

Politicizing the Global Bureaucracy: Populism and the Erosion of Expertise in IOs

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Abstract

International organizations (IOs) face hostility from governments that see them as constraints on sovereignty and vehicles of elite power. Yet we know little about how this contempt translates into institutional change. We argue that a key mechanism is the politicization of leadership and staff appointments. Because IOs rely on professional expertise to exercise authority and implement their mandates, personnel decisions provide governments with an opportunity to weaken these institutions. Focusing on populism as an especially important case, we argue that these leaders often prefer political loyalists to technocrats, both to signal anti-elitism and to assert control over IOs. However, this strategy is conditional on domestic institutions, which can limit leaders' room to maneuver. We test this argument using new data on more than 1,200 senior appointments to the United Nations system between 1995 and 2019. We find that populist governments are significantly more likely to appoint under-qualified representatives, but only among less constrained leaders. The results show how governments hostile to IOs can undermine them through personnel politics, highlighting a central channel through which institutional expertise is eroded from within.

Keywords: international institutions; global governance; populism; United Nations

Word count: 7,514

When Nicolás Maduro selected Venezuela’s permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) in 2014, he bypassed the country’s professional diplomatic corps entirely, instead sending Rafael Ramírez to New York.¹ Ramírez was a former energy minister and head of the state oil company — a political loyalist with no prior diplomatic experience. The decision to forgo diplomatic expertise is consequential: a permanent representative oversees a country’s presence at the UN, bargaining over resolutions and line-item budgets, shaping priorities on the institutional agenda, cultivating coalitions that swing pivotal votes, and sitting at the center of multilateral crisis diplomacy. Such work routinely demands decades of accumulated diplomatic experience, especially for countries that lack structural power.²

Yet not all leaders appoint under-qualified, loyal ambassadors, even when their political orientation is hostile to traditional institutions and diplomats steeped in the norms of the liberal international order. Consider India under Narendra Modi, whose nationalist, anti-establishment bona fides are well-established and who has reshaped much of the Indian state in his own image. India’s permanent representatives have remained, without exception, career officers of the Indian Foreign Service.³

What characteristics do countries prioritize when making appointments to international organizations (IOs)? More specifically, what determines whether leaders favor loyalty or competence when making appointments to these bodies? We argue that leaders who are hostile to IOs use political appointments to signal anti-elitism and undermine the organization. However, while such leaders are often inclined to dispatch loyalists to key institutions like the UN, their ability to do so depends on the domestic constraints they face. In India, for example, the foreign service, not the prime minister, decides who occupies the permanent representative’s chair, limiting the leader’s discretion.

To capture leaders’ disdain for IOs, we focus on populists since this represents a conse-

¹*Reuters*, 2014, <https://bit.ly/4xP9KBq>

²See Arias (2026).

³*Permanent Mission of India to the UN*, 2026, <https://pminewyork.gov.in/IndiaPR>

quential, numerous group that has demonstrated aversion to IOs across time and space. Populism is defined by two core commitments: (1) anti-elitism, or the claim that “the people” are exploited by self-serving cosmopolitan elites, and (2) a pro-sovereignty stance, or the insistence that leaders should exercise ultimate authority over their nation’s affairs (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Multilateral institutions offend both principles (Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019; Carnegie and Clark, 2026). They are staffed by technocrats whose expertise carries epistemic authority and are designed to “prescribe [and] proscribe” state behavior (Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal, 2001, 762). From a populist viewpoint, IOs therefore constitute constraining bodies run by the elites they denounce.

Installing loyal but under-qualified representatives advances three populist goals. First, it places a sympathetic gatekeeper inside the organization, allowing leaders to monitor or slow decisions that threaten national autonomy. Second, it degrades the professional capacity of the institution, which can indirectly undercut the IO’s ability to monitor and enforce compliance. Third, it signals contempt for IOs’ expert culture and gratifies constituents who share that contempt (Handlin, Kaya and Günaydin, 2023).

Yet not all populists can act on these incentives. Whether a leader fills an IO post with a loyalist or a professional depends on the amount of discretion they have over such an appointment. In many states, the head of government names the country’s representatives directly and at will; in others, a professional, merit-based foreign service effectively controls who is posted abroad, insulating these decisions from political interference. Populists who enjoy such discretion can translate their anti-elite preferences into politicized appointments, while those who do not tend to send credentialed professionals. The politicization of the global bureaucracy, in other words, is conditional on institutional permissiveness at home.

To test these propositions, we leverage a novel dataset on the professional backgrounds of the permanent representatives whom roughly 150 countries sent to the United Nations between 1995 and 2019, which we hand-coded from biographical sources. We merge it with a cross-national measure of populist rule (Funke, Schularick and Trebesch, 2023) and original data on each state’s

domestic appointment infrastructure. The latter includes both statutory and *de facto* considerations to capture formal rules, which may be more or less binding, as well as actual practices. We find that populist executives are markedly more likely than non-populists to appoint representatives with no professional diplomatic background, but that this effect is concentrated among states whose institutions grant the executive discretion over appointments. This separation suggests that even though emboldened populists may ignore or try to circumvent the guardrails of domestic political institutions, such constraints often prevent them from doing so. Where career foreign-service rules bind, populists and non-populists appoint similarly credentialed individuals. Strong institutions at home can then insulate the bureaucracy abroad.

These findings help explain otherwise puzzling variation in the quality of appointments to the UN and other multilateral bodies. They also speak to several bodies of scholarship. First, they extend the burgeoning literature regarding populism’s impact on global governance, which has focused largely on withdrawal threats, budget cuts, the manipulation of information, and rhetorical attacks (Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019; Voeten, 2020; Carnegie, Clark and Zucker, 2024; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2025). We reveal a subtle but consequential channel in the form of personnel power. Second, we advance literature on the domestic politics of diplomatic appointments of career and political officials (Malis, 2021; MacDonald, 2021; Goldfien, 2024). While most previous work on this topic focuses on the U.S. diplomatic service, by taking a cross-national approach we are able to leverage variation in constraints to assess the impact of domestic institutions on leaders’ appointment decisions. Third, we contribute to research on IO bureaucracies by demonstrating how domestic politics shape not only the mandates IOs receive but also the human capital they can deploy.⁴ In doing so, we complicate the loyalty-competence tradeoff, which has long been central to the study of autocratic regimes and national security bureaucracies (Egorov and Sonin, 2011; Talmadge, 2015). We show that in this setting, some leaders favor able subordinates, and may not value competence in IOs to begin with. Finally, by identifying a previously underappreciated mechanism that impairs IO functioning, we refine theories of when and why IOs

⁴See Clark, Dolan and Jost 2025 for a review.

succeed or falter (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Gutner and Thompson, 2010; Lall, 2017; Gray, 2018; Lundgren et al., 2023).

At a time when collective responses to pressing global challenges like climate change, artificial intelligence, and financial instability are imperative, populist staffing strategies threaten to erode the expertise on which effective cooperation depends. Understanding this pattern, and the conditions under which it emerges, is therefore critical for both scholars and practitioners of international politics.

Expertise, Populists, and IOs

IOs rely on a heterogeneous cohort of officials to carry out their mandates. Some are international civil servants, or the permanent bureaucrats employed by the organization. These individuals collect and standardize data, draft technical reports, and monitor compliance with international rules and norms. These functions underpin virtually every IO, from managing global health statistics at the World Health Organization to verifying disarmament commitments at the International Atomic Energy Agency. International civil servants are accountable to their superiors within IOs first and foremost, which renders any state influence partial and indirect (see e.g., Clark and Dolan 2021).

Another key type of IO official is the diplomat that member states appoint to represent them inside these bodies, such as permanent representatives at the UN or executive directors at the IMF. Diplomats (along with civil servants) supply the informational, operational, and political backbone on which multilateral cooperation rests (Clark, Dolan and Jost, 2025). These delegates are named and paid by national governments rather than the secretariat. They must serve at their home state's pleasure; they are the most direct lever a leader has over how their country is represented within an IO (Falzon, 2021; Pouliot, 2016). Although civil servants and diplomats often work in concert, it is diplomats for whom the political selection mechanisms we identify come into play, and so we focus on them.

The specific officials who occupy diplomatic posts matter a great deal. Indeed, a growing literature shows that accounting for the impact of particular IO officials explains important substantive variation in IO outcomes. World Bank Task Team Leaders with field experience achieve higher project performance ratings (Heinzel and Liese, 2021; Honig, 2018); IMF officials vary in their prioritization of economic issues across surveillance and lending operations (Lang, Wellner and Kentikelenis, 2024; Clark and Zucker, 2024); UN peacekeepers with command experience reduce civilian casualties through strategic deployment (Kim, Chae and Sandler, 2025); and World Bank projects that include women more deeply mainstream gender issues (Heinzel, Weaver and Jorgensen, 2025). The experience and status of national diplomats affect the issues added to IO agendas and how they are addressed (Pouliot, 2016; Forster, 2024; Arias, 2026), and the social relationships between ambassadors create coalitions to support new initiatives (Arias and Bare, 2025). Individual officials within IOs can even shape (and reshape) institutional design (Johnson, 2014). These patterns accord with findings in domestic politics that leaders' identities and professional networks help determine policy (Carcelli, 2024; Jost, 2024; Thrall, 2024; Casler and Jost, 2025), as well as those showing that individual diplomats and bureaucrats impact outcomes across IOs (Falzon, 2021; Pouliot, 2016; Hardt, 2014; Goes and Chapman, 2024; Breen and Doak, 2021; Clark, Dolan and Jost, 2025; Arias, Clark and Kaya, 2026).

Due to the power inherent in these positions, competition is intense for influential postings like the permanent representative's chair at the UN or a seat on the IMF's Executive Board. Member states that value multilateral cooperation invest heavily in recruiting the most qualified candidates, who are typically individuals with advanced degrees, multilingual field experience, and reputations for impartiality (Chwiero, 2015; Nelson, 2017; Clark and Dolan, 2021). Experienced officials increase the likelihood that an organization will deliver programmatic success and their home governments will realize tangible benefits including larger aid packages, more favorable dispute resolutions, or greater agenda influence. The question of who staffs IOs is thus central to the politics of global governance (Novosad and Werker, 2014; Parízek, 2017). Selecting someone who lacks diplomatic experience or elite credentials is therefore costly, as it can result in

less favorable or efficient outcomes (Lewis, 2008; Talmadge, 2015).

However, we argue that populist leaders prioritize different qualities than their mainstream counterparts when filling such posts because they derive ideological and electoral benefits from demonstrating contempt for multilateral expertise (Handlin, Kaya and Günaydin, 2023; Kelemen, 2020). Populists distrust the authority of experts, believing that specialized knowledge masks class interest or foreign manipulation; they tend to privilege common sense and personal experience over elite training and best practices (Bellodi, Morelli and Vannoni, 2024; Gauchat, 2012; Eichengreen, 2018). They castigate technocrats as out of touch with ordinary people and are uniquely susceptible to conspiracy theories (Brewer, 2016; Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017; van Kessel, Sajuria and Van Hauwaert, 2020; Norris, Cameron and Wynter, 2018). Disdain for international technocracy also resonates with populist supporters who feel marginalized by globalization (Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019; Broz, Frieden and Weymouth, 2021). Most populists are influenced by some combination of these ideological and electoral benefits, with the same result.

They thus tend to select less-qualified representatives, which allows a populist to simultaneously degrade an institution, tighten personal control over its day-to-day functions, and demonstrate their anti-elite orientation. Appointing a seasoned technocrat undercuts populists' anti-IO narrative, while selecting a loyal political operative or celebrity donor reinforces it. Populists find it attractive to install a trusted insider who will defend their domestic priorities and thwart multilateral agendas. More experienced individuals may privilege objective outcomes of success above the leader's narrow goals. Indeed, officials' preferences tend to follow from their professional positions and socialization rather than from the leaders' instructions alone (Allison, 1971; Allison and Halperin, 1972). Since a career diplomat is socialized into the professional norms of the foreign service and has career incentives aligned with serving as an effective policymaking agent (Goldfien, 2024), a political ally who depends on executive patronage is more likely to follow instructions to stall unfavorable reports, leak sensitive drafts, or obstruct consensus that threatens

the home government's preferred course of action.⁵ While other types of leaders may also have incentives to politicize staffing, they tend to value the benefits of IOs more highly and derive fewer domestic benefits from undermining IOs than populists, who often oppose the entire project of internationalism (Carnegie and Clark, 2026).⁶

The Conditioning Role of Appointment Discretion

A populist's contempt for international expertise does not automatically translate into the appointment of unqualified representatives. Leader preferences must pass through institutions, and countries vary in the set of rules and practices that determine who, within a government, actually controls the people a state sends abroad. We refer to this as a country's degree of *appointment discretion*, which we define as the extent to which the head of government can name the state's representatives to IOs freely, as opposed to inheriting appointees selected through a professional, merit-based process insulated from political direction.

At one extreme sit states in which the executive appoints officials at will. In many presidential systems, and in foreign ministries whose senior postings are filled by political patronage, the permanent representative to the United Nations serves at the leader's pleasure and can be replaced with a loyalist overnight. Here, the populist's anti-elite preference can determine the appointment. When Hugo Chávez and later Nicolás Maduro sent combative loyalists rather than career diplomats to speak for Venezuela at the United Nations, or when Evo Morales and Rafael Correa did the same for Bolivia and Ecuador, these abilities reflected their constitutions and politicized foreign ministries.

At the other extreme are states with professional, merit-based foreign services. In these systems, postings to New York are earned through decades of service, competitive examination,

⁵While politically appointed ambassadors may not be less effective than career diplomats in bilateral postings (Goldfien, 2024; Malis, 2021), populists deliberately choose individuals who will undercut the IO.

⁶The strategy echoes dynamics recognized in the sociology of "organizational deviance," whereby opponents of an organization deliberately foster toxic environments (Likert, 1967; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

and institutional seniority; the diplomatic corps, not the chief executive, effectively determines who occupies the chair. A populist who governs atop such a bureaucracy may find that the machinery of appointment delivers a seasoned diplomat regardless of their preferences. The leader of this type of country (e.g., India and Japan) inherits a permanent representative groomed over a professional lifetime, who cannot be easily removed or readily replaced with a political ally. In other words, we expect that when a professional foreign service controls postings, even populists tend to appoint professionals because they cannot readily act on their impulses.

Many states sit in between these extremes of high and low discretion, and leaders in such states at various points may appoint loyalists or foreign service professionals. In the U.S., for example, the Permanent Representative to the United Nations is often a political appointee with little experience in the diplomatic realm. Donald Trump appointed Kelly Craft, known for her brief ambassadorship to Canada and for declaring that she “believed in both sides of the science” on climate change,⁷ while Joe Biden appointed Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a 35-year veteran of the Foreign Service.⁸

Given this substantial variation in the degree to which domestic political institutions constrain (or do not constrain) diplomatic appointments by leaders, we therefore advance the following argument. Populists prefer loyal, politically reliable representatives over credentialed professionals, but whether they can satisfy this preference depends on the domestic institutions that govern appointments. As such, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Populist leaders appoint less professional representatives to the United Nations than non-populists do, but only where the executive enjoys discretion over appointments. Where a professional, merit-based foreign service controls postings, populism does not affect the professional profile of a country’s representatives.

⁷Rummier, Orion. “Trump’s UN ambassador pick said she supports ‘both sides’ of climate science.” Axios. Feb 23, 2019.

⁸The populist Trump is not the only U.S. president to appoint a political agent for the UN Permanent Representatives — presidents more oriented towards participation in global governance such as Barack Obama also have done so, for example, in his appointment of Samantha Power, though these political appointees are selected to advance rather than hinder IO operations.

A Focus on the United Nations

We focus our empirical analysis on the United Nations because it is a highly salient and consequential IO that embodies the two features populists most resent: elite authority and multi-lateral constraint. The UN is the hub through which states coordinate peace operations, negotiate sanctions, codify international law, set global health standards, and funnel billions of dollars in development assistance. Its General Assembly confers legitimacy on state behavior, its Security Council can authorize military action, and its specialized agencies shape everything from aviation safety to intellectual-property enforcement (Vreeland and Dreher, 2014; Voeten, 2001; Hurd, 1999).

Inside the UN, diplomats have consequential roles. They draft resolutions, bargain over line-item budget allocations, lobby for committee assignments, and cultivate coalitions that can swing pivotal votes (Vreeland and Dreher, 2014). Much of this work is relationship-driven: lasting influence depends on knowing which delegate can unblock a stalled paragraph in the Fifth Committee at midnight, or which regional group is searching for a co-sponsor on a human-rights text. Accumulated experience translates directly into issue-area authority and reputational capital. A seasoned envoy who can cite past precedents, invoke informal norms, and anticipate Secretariat preferences often steers negotiations in ways that benefit the home government (Arias, 2026). Many UN appointees are graduates of prestigious universities or have other work experiences — for example at prominent law or consulting firms — that otherwise signal their elite credentials.

These features make the UN a prime target for populist backlash (Farrall, 2020). First, its decision procedures constrain unilateral action. For example, Security Council resolutions impose binding obligations, treaty bodies monitor human-rights compliance, and budget committees withhold funding from programs that violate financial-integrity rules. Second, the UN is the archetypal home of the “global elite.” Its secretariat, permanent civil servants, and diplomats are unelected technocrats, steeped in international law and socialized into cosmopolitan norms, who enjoy bureaucratic insulation and often speak a professional dialect remote from everyday political discourse at home. For populist leaders who campaign on restoring national sovereignty and

elevating “common sense” above expert rule, the UN epitomizes the foreign, aloof authority they promise to tame.

Studying the United Nations thus offers a double payoff. Substantively, it reveals how the trade-off between populism and expertise unfolds in a consequential arena. Empirically, it provides rich biographical and performance data on diplomats, enabling us to test how variation in professional pedigree shapes state behavior and institutional outcomes.

Data and Measurement

We assemble an original dataset on the professional backgrounds of countries’ permanent representatives to the United Nations, covering roughly 150 countries between 1995 and 2019. We hand-code biographical information from successive volumes of “Who’s Who in International Affairs,” which supply detailed career histories for prominent individuals in international politics. For each ambassador, we recorded the number of years spent in distinct career tracks including national diplomatic service, UN-internal posts, other international-organization roles, the military, other national-government positions, and outside (non-governmental) careers. This database is advantageous for its broad coverage and its consistency. That is, most ambassadors in the population are included in the database, and most entries are characterized by the same data fields and levels of specificity. Out of 1,283 UN ambassadors from 1995-2019, records were available for 971 (76%).

From these histories we constructed two complementary outcomes that capture the competence of a given individual. The first, *Diplomatic Share*, is the proportion of an ambassador’s prior career spent in diplomatic or IO roles (mean 0.72), where higher values denote a more professional, career-diplomatic profile. The second, *Political Appointee*, is a binary indicator equal to one when an ambassador has *no* prior diplomatic or IO experience, which describes about ten percent of cases.

Our key independent variable is whether a country’s leader is a populist, lagged one year, from Funke, Schularick and Trebesch (2023). They identify executives who claim to rep-

resent “true, common people” against “elites,” classifying around 1,500 leaders as populist or non-populist by digitizing hundreds of books, chapters, and academic articles on populism. Because populist incumbency turns on and off *within* countries over time, its effect is identified even under country fixed effects.

Whether populists can act on their incentives, however, depends on whether the executive actually controls who is appointed. We therefore code each country’s degree of *executive appointment discretion* over its UN representative on a one-to-five scale, distinguishing systems in which the head of government appoints freely from those in which a professional, merit-based foreign service effectively determines postings. This variable was constructed from a variety of sources including primary legal texts such as national constitutions (accessed via constituteproject.org or official government portals), foreign service acts/laws, and civil service statutes. We also relied on official government sources including foreign ministry websites and parliamentary records of confirmation hearings, and academic and policy sources. Finally, we use the observed career backgrounds of recent UN appointments. A full list of codings, with sources and variable construction, is reported in the appendix, and in more detail in our codebook.

A potential concern is that incorporating the observed career profiles of recent permanent representatives into the coding risks conflating the moderator with the outcome: a country whose ambassadors are political appointees might receive a high discretion score partly by construction. However, it is important that our measure includes both statutory *de jure* rules and actual *de facto* appointment practices.⁹ Politicizing the machinery of the state, including the foreign ministry, is a signature populist project (Bellodi, Morelli and Vannoni, 2024; Kelemen, 2020), and populist leaders might erode or ignore constraints on diplomatic appointments. Venezuela’s diplomatic corps, for instance, was substantially more professionalized before Hugo Chávez’s leadership than after. In contexts in which a merit-based foreign service is entrenched, dismantling it requires legislative change, sustained confrontation with the bureaucracy, and political capital; thus, we ex-

⁹The results are robust when the measure is restricted to only include statutory rules, i.e., excluding the observed career profiles. See Appendix G.

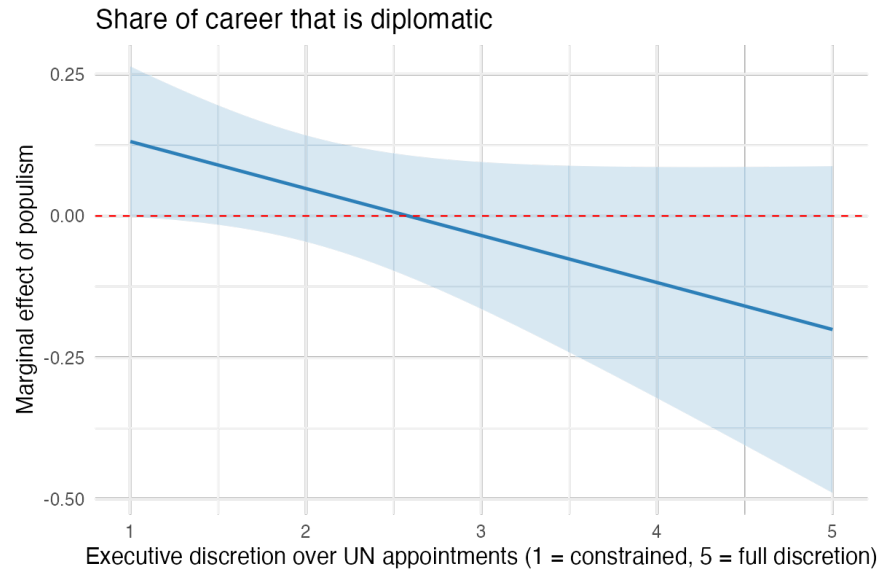
pect that changes to institutional constraints are rare. However, in some cases, leaders may ignore rather than change constraining rules. Because statutory rules on appointments may be ignored by emboldened populist leaders, we include a measure of observed constraints — the actual career backgrounds of appointees — in constructing our discretion measure. Further, if populists actually ignored or changed constraints on appointments with regularity, we would observe no differences in the appointment decisions of populist leaders in high and low discretion environments, which our empirical analysis refutes.

In our analysis, our sharpest test contrasts *discretionary* systems (score ≥ 4) against *constrained* ones (score ≤ 2), setting aside the partially constrained middle. Because appointment rules are slow-moving, discretion enters as a moderator rather than as a free-standing cause. We interact it with (lagged) populist incumbency, which supplies the within-country variation that identifies the effect.

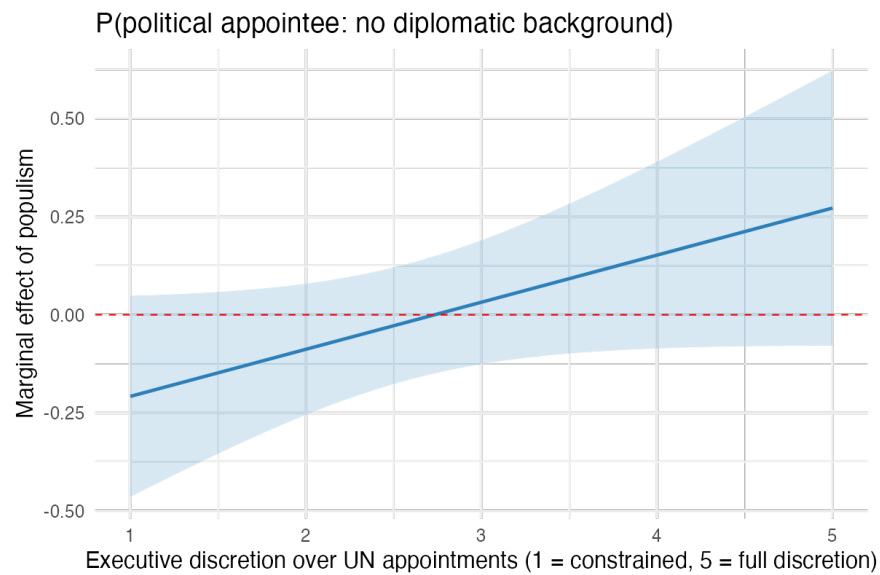
Results

We estimate linear models of each outcome on the interaction of populist incumbency and appointment discretion, with country and year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country. Table 1 reports the central results. The pattern is consistent across both outcomes and a range of specifications: populist leaders appoint markedly less professional ambassadors, but *only* where they enjoy appointment discretion. In a discretionary system, a populist government reduces the diplomatic share of the ambassador’s career by more than a third (-0.38 , $p < .1$) and raises the probability of a political, no-background appointee by more than 50 points ($+0.53$, $p < .01$) —an enormous shift against a ten-percent base rate. Where career foreign-service rules bind, populism has no discernible effect on either outcome. Figure 1 traces these populism slopes across the full discretion scale: both are indistinguishable from zero under constrained rules and reach the predicted magnitude only at high discretion.

These findings survive a battery of robustness checks. The interaction holds under a fuller specification adding country wealth, population, and trade; and it is, if anything, stronger once we



(a) Diplomatic career share



(b) Probability of a political (no-background) appointee

Figure 1: Marginal effect of populist incumbency on the professional profile of a country's UN ambassador, across the degree of executive appointment discretion (1 = constrained, 5 = full discretion), with 95% confidence intervals.

Table 1: Populism, appointment discretion, and the professional profile of UN ambassadors

	Diplomatic career share		Political appointee	
	Fuller	Net of GDP	Fuller	Net of GDP
Populism $\times$ Discretionary	−0.378*	−0.424*	0.532**	0.857***
	(0.180)	(0.204)	(0.198)	(0.210)
Populism $\times$ GDP (size)		−0.036		0.257**
		(0.061)		(0.097)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fuller controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	462	462	485	485

Notes: Linear models with country and year fixed effects; standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.

“Discretionary” contrasts appointment-discretion scores ≥ 4 with scores ≤ 2 . Fuller controls comprise leader right-ideology, V-Dem polyarchy, distance from the United States in UN ideal points, UN Security Council membership, US aid, FDI/GDP, log GDP per capita, log population, and trade/GDP; the “net of GDP” columns add the populism $\times$ GDP (economic size) interaction. $^{\dagger}p < .1$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

control for the populism $\times$ economic-size interaction—a natural proxy for state-power—showing that appointment discretion does independent work rather than standing in for raw structural power (Table 1, “net of GDP”). Further, larger economies are more likely to send a no-background appointee even net of discretion (populism $\times$ economic size = +0.26, $p < .01$), consistent with the intuition that structural power lessens a government’s need for diplomatic skill. In other words, a state that can command deference by sheer weight has less reason to spend a posting on a credentialed envoy. This additive channel appears only for the binary appointee margin and not for the continuous measure of diplomatic experience; we report it, along with a three-way interaction between populism, power, and discretion, in the appendix, but do not build our theory on it. The continuous one-to-five discretion measure yields the same signs (both $p < .1$) and is robust to excluding the United States, confirming that the action lies at the discretionary extreme. The interaction is likewise robust to omitting any single country from the sample (Appendix C).

Because right- and left-leaning governments might staff missions differently, every model controls for leader ideology; the interaction is likewise stable when we substitute alternative measures of executive left–right placement, so the pattern is not an artifact of where a government sits

on the ideological spectrum.¹⁰ Finally, as noted previously, results are robust when the measure of discretion is limited to only the statutory components (Appendix G).

Three further analyses reinforce the interpretation. First, an independent behavioral measure points the same way. Replacing the formal-rules moderator with V-Dem’s index of non-meritocratic bureaucratic recruitment, populism raises the probability of a political appointee where recruitment is patronage-based (+0.36, $p < .05$) but not where it is meritocratic. Thus, the pattern appears whether the appointment environment is gauged by *de jure* rules or by a *de facto* index of patronage. Second, the effect is graded rather than confined to the political-appointee extreme. Recoding the outcome as an ordered “career ladder”—from a pure political appointee, through mixed profiles, to a predominantly career diplomat—and estimating cumulative-threshold models, we find that, under discretion, populism pushes ambassadors down every rung, with the largest gap at the top of the ladder (the probability of a predominantly career profile falls by 0.45, $p < .001$). The ordering of professional backgrounds responds to populist incumbency as the theory anticipates, and only where the executive is free to act on it. Third, the effect is driven by loyalists without elite credentials, not by credentialed outsiders (Appendix D).

Conclusion

We have argued that individuals hostile to IOs undermine them by staffing them with loyalists rather than professionals, but that they can do so only where domestic institutions give the executive a free hand over appointments. Focusing on populists, we showed that those who govern atop professional, merit-based foreign services inherit career diplomats whom they can neither easily remove nor replace, and they appoint much as non-populists do. Those who enjoy appointment discretion, by contrast, translate their anti-elite preferences directly into the personnel they send abroad. Using an original dataset on the professional backgrounds of United Nations

¹⁰For the political-appointee outcome the interaction is robust across ideology controls (e.g., +0.41, $p = .02$ using the Database of Political Institutions classification; +0.51, $p = .02$ using a V-Dem party-based left–right scale). For diplomatic share, it is robust to the full-coverage measure and weakens only where the added control sharply reduces the estimation sample.

ambassadors, we found support for this account: populist incumbency depresses the professional profile of a country's representatives, but only where the executive controls who is appointed. The politicization of the global bureaucracy, in short, is conditional on institutional permissiveness at home.

Our argument has broad generalizability, though the mechanism pertains primarily when an IO both constrains member behavior and is staffed by global elites. Institutions that impose binding rules, monitor compliance, or allocate scarce resources threaten the populist commitment to unfettered sovereignty and heighten leaders' incentives to place loyal representatives who will blunt or politicize expert authority. By contrast, the pay-off from appointing non-experts is minimal when an IO lacks enforcement or is deliberately designed to minimize technocratic influence, such as populist-led institutions like ALBA or the Visegrad Group. These bodies serve primarily as stages for symbolic grandstanding rather than sites of genuine rule production, so leaders face little need to displace expertise with political reliability (Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi, 2021).

Our study advances several strands of international-relations scholarship. First, we push forward the rapidly growing literature on populism and global governance. Existing work shows that populist leaders rarely dismantle major institutions outright. Instead, they chip away at them through funding cuts, information withholding, or high-profile withdrawals (Carnegie, Clark and Zucker, 2024). We uncover a quieter but consequential mechanism: personnel subversion. By demonstrating that many populist governments deliberately infuse IOs with non-experts, we reveal how populists can hollow institutions out from the inside while maintaining the veneer of multilateral engagement. This moves the debate beyond high-profile exits (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2025) toward more subtle forms of institutional erosion.

Second, the article enriches research on how states wield power within IOs. Prior studies emphasize agenda-setting, vote shares, side-payments, or vetoes as the principal levers through which great powers shape institutional outputs (Vreeland, 2019). We build on a burgeoning literature which adds staffing politics to this toolkit (Fung and Lam, 2021; Parizek and Stephen, 2021). Our theory and new data show that senior appointments are not merely administrative details, but

are strategic instruments that states can weaponize.

Third, we extend the literature on the selection of diplomatic representatives, which has focused largely on bilateral ambassadorships in the American case (Goldfien, 2024; MacDonald, 2021; Malis, 2021). We broaden this research program from a single sender state to roughly 150 countries. In doing so, we show that the selection process is not merely a question of managerial style or patronage, but is systematically influenced by the domestic institutions that govern appointments.

Finally, we contribute to broader debates about IO performance and resilience. Our findings add to scholarship that looks beyond formal rules or resource flows to examine the people who animate these organizations. We underscore variation in IO personnel, explaining when under-qualified individuals are chosen, which may impact IO efficacy and legitimacy (Dellmuth et al., 2022).

Our findings suggest several promising avenues for future inquiry. First, personnel politics is only one weapon in the populist arsenal. Scholars could catalog and theorize additional tactics used to undermine IOs such as leaving appointments unfilled, withholding financial contributions, refusing to share data required for monitoring, or flooding bureaucracies with disinformation. Second, research could probe the interactive dimension of this contest. It could examine how secretariats, like the UN Secretariat or the WTO's Director-General, adapt their recruitment practices, oversight rules, or knowledge-collection strategies once a key member begins starving the organization of expertise or information. Finally, a micro-level focus could trace the career trajectories and day-to-day influence of both technocratic and non-technocratic delegates to explore how politicized appointments translate into policy drift or administrative paralysis, or co-opt IOs from the inside.

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Appendix A Coding Appointment Discretion

Our moderating variable measures the balance of power in appointing UN permanent representatives, contrasting political discretion by the head of government with a merit-based foreign service selection. We assign each of 193 countries a single score from one to five, anchored as follows:

- **Fully constrained.** Ambassadors are drawn exclusively from a career foreign service entered by competitive examination and advanced by seniority; political appointees to the UN post are essentially unknown (e.g., India, Japan).
- **Career-dominant.** Career diplomats are the norm; the executive formally appoints, but non-career appointments are rare in practice (e.g., Austria, Belgium).
- 3 – Mixed.** While professional diplomats typically fill this role, executive discretion or legislative checks often yield non-career appointments (e.g., the United States and Cyprus).
- 4 – Discretionary.** The executive appoints largely at will, drawing on but not bound by the professional corps. Loyal political appointees are common.
- **Fully discretionary.** Appointments are an extension of executive patronage, with no effective career-service constraint (e.g., Venezuela, Nicaragua).

Each score rests on three sources of information: (i) the constitutional and statutory rules governing ambassadorial appointment; (ii) the legal and practical structure of the country’s foreign service (entry by examination, promotion by seniority, and the like); and (iii) the observed career profiles of recent UN permanent representatives. The complete codebook contains one entry per country, with the underlying explanation and primary sources for each. This is available in the replication materials; Table A3 reproduces a handful of illustrative entries. Table A2 reports the distribution of scores. Our sharpest empirical test contrasts *discretionary* systems (score ≥ 4 ; 111 countries) with *constrained* ones (score ≤ 2 ; 32 countries), setting aside the mixed middle (score 3; 50 countries) where the executive’s latitude is ambiguous.

Table A2: Distribution of appointment-discretion scores (193 countries)

Score	1	2	3	4	5
Countries	7	25	50	64	47

Notes: Sharp test groups scores ≥ 4 as discretionary (111) and ≤ 2 as constrained (32); score 3 (50) is dropped.

Appendix B Full Estimates: Populism, Discretion, and Ambassador Professionalism

Tables B4 and B5 report the full set of specifications underlying the results section, for the diplomatic-career-share and political-appointee outcomes respectively. Across base controls, the fuller specification, the net-of-GDP model, the continuous one-to-five moderator, the three-category moderator, and a continuous specification that excludes the United States, the interaction between populist incumbency and appointment discretion retains its sign and significance. The continuous-scale models confirm that the action lies at the discretionary extreme rather than along a smooth gradient. All models include country and year fixed effects; standard errors are clustered by country. Control coefficients are suppressed for readability.

Table A3: Illustrative appointment-discretion codings

Country	Score	Basis for coding
India	1	Representatives drawn exclusively from the Indian Foreign Service, entered through the UPSC examination; no political appointee has served as India's UN permanent representative.
Japan	1	UN representatives are invariably career MOFA diplomats risen through decades of service; political appointees are essentially unknown.
Austria	2	Permanent representatives are typically senior career diplomats; the Federal President formally appoints on the government's proposal, but political appointments are very rare in practice.
United States	3	The President nominates and the Senate confirms; roughly a third of U.S. ambassadors are political appointees, and the Cabinet-level UN post is frequently given to political figures.
Venezuela	5	Appointments have been openly political under Chávez and Maduro; the professional corps is routinely bypassed (e.g., former oil minister Rafael Ramírez as UN ambassador).
Nicaragua	5	Posts are filled by loyalists or family members of the Ortega administration; ambassadorships function as extensions of domestic patronage.

Notes: Abbreviated from the full codebook (replication materials), which records the constitutional, statutory, and biographical sources underlying each score.

Table B4: Diplomatic career share

	Base	Fuller	Net of GDP	Cont. (1–5)	3-Cat.	No US (1–5)
Populism	0.070* (0.033)	0.076 (0.053)	0.118 (0.091)	0.224* (0.105)	0.075* (0.034)	0.222* (0.106)
Populism × Discretionary	−0.396** (0.146)	−0.378* (0.180)	−0.424* (0.204)		−0.360* (0.162)	
Populism × Discretion (1–5)				−0.086† (0.046)		−0.085† (0.047)
Populism × Partially constr.					−0.047 (0.069)	
Populism × GDP (size)			−0.036 (0.061)			
Country / Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	513	462	462	689	689	676
R ²	0.490	0.521	0.524	0.471	0.473	0.473

Notes: Linear models, country and year fixed effects, SEs clustered by country. “Fuller” adds log GDP/capita, log population, and trade/GDP to the base controls (leader ideology, polyarchy, U.S. ideal-point distance, UNSC membership, U.S. aid, FDI/GDP). The “No US (1–5)” column re-estimates the continuous specification excluding the United States: because the U.S. (discretion score 3) falls in the excluded middle tier, it never enters the binary ≥ 4 vs. ≤ 2 contrast, so a leave-out is only meaningful on the continuous measure. † $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table B5: Political (no-background) appointee

	Base	Fuller	Net of GDP	Cont. (1–5)	3-Cat.	No US (1–5)
Populism	−0.136 (0.155)	−0.099 (0.157)	−0.371* (0.155)	−0.334 [†] (0.189)	−0.114 (0.134)	−0.336 [†] (0.190)
Populism × Discretionary	0.477* (0.195)	0.532** (0.198)	0.857*** (0.210)		0.521** (0.182)	
Populism × Discretion (1–5)				0.120 [†] (0.067)		0.123 [†] (0.068)
Populism × Partially constr.					0.048 (0.159)	
Populism × GDP (size)			0.257** (0.097)			
Country / Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	539	485	485	717	717	704
R ²	0.383	0.404	0.409	0.325	0.332	0.330

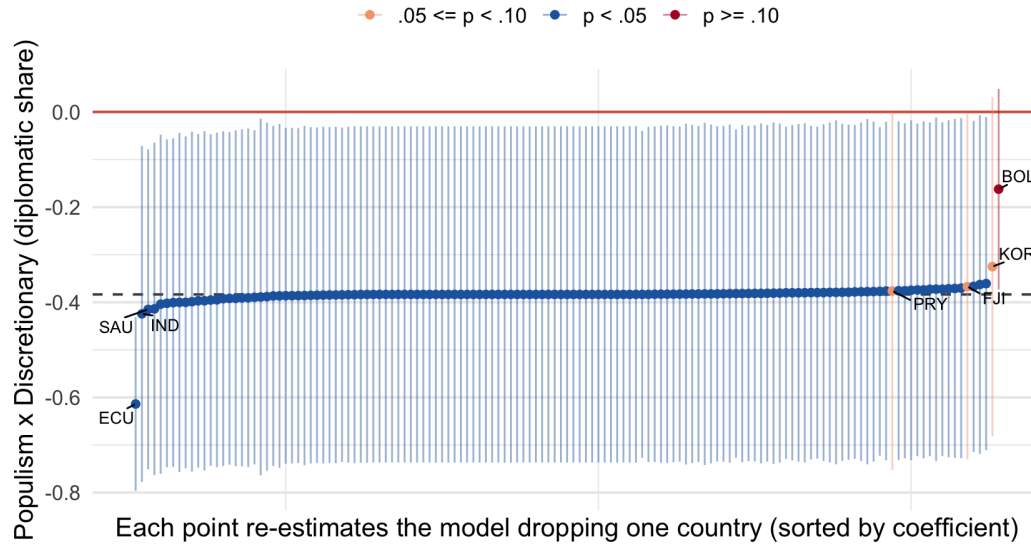
Notes: As in Table B4; the “No US (1–5)” column excludes the United States from the continuous specification. A conditional logit with country and year fixed effects is uninformative for this rare binary outcome: fixed-effects separation drops all but 111 observations, so the linear probability model is the appropriate estimator. The continuous diplomatic-share outcome corroborates the binary result.

Appendix C Leave-One-Country-Out Robustness

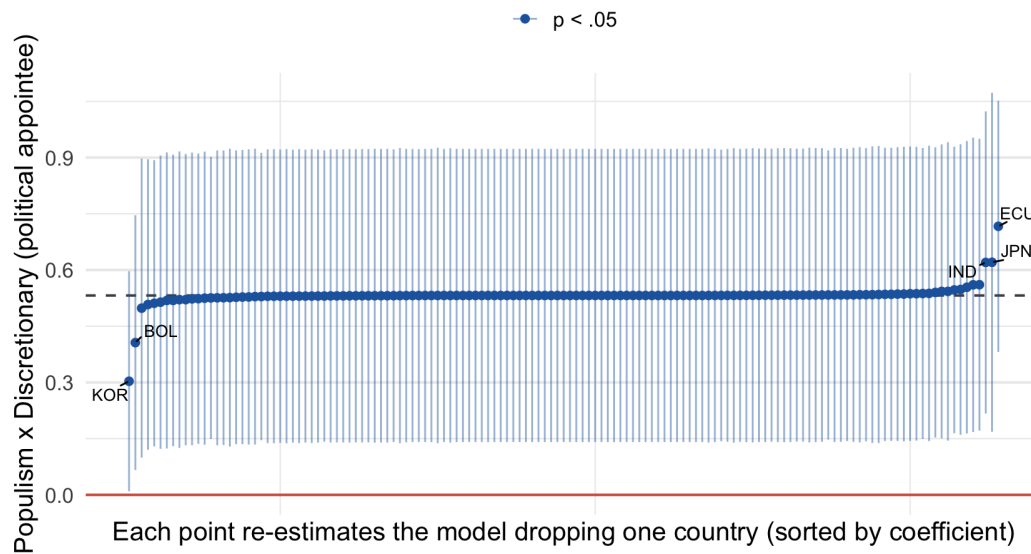
Because the interaction is identified from within-country variation in populist incumbency, a natural concern is that a few countries drive the result. We re-estimate the fuller specification of Table 1 104 times, each time dropping one country, and plot the resulting *Populism* × *Discretionary* coefficient with its 95% confidence interval (Figure C2). For the political-appointee outcome the interaction stays positive and significant at $p < .05$ in **all 104** leave-one-out fits. For diplomatic career share it keeps its sign in every fit and remains significant at $p < .05$ in **97%** of them; the single exception is the omission of Bolivia, after which the estimate retains its sign but weakens to $p = .14$. The countries whose removal moves the estimate most—Ecuador and Bolivia among discretionary populist cases, and India, Japan, and South Korea among the constrained systems that anchor the null—are precisely those the theory flags as informative, and no single omission overturns the finding.

Appendix D Decomposing the Political-Appointee Outcome

Our *Political Appointee* indicator marks representatives with no prior diplomatic or IO experience. One might worry that it captures credentialed outsiders—an accomplished academic or executive with elite training but no diplomatic record—rather than genuine loyalists. We therefore divide political appointees into *credentialed outsiders*, who hold an elite (Western elite university) credential, and *loyalists*, who do not. The category is overwhelmingly the latter: of 97 political appointees, 87 are non-credentialed loyalists and only 10 are credentialed outsiders. Re-estimating the fuller specification on each subtype (Table D6), the effect of populism under discretion is concentrated entirely among loyalists (+0.54, $p < .01$) and is a precise zero for credentialed outsiders (−0.01, n.s.). Populists granted discretion appoint loyal ones.



(a) Diplomatic career share



(b) Political (no-background) appointee

Figure C2: Leave-one-country-out estimates of the *Populism* $\times$ *Discretionary* interaction. Each point re-estimates the fuller specification of Table 1 with one country removed; bars are 95% confidence intervals (clustered by country). The dashed line marks the full-sample estimate, the solid line marks zero, and point color indicates the significance of each leave-one-out estimate.

Table D6: Political appointees decomposed: loyalists vs. credentialed outsiders

	Loyalist (no elite credential)	Credentialed outsider (elite credential)
Populism	−0.096 (0.151)	−0.001 (0.011)
Populism × Discretionary	0.542** (0.197)	−0.010 (0.015)
Country / Year FE	Yes	Yes
Observations	472	472
R^2	0.405	0.347

Notes: Linear probability models; fuller controls; country and year fixed effects; SEs clustered by country. The dependent variable equals one for a political appointee of the indicated subtype and zero otherwise; “elite credential” denotes a degree from a Western-elite university. [†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Appendix E Does the Discretion Effect Depend on State Power?

A natural question is whether appointment discretion and state power *interact*, so that the politicizing effect of populism under discretion is larger in more powerful states. We probe this with a full three-way interaction of populist incumbency, economic size (standardized GDP), and discretion, added to the fuller specification. The evidence does not support such a conditional relationship, and we report it here for completeness.

Under the sharp binary discretion contrast, the three-way term is poorly identified. The discretionary cell comprises relatively few country-years with little internal variation in economic size, so the estimates are unstable and implausibly large. For the diplomatic-share outcome the implied populism effects swing well outside the unit interval of the dependent variable, a clear sign of near-separation rather than a substantive finding. Under the continuous one-to-five discretion measure, which is better behaved, the three-way term is null for diplomatic share (+0.039, $p = .62$) and only marginal for political appointees (−0.159, $p = .03$). The latter is not reproduced in the binary specification and is fragile. We therefore treat economic size as an *additive* influence. In other words, powerful states are independently freer to forgo diplomatic skill, as the “net of GDP” columns of Tables B4–B5 show, rather than as a factor that conditions the discretion effect. We leave a fuller treatment of the power–discretion interplay to future work.

Appendix F An Alternative Moderator: Non-Meritocratic Recruitment

As a behavioral complement to our *de jure* appointment rules, we re-estimate the interaction using V-Dem’s index of meritocratic bureaucratic recruitment (v2stcritrecadm). We code a country as “low merit” when it falls below the sample median. The substitution reproduces the story for political appointees. Where recruitment is patronage-based, populism raises the probability of a political appointee, whereas where recruitment is meritocratic it does not (Table F7). Two independent gauges of the appointment environment—formal rules and a behavioral patronage index—thus point the same way.

Table F7: Populism $\times$ non-meritocratic recruitment (V-Dem)

	Diplomatic share	Political appointee
Populism	0.021 (0.063)	−0.126 [†] (0.073)
Low-merit recruitment	−0.086 (0.080)	0.011 (0.040)
Populism $\times$ Low merit	−0.161 (0.151)	0.359* (0.141)
Country / Year FE	Yes	Yes
Observations	672	696
R^2	0.472	0.329

Notes: Fuller controls; country and year fixed effects; SEs clustered by country. [†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Appendix G A Pre-Treatment (De Jure) Discretion Measure

A possible concern is that our discretion coding is not fully exogenous to the outcome. Each score draws on three inputs: (i) constitutional and statutory appointment rules; (ii) the legal and practical structure of the national foreign service; and (iii) the observed career profiles of recent permanent representatives. The third component overlaps mechanically with our dependent variable, which is itself built from ambassadors' career profiles. To guard against this, we reconstruct the moderator using only the pre-treatment components (i) and (ii)—the legal architecture and the foreign-service structure—and disregard component (iii) entirely.

Re-coding every country on this basis leaves the binary classification unchanged for all 193 states: the observed-appointee component never determines which tier a country occupies, because the legal rules and foreign-service structure independently support each classification. The six countries that identify the interaction retain their tiers on purely structural grounds. India, Japan, and South Korea remain constrained through a statutory career mandate (India) or an examination-entry professional service (Japan, South Korea); Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador remain discretionary because their constitutions vest ambassadorial appointment in the executive with no binding career-service requirement—facts that hold irrespective of whom these governments actually appointed. Only eleven countries shift by a single gradation, and always within (never across) tiers. Because the binary contrast is thus identical, the interaction reproduces the main estimates exactly (diplomatic share -0.38 , $p = .04$; political appointee $+0.53$, $p = .01$). The continuous de jure measure points the same way (diplomatic share -0.13 , $p = .09$; political appointee $+0.17$, $p = .11$). The complete re-coding, with the de jure basis and sources for each country, is provided in the replication materials (`un_appointment_rules_dejure.csv`).

Appendix H An Ordered “Career Ladder” Outcome

To confirm that the effect is graded rather than an artifact of the binary cut, we recode the outcome as an ordered career ladder. We code 0 for a pure political appointee, 1 for a marginal profile, 2 for a mixed one, and 3 for a predominantly career diplomat (distribution: 56, 133, 131, 589), and estimate both a cardinal model of the ladder and cumulative-threshold linear probability models of $P(\text{ladder} \geq k)$. Table H8 reports the interaction terms. The bottom panel reports the implied effect of populism *under discretionary rules* (the sum of the main and interaction terms, with delta-method significance). Under discretion, populism pushes representatives down every rung, with the sharpest effect at the top. The probability of a predominantly

career profile falls by 0.45 ($p < .001$).

Table H8: Populism and appointment discretion across the career ladder

	Ladder (0–3)	$P(\geq 1)$	$P(\geq 2)$	$P(\geq 3)$
Populism	0.092 (0.165)	–0.000 (0.039)	0.016 (0.079)	0.077 (0.065)
Populism $\times$ Discretionary	–1.17* (0.525)	–0.285 (0.201)	–0.357 (0.242)	–0.529*** (0.130)
<i>Effect of populism under discretionary rules (delta method):</i>				
estimate	–1.079*	–0.285	–0.341	–0.452***
<i>p</i> -value	0.029	0.157	0.130	< 0.001
Country / Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	462	462	462	462

Notes: Fuller controls; country and year fixed effects; SEs clustered by country. [†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.