A new approach to sunsetting[*]

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There are perennial requests (perhaps even demands) that the World Assembly be reset or a sunsetting mechanic introduced.[1] I will introduce in this essay a new idea to sunset proposals.[2]

The standard idea as to sunsetting is that every resolution will simply expire after some set x days where x represents a period somewhere between a couple of years and perhaps up to a decade. There are a couple of problems with this approach. First, there is substantial bunching, where resolutions expire based on activity gluts in years long past. Second, certain resolutions probably ought not to be sunset: GA 2 'Rights and Duties of WA States' (2008) being the foremost example. Third, it seems somewhat counterintuitive to treat more popular resolutions identically to controversial ones.[3]

My solution is to avoid a set duration over which a resolution would be active. Instead, all resolutions would be placed into a queue, ordered by a scoring function taking into account the age and the then-popularity of the resolution. I will also propose some variations.

Rate-limited expiration

In the queue, every two weeks or so, the resolution at the top of it would be expired.[4] By imposing a rate limit on the expirations directly, this avoids a flood of expiries based on past activity gluts.

The specific rate limit at which resolutions expire is up for debate. There are two major factors to consider:

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[1]   The latest example, eg, Gruenberg (as Quintessence of Dust), *NationStates* (22 Jun 2021) `https://forum.nationstates.net/viewtopic.php?t=506629`.
[2]   See also Imperium Anglorum, *NationStates* (23 Jun 2021) `https://forum.nationstates.net/viewtopic.php?p=38762237#p38762237`.
[3]   Adjusting x by popularity would not resolve the first or second problems.
[4]   If all resolutions passed with the same per cent in favour, this would simply be the oldest resolution.

1. Expiries should not greatly outpace the rate of new legislation after factoring in the possibility of resolution failure.

2. The rate of expiration should still be fast enough to produce meaningful tradeoffs between filling in a hole, affirming old resolutions (see infra), passing new legislation, and masterful inactivity.

As a ballpark first-order estimate, something a bit more than two weeks seems sensible. In around that time, three or four resolutions could pass. Assuming that one of them fails (perhaps for politics, untimeliness, or lack of quality), one resolution could still patch an expired resolution and the remaining time could suffice for new legislation or repeals.

Scoring function

The order in which resolutions expire would have to be determined by a scoring function. To avoid the somewhat perverse treatment of popular resolutions identically with controversial ones, this scoring function would have to take popularity into account. While one might prefer a quality measure, we must deal with the second best, as quality is not easily measurable, quantifiable, or available.

For purposes of illustration, I have created and will illustrate a simple general scoring function as follows:

$$S = a - N\,(f - 50)$$

S is the score, a is the age of the resolution in days, N is a weighting parameter for popularity, and f is the per cent in favour of the resolution.[5] The scoring function *decreases* as f (popularity) increases, meaning that with two resolutions of the same age (I am aware this is impossible), the *more popular* one receives a *lower* score.

Being able to change N means that the amount of leeway given to a popular resolution can change. However, the rate-limited structure means a resolution's time in effect cannot easily be calculated without taking into account all other resolutions and the possibility of a future extremely popular resolution.

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[5] f is per cent, rather than proportion, meaning that if a resolution achieves 92 per cent support, f would be 92.

Scoring the first 20 resolutions

GA #	Title	Age (days)	% for	Score ($N = 7$)	Rank (N)				
					1	3	5	7	9
8	World Assembly Headquarters	4 854	52.22	4 838.43	2	0	0	0	0
10	Nuclear Arms Possession Act	4 834	57.52	4 781.39	6	3	1	1	1
9	Prevention of Torture	4 849	61.91	4 765.62	4	2	2	2	2
6	Humanitarian Transport	4 864	67.57	4 741.01	3	4	3	3	3
2	Rights and Duties of WA States	4 890	74.92	4 715.56	0	1	4	4	4
4	Restrictions on Child Labor	4 878	76.03	4 695.82	1	5	5	5	5
7	Workplace Safety Standards Act	4 859	75.33	4 681.66	5	6	6	6	6
17	WA General Fund	4 725	61.63	4 643.56	7	7	7	7	7
20	Suppress International Piracy	4 710	60.75	4 634.72	9	8	8	8	8
18	The Prisoners of War Accord	4 720	68.99	4 587.09	8	9	9	9	9
22	Diplomat Protection Act	4 700	70.17	4 558.82	10	10	10	10	10
25	WA Counterterrorism Act	4 657	73.46	4 492.80	12	12	11	11	12
39	The Right to a Lawful Divorce	4 560	61.06	4 482.61	17	16	13	12	11
35	The Charter of Civil Rights	4 589	67.03	4 469.79	15	14	14	13	13
23	Ban on Slavery and Trafficking	4 691	81.84	4 468.12	11	11	12	14	15
43	WA Labor Relations Act	4 519	61.75	4 436.72	20	20	18	15	14
34	International Transport Safety	4 594	72.63	4 435.61	16	17	15	16	16
29	Patient's Rights Act	4 630	80.20	4 418.61	13	13	16	17	18
31	World Health Authority	4 620	79.67	4 412.31	14	15	17	18	19
37	Fairness in Criminal Trials	4 571	73.30	4 407.88	18	18	19	19	17

Note that ranks are 0-indexed. That is, the first element is marked as 0.

The table is ordered, descending, based on the Score column. Age is calculated as of 31 August 2021.

In the illustrative table on page 3, the resolutions are scored using $S = a - 7(f - 50)$, calibrated such that where $f = 100$, the value $7(f - 50)$ is 350, approximately a year. Linear adjustment of S allows interpreting it as something like an 'adjusted age' that, where $N = 7$, allows a perfectly popular resolution to pretend to be approximately a year younger.

There are other scoring approaches that may be of some use, balancing these factors in different ways, though multiplicative functions[6] would give up an easy interpretation.

Affirmations

The table above does, however, raise concerns about undercutting 'core' resolutions such as GA 2 'Rights and Duties of WA States' and GA 8 'World Assembly Headquarters', with GA 8 coming up first for expiration under all rankings where $\{N : 2 \leq N \leq 16\}$. Insofar as the Assembly might not *want* those proposals to be expired, it would need some means of exempting them.

To that end, the Assembly could introduce a new type of proposal: an Affirmation.[7] In this proposal, affirmations would exempt a resolution from automatic expiration, but importantly, *not* against repeal. Such a resolution might look like:

> The World Assembly,
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> Recognising the importance of GA 8 'World Assembly Headquarters' for the smooth functioning of the Assembly and most especially recognising the usefulness of providing a location for member states to exile troublesome bureaucrats and
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> Believing that the resolution should therefore be granted an exemption from expiration, hereby
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> Affirms GA 8 'World Assembly Headquarters'.

There are a few issues that also come immediately to mind. Some authors may want to affirm their own resolutions. This should be frowned upon in the same way self-commends are frowned upon. Norms would have to be

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6   Eg something like $S = a^\alpha (Nf)^\beta$ with parameters α and β.
7   The specific name 'Affirmation' is not meaningful.

constructed against self-affirmations.[8] Similarly, some authors may want to affirm their resolutions preemptively. For that, two immediate solutions come to mind: a technical limitation preventing any proposal from being affirmed until it is one of the top twenty or so resolutions to be expired or strong norms against affirming anything preemptively. I prefer a technical solution; in-character, the Assembly would procedurally reject affirmation of something not in any danger of expiration.

Public or private expiration queue

Whether the expiration queue is public or private has a substantial impact on new authors.[9] One of the main arguments for sunsetting is to open old topics for new authors. Publishing a list of upcoming expirations would provide necessary time for drafts to be written, polished, and commented on. But it would not do if resolution expiration were so clearly telegraphed that a single monopolising draft could be made in advance.[10]

There are a few ways to reduce the chance of monopolisation. The expiry queue could just be hidden, so that expirations are given as notifications only as they happen. But this stops people from planning ahead: drafting replacements or affirming resolutions. Furthermore, it does not actually solve the problem, as the order of expiry would betray the underlying scoring function.

Alternatively, the game could randomly pick its choice from a bucket of the five or seven highest-scored resolutions.[11] This would introduce randomness that could be confusing to new players – and also accusations that a 'WA elite' is picking and choosing which resolutions to expire – unless explained clearly in technical documentation.

Randomness would also have some benefits. By announcing which res-

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[8]   One can imagine a response sneering 'surely if your resolution is so important that it must be preserved forever, someone else will agree'.

[9]   I explored how the relative dearth of non-trivial topics harms new authors at length in another symposium essay: 'Repeals mean activity'.

[10] The other oft-brought issue – that older players would just resubmit their old resolutions – is relatively mild given the extreme age of many of these resolutions: many of the original authors have already retired.

[11] Another variation is to weigh the chance of selection by the resolutions' scores so that the highest scoring resolution within the bucket has a higher chance of expiry. Or other variations such as varying N for different resolutions.

olutions are coming up for expiry, players have the necessary lead-in time to draft and receive feedback on replacements. But because the expiration choice is uncertain, a replacement cannot be monopolised: up to five different resolutions expiring forces a monopolising player to draft for all possibilities or leave remaining topics to others. Uncertainty would also force players to make interesting temporal trade-offs on which resolutions are most important to affirm.