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

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August 28, 2024

Abstract

Why are some small powers effective in shaping the UN agenda, even in the face of larger powers' 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 large powers. I further argue that small powers acquire more diplomatic capital than large powers as an unintended consequence of resource constraints. 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 powers 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 powers influence international politics.

Word Count: 11,529

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 United States and 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 and contributing to a nuclear taboo (Tannenwald, 1999). 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 powers shaped the UN agenda, even while countries such as the US are known to use foreign aid and military threats to obtain favorable policy outcomes (Mearsheimer, 1994; Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Carter & Stone, 2015). If these material sources

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

[2] A/RES/76/262

of power explained which states influence institutional priorities, we would expect the agenda to be more reflective of American or Soviet interests. Instead, small powers frequently use the UN's agenda to criticize the actions of major powers 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; Mikulaschek, 2021; Allen & Yuen, 2022), we have yet to understand how and why some small powers succeed in influencing institutional agendas while others do not. 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.[3]

To address this puzzle, I account for diplomacy in explaining states' influence on agenda-setting and other activities in the early stages of the IO policymaking process. First, I argue that investment in *diplomatic capital* explains why some small powers find unexpected success in accomplishing their foreign policy goals in IOs. 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. Because small powers tend to have smaller pools of qualified individuals to fill important diplomatic posts, they acquire higher levels of diplomatic capital on average compared to larger powers as an *unintended consequence* of these resource constraints. Second, I specify that diplomatic capital is significant in understanding influence in the early-stage activities of the policymaking process. In these settings, it is more difficult for powerful states to monitor activities, which creates space for smaller powers 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

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

argue that while large powers may be able to deploy material power to dominate late-stage activities, small and medium powers can overperform in early-stage activities.

To test the expectations generated by my theory, I develop datasets of 1,476 proposed GA agenda items from 1946 to 2018 and the tenure of all UN member states' ambassadors during that period. I find that smaller powers are more likely to have experienced ambassadors than larger powers. Further, I find that diplomatic expertise is an important predictor of agenda-setting activity, even after controlling for measures of material power. 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]

Understanding agenda-setting politics in IOs is a key outcome to examine to understand downstream political outcomes. The ability to control the agenda confers a great deal of power by framing issues in a favorable way to the exclusion of other conceptualizations (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Furthermore, agenda-setting creates path dependencies in the early stages of policymaking that are difficult to change later on. While large powers may wield more influence in the later stages of policymaking, agenda-setting actors have moved the proposed policy outcome away from the status quo toward their desired outcome (and potentially away from the desired outcome of powerful states), and are better positioned to extract concessions than they otherwise would be (Romer & Rosenthal, 1978; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987; Cox & McCubbins, 2005).

In addition to the relevance of understanding agenda-setting in IOs broadly, the GA itself is a substantively important case to understand. First, the UN's salience in international media and public opinion arguably renders it the most prominent of any IO. If an issue is

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[4]Quotations from selected interviews are included in this text; a more systematic representation of the interviews is in Section 1.3 of the Appendix.

of importance to the international community, states are most likely to advance it in this premier IO; thus the UN is a crucial case to test for validity. This prominence also suggests that agenda-setting in the GA is likely to generate insights that generalize to other IOs through diffusion, socialization, emulation, and learning of its institutional rules, norms, and political dynamics (e.g., Simmons & Elkins, 2004; Lenz & Burilkov, 2017; Sommerer & Tallberg, 2019).[5]

Second, 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 on the agenda 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, as well as symbolic power.

I challenge existing theories about the nature of power in IOs. Previous studies (e.g., Kim & Russett, 1996; Voeten, 2000; Dreher et al., 2008; Vreeland & Dreher, 2014) 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. Not only can we better understand the scope of IO activities and the influence of small powers in these settings, we can also understand why some small powers are better at navigating these activities than others: diplomatic capital. Material power is important in explaining some IO politics, but the role of individual diplomats matters as well.

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[5]Testing this generalizability is beyond the scope of this paper.

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). I define the institutional agenda as the set of problems that policymakers in a particular institutional decision-making body are actively considering (Cobb & Elder, 1972). Influencing institutional agendas in the early stages of policymaking can afford enormous control over what issues are addressed—or not addressed—and what policies are developed in response. Agenda control answers the critical political question of "[h]ow does an issue come to be viewed as an important and appropriate subject of attention....Or how is it denied this status?" (Cobb & Elder, 1972, 12).Individual efforts (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) and structural rules (e.g., Shepsle & Weingast, 1987; Krehbiel, 1998; Cox & McCubbins, 2005) play an important role in determining agenda-setting influence.

Agenda control is important in many legislative settings, yet only recently have scholars begun attending to agenda control in many IOs, where it plays a crucial role.[6] For example, agenda control was integral for Ireland's Aiken to advance negotiations on nonproliferation. Aiken faced a competing nonproliferation proposal from Sweden, which the US was more staunchly opposed to. Had this Swedish alternative shaped the agenda on non-proliferation, US opposition would have stymied negotiations towards the NPT.[7] By controlling the agenda and pushing through his proposal, Aiken avoided this premature conclusion of negotiations.

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[6]In European Union studies, see Garrett & Weingast (1993); Pollack (1997); Tallberg (2003); Aksoy (2010); Schneider (2019); and in IOs, see Keck et al. (1998); Koremenos (2015); Allen & Yuen (2022); Binder & Golub (2020); Mikulaschek (2021); Allen & Yuen (2022).

[7]Telegram From the Department of State to the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Regional Organizations, November 21, 1961.

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 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 know 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 state's foreign policy. For example, Malta's ambassador Arvid Pardo introduced an agenda item on the seabed in 1967 that directly led to the Convention on the Law of the Sea.[8] In 2021, campaigning for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council, Malta's diplomats invoked this legacy as part of Malta's campaign platform.[9] In addition to state level benefits, at the individual level, diplomats gain reputational benefits from being active in proposing, which can be leveraged for future career advancement.

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[8]A/BUR/SR.166, September 21, 1967; A/BUR/SR.171, October 5, 1967.

[9]E.g., here; Interview 25. We cannot identify the role that this legacy played in their Security Council campaign, but Malta did win a seat for a 2023-2024 term, and ocean-related questions have featured prominently in their efforts thus far on the Council (e.g., Programme of Work for Malta's UNSC Presidency, February 1, 2023; Digney, February 2, 2023).

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 powers use side payments or pressure to obtain their desired outcome. While material power may matter in the end stages of the policymaking process—i.e., the highly visible and politicized matters of resolution politics[10]—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 powers 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 powers 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. These works generally point to institutional features as explanatory of small powers' influence on agenda setting—for example, Aksoy (2010) and Allen & Yuen (2022) show that the proposal-making role of the EU and Security Council presidencies empower small powers, and Mikulaschek (2021) argues that unanimity decision-making

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[10]E.g., Smith (2006); Carter & Stone (2015); Finke (2021) on resolution sponsorship; Kim & Russett (1996); Alesina & Dollar (2000); Voeten (2000, 2001); Dreher et al. (2008); Vreeland & Dreher (2014); Bailey et al. (2017) on resolution voting.

affords more influence to minor powers as non-permanent Security Council members, especially during crises.[11] But *which* small powers are more likely to succeed in influencing institutional agendas, and why? I suggest that accounting for diplomacy can provide the answer.

By any definition, small and medium powers' activities make up a great deal of international politics, which IR research has largely overlooked to focus on the behaviors of great powers (e.g., Mearsheimer, 1994; Nye, 1990).[12] For example, the Forum of Small States (FOSS), an important organizing group for small powers in the UN, comprises 105 members, representing more than half of the 193 members of the UN. As an analytical category, however, there is continuing debate over the definition of small powers, including material, perceptual, and relational approaches.[13] Baldacchino & Wivel (2020, 7) suggests a definition of small states as "states that are characterized by the limited capacity of their political, economic and administrative systems" and typically suffer from power asymmetry as the weaker end of asymmetric relationships, while Fox (1977) defines them as international actors cannot to successfully apply power or resist the effective application of power on them by other states, and Hey (2003, 3) proposes in a psychological framework that states self-define their identity as small or not. Beyond academic debates, The World Bank's Small States Forum (SSF), FOSS, and the European Union rely on population-based thresholds of fewer than 1.5, 10, and 40 million people, respectively.

I do not seek to adjudicate this debate on the definition of small powers. I follow a material approach, utilizing objective indicators of size because this strategy allows for straight-

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[11]See also Steinberg (2002).

[12]But see Goldstein (2000), who makes a similar point.

[13]See Long (2017); Baldacchino & Wivel (2020) for an overview of this debate on small powers.

Small state and small power are generally used interchangeably in this literature.

forward 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. However, a challenge with this approach is that there are no clear cutoffs between small and non-small powers unless arbitrary cutpoints are created. To address this concern, in the empirical analysis I employ continuous measures of power resources and test for robustness with politically defined measures of smallness: membership in FOSS, the SSF, and non-membership in the G20.

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 understand why materially weak states can succeed in shaping IO agendas. I define diplomatic capital as a pool of social 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). In addition to state-level characteristics which have previously been examined by the literature, I argue that *individual diplomatic skill* is a critical element of a 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.[14] Individual diplomats develop diplomatic capital

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

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).[15] 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 context of permanent representation, where diplomats interact repeatedly within their community.[16] A Deputy Permanent Representative from a Latin American state observed:

> 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.[17]

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; Reiners, 2024). As one diplomat from a small Middle Eastern power

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

[16]See Tables A-4—5, Figures A-4—A-7, and Figure 1.

[17]Interview 12.

observed, "the most important thing in the UN is to have a good social network,"[18] which can include relationships with fellow diplomats, members of the Secretariat, civil society leaders, journalists, and officials in their home government. 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 powers—which are also disadvantaged by factors such as social hierarchies (Pouliot, 2016)—experience mitigates these disadvantages and helps diplomats obtain favorable outcomes in confrontations with larger powers (Fox, 1977, 185).

Figure 1: Interview Evidence for Diplomatic Capital Mechanisms
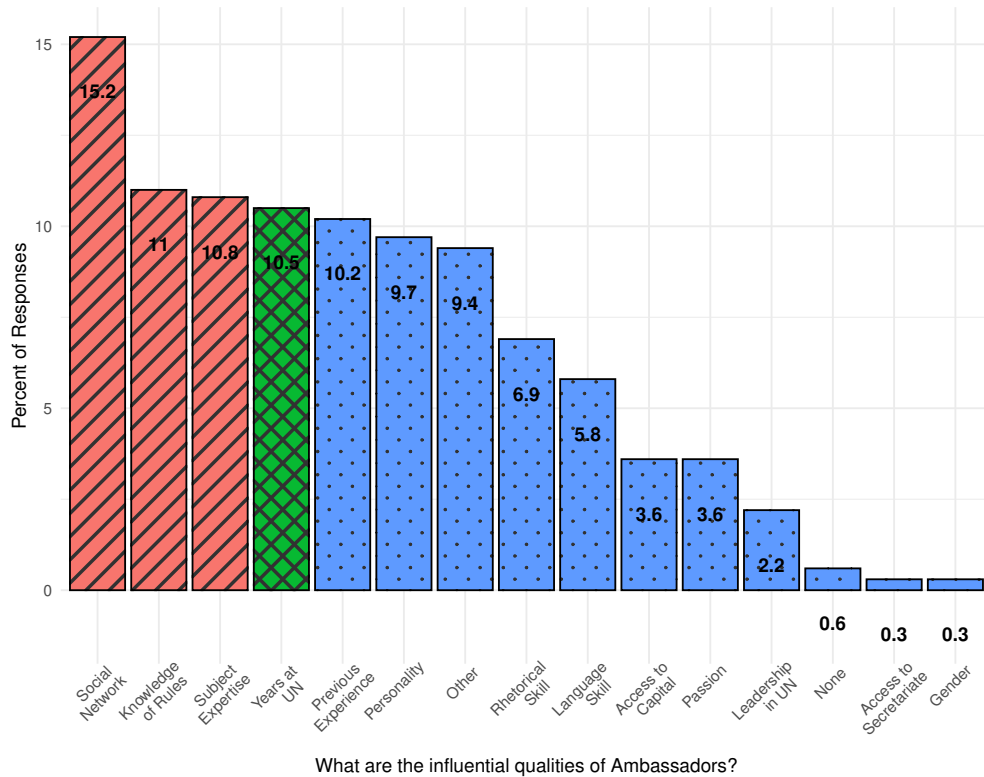
Notes: Percent of interview responses. Red/diagonal bars show specific mechanisms theorized; green/hatched bar shows proxy mechanism theorized; blue/dotted bars show other responses.

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[18]Interview 27.

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. The importance of these mechanisms for developing diplomatic capital is supported by evidence from interviews with diplomats. When asked "What makes an ambassador influential?" these mechanisms are the most frequent responses, followed by years of experience—which encapsulates the mechanisms (see Figure 1). 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.[19] When a skillful ambassador is replaced by a novice, diplomatic capital is lost.

> 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.[20]

> 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.[21]

> 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

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[19]The diplomats who were identified as most influential were largely identical among diplomats from small powers and large powers.

[20]Interview 2.

[21]Interview 10.

happened, like five years ago? [That] kind of institutional memory is pretty critical.[22]

The case of Aiken also illustrates the role and mechanisms of diplomatic capital. Before proposing the non-proliferation initiative, Aiken had developed a strong reputation during his years at the UN (Skelly, 1997; Evans & Kelly, 2014, 210), which directly contributed to his ability to advance new policy measures such as the non-proliferation proposal (e.g., Chossudovsky, 1990, 129-30). Aiken's reputation and time in New York translated into social networks that he leveraged to gain support, including from the major powers (Skelly, 1997, 88). Aiken also developed substantive expertise on the issue of nuclear proliferation, which he leveraged to act as a leader in promoting the issue (Aiken, 1961). Particularly, Aiken seems to have excelled in his mastery of institutional rules, which contributed to the success of his proposal through his ability to shepherd it through the bureaucratic processes (Evans & Kelly, 2014, 295; Skelly, 1997, 255).

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 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 a diplomat with extremely high diplomatic capital would 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), thus this set of cases should be rare. Bearing this in mind, interviews with diplomats indicate that on average, experience is crucial, and a more

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[22]Interview 43.

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experienced ambassador is a more effective ambassador (see Figures 1 and A-6).

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 powers have historically made such investments as well (e.g., Thorhallsson, 2012). Because small powers do not have the same outside options as large powers 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 powers may also have greater diplomatic capital as an *unintended consequence*. Small powers 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 powers, then, may keep diplomats in place out of necessity, which nevertheless creates an opportunity to develop expertise.[23] Because their Ministries of Foreign Affairs are also smaller, smaller powers may also be less likely to have institutionalized norms about rotation schedules than large powers 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 a 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.[24]

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[23]In addition to these direct impacts, resource constraints may also *indirectly* lead to longer tenure by contributing to weak state capacity and corruption.

[24]Interview 46.

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—states engage in a trade-off against the utility that can be obtained from implementing rotational schemes. First, rotation allows newly elected parties to replace diplomats with new individuals more favorable to their policy agenda. Second, rotation allows for the professional development of the diplomatic corps by exposing junior diplomats to new challenges. Third, rotation allows for fresh perspectives on existing problems. Fourth, by frequently rotating diplomats into new posts, foreign ministries can assuage concerns about "going native," fearing that diplomats' perspectives will be influenced by personal attachment to their host community. Fifth, rotation facilitates the recruitment of new diplomats, pairing less desirable 'hardship' posts with promises of a subsequent position in a more desirable post (Kleiner, 2010). Nevertheless, for small powers, the potential gains of investing in diplomatic capital described above are more important than they are for large powers, which are more likely to favor the benefits of rotation.

For these reasons, I expect to observe that small powers have more individuals with higher stocks of diplomatic capital than large powers. At the same time, this does not imply that diplomatic capital is more effective for small powers—or in other words, there is not expected to be an interaction between power and diplomatic capital, and the same amount of diplomatic capital should provide the same degree of influence for any type of state.

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

However, I do not expect that diplomatic capital is equally important across all contexts. Rather, I expect that it is particularly important in the early stages of the policymaking process on *agenda-setting*.

Power, Monitoring, and Agenda-Setting

Large powers 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 likely 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, and thus receive little media attention. For resource-constrained states, this is one of the only strategies by which they can seek to advance policy priorities.

On the other hand, later-stage activities such as resolution politics occur temporally proximate to policy outcomes, which results in greater attention in the media. Assuming that actors have limited attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), they focus their resources where they have the greatest expectations of obtaining success. Thus, late-stage activities should receive more scrutiny by powerful states since it is easier for them to monitor whether others act in line with their preferences. For example, in voting on a resolution, it is quite easy to observe whether a state complies with the desires of powerful states. This enables powerful 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 (e.g., Keohane, 1984).[25] 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.[26]

Large powers do not ignore early-stage activities but rather, because they are more difficult to monitor, struggle to prevent small powers from pursuing such activities, and small

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

[26]E.g., Interview 40.

powers can take advantage of this structural opportunity. This does not imply, however, that the outcomes of early-stage activities are not important to powerful states: These actions create path dependencies that are hard to later change, shifting the status quo towards the preference of the agenda-setter (Romer & Rosenthal, 1978; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987; Cox & McCubbins, 2005). While major powers can exercise influence over the final decision in the later stages of policymaking, by that point concessions from their ideal points are difficult to avoid. Agenda-setting efforts also put forward issue frames that are likely to dominate alternative frames, which can fundamentally shape the way an issue is considered in a policy-making body (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Yet, major powers also care about smaller state satisfaction to achieve the minimal level of legitimacy necessary for institutional equilibrium (Stone, 2011, 14-16). Major powers "compensate weak states by giving them a greater share of decision-making power during ordinary times....Multilateral decision-making procedures are a deliberate institutional design that allows powerful states to credibly transfer control over routine bargaining "(Stone, 2011, 18-9).

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 like agenda-setting, 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.

> H_2: **States with higher diplomatic capital are more likely to engage in agenda-setting than states with lower diplomatic capital.**

This theory implies that small powers have a much larger potential to influence IO politics than has previously been assumed by most IR research, but is consistent with the findings of works such as Panke (2010b); Aksoy (2010); Mikulaschek (2021); Allen & Yuen (2022)

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while explaining the variation in influence amongst small powers. Structural features—that is, the fact that early-stage activities are more difficult to monitor—give small powers 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

I empirically 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 tenure—i.e., ambassador deaths—to identify the effect of experience.

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. This constraint requires that diplomats 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 are contested (that is, not adopted unanimously). On contested items, an average of 10 state diplomats 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.[27] This data provides the unique feature of representing the universe of potential agenda items, which in many empirical settings is unobservable. These proposals are filed months in advance of the September meeting of the GA, which somewhat insulates the process from the influence of

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[27]More details on the agenda-setting procedure are in Appendix Section 1.1.

external events—for example, only a small proportion of agenda proposals concern emergency aid relief. This relatively long bureaucratic process for agenda-setting is distinct from other UN organs like the Security Council, which proceed more rapidly (Mikulaschek, 2021).[28]

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 the submitted agenda items submitted by state diplomats. For each proposal, I collect meta-data that include the co-sponsors of the proposal, the 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, the number of representatives that speak on the item, whether the debate was contested, the vote tally (if one was recorded), and which representatives spoke in favor or against. I also code each item according to its qualitative content employing the UN coding scheme used in the UN Yearbook and the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) scheme (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002).

Agenda items at the UN tend to remain on the agenda for debate year after year and are rarely removed once they are added, with debates and meetings held on the item as long as it is included on the formal agenda. For many of the issues proposed, GA resolutions are adopted in subsequent years, which devote funds, create programs, and establish norms. 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 sates and is likely to remain on the agenda for many years (Hurd, 2008, 112-117). 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. Failed agenda items tend to be highly politicized matters, for example, "The colonial case of Puerto Rico" proposed by Cuba in 1971 and blocked by the US. These failed proposals, many of which contravene strong foreign policy priorities by major powers, suggest the limitations of diplomatic capital: skillful diplomacy

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[28]Issues on the agendas of the GA and SC generally do not overlap (Arias, 2022).

matters, but may not matter enough to overcome very strong preferences of powerful states, though this set of issues is expected to be narrow.

The median total number of proposals by a country is 21, with a maximum of 128. 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 (see Figure A-1).[29] Co-sponsorship ranges from 1 to 62 co-sponsors, with a median of 17 co-sponsors per proposal. 588 proposals (13%) are sponsored by only one country. These proposals have a nearly identical success rate compared to proposals with more than one sponsor, and the number of co-sponsors over time also remains consistent.[30] These statistics are conditional on a country's submitting at least one proposal. There is substantial variation in the topics of proposals, which are dominated by important substantive questions. Defense and peace, public lands (colonial territorial disputes), international affairs,[31] 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).

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

[30]Contrast this with co-sponsorship of GA resolutions, for which drafts *start* with an average of 55 sponsors between 2009 and 2019 (Seabra & Mesquita, 2022). This suggests that, as expected, small power influence is attenuated in later stages of policymaking, requiring more coalition-building to obtain success.

[31]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
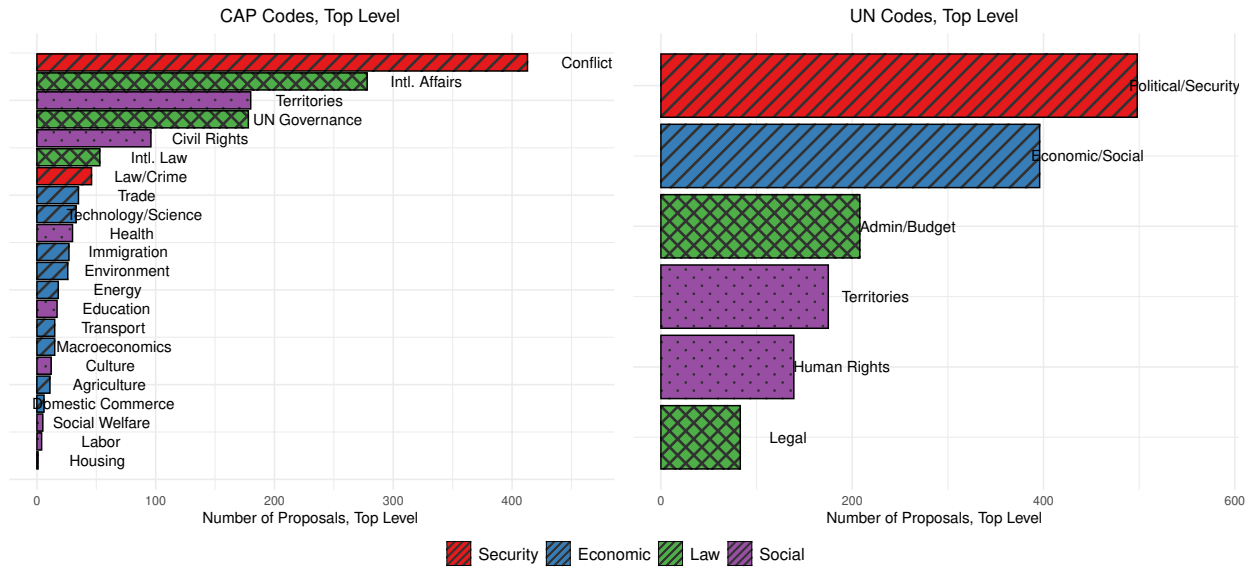
Notes: Total number of proposals according to the two major qualitative coding schemes, the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) and UN internal codes. Colors indicate thematic topic groupings.

Overall, proposals are not dominated by powerful states (the most frequent proposers are listed in Table A-1). 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 members of the G20. The raw results are skewed toward countries that have been UN members for longer—and thus have had greater opportunities over time to submit proposals—which is likely to bias against smaller and post-colonial states. This is especially likely given that during the early period of the UN, the institutional agenda was still largely undefined and member states thus had 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 G20 proposers decreases to 16% of the top 25 (Russia, India, USA, and Indonesia). 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).

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Large powers do not propose substantially more agenda items than small powers do, which demonstrates that the opportunity to influence the agenda does exist for small powers. Furthermore, the proposals raised by small powers tend to be substantively different than those raised by large powers—focusing on issues related to economic and social matters— while large states prioritize issues related to security concerns. This division reflects the differences in large and small powers' foreign policy priorities, as expressed in their speeches in the UN General Debate (Baturo et al., 2017).[32] I argue that while this structural feature of early-stage policymaking gives small powers 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 1). 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

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[32]See Appendix Section 4.

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 accounts for the experience of the Ambassador's larger diplomatic team in the form of their deputy, allows for gaps before a diplomat is reposted, and cases when a deputy is appointed as ambassador, which occurs frequently.[33]

This measurement approach entails a tradeoff. One advantage is that I can compare tenure for all UN members in all years, which means that there are no concerns about missingness resulting in bias. A disadvantage, however, is that I cannot observe at scale other demographic features—such as education or military experience—or social ties that may be relevant for understanding diplomatic effectiveness (e.g., MacDonald, 2021; Arias & Smith, 2018; Haglund, 2015; Heinzel, 2022; Reiners, 2024). Nonetheless, a detailed smaller-scale analysis can shed some light on demographic patterns. I examine nine of the longest-serving ambassadors, focusing on the post-1980 period to maximize data availability.[34]

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 before 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. This is because 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 differ from those of bilateral representation.

Aside from shared diplomatic experience, the ambassadors' professional backgrounds

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[33]Interview 48.

[34]Full profiles are available upon request.

were varied, including business and finance, health, development, education, and legislature. About half were educated at universities in the US or Europe. While most of these individuals were career diplomats, other influential ambassadors—such as the Ambassador from Costa Rica—are political appointees.

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 service.

Predicting Diplomatic Capital

At first glance, all of the 25 countries with the longest diplomatic tenure are small powers (see Table A-2), which comports with the expectation that small power diplomats are more likely to have high diplomatic capital than large power diplomats (Hypothesis 1). To further probe the relationship between state power and diplomatic capital, I employ a regression approach. I expect ambassadorial tenure to be negatively related to measures of state power: Population (logged), GDP (logged), and military expenditure as a share of GDP.

In addition to these key measures of state power, 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 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) from the Mission's preferred language for correspondence in the Blue Book.

At the state level, I include the number of IOs 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. 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. To proxy for the intensity of a state's preferences for multilateralism, I include several measures. First, I include the level of representation at the UN General Debate. Second, I collect data on voluntary contributions to UN agencies from 2009 to 2019, measuring the logged total of voluntary un-earmarked and voluntary earmarked contributions. Third, I include the logged annual number of embassies hosted by that country. Fourth, I include the logged number of UN staff sent by the country to capture the potential influence of country-secretariat connections, which covers 1997-2015, as having staff in IOs may shift IO policy agendas to be closer to that state (Parizek & Stephen, 2021; Thorvaldsdottir, 2023). Finally, democratic regimes may be better positioned to advocate in IOs, which I capture using the Polity2 measures of regime type.[35]

All independent measures are summarized in Table A-3. 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 the main results were consistent in the fully saturated estimation (see Tables A-8 and A-9). 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 the interpretation of results.

I expect that diplomats from small powers are more likely to have high diplomatic capital

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[35]Missing data are interpolated using Amelia, averaging estimates over 5 imputations; results were robust to listwise deletion. Figure A-4 shows that missingness is not systematically correlated with regime type or GDP, though is related to years because of different time coverage in the various datasets.

than diplomats from large powers, or more specifically, they should have higher levels of ambassadorial tenure. In line with these expectations, Figure 3 shows that key measures of power—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.[36] However, this relationship does not hold when examining military expenditure, which is positively and significantly related to tenure. This suggests that small powers with large militaries, relative to their size—for example, Vietnam, Korea, and Israel—also have long tenures.

Figure 3: Small Powers Have Higher Diplomatic Capital
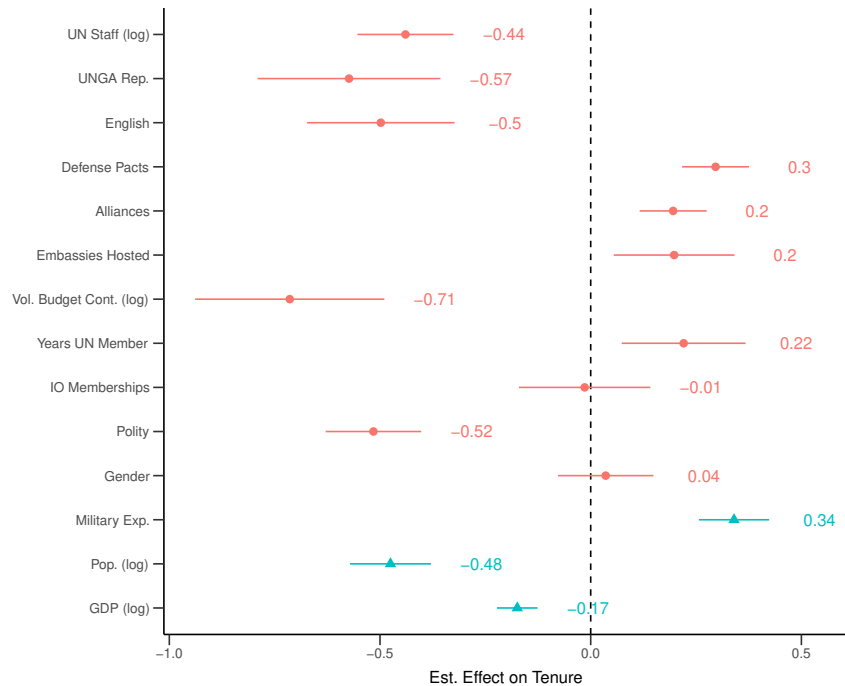
Notes: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals. Red/circle estimates show general diplomatic capital controls; blue/triangle estimates show material resource controls.

In addition to these key theoretical predictors, the relationships between tenure and the

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[36]Full tabular results can be found in Table A-6.

other independent variables are mixed. Importantly, democratic states are less likely to have long-serving ambassadors compared to authoritarian states. This finding is not surprising, as 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. This result should not be ignored, but neither does it suggest that tenure is fully explained by authoritarianism. For example, the magnitude of the effect on regime type is not substantially larger than the positive effect of defense pacts.

These results indicate that small powers are more likely to have long-standing diplomats than large powers. 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. Based on interviews with diplomats at the UN, this was the most commonly mentioned amount of time needed for diplomats to "get their feet under them" after arriving in the post.[37]

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

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[37]Figure A-3 shows the distribution of experience across countries and years. Results are robust to a specification with a continuous measure of tenure when excluding observations above the 95th percentile, though not when these 920 observations are included. This suggests a weak curvilinear relationship may exist at the extreme end of diplomatic longevity, as an individual's social networks are replaced, and substantive expertise and knowledge of rules

likely to propose 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.[38] 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 with 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, measures of diplomatic capital are significant predictors of agenda-setting. GDP and population are generally positively and significantly related to agenda-setting across models, while the relationship with military expenditure is negative and, for the most part, not statistically significant. 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.

Small powers are not necessarily uniquely positioned to maximize investments in diplo-

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become outdated.

[38]Full tabular results can be found in Table A-7.

Figure 4: Diplomatic Capital Significantly Predicts Agenda-setting Frequency
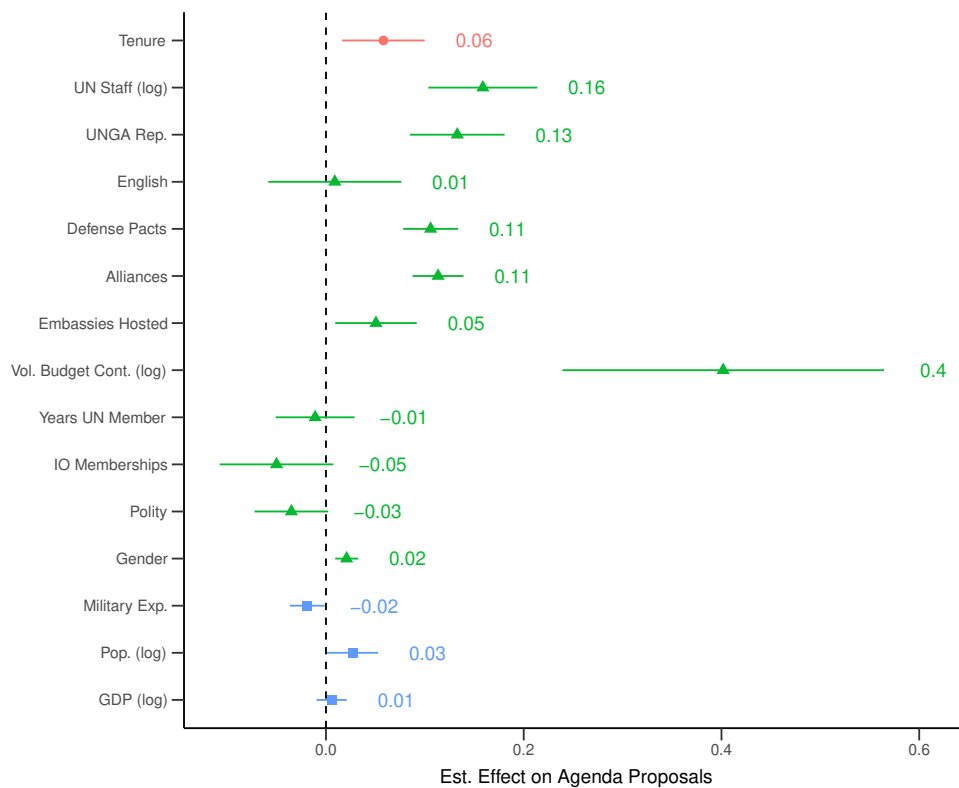
Notes: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals. Red/circle estimate shows key tenure measure; green/triangle estimates show general diplomatic capital controls; blue/circle estimates show material resource controls.

matic capital. I estimate alternative models, subsetting to only small powers, and observe the same pattern of results as in the whole sample. I also estimate models that interact ambassadorial tenure with the measures of smallness and do not observe a significant effect of this interaction (Table A-11). The independent effect of tenure remains significant in all of the models, but the interaction effects do not achieve statistical significance. While small powers may invest more in their diplomatic capital (see Table A-2), these results suggest that any state that invests in diplomatic capital can expect 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 powers. Some investments in multilateral diplomacy—such as establishing new alliances or contributing additional funds and staff to the UN—are costly and out of reach for some small powers. The magnitude of the effect of ambassadorial experience is nearly as large as these other sources of diplomatic capital—and is larger than the magnitude of the effect of the number of embassies hosted.

The implication of these results is not that small powers dominate agenda-setting at the UN, but rather that they are not precluded from participating in the ways that many existing theories would predict. Major powers still engage in agenda-setting by proposing items and blocking agenda proposals that contravene important foreign policy priorities. For example, the representation of Taiwan in the UN is one of China's most important issues, and even the most skilled diplomat cannot circumvent China's opposition to this proposal. Bearing this scope condition in mind, while powerful states may be able to determine the outcomes of very high salience—but also very rare—cases, for a large majority of political decisions, diplomatic capital can be a tool for small powers to gain influence.

Robustness

I conduct additional tests to predict both tenure and agenda proposing. In both cases, I find that the main results—that small powers have longer tenure on average, and that ambassadorial tenure is a significant positive predictor of agenda proposing—hold across all specifications, which can be found in Figures A-8—A-10. First, I estimate models only using observations from 1990 and later to exclude Cold War dynamics, as it may be the case that small powers do better when major powers vie for their support. Second, I exclude China and then Belarus and Ukraine from the models to ensure these states do not drive the results. Third, I change the method of handling missing data from multiple imputation to listwise deletion. 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 a negative binomial model to account for overdispersion. Seventh, I replace year fixed effects with time trends to capture potential temporal dynamics. Eighth, I test measures of small power status based on political constructs rather than material resources. As Maass (2009, 66) argues, "[s]ince small states exist in all kinds of forms, shapes and sizes, international relations has to account for that and apply different conceptualizations of the small state as needed and appropriate."

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. In these issue areas, we might expect to see power-based rather than rules-based bargaining, which would especially disadvantage small powers (Steinberg, 2002). Second, I exclude procedural and commemorative proposals from the data to ensure that non-substantive proposals are not driving the results—that is, whether small powers are allowed to influence the agenda only on issues of little importance to large powers. Third, I remove countries in the bottom quartile of standard deviation in turnover to proxy for highly regularized turnover rules.

Across these specifications, the results from the main models hold. Predicting tenure, population remains negatively related to tenure in 5/8 tests and GDP remains negatively related in 6/8 tests, while military expenditures remain positively related in 6/8 models. All of the politically constructed indicators of smallness are strongly and significantly related to tenure. For the agenda-setting models, in all cases, the direction and statistical significance of the effects hold. In 12/14 robustness test, the magnitude of the effect is substantively the same, and in the two cases where the magnitudes change, it is a *larger* effect.

Taking these results together, we can have a high level of confidence that the expected relationships do exist: that small powers 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 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 to therefore negatively affect its ability to engage in agenda-setting. However, in the years following the turnover, as the new ambassador gains experience, their diplomatic capital increases, and the Mission should start to regain 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.[39] 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 predicts a statistically significant 5.9 percentage point decrease in agenda-proposals (Figure 5). As expected, this effect is attenuated over time as the new team gains diplomatic capital.[40]

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. The foreign ministry must fill the post rapidly, which precludes a strategic selection process for the ambassador's replacement. Thus, in this case, the replacement ambassador is more similar to a randomly assigned replacement. 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 the post.[41] I extract these records and create the death indicator following the same procedure as for the turnover indicator described above.[42]

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

[40]The lead term shows no pre-treatment trends. The null effects in years $t+3$ to $t+5$ may be a result of additional turnovers that occur during this 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.

[41]See here for an example.

[42]Table A-12 shows that states that experience ambassadorial deaths and those that do not are balanced across relevant measures such as Policy and GDP.

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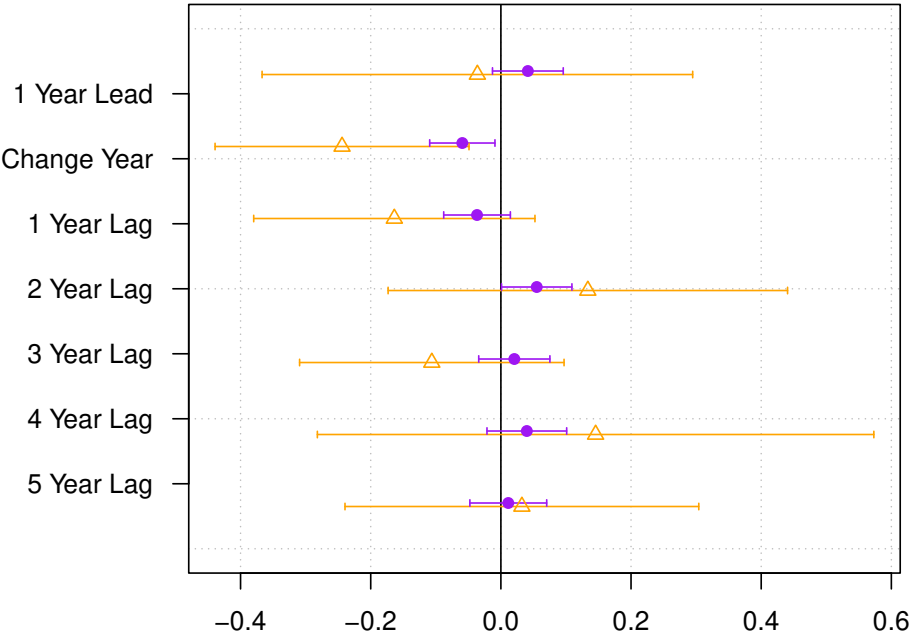
Notes: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates from turnover models are shown in purple/filled circles; estimates from death models are shown in orange/open triangles.

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 normal turnover. This is in line with my expectation that an unexpected death would serve as a larger shock to diplomatic capital than a typical turnover, 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-12 and A-13 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 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. Together, these tests help to assuage concerns that the effectiveness of an ambassador could predict both their tenure and their agenda-setting success.

Across these 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 agenda-setting, and particularly in explaining how small powers can influence IO politics.

Alternative Explanations: Major Power Influence

An important alternative explanation to consider is whether small powers are simply pass-throughs for the influence of large powers. In other political activities in IOs, great powers have been shown to shape the behavior of smaller powers through inducements and threats to act in accordance with their preferences (e.g., Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Dreher et al., 2008;

Vreeland & Dreher, 2014; Carter & Stone, 2015).[43]

The example of Aiken's non-proliferation proposal illustrates that small power diplomats are independent proposers and that diplomatic capital can even be effective at shaping the agenda against great power preferences. Aiken's proposal faced significant opposition from major powers—including, at various points, the US, the UK, France, and the Soviet Union. This opposition was present from the beginning, when Aiken's proposal was contested in the General Committee: While most proposals are adopted by consensus, non-proliferation was nearly voted down. State Department officials described the proposal as "potentially dangerous" and "disruptive," and advised that Aiken should be discouraged from trying to advance the measure.[44] British diplomats shared in these assessments.[45] Given that the major powers were largely unified in their opposition to the measure, it seems unlikely that Aiken's proposal could have been part of a proxy campaign. The Irish Department of External Affairs claimed sole sponsorship of the measure (Manathunga, 1996, 102), pushing back on such narratives. Indeed, Ireland's diplomacy was regarded as being strongly independent (Dorr, 1996), and there was no evidence of systematic consultations with other states in advance on the non-proliferation proposal (Chossudovsky, 1990, 112).

Interviews with diplomats corroborate the independence of diplomatic proposals and sug-

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[43]A standard approach to testing for great power influence—and its inverse, neutrality—would be to include alignment scores (Bailey et al., 2017) as a predictor. However, because such scores are based on voting on UN resolutions (*outputs*), they are endogenous to activities on setting the UN agenda (*inputs*) and are thus inappropriate measures in this context.

[44]State Department telegram GADEL 35 to U.S. Delegation to the UN, October 5, 1958.

[45]US Delegation to the UN telegram DELGA 169, October 14, 1958; Memorandum of Conversation, "Irish Disarmament Resolution at 14th General Assembly," with British Note Attached, September 1, 1959.

gest that they are unlikely to be a function of great power influence. Diplomats emphasized that the issues that they raise at the UN must be in line with the state's foreign policy as the ultimate guiding principle. When asked about the sources of policy ideas, respondents were most likely to say capital (27% of responses) or the diplomats at the Mission (22%).If the idea originates at the Mission or with civil society partners, capital must approve the idea before the proposal can go ahead.[46]

Collaborating with large powers on proposing agenda items is not a priority for diplomats. When respondents were asked "Who do you work with to advance an agenda proposal?" 25 respondents said the regional or sub-regional group, followed by 19 respondents who said like-minded countries. Only two respondents said that "the P5" or "the most influential states" were their partners. Similarly, when asked to identify key actors to get support from, respondents were more likely to point to regional groups than great powers.[47] These findings are in line with other studies of small powers in IR, which point to the importance of neutrality for small powers to have normative influence (e.g., Björkdahl, 2007; Panke, 2010a).

Conclusion

Lyne et al. (2006, 56) argue that "[i]n the study of IOs, the consensus view is that small states do not affect IO behavior in significant ways." I challenge the conventional notion that materially powerful states should dominate IO politics. I theorize that while large powers may be able to deploy material resources to dominate late-stage activities, small and medium powers can do better in early-stage activities such as agenda-setting. It is

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[46]Interview 20.

[47]Of 27 respondents who identified key actors, 8 named the P5 or most powerful states, while other respondents were more likely to name the global south, regional groups, or G77.

diplomatic capital—not material resources—that small powers can deploy in these contexts, even contravening the preferences of major powers in some cases. Diplomacy, though often overlooked by international relations scholarship, matters in international politics. Despite power asymmetries between states, individual effectiveness matters in IOs, just as it does in the domestic legislative context. I show that smaller powers are more likely to have high diplomatic capital than large powers, 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.

I shine light on the early stages of IO policymaking, which, though they comprise the majority of the everyday work of diplomats, have been largely unexamined. The ability to influence the IO agenda in the early stages of policymaking is substantively important. These activities can yield substantial returns in terms of policy on key issues to small powers— such as non-proliferation, development, and the rule of law — as well as political reputational benefits. Even non-binding GA resolutions construct durable norms, create new programs, and dedicate large amounts of funds. Agenda-setting power establishes issue frames and creates path dependence in bureaucratic institutions. This can shift the ideal point of the final outcome closer to that of the agenda-setter. Thus, while large powers can influence voting outcomes on the final resolutions, agenda-setting influence by small powers forces concessions away from major powers' ideal points and from the status quo. In illuminating these early-stage policymaking dynamics, I contribute two new datasets on agenda proposals and ambassadorial tenure that can be fruitfully applied by scholars to examine questions relating to influence (e.g., Voeten, 2014) and policy entrepreneurship (e.g., 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 diplo-

matic capital with greater nuance. Drawing on the literature on leader effectiveness and disposition (e.g., Horowitz et al., 2015; Saunders, 2011; Lupton, 2022; Rathbun, 2011), the effects of serving in the military or other IOs, having trusting dispositions, or attending elite western universities could be probed for their relationship to diplomatic effectiveness. Network dynamics may also prove a fruitful avenue for future research, building on findings that heads of state with prior relationships may collaborate more (Krcmaric et al., 2020). Such avenues could further illuminate the specific mechanisms of diplomatic capital—social networks, substantive expertise, and bureaucratic knowledge—and test for cross-institutional linkages.

The logic of my theory of diplomatic capital is not specific to the context of the UN: Because the diffusion of institutional structures from the UN to other IOs is likely (e.g., Lenz & Burilkov, 2017; Sommerer & Tallberg, 2019), these insights are expected to be generalizable to other IOs. Features such as equal and consensus-based voting, permanent representation, multi-issue and technical domains, and formal rules constrain the influence of material resources and therefore make diplomatic capital more likely to be influential. This implies that institutions such as the EU and WTO 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 powers are more influential than previous work has credited. The diplomats of small powers 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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