Who Sets the Agenda? Diplomatic Capital and Small State Influence in the United Nations

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Abstract

Why are some small states effective in shaping the UN agenda, even in the face of powerful states' opposition? I argue that states can influence the early stages of policymaking with *diplomatic capital*, a form of social power developed through skilled representation. By focusing on the late stages of policymaking, previous studies have overestimated the influence of powerful states. To test these claims, I assemble a dataset of proposed agenda items and the tenure of all states' ambassadors from 1946-2019, and conduct interviews with diplomats from 49 states. I find that smaller states have higher diplomatic capital, states with greater diplomatic capital are more successful at agenda-setting even after accounting for material power, and random shocks to ambassadorial tenure—ambassador deaths—have negative effects on diplomatic capital. These insights challenge our understanding of the importance of power and diplomacy in IOs and the extent to which small states influence international politics.

Word Count: 9,930

Introduction

In 1959, Ambassador Frank Aiken of Ireland proposed that the question of nuclear weapons proliferation be included for debate in the United Nations General Assembly (GA). Despite objections from the Soviet Union, the proposal was approved and nuclear proliferation was debated. Aiken subsequently led the GA to adopt resolutions that called for states to create an agreement on weapons dissemination.[1] Shortly thereafter, the Partial Test-Ban Treaty and Non-Proliferation Treaty were signed, which largely succeeded in preventing further nuclear proliferation. More recently, an initiative led by Ambassador Christian Wenaweser of Liechtenstein added a recurring item to the GA's agenda that directed the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (United States, China, United Kingdom, France, Russia) to justify their use of the veto in the GA—a landmark accountability measure and a potential check on the most powerful member states (Miliband, 2022).[2] How did these relatively weak states accomplish their foreign policy objectives in the face of opposition from major powers? I argue that the answer is the expertise of these states' ambassadors. In these examples, Ireland and Liechtenstein were both represented by experienced ambassadors—7 and 23 years at the United Nations (UN), respectively—who were able to shepherd these proposals through, even in the face of opposition by more powerful states.

Conventional explanations of international politics cannot account for these diplomatic successes in which smaller states shaped the UN agenda. Why are small states such as Costa Rica, Singapore, and Jordan frequently pointed to by diplomats as among the most influential actors at the UN—even while countries such as the US are known to use foreign aid and military threats to obtain favorable policy outcomes (Mearsheimer, 1994; Alesina

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[1]A/RES/1380 (XIV) and A/RES/1576 (XV)

[2]A/RES/76/262

& Dollar, 2000)? If these material sources of power explained which states have influence over institutional priorities, we would expect the agenda to be more reflective of American or Soviet interests. Instead, small states frequently use the UN's agenda to criticize the actions of powerful states and their respective allies and to advance initiatives contra the preferences of powerful states. Although several important studies in international relations (IR) examine agenda control in international organizations (IOs) (e.g., Keck et al., 1998; Tallberg, 2003; Schneider, 2019), we have yet to understand how small states succeed in influencing institutional agendas. At the same time, other studies have shown that the effectiveness of individual legislators affects policymaking in domestic legislatures (Volden & Wiseman, 2014), yet we lack theories about how diplomatic skill matters in IOs, which are central sites for international politics (e.g., Keohane, 1984; Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Fearon, 1998).[3]

To address this puzzle, I account for *diplomacy* in explaining states' influence on agenda control and other activities in the early stages of the IO policymaking process. As we see with the examples of Ireland and Liechtenstein, diplomatic skill affects how likely states are to achieve these ends. While IR research has tended to focus on system-level variables rather than the role of individuals, I argue that the characteristics and expertise of individual diplomats are critical in explaining the political outcomes of IOs, which are deeply social environments (e.g., Sending et al., 2015; Pouliot, 2016; Holmes, 2018). This expertise allows smaller states to obtain better results than they would otherwise be expected to.

First, I argue that investment in *diplomatic capital* explains why some small states find unexpected success in accomplishing their foreign policy goals in IOs. As in the case in domestic legislatures, as individual ambassadors gain experience in their work in IOs like the UN, they cultivate social networks, substantive expertise, and mastery of the institutional rules that allow them to more effectively advance policy initiatives. Diplomatic capital is

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[3]But see Clark & Zucker (2023); Heinzel (2022).

not a direct function of a state's material power. While conventional IR theories would suggest that individual effectiveness would not matter in IOs because of the substantial power asymmetries, I contend that individual effectiveness is crucial. Second, I specify that diplomatic capital is particularly important in understanding influence in the early-stage activities of the policymaking process. In these settings, it is more difficult for large states to monitor activities, which creates space for smaller states to operate. Early-stage activities are critical parts of the policymaking process, since this is where the agenda is set, issues are framed, and coalitions are developed. Combining these theoretical insights, I argue that while large states may be able to deploy material power to dominate late-stage activities, small and medium-sized states can outperform in early-stage activities, where the application of coercive power is less effective.

To test the expectations generated by my theory, I develop datasets of 1,476 proposed General Assembly agenda items from 1946 to 2018 and the tenure of all UN member states' ambassadors during that period. I find that smaller states are more likely to have experienced ambassadors than are larger states. Further, I find that diplomatic expertise is an important predictor of agenda-setting activity, even after controlling for power-based predictors. Turnover from experienced to inexperienced ambassadors is *negatively* associated with agenda-setting, including in cases in which this turnover is exogenously determined by an ambassador's death. These analyses are buttressed by 49 in-depth interviews with UN diplomats.[4]

The GA is a substantively important case to understand. First, the UN's high status in international media and public opinion arguably renders it the most prominent of any IO. If an issue is of importance to the international community, states are most likely to

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[4]Interview research was granted exempted status by the Institutional Review Board of the author's university.

advance it in this premier IO; thus the UN is a crucial case to test for validity. Second, the GA is a highly institutionalized forum. This implies that agenda-setting is important in the policymaking process—i.e., states must advance issues through formal procedures. It is therefore a likely case for detecting patterns in agenda influence. Third, the substantive importance of the UN makes its attention a normatively important outcome to study. The regular UN budget for 2020 was more than $3 billion, which financed a variety of programs around the world. Funds cannot be allocated in the budget unless a resolution is passed on an issue, and thus the inclusion of items has enormous financial implications. While resolutions passed by the GA are non-binding, the examples highlighted at the beginning of this paper show that influence in agenda-setting at the GA can translate to policy outputs with substantial legal, economic, normative, and political ramifications. Because the stakes are quite tangible, agenda control will be taken seriously.

Agenda-setting in the GA is also likely to generate insights that are generalizable to other IOs. Testing this generalizability is beyond the scope of this paper, but is likely for several reasons. The UN, as one of the oldest and largest IOs, is likely to be a source of diffusion for other IOs through socialization, emulation, and learning (e.g., Simmons & Elkins, 2004; Lenz & Burilkov, 2017) and thus its institutional rules and norms may be similar. Further, the UN is highly interconnected with other IOs, through both formal channels (Sommerer & Tallberg, 2019) and networks of bureaucrats (Johnson, 2013), which both increase the likelihood that institutional structures and dynamics in the GA serve as models for other IOs.

I challenge existing theories about the nature of power in IOs. Previous studies (e.g., Kim & Russett, 1996; Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Voeten, 2000; Dreher et al., 2008) have focused on later-stage activities such as resolution sponsorship and voting patterns, and have subsequently overestimated the degree to which material resources matter in IO politics. I show that late-stage activities do not accurately reflect the full institutional agenda, and

we have underestimated the degree to which small and medium states can obtain favorable outcomes. Not only can we better understand the scope of IO activities and the influence of small states in these settings, we can also understand why some small states are better at navigating these activities than others: diplomatic capital. Thus, our conventional understanding of multilateral politics has been biased against detecting the activities and successes of smaller states by focusing only on late-stage activities. Material power is important in explaining some IO politics, but the role of individual diplomats matters as well.

Setting the IO Agenda

Agenda control, including *negative* agenda control—blocking things from being added to the agenda—is critical for understanding political outcomes (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Kingdon, 1984). Following Cobb & Elder (1972), I define the institutional agenda as the set of specific problems that policymakers—in this case, member state representatives—in a particular institutional decision-making body are actively considering. Agenda control is important in many legislative settings, including in American politics and the European Union, yet more recently have scholars begun attending to agenda control in other IOs.[5]

Agenda control is crucial in IOs. For example, agenda control was integral for Ireland to advance nonproliferation on the international agenda. Furthermore, only by considering agenda politics can we observe the topics that are actively being blocked from being discussed—such as the representation of Taiwan in the UN—compared with those that are

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[5]In American politics, see Shepsle & Weingast (1987); Baumgartner & Jones (1993); Krehbiel (1998); Cox & McCubbins (2005); in European Union studies, see Garrett & Weingast (1993); Pollack (1997); Tallberg (2003); Schneider (2019); and in IOs, see Keck et al. (1998); Joachim (2007); Carpenter (2014); Koremenos (2015); Allen & Yuen (2020); Binder & Golub (2020).

simply not being raised. IOs allow states to achieve policy outcomes that would otherwise be impossible (e.g., Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Fearon, 1998; Martin & Simmons, 1998), yet for these cooperative outcomes to be achieved, an issue must first be placed on the institutional agenda. Understanding which countries are influential in setting the agendas of IOs, therefore, informs who shapes the set of policy outcomes produced by those institutions.

Proposing new agenda items is not costless: The formal institutional structures of IOs are complex and knowledge intensive to navigate. A successful effort to add a new agenda item requires that a diplomat have knowledge about matters such as voting rules, the deadlines and procedures for submitting agenda items, and relevant precedents. However, the potential payoffs of proposing are large. In some cases, getting an item included on the IO agenda can result in substantive policy developments that obtain crucial goals in a states' foreign policy. For example, Austria had a foreign policy interest in advancing a ban on cluster munitions (Government of Austria, 2009). After Austrian diplomats successfully added the item to the GA's agenda for debate, the state's diplomats generated a successful campaign that resulted in the passage of Convention on Cluster Munitions. Less than 15 years later, 110 states are party to the Convention, and almost no states continue to produce cluster munitions. These successes also have political benefits, as states use these victories to burnish their reputations.[6]

While previous work provides invaluable insights into some of the key features of agenda setting and legislative politics, this literature does not help to inform expectations about which states are more likely to be successful. What *type* of power is relevant to these outcomes? Material conceptualizations of power as the possession of military capability (e.g., Claude, 1962; Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer et al., 2001) or economic resources (e.g., Keohane & Nye, 1977) suggest that large states use side payments or pressure to obtain their desired outcome. While material power may matter in the end stages of the policymaking process—

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[6]Interview 25.

i.e., the highly visible and politicized matters of resolution politics[7]—we lack evidence of its influence on the legislative activities at the *early* stage of the policymaking process. Materialists might argue that the same logic should hold, and that we would expect large states with greater military and economic leverage to control IO agendas (Mearsheimer, 1994). Powerful states would use this leverage to dominate agenda setting in the same ways that they dominate resolution politics. The large power asymmetries in IOs would make individual skill unlikely to be important in predicting influence—unlike the case of legislators in a domestic context, in which power distributions are relatively flatter (Volden & Wiseman, 2014).

However, in practice, small states accomplish policy goals in IOs (e.g., Panke, 2010a; Jensen, 2016; Corbett et al., 2019; Long, 2022) and have demonstrated success in navigating the agenda-setting process. As an analytical category, there is continuing debate over the definition of small states, including material, perceptual, and relational approaches (Long, 2017, 2022). I follow a material approach and utilize objective indicators of size. This strategy allows for straightforward comparison across countries and over time, generally captures the largest states in terms of GDP, population, and military capacity, and is the most widely employed approach in the literature.[8]

Since small states have fewer material capabilities, how do we still observe them succeed-

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[7]E.g., Smith (2006b); Dijkhuizen & Onderco (2019); Finke (2021) on resolution sponsorship; Kim & Russett (1996); Alesina & Dollar (2000); Voeten (2000, 2001); Dreher et al. (2008); Bailey et al. (2017) on resolution voting; and Steinberg (2002); Stone (2011) for similar studies in other Bretton Woods institutions.

[8]For simplicity in the discussion, I refer to large states as members of the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK, and US) plus China and Russia. I refer to medium states as the other members of the G20 (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi

ing in such activities in IOs? What is the mechanism that allows small states to obtain these outcomes in the absence of material power? I suggest that accounting for diplomacy can provide the answer. I argue that diplomatic capital cannot be ignored in explaining influence on the IO agenda.

Theory of Diplomatic Capital and Agenda-Setting

Diplomatic Capital

I argue that by cultivating diplomatic expertise, states are more effective at accomplishing their goals in IOs, and that this can help us to understand why materially weak states can succeed in shaping IO agendas. I define diplomatic capital as a pool of influence a state can call upon to change the behavior of other actors within a diplomatic context. This form of social power is deeply related to constructivist accounts of international politics, in which "power works through behavioral relations or interactions, which, in turn, affect the ability of others to control the circumstances of their existence" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, 45). States can cultivate diplomatic capital by exhibiting commitment to the formal institution through good-standing membership and to the institution's values—in the case of the UN, values such as democratic governance, the maintenance of international peace and security, and respect for human rights. In addition to these state-level characteristics which have previously been examined by the literature, I argue that *individual diplomatic skill* is a critical element of a

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Arabia, South Korea, South Africa, and Turkey) plus Spain and the Netherlands. I refer to all other states as small states. However, these cutoffs are somewhat arbitrary, so in the empirical analysis I operationalize continuous measures of state size, which faciltates comparisons of "smaller" and "larger" states.

state's diplomatic capital. Diplomatic capital aggregates from the individual level to pool at the level of a state's representation in a given institution. That is, multiple diplomats in a state's mission to the UN can contribute to its diplomatic capital there, but they do not contribute to its diplomatic capital in other institutions.[9] Individual diplomats develop diplomatic capital through experience as they cultivate social relationships, knowledge of institutional rules, and substantive expertise.

My theory builds on the claim that the characteristics of individual diplomats matter in explaining the political outcomes of IOs (e.g., Holmes, 2018; Gertz, 2018; Malis, 2021; Heinzel, 2022).[10] In these fundamentally social environments, individuals can persuade and influence their counterparts (e.g., Wendt, 1999; Risse, 2000; Johnston, 2001; Gray & Baturo, 2021). Even in IOs governed by the principles of sovereign equality, some diplomats are more influential than others and accumulate "standing" through the display of practical know-how within the corps of permanent representatives (Pouliot, 2011, 2016). Competent individual diplomats may be much more influential than a baseline expectation based on state power would portend (Schneider, 2019). These dynamics are especially important in the contexts of permanent representation, where diplomats interact repeatedly within their community. Diplomats from both small and large states assert that individual-level features matter at least as much as structural state-level features in shaping a state's success in the UN, and that not all diplomats are equally influential.[11] A Deputy Permanent Representative from a Latin American state observed:

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[9]I discuss the empirical operationalization of diplomatic capital in the empirical analysis.

[10]See also the literature on the importance of leader characteristics (e.g., Horowitz et al., 2015; Saunders, 2011; Lupton, 2022).

[11]See Tables A-4 and A-5 in the Appendix, which show that respondents represented a wide variety of state sizes, and Figures A-3—A-7, which summarize these results.

When you're trying to move forward a particular initiative, you go for those colleagues that are most well spoken and best connected regardless of the country that they represented...you reach out to because their ambassador or their delegate is particularly well-versed, particularly well connected, or particularly influential on the basis of...experience, charisma, so on and so forth.[12]

Individual diplomatic skill is acquired through experience. It takes time for new diplomats in an institution to "learn the ropes," and develop relationships with other key actors (Sending et al., 2015). As one diplomat from a small Middle Eastern state observed, "the most important thing in the UN is to have a good social network."[13] Diplomats must learn the local rules of the game and the distinct social dynamics, to craft compromises across diverse positions, to take initiative, and to shepherd other representatives toward agreement (Pouliot, 2016). In the UN, new diplomats must gain a sense of place as they are "socialized into a UN culture" that provides the framework within which they will need to negotiate with other members (Karns & Mingst, 2013, 150). Particularly for small states, experience helps diplomats obtain favorable outcomes in confrontations with larger states (Fox, 1977, 185).[14]

As an ambassador gains experience, I posit that they accumulate diplomatic capital through three mechanisms: building their social network, developing substantive expertise in issue areas, and mastering institutional procedures.[15] When a skillful ambassador is replaced

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[12]Interview 12.

[13]Interview 27.

[14]These dynamics have been observed in other IOs as well (Falzon, 2021; Cooper & Shaw, 2009) and in bilateral settings (Gertz, 2018; Malis, 2021; MacDonald, 2021).

[15]The importance of these mechanisms for developing diplomatic capital is supported by evidence from interviews with diplomats, see Figure A-7 in the appendix.

by a novice, diplomatic capital is lost. Ambassador Christian Wenaweser of Liechtenstein, for example, was specifically identified by 8 out of 49 interviewees as an example of a diplomat whose long experience has translated into substantial influence:[16]

> I mean, that enables him to participate at a level that mid-sized states do. If you look at Liechtenstein on a map, Lichtenstein is not a mid-sized state, so I think he manages to compensate [for] that simply by the fact that he's been here for a very long time, he knows exactly how everything works.[17]

> They're very...well versed when it comes to procedures, you know. They know how to go about the UN system. You know, this is something that you only acquire through...the years and through knowledge of the human system....[Y]ou know it's because he has been here for all this time, that he punches well beyond, above his weight.[18]

> He has been here for like decades, and it's such an advantage...they know the history. For example...if we get into the negotiation, those are the people who understand the history and provide the information, and usually we rely on them. So what what happened, like five years ago? [That] kind of institutional memory is pretty critical.[19]

To be sure, the translation of experience to influence is not automatic. Further, individual characteristics—charisma, language skills, etc.—help some ambassadors cultivate diplomatic capital more quickly than others. Finally, the scope for diplomatic skill to influence outcomes is not unlimited: in issue areas where powerful states have critical foreign

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[16]These patterns were not driven by responses from small state diplomats alone, and the diplomats who were identified as most influential were largely identical among small state diplomat and large state diplomat responses.

[17]Interview 2.

[18]Interview 10.

[19]Interview 43.

policy interests, homogenous preferences, or strong ex ante positions, there is likely to be less opportunity for diplomatic capital to sway positions (Copelovitch, 2010; Stone, 2011). For example, on the issue of Taiwan's representation in the United Nations, even an diplomat with extremely high diplomatic capital would be not be expected to shift the outcome away from China's preferred result. However, because of legitimacy and reputational concerns, powerful states are wary about exercising their power to 'put their thumb on the scales' too frequently (Hurd, 2008; Binder & Heupel, 2015; Long, 2022). Bearing this in mind, interviews with diplomatic practitioners indicate that on average, experience is crucial, and a more experienced ambassador is a more effective ambassador (see Figures A-6 and A-7 in the appendix).

Diplomatic capital is *not* a deterministic function of material power. While states with more material resources may be more able to invest in recruiting and training skilled diplomats, smaller states have historically made such investments as well (e.g., Thorhallsson, 2012). Because small states do not have the same outside options as large states, and must rely to a greater extent on IOs such as the UN to conduct their foreign policy (e.g., Voeten, 2001; Sending et al., 2015; Lipscy, 2017), they have greater incentives to invest in any tool that can enhance their effectiveness—including ambassadorial experience. Smaller states may also have greater diplomatic capital as an *unintended consequence.* Small states tend to have smaller diplomatic corps, which results in fewer skilled diplomats who can rotate into key posts such as the UN (e.g., Panke, 2010b). Smaller states, then, may keep diplomats in place out of necessity, which nevertheless creates an opportunity to develop expertise. Because their Ministries of Foreign Affairs are also smaller, smaller countries may also be more likely to have institutionalized norms about rotation schedules than larger states such as the US (Gertz, 2018; Malis, 2021). A Permanent Representative from a small Caribbean island state observed this dynamic:

> [F]or our small state, the PR stays longer for all the obvious reasons: we have smaller

permanent mission, we are still developing foreign service, so we don't have as many people to choose from. We stay longer, and what we lack in career training, we make up for [with] tenure on the ground, with understanding the space, and therefore being better able to navigate that space....Small states benefit from longer tenures, because the longer we stay, the better...we might perform.[20]

Why not invest in diplomatic capital? In other words, if states can obtain advantages from leaving diplomats in post longer, why would we expect to observe variation in these practices? By investing in diplomatic capital—or put most simply, keeping diplomats in post for longer periods of time—states engage in a trade-off against the utility that can be obtained from implementing rotational schemes. First, rotational schemes allow newly elected parties to replace diplomats with new individuals who are more favorable to their policy agenda and preferences. Second, rotational norms allow for professional development of the diplomatic corps by exposing junior diplomats to new challenges. Third, rotation allows for fresh perspectives on existing problems. Forth, by frequently rotating diplomats into new posts, foreign ministries can assuage concerns about "going native," fears that diplomats' perspectives will be influenced by personal attachment to their host community. Fifth, rotation facilitates the recruitment of new diplomats into the corps. To facilitate posting diplomats into less desirable 'hardship' posts, a state that implements rotation can promise a subsequent position in a more desirable post (Kleiner, 2010). Nevertheless, for small states, the potential gains of investing in diplomatic capital are more important than they are for larger states, who are more likely to favor the benefits of a rotational scheme.

For all these reasons, we can expect to observe that small states have more individuals with higher stocks of diplomatic capital than large states. At the same time, this does not imply that diplomatic capital is *more effective* for small state diplomats than large state diplomats—or in other words, there is not expected to be an interaction between state size

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[20]Interview 46.

and diplomatic capital. Ounce for ounce, diplomatic capital is expected to provide the same degree of influence for any type of state.

H_1: **Small state diplomats are more likely to have high diplomatic capital than large state diplomats.**

Regardless of how it is cultivated, I suggest that diplomatic capital can help to explain when states are more likely to succeed conditional on their engagement in the politics of IOs. However, I do not expect that diplomatic capital is equally important across all contexts, and that it is particularly important in the early stages of the policymaking process on *agenda-setting.*

Power, Monitoring, and Legislative Strategies

Large states can exert influence in the late stages of the policymaking process (e.g., Mearsheimer, 1994; Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Voeten, 2000), but I argue they are less able to do so in the early stages of policymaking. I suggest that this difference arises from variation in states' ability to *monitor* these activities.

Early-stage activities such as proposing agenda items are temporally removed from policy outputs and can be highly technical. Thus, they tend to receive less media attention and are more difficult to monitor. On the other hand, later-stage activities such as resolution politics are relatively more rare and occur temporally proximate to policy outcomes, which results in greater attention in the media and renders them easier to monitor. Beyond these differences in visibility, early- and late-stage activities *do not* differ consistently in the amount of resources or effort required to conduct, according to interviews with diplomats.

Assuming that actors have limited attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), late-stage activities should receive more scrutiny, since it is easier for states to observe and monitor whether other states act in line with their preferences. For example, in voting on a resolution,

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it is quite easy to observe whether a state complies with the desires of powerful states. This enables large states to effectively leverage material power in obtaining favorable outcomes: They can promise foreign aid or levy sanctions on others, and can monitor whether their efforts have been successful in the highly observable outcome of the target state's vote (e.g., Keohane, 1984). As an ambassador from a small Pacific island state noted, to get votes from other states, large states can

> [L]everage power, they have resources. But for small island countries like us, you know we—it's extremely difficult to to do—rich countries, they can buy your votes. That's not what the small island countries, least developed countries in the UN can do. We don't have the luxury to do that.[21]

Early-stage activities are more difficult to monitor, and are therefore more difficult to influence via material power. If the target state's behaviors are not subject to monitoring, the powerful state cannot apply material power to influence its behavior.[22] Large states do not ignore early-stage activities, but rather are unable to prevent small states from pursuing such activities, and small states take advantage of this structural opportunity.

Powerful states' ability to monitor behavior circumscribes the contexts in which diplomatic capital can be used to influence outcomes. In late-stage activities in which monitoring is efficient, power can be deployed to obtain favorable outcomes, and even a state with high diplomatic capital has little chance of altering the outcome. However, in early-stage activities, where observing target states' behaviors is more difficult and thus material power cannot be applied as effectively, states with high diplomatic capital *do* have an opportunity to shape the agenda toward their preferred outcome.

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[21]Interview 40.

[22]See also findings on monitoring and compliance in bureaucracies; e.g., McCubbins et al. (1989); Epstein & O'Halloran (1994).

H_2: **States with higher diplomatic capital are more likely to engage in early-stage activities than states with lower diplomatic capital.**

While late-stage legislative activities—resolution sponsorship and voting—have been examined in previous research, early-stage activities such as agenda-setting represent a new empirical domain. To be clear, early-stage activities are not understudied because they are of lesser importance. New policy issues must be added to the institutional agenda before they can even be formally debated or resolutions can be put on the table.

This theory implies that smalls states have much larger potential to influence IO politics than has previously been assumed. Structural features—that is, the fact that early-stage activities are more difficult to monitor—give small states the *opportunity* to influence the agenda of IOs, while investing in diplomatic capital allows them to take advantage of this opportunity in advancing their policy goals.

Agenda Control in the UNGA

In my empirical analysis, I focus on the role diplomatic capital plays in explaining agenda-setting in the UN General Assembly to test these theoretical propositions. I measure the frequency with which states propose agenda items over time and whether diplomatic capital predicts this activity, as well as the determinants of diplomatic capital itself. Finally, I gather data on exogenous shocks to ambassadorial tenure—i.e., ambassador deaths—to identify the effect of experience.

Attention on the UN agenda is constrained. Since the GA session is time-limited, there are a finite number of items that can be included in a given session, which is necessarily less than the full universe of items that are worthy of attention. Because the institutional agenda is now so saturated, states must carefully consider the utility of proposing new items, work to cultivate support for these proposals, and ensure that their proposals are of high

quality. States also have heterogeneous preferences about what items to include on the agenda: 44% of all agenda items proposed by countries are contested (that is, not adopted unanimously). On contested items, an average of 10 states participate in the debate on the proposals' inclusion.

I examine all proposed agenda items submitted to the General Committee—the body that decides what proposals will be included on the GA's agenda—from 1946 to 2018.[23] Each year, these items are contained in the Preliminary List of Items, the Provisional Agenda, the Supplementary List of Items, and all of the General Committee reports. I download all of these records from the UN Digital Library, as well as any addenda or corrections, and extract 1,500 unique proposals for submitted agenda item.[24] For each proposal, I collect meta-data that include the co-sponsors of the proposal, topic, countries and regions involved, and whether the topic involved an interstate conflict. I also note whether the item is included on the agenda, the committee to which it was allocated, the item's number on the agenda,

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[23]The process of agenda setting follows a formal procedure laid out in the UN Charter and the General Assembly's Rules and Procedures, which delegates this responsibility to the General Committee. Every state has an equal right to submit new agenda proposals, which may be co-sponsored. The General Committee then considers all proposed agenda items and determines whether they will be included on the GA's agenda. Many agenda items are adopted by consensus, though votes can be requested and are decided by a simple majority rule (Alker, 1964; Kaufmann, 1980; Smith, 2006a).

[24]While most items are proposed by states, some are also submitted by 15 institutional pro- posers (President of the General Assembly, the Trusteeship Council, etc). Of this type, a prior resolution was the most common source (381 instances), followed by the Secretary- General (140). I remove these observations to focus on country behavior.

the number of countries that speak on the item, whether the debate was contested, the vote tally (if one was recorded), and which countries spoke in favor or against. I also code each item according to its qualitative content, which allows for examination of the substantive nature of the agenda. I employ two coding schemes for qualitative coding: the UN coding scheme used in the UN Yearbook, and the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) scheme (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002).

Figure 1: Number of Proposals Decreasing Over Time
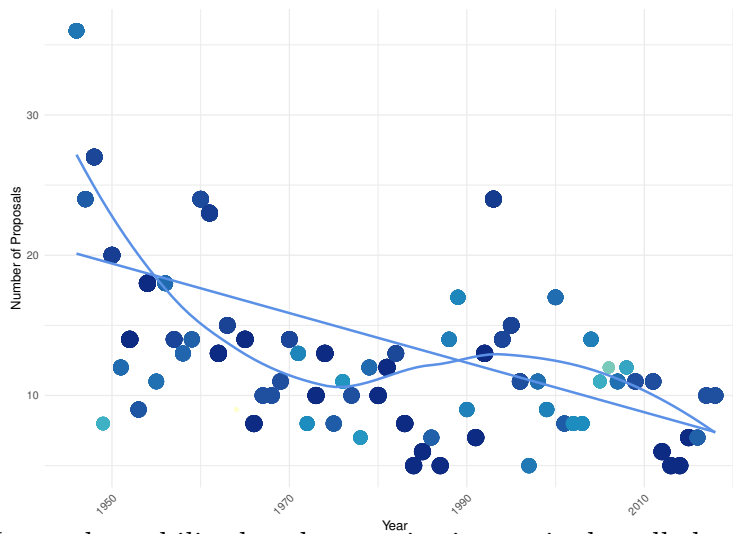
Notes: As the UN agenda stabilized and countries increasingly called to reduce the burden of the GA's schedule, the number of proposals each year declined (trend lines are linear and Loess fits). Larger and darker circles indicate a higher rate of proposal success, smaller and lighter circles indicate a lower rate of proposal success. 2010 is excluded as an outlier.

Ultimately, most proposed items are included on the agenda (87%). Because of this high rate of success, I focus on proposing as the outcome of interest rather than proposal success. Agenda items at the UN are tend to remain on the agenda for debate year after year and are rarely removed once they are added. The inclusion of an agenda item for debate—independent of whether any subsequent material action is taken on the matter—is of great importance to states (Hurd, 2008).

The median number of proposals by a country is 21, with a maximum of 128.[25] The average number of submissions by a country in a given year is 2 and the maximum is 8. The yearly number of proposals is decreasing over time (Figure 1).[26] Co-sponsorship ranges from 1 to 62 co-sponsors, with a median of 17 co-sponsors per proposal. These statistics are conditional on a country's submitting at least one proposal; that is, they do not reflect member states that do not submit any proposals, which would result in the central tendency skewing lower. There is substantial variation in the frequency with which different topics are introduced. Defense and peace, public lands (in this case, colonial territorial disputes), international affairs[27], and UN governance are the most frequent topics (Figure 2, left). Based on the UN coding, political and security questions are similarly the most prevalent, followed by economic and social questions (Figure 2, right).
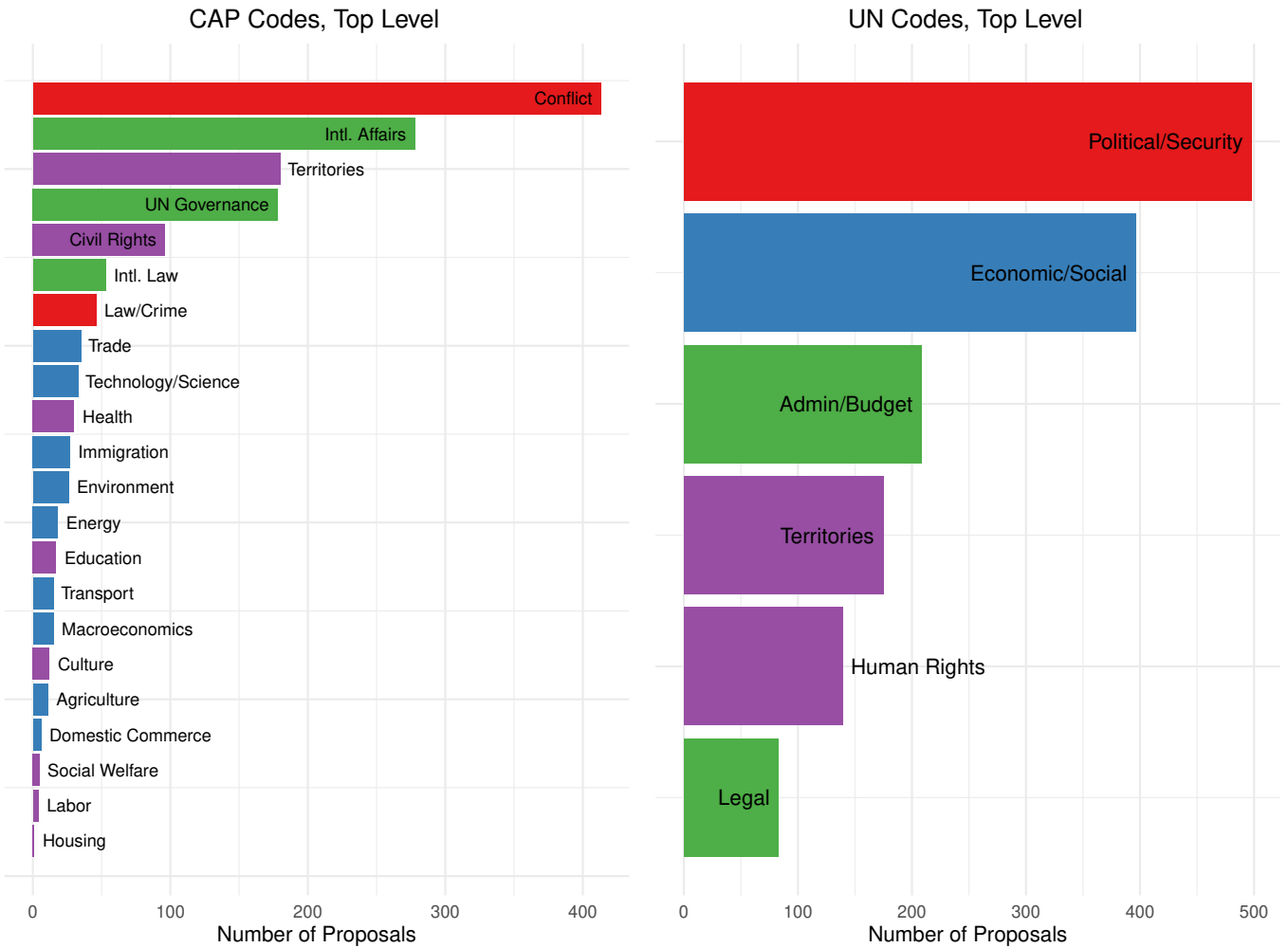
Overall, proposals are not dominated by powerful states (the most frequent proposers are listed in Table A-1 in the appendix). For example, the US and Russia/USSR combined represent only 4% of total proposal sponsorships. Only 20% of the top 25 proposers (Russia, India, the US, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia) are medium or large states, and of these, only 8% are large states (Russia and the US). However, the raw results will be skewed toward countries that have been UN members for longer—and thus have had greater opportunities

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[25]There is no theoretical upper limit to the number of country proposal sponsorships.

[26]Based on evidence from interviews, this seems to be a reaction to the large size of the agenda, and an attempt to "rationalize" the GA's work by constraining the addition of new agenda items.

[27]The international affairs topic includes general questions of international affairs, foreign aid, resource exploitation, Law of the Sea, development, international finance, regional issues, human rights (general), human rights (country-specific), organizations, terrorism, diplomats, and population.

Figure 2: Topics of Agenda Proposals

CAP Codes, Top Level

UN Codes, Top Level

Legend: Disarmament/Security · Economic/Financial · Law/Administration · Social/Cultural/Humanitarian

Notes: Total number of proposals according to the two major qualitative coding schemes, the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) and UN internal codes. Colors indicate thematic topic groupings. Proposals address a variety of topics, though the majority involve economic/financial and social/cultural/humanitarian issues.

over time to submit proposals—which is likely to bias against smaller and post-colonial states. For example, while the US has been a member of the UN since its inception, Kiribati did not join until 2014, and therefore had many fewer year-opportunities to submit proposals. This is especially likely given that the agenda was more fluid early on. As Figure 1 shows, during the early period of the UN, when the institutional agenda was still largely undefined, member states had much more opportunity to shape the agenda by proposing new items. To address this, I rescale the number of proposals by the total number of years a state has been a UN member (to 2018). After scaling, the proportions of medium and large proposers decreases to 16% of the top 25 (Russia, India, USA, and Indonesia), and again, 8% are large states. Reflecting this, the overall correlation between GDP and the number of proposals submitted by a country is just 0.11, and .27 with population (see Figure A-1 in the appendix). While large and medium states propose an average of 0.59 items per year of UN membership, small countries propose 0.41 items: a difference that, while statistically significantly different ($p = .03$), is substantively quite small.

Large states do not propose substantially more agenda items than small states do, which demonstrates that the opportunity to influence the agenda does exist for small states. I argue that while this structural feature of early-stage policymaking give small states the opportunity to influence the agenda, it is only by investing in diplomatic capital that they can *take advantage* of this opportunity. In the following sections, I test the role of diplomatic capital in predicting states' agenda-setting activity.

Diplomatic Capital and Agenda Control

Measuring Diplomatic Capital

Diplomatic capital can be cultivated through a variety of channels. One novel source that I propose is based on the experience of a country's diplomats: I expect that increased diplomatic tenure is associated with higher levels of diplomatic capital. Tenure is certainly a simplified way to think about diplomatic capital, but it is a reasonable proxy to capture the importance of experience. In interviews, diplomats emphasized experience as one of the most crucial attributes of effective diplomats (see Figure A-7 in the appendix). Following this logic, I use the annual Blue Book listings of Permanent Missions to the United Nations to capture the name of every country's ambassador and first deputy, creating a database of 21,159 ambassador and deputy entries from 1946 to 2019. To construct the tenure measure, I sum the total number of years each ambassador and deputy have been serving in either position. This measure is preferable to a strict count of consecutive ambassador years, because it allows for gaps before a diplomat is reposted or when a deputy is appointed as ambassador, which occurs frequently. For example, as one southern African diplomat noted:

> My Ambassador...he was here in the 80s or 90s, and then comes back again for a second tour, so that makes him a reference. Diplomacy is a traditional profession where rank, integrity, and so on counts, so people defer to you...if you [have] accumulated experience, have been there, done that, so to speak.[28]

This measurement approach entails a tradeoff. One advantage is that I can compare tenure for *all* UN members in *all* years of membership, which means that there are no concerns about missingness resulting in bias. A disadvantage, however, is that I cannot observe

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[28]Interview 48.

other demographic features—such as education or military experience—that may be relevant for understanding ambassadorial effectiveness (e.g., MacDonald, 2021; Arias & Smith, 2018; Haglund, 2015; Heinzel, 2022). Such data were not feasible to collect at scale, and attempts to do so would have resulted in missing data that could bias results. Nonetheless, a detailed smaller-scale analysis can shed some light on who these long-serving ambassadors are. I examine nine of the longest-serving ambassadors, focusing on the post-1980 period to maximize data availability.[29]

The profiles of the ambassadors did not suggest major commonalities, with one exception: prior diplomatic experience. Seven of the ambassadors had previously served in other positions in their home Ministry of Foreign Affairs; two had served in other multilateral posts (including the EU, World Bank, and IMF); four had served in other positions at the Mission to the UN prior to becoming permanent representative; and five had served in bilateral posts. While this experience is noteworthy, diplomatic capital is not expected to be fungible across institutional contexts. Institutional rules and remits vary across IOs, as do the individuals who comprise the diplomatic corps and the Secretariat. Further, the norms and practices of multilateral permanent representation are quite different from those of bilateral representation. All this is to say that though other diplomatic experience may be widely present among the ambassadors, I do not have substantial concerns about its influence as a possible omitted variable in predicting diplomatic capital. Aside from shared diplomatic experience, the ambassadors' professional backgrounds were varied: two had a background in business and finance; two in health, development, and education; and one in legislature. About half were educated at universities in the US or Europe.

These examples illustrate that long-serving UN ambassadors are qualified and diverse individuals. There do not appear to be systematic characteristics that might confound the effects of experience or suggest that particular types of individuals select into longer

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[29]Full profiles are available upon request.

service. Even so, while most of these individuals were career diplomats, other influential ambassadors—such as the Ambassador from Costa Rica—are political appointees.

Predicting Diplomatic Capital

All of the 25 countries with the longest diplomatic tenure are small countries (see Table A-2 in the Appendix), which comports with the expectation that small state diplomats are more likely to have high diplomatic capital than large state diplomats (Hypothesis 1). To further probe the relationship between state size and diplomatic capital, I employ a regression approach. I expect that ambassadorial tenure should be negatively related to measures of state power and size. I include measures of population (logged), GDP (logged), and military expenditure as a share of GDP (World Bank, 2019).

In addition to these key measures of state size, I include explanatory variables that are potentially related to a state's diplomatic capital, capturing different dimensions of a state's embeddedness in the multilateral system. At the individual level, I construct two measures to capture the ease with which the individual diplomat is likely to navigate the UN institutional system. I use the `genderize` API to construct a "male" indicator estimated based on the ambassador's name, since women diplomats may face additional challenges in a traditionally male-dominated role (Towns & Niklasson, 2017; Towns, 2020). I also construct an indicator of whether English is the principal language of the Mission (as of 2022) by the Mission's preferred language for correspondence from the Blue Book.

At the state level, I include the number of international governmental organizations in which a country is a full member, associate member, or observer and an indicator for whether a country was a UN member in a given year (Pevehouse et al., 2020). I include a count of the number of alliances a country is a member of per year and for a stricter measure of alliances, I also include the number of defense pacts (Gibler, 2009). I include the level of representation at the UN General Debate to proxy for the intensity of a state's preferences

for multilateralism (Baturo et al., 2017). I collect data on voluntary contributions to UN agencies from 2009 to 2019, measuring the logged total of voluntary core (un-earmarked) and voluntary non-core (earmarked) contributions (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, 2019).[30] I include the logged annual number of embassies hosted by that country (Rhamey et al., 2013).[31] Finally, democratic regimes may be better positioned to advocate in IOs, which I capture using the Polity2 measures of regime type (Center for Systemic Peace, 2018).[32]

All independent measures are summarized in Table A-3 in the appendix. I present results from a linear regression model to predict the count of agenda-proposals. To avoid autocorrelation, I estimate a separate model with each predictor, though main results were consistent in the fully saturated estimation (see Tables A-8 and A-9 in the appendix). To account for unobserved heterogeneity *between* years, I include year fixed effects. To measure uncertainty *within* countries and years, I estimate bootstrap standard errors clustered at the country and year level. I standardize all independent variables to mean 0 and standard deviation 1 to ease interpretation of results.

I expect that small state diplomats are more likely to have high diplomatic capital than are large state diplomats, or more specifically, they should have higher levels of ambassadorial

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[30]The agencies included are WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, UNDP, WHO, UNRWA, FAO, UN, IAEA, UNODC, UNAIDS, ILO, UNFPA, IFAD, PAHO, UNEP, UNHABITAT, UN-WOMEN, WMO, ICAO, UNIDO, WTO, IARC, OPCW, UNITAR, ITC, UNCDF, UN-ESCO, IMO, CTBTO, WIPO, UNU, UNSSC, UNFCCC, ITU, UNITAID, ICC, UNWTO, UNRISD, DPKO, and UNOPS.

[31]These data are measured at 3- and 5-year increments.

[32]I interpolate these scores for 1982, which is missing. Missing data are interpolated using Amelia, averaging estimates over 5 imputations.

tenure. In line with these expectations, Figure 3 shows that the key measures of size—GDP and population—are negatively and statistically significantly related to tenure, and suggest substantively large impacts on predicted tenure. Averaging across the models, a 1% increase in GDP corresponds to a 12% *decrease* in tenure, while a 1% increase in population corresponds to a 50% *decrease* in tenure.[33] However, this relationship does not hold when examining military expenditure, which is positively and significantly related to tenure. This suggests that small states with large militaries, relative to their size—for example, Vietnam, Korea, and Israel—also have long tenures.

Figure 3: Small States Have Higher Diplomatic Capital
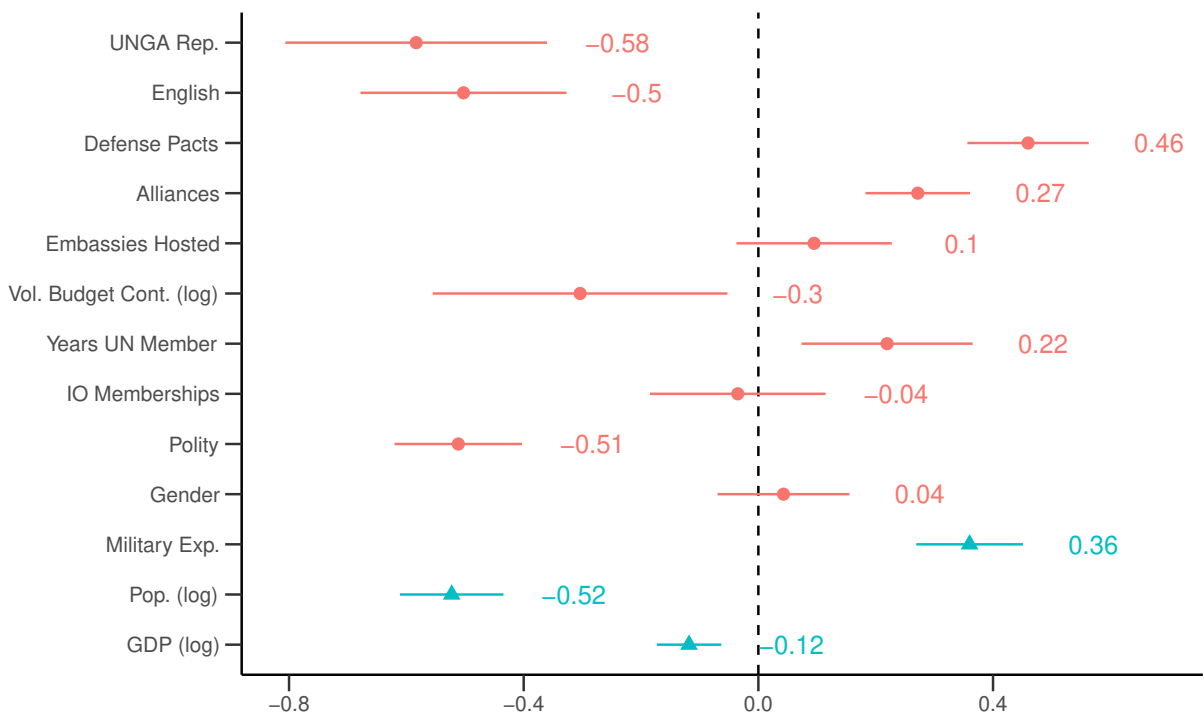
Notes: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals.

In addition to these key theoretical predictors, we can also examine the patterns of relationships between tenure and the other independent variables, which are mixed. Importantly,

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[33]Full tabular results can be found in Table A-6 in the Appendix.

we observe that democratic states are less likely to have long-serving ambassadors compared to authoritarian states. This finding is not surprising, as we can expect that democratic states are more likely to implement rotational rules that limit the tenure of diplomats, while authoritarian regimes are less subject to rules-based constraints, and may be more likely to use diplomatic posts for patronage.[34] This result should not be ignored, but neither does it suggest that tenure is fully explained by authoritarianism. The magnitude of the effect on regime type is not substantially larger than the positive effect afforded by the number of defense pacts to which a state is party, for example.

These results indicate that small countries are more likely to have long-standing diplomats than large countries. I suggest that these findings imply that ambassadorial tenure is a unique dynamic that moves independently of many state-level features that previous work has examined in seeking to understand state influence in international politics. Next, I seek to examine whether this measure of diplomatic capital helps to explain states' success in influencing the IO agenda.

Explaining Agenda Influence

For ease of interpretation, I simplify the measure of tenure to a binary variable that indicates whether the ambassador's and deputy's combined experience is 3 years or greater.[35] Based on interviews with diplomats at the UN, this was the most commonly mentioned period of time required for diplomats to "get their feet under them" after arriving in post, make substantial contacts with their counterparts, and develop substantive expertise.

Per Hypothesis 2, I expect that states with higher levels of diplomatic capital are more

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[34]Although democratic states are also apt to use diplomatic posts for patronage through political appointments (e.g., Haglund, 2015; Arias & Smith, 2018).

[35]Figure A-2 in the appendix shows the distribution of experience across countries and years.

likely to engage in early-stage activities; in this case, proposing agenda items. I also expect that turnover—i.e., changes from experienced to inexperienced ambassadors—should be *negatively* related to the country's success in agenda-setting. To predict proposals, I employ the model specifications described in the previous section, including tenure as the key predictor of interest.

In line with these expectations, Figure 4 shows that for all of the predictors of diplomatic capital that are statistically significantly related to agenda-proposing, the relationship is positive.[36] Countries with experienced ambassadors are 5.9 percentage points more likely to propose an agenda item than those with novice ambassadors. Proposals submitted by experienced ambassadors are also 6 percentage points less likely to be contested during the debate ($p = .03$). Male ambassadors are also 2.6 percentage points more likely to propose agenda items; English as a first language is not significantly related. Once again, relationships with the state-level measures are mixed. To test whether tenure matters differently for democratic and autocratic states—whose ambassadors may stay in their post longer because of corruption rather than skill—I estimate a model that interacts tenure and Polity and find no significant interaction effect.

Materially based power is clearly not the only factor that impacts agenda-setting influence. Even after controlling for measures of power—population size, GDP, and military expenditure—these measures of diplomatic capital are significant predictors of agenda-setting. The logs of GDP and population are generally positive and significantly related to agenda-setting across models, while the relationship with military expenditure is negative and, for the most part, is not statistically significant. In all cases, the magnitude of the effect of power is modest: A 10% increase in GDP or population results in an expected increase in agenda-setting of less than 1%. Though material power matters, its effects are smaller than those of tenure and most other measures of diplomatic capital.

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[36]Full tabular results can be found in Table A-7 in the Appendix.

Figure 4: Diplomatic Capital Significantly Predicts Agenda-setting Frequency
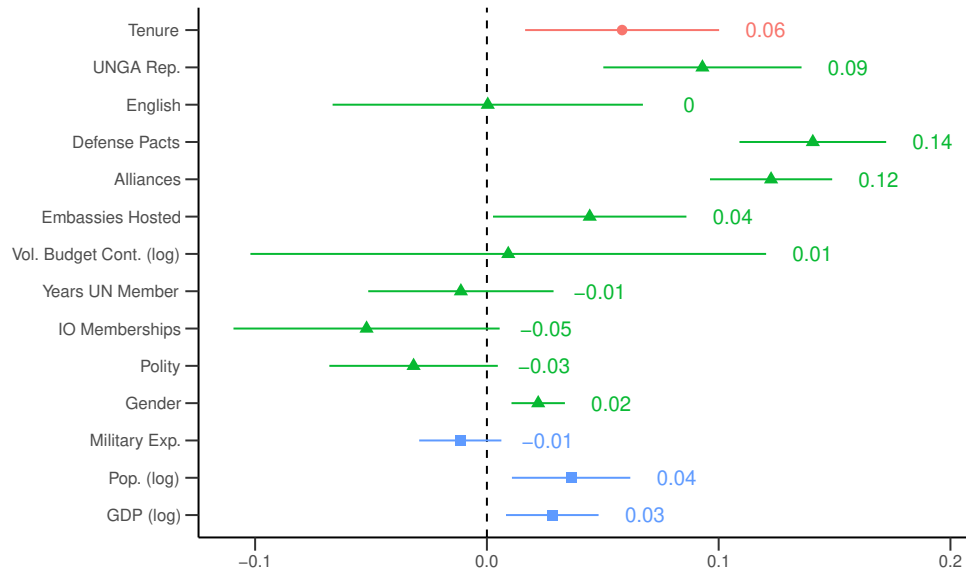
Notes: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals.

Small states are not necessarily uniquely positioned to maximize investments in diplomatic capital. I estimate alternative models, subsetting to only small states, and observe the same pattern of results as in the whole sample. I also estimate models that interact ambassadorial tenure with an indicator for small states and with each of the measures of state size and do not observe a significant effect of this interaction (Table A-10 in the appendix). The independent effect of tenure remains significant in all of the models, but the interaction effects do not achieve statistical significance. While small states may invest more in their diplomatic capital (see Table A-2 in the Appendix), these results suggest that any state that invests in diplomatic capital can expect to obtain a similar payoff in its ability to engage in early-stage activities. Nevertheless, the positive effects of ambassadorial expertise may still be particularly relevant for small states. Some investments in multilateral diplomacy—such as establishing new alliances or contributing additional funds to the UN (Graham & Serdaru, 2020)—may be costly and out of reach for some small states. The magnitude of the effect of ambassadorial experience is nearly as large as these other sources of diplomatic capital—and

is in fact larger than the magnitude of the effect of the number of embassies hosted.

Robustness

I conduct additional tests of model specification to predict both tenure and agenda proposals. In both cases, I find that the main results—that small states have longer tenure on average, and that ambassadorial tenure is a significant positive predictor of agenda proposing—hold across all specifications. These results can be found in the Appendix (Figures A-8 and A-9). First, I estimate models only using observations from 1990 and later. Second, I exclude China from the models. Third, I change the method of handling missing data from multiple imputation to listwise deletion, dropping observations that are missing. Fourth, I change the specification of standard errors from both country clusters and year clusters to only country clusters. Fifth, I add country fixed effects to account for possible unobserved heterogeneity between countries. Sixth, I estimate the model as a negative binomial model which accounts for overdispersion. I conduct three additional robustness tests on agenda-setting influence. First, I estimate a model only on the agenda proposals related to security issues as a hard test. Second, I exclude procedural and commemorative proposals from the data to ensure that non-substantive proposals are not driving the results. Third, I remove countries in the bottom quartile of standard deviation in turnover to proxy for highly regularized turnover rules.

Across these specifications, I find that in general, the findings from the main models hold. Predicting tenure, population remains negatively related to tenure in 4/6 tests and GDP remains negatively related in 5/6 tests while military expenditures remain positively related in 4/6 models. For the agenda-setting models, in all cases, the direction of the effect remains the same. In almost all cases—with the exception of the modern-only model, which is nearly significant—the effects are statistically significant. In 7/9 robustness test, the

magnitude of the effect is substantively the same, and in the two cases where the magnitudes changes, it is a *larger* effect.

Taking these results together, we can have a reasonable level of confidence that the expected relationships do in fact exist: that small states, particularly when it comes to size-based measures of material power, are more likely to have high levels of diplomatic capital, and that diplomatic capital is positively related to success in agenda-setting.

Ambassadorial Turnover

However, ambassadorial tenure is not randomly determined. As discussed previously, longer tenure may be an unintended consequence of resource constraints or a strategic decision by a state seeking to develop its diplomatic expertise. States characterized by longer tenure may simply care more about multilateral diplomacy. So far, I have shown a strong *association* between tenure and agenda-setting, but not necessarily a causal relationship. I isolate this relationship by specifically examining cases of turnover, and to gain insight into the *effects* of tenure, I leverage an exogenous source of variation in ambassadorial turnover: deaths. Turnovers would be expected to serve as a shock to the Mission's institutional knowledge and social positionality, and would be expected to negatively affect its ability to engage in agenda-setting. However, in the years following turnover, as the new ambassador gains experience on the ground, their diplomatic capital increases and the country should start to regain its effectiveness for agenda-setting.

To examine these dynamics, I first analyze all cases of turnover when experienced ambassadors/deputies are replaced by pairs with no experience. While not exogenously determined, this replacement would still constitute a shock to diplomatic capital. This measure is an indicator for country-years when the summed experience is reduced from 3 or more years

to 0.[37] I use this indicator to predict agenda-setting in the turnover year as well as the following 5 years, and find that the immediate shock of turnover has a statistically significant 5.9 percentage point *decrease* in agenda-proposals (Figure 5). As I expected, this effect is attenuated over time as the new team gains diplomatic capital.[38]

Figure 5: Ambassador Turnover and Deaths Negatively Affect Agenda-setting Initially, Attenuated Over Time
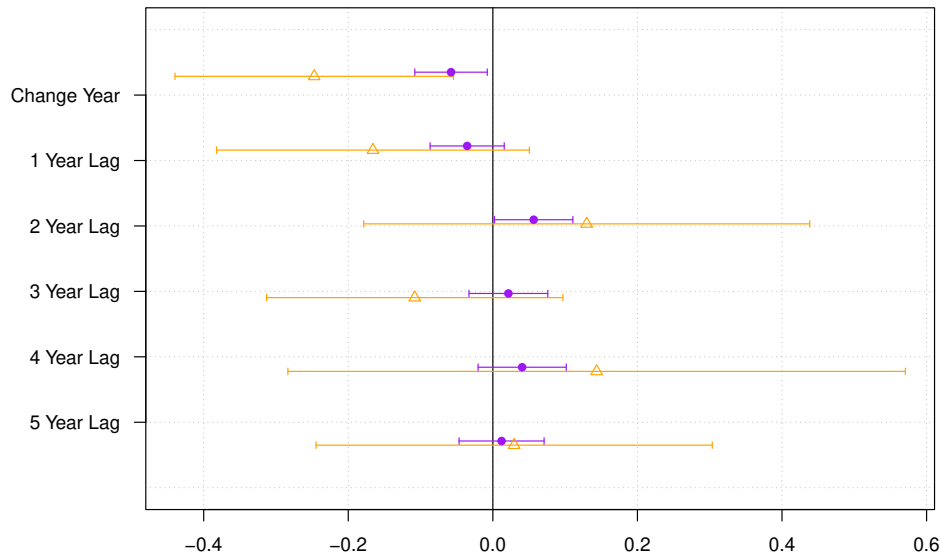
Notes: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates from turnover models shown in purple/filled circles; estimates from death models shown in orange/open triangles.

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[37]Results are robust to alternate specifications of experience, including 5 years.

[38]The null effects in years $t+3$ to $t+5$ may be a result of additional turnovers that occur during this time period. To account for this, I repeat this test only in cases in which there is no second turnover in years t through $t+5$. However, because this severely restricts the sample size, the results are not statistically significantly different from 0 in any of the time periods.

Second, I examine cases in which turnover is exogenously determined by ambassadorial death. While regular turnovers may be anticipated and planned for to reduce shocks to diplomatic capital, the unexpected event of an ambassador's death cannot be foreseen. For example, after the unexpected death of US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson in 1965, his replacement, Arthur Goldberg, took up the post in just 2 weeks, lacking relationships or expertise in urgent issues such as the Cyprus problem (Urquhart, 1998). To measure this phenomenon, I use UN meeting records, which announce when an ambassador has died in post.[39] I extract these records and create the death indicator following the same procedure as for the turnover indicator described above.[40] Although rare, I find that the same pattern of results holds for deaths as for turnovers—and in fact, the substantive magnitude of the effect is greater: a 24.5 percentage point decrease in agenda proposals in the year following the death, compared with the 5.9 percentage point decrease in the year following any turnover. This is in line with my expectation that an unexpected death would serve as a larger shock to diplomatic capital than a regular turnover—which could be anticipated—but even in the case of death, diplomatic capital recovers over time.

In the appendix, I examine another type of external shock to diplomatic capital: governmental changes. When a new government takes office, a priority is often replacing existing bureaucrats with individuals more in line with the new party. Figures A-10 and A-11 show that, as in the case of ambassador death, ambassadorial turnovers that coincide with elections that replace incumbents reduce agenda-setting influence, while a placebo test of such

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[39]See here for an example.

[40]There do not appear to be systematic biases in the occurrences of deaths. Deaths occurred between 1979 and 2018, with no more than 2 per year. Only one ambassador had been serving for an extremely long period when he died in office—Ambassador Roble Olhaye of Djibouti, who died in 2015 after 28 years in post.

elections alone has no effect on diplomatic capital. In other words, there is not evidence of an independent effect of party changes on diplomatic capital that is not moderated by ambassadorial experience.

Across these statistical tests, I show that even after accounting for power, diplomatic capital *matters* in understanding how active states are in advancing their foreign policy priorities in early-stage legislative activities, and particularly in explaining how small states are able to influence IO politics.

Conclusion

I challenge existing theories about the nature of power in IOs, which contend that materially powerful states should dominate IO politics. I theorize that while larger states may be able to deploy material power to dominate late-stage activities, small and medium states can do better in early-stage activities such as agenda-setting, in which larger states cannot monitor or apply material power as effectively. It is *diplomatic capital*—not material power, measured in GDP, population, or military capacity—that small states are able to deploy in these contexts, even contravening the preferences of powerful states. Diplomacy, though often overlooked by international relations scholarship, matters in international politics: By accounting for diplomatic capital, I obtain a very different picture of which states have power over the international agenda. Small states *do* have the opportunity to influence the IO agenda, and with skilled diplomacy, they can take advantage of this opportunity. Despite power asymmetries between states, individual effectiveness matters in IOs, just as it does in the domestic legislative context. I show smaller states are more likely to have high diplomatic capital than larger states, and that diplomatic capital—particularly in the form of ambassadorial experience—is an important predictor of a state's ability to influence the IO agenda. This relationship holds even in cases of exogenous shocks—ambassadorial

deaths—to diplomatic capital. These findings are encouraging for the future legitimacy of IOs as sites of multilateral problem solving.

I shine the first light on the early stages of IO policymaking, which, though they comprise the majority of the everyday work of diplomats, have have previously been unexamined. In doing so, I contribute two new datasets on agenda proposals and ambassadorial tenure that can be fruitfully applied by scholars to examine questions relating to influence (Voeten, 2014) and policy entrepreneurship (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Corbett et al., 2019) in IOs. These data represent the first attempt to quantitatively measure diplomatic skill at scale, yet are nevertheless somewhat coarse measures; future work should strive to measure diplomatic capital with greater nuance to probe the sources of variation in ambassadorial tenure across different states. Examining additional demographic information on diplomats—e.g., their previous postings—may also provide insight into the social dynamics of IO diplomacy.

The logic of my theory of diplomatic capital is also not specific to the context of the UN: As I suggest, because the diffusion of institutional structures from the UN to other IOs is likely, these insights are expected to be generalizable to other IOs. Diplomatic capital is most likely to influence legislative politics in institutions with features that constrain the influence of material resources. I suggest that features such as equal and consensus-based voting, permanent representation, multi-issue and technical domains, and formal rules make diplomatic capital more likely to be influential. This implies that institutions such as the EU are likely cases for diplomatic capital to matter, whereas the IMF is a less likely case. Future work should test these expectations.

I contribute a more accurate understanding of IO politics—which, by accounting for the whole of the legislative process, shows that small states are more influential than previous work has credited. The diplomats of small states can be effective agents in IOs, and their influence should not be ignored, by either diplomatic practitioners or scholars of international politics.

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