrective measures" (383). Ongoing organizational talk about ideals is an important resource for social change (Christensen et al., 2013, 385).

But aspiration talk with the effects Brunsson describes--lots of talk about problems while little actually changes on the ground--can have more worrisome causes and more negative consequences. If aspiration talk is never translated into action in the future, such hypocrisy can be a perverse enabler of suboptimal outcomes and postponement of performance. Weaver (2008) shows how this kind of "hypocrisy trap" is generated at the World Bank and documents the unsatisfactory policies that often result. And, of course, talk focused on far-off goals can facilitate duplicity and outright fraud in the hands of parties seeking to distract attention from malicious actions or policies. Far from facilitating positive social change, hypocrisy of this type quickly breeds cynicism and disillusionment (Christensen 2013, 378.)

### *Susceptibility of Aspiration to Manipulation and Co-optation*

Aspirational goals also run the risk of political and private manipulation. Drahos describes similar dangers in what he terms “public hope,” which he defines as “hope that is articulated or held by actors acting politically in relation to societal goals” (2004, 20). Hope of this sort reflects the emotional underpinning of aspiration but, Drahos argues, it is also a danger. It can become “a tool of manipulation, an emotional opiate that political actors use to dull critical treatments of decisions and policies that serve private rather than social interests” (2004, 33). Pharmaceutical corporations, for example, can leverage public hope for much-needed HIV/AIDS treatments to justify claims for stronger intellectual property rights in TRIPS that benefit these companies financially (2004, 18, 33). Monsanto can leverage the public hope that starving people could be fed to sell its genetically modified seeds (2004, 18-20). Hope can be harnessed for good but it can also be manipulated for profit. Aspirations similarly reflect a shared hope and may be similarly vulnerable to Trojan horse scenarios in which policies marketed as serving one purpose (attainment of an aspirational goal) are driven by and serve private interests which go unchecked because publics, distracted by their desire to achieve the aspiration, apply less scrutiny to proffered solutions.

The private sector has no monopoly on this kind of behavior. States and political actors may also use lofty aspirations to excuse or distract from unsavory and harmful behavior of many kinds. Wars and military actions, themselves, are always justified by lofty goals like protecting liberty, spreading democracy, or protecting the homeland. War crimes, including torture and mass killing, are often justified to publics, and to perpetrators themselves, as necessary means to attain

the larger aspirational end. Aspirations can thus be manipulated by skilled political actors to justify or enable ethically dubious means in ways that require constant vigilance.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noticing who bears these costs and risks of aspirational appeals. In many of the examples provided above, costs are not borne by political leaders but by citizens and societies whose problems are not solved. Disconnected talk and action may be a necessary hypocrisy for bureaucracies in modern life, as Brunsson argues, one that enables them to cope with the myriad contradictory demands which cannot possibly be met. But it can also be an excuse and a tool for disguising poor performance. Indeed, the relative lack of accountability for aspirations may create a type of moral hazard that enables political leaders to face few, if any, political costs when they fail to achieve aspirational goals. In this way, aspiration may be used to perpetuate rather than mitigate social problems, especially deeply entrenched structural problems. Creating accountability around aspirational appeals and harnessing aspiration as a tool while managing its dangers is a challenge for publics and societies.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

Understanding aspiration's work in political life has broad implications for many important conversations in IR, for example, our theories of norm construction and strategic interaction, but also how we analyze contemporary political action on important issues like climate change and sustainable development. Thinking through the differences between aspirational politics and norm or interest governed politics highlights important distinctions between their core logics. Aspirational politics and norm or interest governed politics vary in their temporal orientation

---

<sup>13</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this point.



(whether the goal or interest applies in the present or the future), behavioral expectations, and importantly in the expected consequences for non-performance. In the end, the very nature of the goal of each of these types of politics is distinct (see Table 1, below).

**Table 1: Comparing Types of Politics**

<b>Core Concept</b>	<b>Temporal orientation</b>	<b>Behavioral expectation</b>	<b>Consequences for non-performance</b>	<b>Goal</b>
<b>Aspirational politics</b>	Future	Effort	Few	Transformation
<b>Norm governed politics</b>	Present	Proper behavior	Yes	Norm compliance
<b>Interest governed politics</b>	Present	Strategic choice	Yes	Utility maximization

Aspirations are not norms, but they may help constructivists understand the origins and workings of norms in new ways. Attention to aspiration can help us theorize better the front end of the norm life cycle (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) and where norms come from in the first place. In articulating a shared goal and affirming identity and values, aspiration may serve as a building block for future norms. As discussed earlier, aspirations have the ability to facilitate agreements and mobilize supporters in ways that activists working to construct a norm may find valuable. Agreement on goals, even if the agreement is substantively general or vague, can be helpful in these efforts. For example, a society may be more likely to embrace a norm that good governments are obliged to ensure women and men are paid equal wages for equal work if there is first a more general aspirational goal that all people be treated equally. But even general agreements on goals can be elusive. Goals, much less norms, around dual use technologies, like digital communications, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology, have been hard to articulate in

part because parties fundamentally disagree about what they want from these technologies. This has not stopped efforts to forge aspirational agreements, but the work has been difficult. Future research might examine how aspirations are used (or not) in the process of building norms by the norm entrepreneurs discussed in IR scholarship.

Understanding the role of aspiration in politics may also contribute to growing debates over audience costs. Recent scholarship has challenged arguments that domestic publics uniformly punish political leaders for renegeing on international commitments, but exactly when and why audience costs are applied remains a matter of considerable debate.<sup>14</sup> A greater focus on aspiration opens new avenues for inquiry in these debates. How do audiences distinguish between promises and aspirational statements in deciding what kinds of costs to apply when goals are not met? One reason for variation in audience costs might be the nature of the stated goal or commitment. As discussed in this article, aspirations and promises elicit very different reactions from audiences when they are not fully met. If a statement is interpreted as aspirational by a domestic audience, it should be less surprising if it does not elicit costs when it is unfulfilled. As we have shown here, audiences do not expect full compliance with aspirational goals, extending support for effort towards that goal regardless of outcome. The same cannot be said for other types of political commitments (like promises). If we group all political statements and goals together as one type, we miss this important distinction.

Beyond theories of norm construction and audience costs, taking aspirations seriously also helps us to make sense of contemporary political challenges in new ways. For instance, the Paris

---

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Debs & Weiss (2016); Kertzer & Brutger (2016); Chaudoin (2014); Weeks (2008); Leeds (1999); Fearon (1994)

Agreement, adopted by consensus by the parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 2015 and signed in 2016 is an aspirational agreement. Parties aspire to no more than a 1.5 degree Celsius increase in global temperatures over pre-industrial levels but agree to no more than a 2 degree Celsius increase above a pre-industrial temperature baseline. At the time of the Paris Agreement, however, what precisely constituted the “pre-industrial temperature” was left undefined.<sup>15</sup> Neither the text of the agreement nor the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) determined what this baseline should be, as data on pre-industrial global temperatures were limited. If the Paris Agreement were a commitment or a promise, this would have been a problem since there is no way to know whether the obligation has been met. As an aspirational document, however, a firm baseline is not necessary, since audiences will not expect or require complete fulfillment. We should expect effort and progress to be rewarded by domestic and international audiences. Fulfilling the goal itself will not be required to reap benefits. Aspiration thus gives political actors some significant benefits but scholars should also interrogate the potential risks of the sorts of agreements outlined above.

Similarly, eliminating hunger and poverty everywhere in the world are aspirational goals. If the SDGs were solely a program of work to deliver specified outcomes, we would expect to see incremental manageable goals. And yet, goals to eliminate poverty and hunger everywhere are so ambitious as to defy any credible belief that they will be met by 2030. Like the Paris Agreement, however, thinking of the SDGs as aspiration highlights political benefits to signing on (including reputational benefits in showing effort towards achieving the goals) and also highlights some of

---

<sup>15</sup> For one investigation of the effects of different possible pre-industrial temperature baselines, see Schurer et al (2017).

the risks of this type of agreement in fuzzy accountability mechanisms, the risk of political talk as a substitute for action, aspirational fatigue, and the susceptibility of these goals to private and political manipulation.

## **Conclusion**

Imagine a world without aspiration. In such a political world, governments and institutions would never set goals that did not appear immediately feasible. Political elites would not imagine or strive for an ambitious and ever-improving better world. There would be no proclamations of a future world without war, a free and fair society, or the elimination of hunger. There would be no MDGs, SDGS, or Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Arguably without aspirations, even baby steps inching towards progress would be inconceivable, as without aspiring there is no “better” toward which to inch. That world, a world without aspiration, is certainly not the one in which we live. But absent a clear understanding of aspiration and its role in political life, IR scholars are hampered in their efforts to understand these politics.

Aspiration is everywhere in politics, but international relations scholars can benefit from deeper consideration of its role and its effects. This paper develops the concept of aspiration in political life for IR theorizing, explains how this concept differs from extant concepts familiar to rationalists and constructivists, identifies the political uses of aspiration, theorizes its potential risks and consequences, and we hope makes the case for why IR scholars in particular should pay closer attention to aspiration in political behavior.

## References

- Amnesty International. 2018. "Who we are." Accessed August 1, 2018 from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/who-we-are/>
- Apple. 2018. *Environmental Responsibility Report: 2018 Progress Report, Covering Fiscal Year 2017*. Accessed November 5, 2019 from: [https://www.apple.com/environment/pdf/Apple\\_Environmental\\_Responsibility\\_Report\\_2018.pdf](https://www.apple.com/environment/pdf/Apple_Environmental_Responsibility_Report_2018.pdf)
- Árdal, Pall S. 1968. "And that's a promise." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 18 (72): 225-237.
- Berk, Gerald, and Dennis Galvan. 2009. "How people experience and change institutions: a field guide to creative syncretism." *Theory and Society* 38(6): 543–580.
- Berenskoetter, Felix (Ed.) 2016. *Concepts in World Politics*. Sage Publications.
- Bowman, Karlyn. 2016. "Read my lips: politicians, promises, and public opinion." *Forbes* June 14. Accessed August 12, 2017 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bowmanmarsico/2016/06/14/read-my-lips-politicians-promises-and-public-opinion/#10e9aaff5297>
- Brunsson, Nils. 1989. *The organization of hypocrisy: Talk, decisions and actions in organizations*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Callard, Agnes. 2018. *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*. Oxford University Press.
- Chaudoin, Stephen. 2014. "Promises or policies? An experimental analysis of international agreements and audience reactions." *International Organization*, 68(1): 235-256.
- Craswell, Richard. 1989. "Contract law, default rules, and the philosophy of promising." *Michigan Law Review* 88(3):489-529.
- Davies, Sara E. and Jacqui True. 2017. "Norm entrepreneurship in foreign policy: William Hague and the prevention of sexual violence in conflict." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13(3): 701-721.
- Debs, Alexandre and Weiss, Jessica Chen. 2016. "Circumstances, domestic audiences, and reputational incentives in international crisis bargaining." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 60(3): 403-433.
- Deloffre, Maryam Z. 2020. "The Sphere Project: Imagining Better Humanitarian Action through Reflective Accountability Institutions and Practices." Working Paper on file with authors.
- Desjardins, Marie-France. 2014. *Rethinking Confidence-Building Measures*. Routledge.

Drahos, Peter. 2004. "Trading in public hope." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 592(1), 18-38.

Editorial Board. 28 September 2015. "An ambitious development agenda from the U.N." *The New York Times*. Accessed July 1, 2018 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/28/opinion/an-ambitious-development-agenda-from-the-un.html>

Estlund, David. 2014. "Utopophobia." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42(2): 113-134.

Farrell, Joseph. 1987. "Cheap talk, coordination, and entry." *The RAND Journal of Economics*: 34-39.

Farrell, Joseph and Rabin, Matthew. 1996. "Cheap talk." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 10.3 pp. 103-118.

Finnemore, Martha and Sikkink, Kathryn. 1998. "International norm dynamics and political change." *International Organization*, 52(4):887-917.

Finnemore, Martha, and Duncan B. Hollis. 2016. "Constructing norms for global cybersecurity." *American Journal of International Law* 110(3): 425-479.

Fligstein, Neil, and Doug McAdam. 2011. "Toward a general theory of strategic action fields." *Sociological Theory* 29(1): 1-26.

Genicot, Garance, and Debraj Ray. 2017. "Aspirations and inequality." *Econometrica* 85(2): 489-519.

Gerring, John. 1999. "What makes a concept good? A criterial framework for understanding concept formation in the social sciences." *Polity* 31(3): 357-393.

Hawkins, Ed, Pablo Ortega, Emma Suckling, Andrew Schurer, Gabi Hegerl, Phil Jones, Manoj Joshi et al. 2017. "Estimating changes in global temperature since the preindustrial period." *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 98(9): 1841-1856.

Hill, Timothy. 2016. "Trust us: politicians keep most of their promises" *FiveThirtyEight* April 21. Accessed August 12, 2017 from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/trust-us-politicians-keep-most-of-their-promises/>

IAEA Statute, Article II. Accessed August 8, 2017 from <https://www.iaea.org/about/statute#a1-2>.

IMF Articles of Agreement Article I (i). Accessed August 8, 2017 from <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/aa/>

Ish-Shalom, Piki. 2016. "Democracy," in Felix Berenskoetter (Ed.) *Concepts in World Politics*. Sage Publications, 217-232.

- Jurkovich, Michelle. 2019. "What isn't a norm? Redefining the Conceptual Boundaries of "Norms" in the Human Rights Literature." *International Studies Review*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz040>
- Jurkovich, Michelle. 2020. *Feeding the Hungry: Advocacy and Blame in the Global Fight against Hunger*. Cornell University Press.
- Katzenstein, Peter J. (Ed). 1996. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and identity in world politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Kertzer, Joshua D., and Ryan Brutger. 2016. "Decomposing audience costs: Bringing the audience back into audience cost theory." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(1): 234-249.
- Krook, Mona Lena, and Jacqui True. 2012. "Rethinking the life cycles of international norms: The United Nations and the global promotion of gender equality." *European Journal of International Relations* 18(1): 103-127.
- Leeds, Brett Ashley. 1999. "Domestic political institutions, credible commitments, and international cooperation." *American Journal of Political Science* (1999): 979-1002.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press.
- List, Christian, and Laura Valentini. 2016. "The methodology of political theory." In H. Cappelen, T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*. Oxford University Press.
- MacCormick, Neil and Raz, Joseph. 1972. "Voluntary obligations and normative powers." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, supplementary volumes*, 46, 59-102.
- Martin, Lisa L. 1993. "Credibility, costs, and institutions: Cooperation on economic sanctions." *World Politics* 45.3: 406-432.
- Martin, Lisa L. 2000. *Democratic commitments: Legislatures and international cooperation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mitrany, David. 1943/1994. "A working peace system." *The European Union*. Macmillan Education UK, 77-97.
- Nike. 2017. Maximum Performance Minimum Impact: FY16/17 Sustainable Business Report. Accessed November 5, 2019 from: [https://purpose-cms-production01.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/18175102/NIKE-FY1617-Sustainable-Business-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://purpose-cms-production01.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/18175102/NIKE-FY1617-Sustainable-Business-Report_FINAL.pdf)
- North, Douglass C. 1993. "Institutions and credible commitment." *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE)/Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft*, 11-23.

- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1994. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice of Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2016. "Introduction: Aspiration and the Capabilities List," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17(3): 301-308.
- Ray, Debray. 2006. "Aspirations, Poverty, and Economic Change." In Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee, Roland Bénabou, and Dilip Mookherjee (Eds.) *Understanding Poverty*. Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, John. 2001. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Harvard University Press.
- Reicher, Stephen D., S. Alexander Haslam, and Michael J. Platow. 2014. "Social psychology." *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*.
- Rodrik, Dani. 1989. "Promises, promises: Credible policy reform via signaling." *The Economic Journal*, 99(397): 756-772.
- Roosevelt III, Kermit 2012. "Law's Aspirations." *Journal of Law and Interdisciplinary Studies* 2.1.
- Rorty, A.O., 1983. "Imagination and power." *Social Science Information*, 22(6), 801-816.
- Sandholtz, Wayne and Stiles, Kendall. 2008. *International Norms and Cycles of Change*. Oxford University Press.
- Schelling, Thomas. 1980. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Harvard University Press.
- Schurer, A. P., Mann, M. E., Hawkins, E., Tett, S., & Hegerl, G. C. 2017. Importance of the Pre-Industrial Baseline in Determining the Likelihood of Exceeding the Paris Limits. *Nature Climate Change*, 7(8), 563–567. doi:10.1038/nclimate3345
- Searle, John R. 1964. How to derive "Ought" from "Is." *The Philosophical Review*, 73 (1), 43-58.
- Smith, Laura GE, Emma F. Thomas, and Craig McGarty. 2015. "'We must be the change we want to see in the world': Integrating norms and identities through social interaction." *Political Psychology* 36(5): 543-557.
- Srivastava, Swati. 2019. "Varieties of Social Construction." *International Studies Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz003>
- Staunton, Eglantine. 2020. *France, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect*. Manchester University Press.
- Stein, Jeremy C. 1989. "Cheap talk and the Fed: A Theory of Imprecise Policy Announcements." *The American Economic Review*, 32-42.



Stemplowska, Zofia, and Adam Swift. 2012. "Ideal and nonideal theory." In David Estlund (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*: 373-389.

Sukumar, Arun Mohan. 2017. "The UN GGE Fail. Is International Law in Cyberspace Doomed as Well?" *Lawfare* blog, July 4. Accessed October 30, 2019 from <https://lawfareblog.com/un-gge-failed-international-law-cyberspace-doomed-well>

Tomz, Michael, 2007. "Domestic audience costs in international relations: An experimental approach." *International Organization* 61.4: 821-840.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press.

United Nations. 2015. *Millennium Development Goals Report*. Retrieved November 5, 2019 from: [https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015\\_MDG\\_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf)

United Nations General Assembly. 21 October 2015. Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: A/RES/70/1. Accessed June 1, 2018 from: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E)

United Nations Development Program. 2003. *Indicators for Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals: Definitions, Rationale, Concepts, and Sources*. Accessed August 15, 2019 from: [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/poverty-reduction/poverty-website/indicators-for-monitoring-the-mdgs/Indicators\\_for\\_Monitoring\\_the\\_MDGs.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/poverty-reduction/poverty-website/indicators-for-monitoring-the-mdgs/Indicators_for_Monitoring_the_MDGs.pdf)

United Nations Development Program. 2017. Sustainable Development Goals. Accessed August 16, 2017 from: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>.

Weaver, Catherine. 2008. *Hypocrisy trap: The World Bank and the Poverty of Reform*. Princeton University Press.

Weeks, Jessica L. 2008. "Autocratic audience costs: Regime type and signaling resolve." *International Organization*, 62(1): 35-64.

Wiener, Antje. 2004. "Contested compliance: Interventions on the normative structure of world politics." *European Journal of International Relations*, 10 (2):189-234.