

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

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## Abstract

Why are some small powers effective in setting the UN agenda, even in the face of larger powers' opposition? I argue that small states are more likely to be represented by experienced diplomats, who, over time, accumulate influence that can be deployed to shape the IO agenda. 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 more diplomatic experience, individuals with greater diplomatic experience 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 experience and effectiveness. These insights build on our understanding of the role of individuals and diplomacy in IR and the ways in which small powers influence international politics.

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# 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,<sup>1</sup> taking advantage of a geopolitical policy window<sup>2</sup> to lay the formal groundwork for international non-proliferation law. Within ten years, the Partial Test-Ban Treaty and Non-Proliferation Treaty were opened for signature, and largely succeeded in preventing further nuclear proliferation and contributing to a nuclear taboo.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 experience 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 do not account for these diplomatic successes in which smaller powers set the UN agenda, even while countries such as the US

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<sup>1</sup>[A/RES/1380 \(XIV\)](#) and [A/RES/1576 \(XV\)](#).

<sup>2</sup>[Kingdon 1984](#).

<sup>3</sup>[Tannenwald 1999](#).

<sup>4</sup>[Miliband 2022](#); [A/RES/76/262](#).

are known to use foreign aid and military threats to obtain favorable policy outcomes.<sup>5</sup> If these material sources 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-setting in international organizations (IOs),<sup>6</sup> and others have examined examples of small states exercising influence in IOs,<sup>7</sup> we lack a generalized empirical understanding of how and why some small powers succeed in influencing institutional agendas. At the same time, other studies have shown that individuals play an important role in international cooperation,<sup>8</sup> yet we lack theories about how diplomatic skill matters in IOs, which are central sites for international politics.

To address this puzzle, I account for diplomacy in explaining states’ influence on agenda-setting in IOs in a two-step theory. First, I argue that *diplomatic experience* 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. I suggest that because small powers tend to have smaller pools of qualified individuals to fill important diplomatic posts, they acquire higher levels of diplomatic experience on average compared to larger powers as an *unintended consequence* of these resource constraints. Second, I specify that diplomatic experience is significant in understanding influence in the early-stage activities of the policymaking

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<sup>5</sup>Mearsheimer 1994; Alesina and Dollar 2000; Carter and Stone 2015.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Tallberg, 2003; Mikulaschek, 2021; Allen and Yuen, 2022.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Cooper and Shaw, 2009; Thorhallsson, 2012; Panke, 2013; Baldacchino, 2023.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Clark and Zucker, 2023; Heinzl, 2022; Hardt, 2014.

process, when the agenda is being set. In these settings, it is more difficult for powerful states to monitor activities, which creates space for smaller powers to operate. Combining these theoretical insights, I 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, including agenda-setting.

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 experience 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.<sup>9</sup> This empirical approach complements prior studies of small states in international politics, which are largely qualitative.

Understanding agenda-setting politics in IOs is key in order to better explain downstream political outcomes. The ability to set the agenda confers a great deal of power by framing issues favorably.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, agenda-setting creates path dependencies 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

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<sup>9</sup>A more systematic representation of the interviews is in Section 1.3 of the Appendix. Interview protocol was reviewed by the IRB of the author's university (Protocol #: 844833). See Appendix Section 5 for a discussion of research ethics.

<sup>10</sup>Chong and Druckman 2007.

powerful states), and are better positioned to extract concessions than they otherwise would be.

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 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.

Second, agenda-setting dynamics and the importance of diplomatic experience in the GA are likely to generate insights that generalize to other IOs through diffusion, socialization, emulation, and learning of its institutional rules, norms, and political dynamics.<sup>11</sup> This expectation is in line with other work that suggests that diplomatic experience matters in IOs<sup>12</sup> and in bilateral settings.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that diplomatic experience is particularly likely to be important in IOs like the GA, which are characterized by equal and consensus-based voting, permanent representation, multi-issue and technical domains, and formal rules constrain the influence of material resources. These features are relatively common across IOs, including important institutions like the EU, WTO, and AU.

Third, the substantive importance of the UN makes its attention a normatively important outcome to study. The regular UN budget for 2020 was more than \$3 billion, which financed a variety of programs around the world. Funds cannot be allocated in the budget unless a resolution is passed on an issue, and thus the inclusion of items on the agenda has enormous financial implications. These social and economic programs are of particular importance to small and medium states, and those who lack outside options via which they can pursue their

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<sup>11</sup>E.g., [Sommerer and Tallberg, 2019](#).

<sup>12</sup>[Falzon 2021](#); [Cooper and Shaw 2009](#); [Hardt 2014](#).

<sup>13</sup>[Gertz 2018](#); [Malis 2021](#).

foreign policy goals.<sup>14</sup> 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 — for both weak and major powers.

I build on a growing understanding of the important role of individuals and small states in shaping IO politics, and attend to the importance of legislative processes in IOs. Previous studies have focused on later-stage activities such as resolution sponsorship and voting patterns,<sup>15</sup> and have subsequently overestimated the degree to which material resources matter in IO politics, but accounting for political processes within IOs such as agenda-setting is imperative for understanding how power translates into influence, conceptualizing IOs as sites of process rather than simply arenas of preference aggregation.<sup>16</sup> Not only can we better understand 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 experience. Material power is important in explaining some IO politics, but the role of individual diplomats matters as well.

## Setting the IO Agenda

Agenda-setting is critical for understanding political outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Influencing institutional agendas can afford enormous control over what issues are addressed—or not addressed—and

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<sup>14</sup>E.g., [Voeten, 2001](#); [Sending, Pouliot and Neumann, 2015](#).

<sup>15</sup>E.g., [Kim and Russett, 1996](#); [Voeten, 2000](#); [Vreeland and Dreher, 2014](#).

<sup>16</sup>[Conrad and Monroe, 2021](#), 606; [Xu and Weller, 2018](#), 8.

<sup>17</sup>I define the institutional agenda as the set of problems that policymakers in a particular institutional decision-making body are actively considering ([Cobb and Elder, 1972](#)) and agenda-setting as the ability to add or exclude issues from the institutional agenda ([Bachrach](#)

what policies are developed in response.

Agenda-setting is important in many legislative settings, yet little scholarship attends to agenda-setting in IOs, where it plays a crucial role.<sup>18</sup> For example, agenda-setting was integral for Ireland’s Aiken to advance negotiations on nonproliferation—though assuredly, rising nuclear tensions between great powers reflected in events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis also created conditions that made this agenda-setting move more likely to succeed. Nevertheless, Aiken’s proposal was integral in putting states on a pathway to developing formal international law on non-proliferation, which was a major step given that ongoing negotiations by major powers had not succeeded.<sup>19</sup> Aiken faced a competing nonproliferation proposal from Sweden, which the US was more staunchly opposed to. Had this Swedish alternative set the agenda on non-proliferation, US opposition would have stymied negotiations towards the NPT.<sup>20</sup> By setting the agenda and pushing through his proposal, Aiken avoided this premature conclusion of negotiations. Furthermore, only by considering the politics of agenda-setting can we observe the topics that are actively being blocked from being discussed compared with those that are simply not being raised. 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. However, the potential payoffs of proposing are large for states’ foreign policy goals. For example, Malta’s ambassador Arvid Pardo introduced an agenda item on the seabed in 1967 that directly led to the Convention on the

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and Baratz, 1962; Kingdon, 1984).

<sup>18</sup>Conrad and Monroe 2021.

<sup>19</sup>Polsby 1985.

<sup>20</sup>Telegram From US Department of State, November 21, 1961.

Law of the Sea.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> In addition to state-level benefits, individual diplomats gain benefits from being active in proposing, as they can present themselves as effective agents for accomplishing their states’ foreign policy goals, which is important for their career advancement.

While previous work provides insights into some of the key features of agenda-setting and legislative politics, it does not answer what *type* of power is relevant to these outcomes. Material conceptualizations of power as the possession of military capability<sup>23</sup> or economic resources<sup>24</sup> 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—we lack evidence of its influence on the legislative activities at the *early* stage of the policymaking process.<sup>25</sup> Materialists might argue that the same logic should hold and that we would expect large powers with greater military and economic leverage to set IO agendas.<sup>26</sup> 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

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<sup>21</sup>A/BUR/SR.166, September 21, 1967; A/BUR/SR.171, October 5, 1967.

<sup>22</sup>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 activities (e.g., [Programme of Work for Malta’s UNSC Presidency, February 1, 2023](#); [Digney, February 2, 2023](#)).

<sup>23</sup>E.g., [Mearsheimer, 1994](#).

<sup>24</sup>E.g., [Keohane and Nye, 1977](#).

<sup>25</sup>[Conrad and Monroe 2021](#).

<sup>26</sup>[Mearsheimer 1994](#).

to be important in predicting influence.

However, in practice, small powers accomplish policy goals in IOs,<sup>27</sup> including through agenda-setting. Prior works on the influence of small states in IOs generally point to institutional features as explanatory of small powers' influence on agenda-setting.<sup>28</sup> But why are some small powers more likely to succeed in influencing institutional agendas than others? Building on these accounts, I suggest that diplomacy can provide the answer.

By any definition, small and medium powers' activities, which IR research has largely overlooked to focus on the behaviors of great powers, make up a great deal of international politics. 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.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>E.g., Thorhallsson, 2012; Panke, 2013; Corbett, Yi-Chong and Weller, 2021.

<sup>28</sup>Aksoy 2010; Allen and Yuen 2022; Mikulaschek 2021.

<sup>29</sup>See Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) for an overview of this debate on small powers; small state and small power are generally used interchangeably in this 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. I address this concern in the empirical analysis by employing continuous measures of power resources and politically defined measures of smallness: membership in FOSS, the World Bank's Small States Forum (SSF), and non-membership in the G20.

## Diplomatic Experience

To better explain who succeeds in IO agenda-setting, I argue that diplomatic experience plays a central role. I argue that individual experience in an institution allows a diplomat to cultivate a form of social power, which they can draw upon to advance their state’s interests 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.”<sup>30</sup>

Diplomatic experience 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 experience there, but they do not contribute to its diplomatic experience in other institutions.<sup>31</sup> As individual diplomats gain experience, they can develop influence by cultivating social relationships, knowledge of institutional rules, and substantive expertise (see Figure 1). 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 [is] particularly influential on the basis of experience.<sup>32</sup>

It takes time for new diplomats in an institution to “learn the ropes,” and develop relationships with other key actors.<sup>33</sup> Particularly for small powers—which are also disad-

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<sup>30</sup>Barnett and Duvall, 2005, 45.

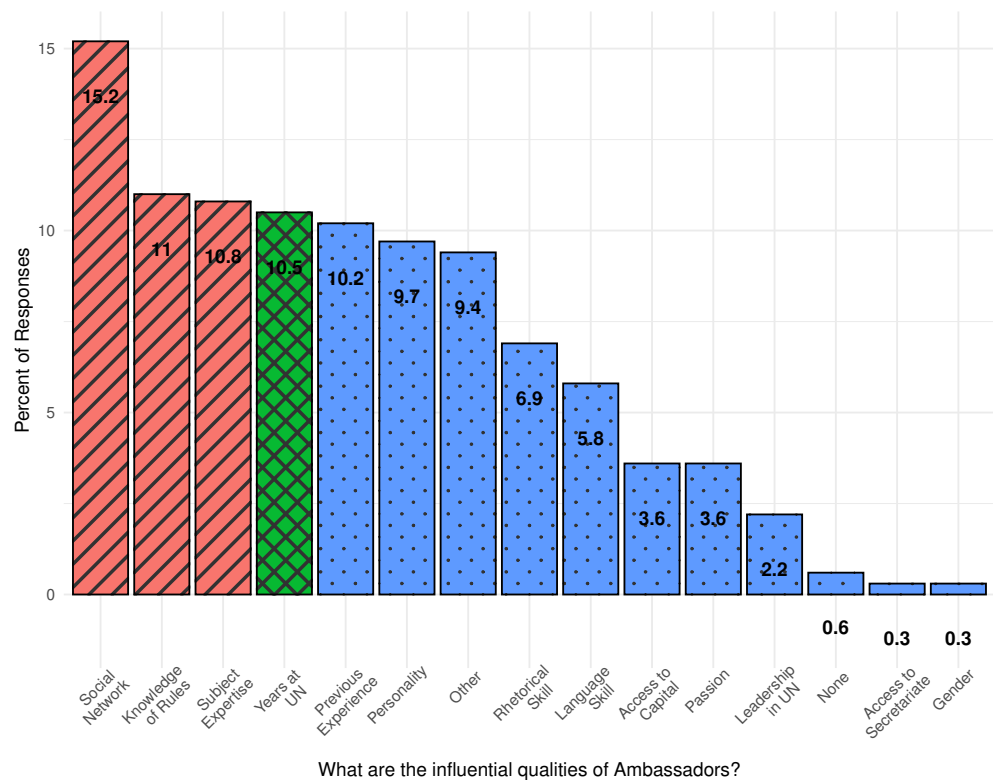
<sup>31</sup>I discuss the operationalization of diplomatic experience in the empirical analysis.

<sup>32</sup>Interview 12.

<sup>33</sup>Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2015.

vantaged by factors such as social hierarchies—experience mitigates these disadvantages and helps diplomats obtain favorable outcomes in confrontations with larger powers.<sup>34</sup> As an ambassador gains experience, I posit that they accumulate influence through three mechanisms: building their social network, developing substantive expertise in issue areas, and mastering institutional procedures. The importance of these mechanisms for developing influence 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). While substantive expertise may be issue-specific, in general, influence is expected to operate across issue areas—skillfully maneuvering through institutional procedures, for example, provides benefits across issues.

Figure 1



<sup>34</sup>Pouliot 2016.

The case of Aiken provides a useful illustration of the dynamics of diplomatic experience. Before proposing the non-proliferation initiative, Aiken had developed a strong reputation during his years at the UN,<sup>35</sup> which directly contributed to his ability to advance new policy measures such as the non-proliferation proposal.<sup>36</sup> Aiken’s reputation and time in New York translated into social networks that he leveraged to gain support, including from major powers.<sup>37</sup> Aiken also developed substantive expertise on the issue of nuclear proliferation, which he leveraged to act as a leader in promoting the issue.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

To be sure, the translation of experience to influence is not automatic. Further, individual characteristics—charisma, language skills, etc.—help some ambassadors cultivate influence more readily. Important scope conditions exist as to when diplomatic experience is likely to matter in agenda-setting. Amongst the most extremely experienced diplomats, their core social network may have experienced so much turnover that they are actually less centrally placed in the network than previously, or the set of issues on the agenda may have changed so much over time that their substantive expertise becomes obsolete—though I expect such cases of extreme longevity to be rare, and that on average, more experience is positively associated with effectiveness.<sup>40</sup>

I further expect scope conditions to exist across topics. In issue areas where powerful states have critical foreign policy interests, homogenous preferences, or strong ex-ante posi-

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<sup>35</sup>Skelly, 1997; Evans and Kelly, 2014, 210.

<sup>36</sup>E.g., Chossudovsky, 1990, 129-30.

<sup>37</sup>88 Skelly, 1997.

<sup>38</sup>Aiken 1961.

<sup>39</sup>Evans and Kelly, 2014, 295; Skelly, 1997, 255.

<sup>40</sup>I assess these nonlinearities in the empirical analysis.

tions, there is likely to be less opportunity for diplomats to sway positions.<sup>41</sup> For example, on the issue of Taiwan’s representation in the UN, even an extremely experienced diplomat with high levels of influence would not be expected to shift the outcome away from China’s preferred result, and we empirically observe China’s diplomats blocking such proposals from the agenda year after year. Similarly, US diplomats have blocked proposed political resolutions from Cuba (“The colonial case of Puerto Rico”) and Libya, while Soviet/Russian diplomats have blocked proposed items on the Korean War and recognition of the Holodomor famine. However, because of legitimacy and reputational concerns, powerful states are wary about exercising their power to ‘put their thumb on the scales’ too frequently,<sup>42</sup> thus this set of cases should be rare, and in the empirical analysis, I show that diplomatic experience matters even in higher-salience (security) issues. I return to these points in the following section in greater detail. Bearing this in mind, interviews with diplomats indicate that on average, experience is crucial, and a more experienced ambassador is a more effective ambassador (see Figure 1).<sup>43</sup>

This argument builds on the claim that the characteristics of individual diplomats matter in explaining the political outcomes of IOs.<sup>44</sup> In these fundamentally social environments, individuals can persuade and influence their counterparts.<sup>45</sup> Even in IOs governed by the

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<sup>41</sup>Copelovitch 2010; Stone 2011.

<sup>42</sup>Hurd 2008; Binder and Heupel 2015; Long 2022.

<sup>43</sup>I also expect scope conditions by institutional features affect when diplomatic experience is more likely to be effective, which I lay out in the conclusion.

<sup>44</sup>E.g., Heinzel, 2022; Hardt, 2014. See also the literature on the importance of leader characteristics, e.g., Horowitz, Stam and Ellis, 2015; Saunders, 2011.

<sup>45</sup>E.g., Wendt, 1999; Risse, 2000; Johnston, 2001.

principles of sovereign equality, some diplomats are more influential than others.<sup>46</sup> Competent individual diplomats may be much more influential than a baseline expectation based on state power would portend. While the importance of expertise has been claimed in other studies of international politics and small states,<sup>47</sup> I provide the first theory of how and when diplomatic expertise can influence IO policymaking, as well as a tractable empirical framework for assessing these claims.

## Theory of Diplomatic Experience and Agenda-Setting

To leverage diplomatic experience in order to better explain influence over IO agenda-setting, I develop a two-step theory. First, I theorize how and when diplomatic experience is cultivated. Second, I derive expectations about when diplomatic experience is most likely to affect policymaking in IOs, identifying agenda-setting as a key opportunity for diplomatic experience to affect outcomes.

### Who Has Diplomatic Experience?

Small powers tend to have smaller diplomatic corps, which results in fewer skilled diplomats who can rotate into key posts such as the UN.<sup>48</sup> These states, then, may keep diplomats in place out of necessity, which nevertheless creates an opportunity to develop expertise. Illustrating this point, Corbett et al. draw on interviews with diplomats from Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to argue that these diplomats have long tenures—and subsequently large institutional memories—because their foreign ministries have “human resource capacity constraints [which means that] there are often few candidates to fill each post. Thus, while

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<sup>46</sup>Pouliot 2016.

<sup>47</sup>E.g., Panke, 2010; Thorhallsson, 2012.

<sup>48</sup>Panke 2010.

long tenure is a function of necessity it has distinct advantages for small states.”<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> A Permanent Representative from a small Caribbean island state provided evidence attesting to 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.<sup>51</sup>

Observationally, we cannot rule out whether longer tenure by small state ambassadors is an unintended result of resource constraints or a strategic decision to maximize diplomatic influence in IOs.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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

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<sup>49</sup>Corbett, Yi-Chong and Weller 2021, 75. In addition to these direct impacts, resource constraints may also *indirectly* lead to longer tenure by contributing to weak state capacity and corruption.

<sup>50</sup>Gertz 2018; Malis 2021.

<sup>51</sup>Interview 46.

<sup>52</sup>Future work could fruitfully explore the rules, practices, and determinants of rotation rules cross-nationally.

<sup>53</sup>E.g., Thorhallsson, 2012.

foreign policy,<sup>54</sup> they have greater incentives to invest in any tool that can enhance their effectiveness—including diplomatic experience.

However, the downsides of long tenure suggest that the strategic mechanism is less likely to be at work than the resource constraint mechanism. By keeping diplomats in post for longer periods, states make a trade-off against the utility that can be obtained from rotational schemes. For example, rotation allows newly elected parties to replace diplomats with new individuals who are more amenable to their policy agenda. Furthermore, by frequently rotating diplomats into new posts, foreign ministries can assuage concerns about “going native,” and can better recruit new diplomats, pairing less desirable ‘hardship’ posts with promises of a subsequent position in a more desirable post.<sup>55</sup> These incentives are likely to be greater for major powers with foreign policy interests across many different diplomatic postings and with large diplomatic corps to manage.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, for small powers, the potential gains of investing in diplomatic experience 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 that small powers have more individuals with more diplomatic experience than large powers.

***H<sub>1</sub>: Small power diplomats are more likely to have more diplomatic experience than large power diplomats.***

## **When Does Diplomatic Experience Matter for IO Policymaking?**

However, I do not expect that diplomatic experience is equally important across all policymaking activities. In the second stage of the theory, I argue that it is particularly important

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<sup>54</sup>E.g., Voeten, 2001; Sending, Pouliot and Neumann, 2015.

<sup>55</sup>Kleiner 2010.

<sup>56</sup>Corbett, Yi-Chong and Weller, 2021, 75.

in the early stages of the policymaking process on *agenda-setting*. This expectation rests on two claims: first, that diplomatic experience matters for a state representative’s ability to add items to the agenda, and second, diplomatic experience is particularly relevant for agenda-setting relative to other policy activities such as voting.

Diplomatic experience is highly relevant for the activities that a diplomat must engage in to successfully set the IO agenda. First, diplomats leverage their social relationships, developed over time, to gain support for the proposals they seek to add to the agenda.<sup>57</sup> When their counterparts have developed trust in a diplomat, they are more likely to support their proposed agenda item.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, experienced diplomats call upon their social networks to attend meetings of the General Committee en masse when their agenda proposals will be voted on, signaling broad backing for the measure. Second, experienced diplomats leverage substantive expertise to make an effective case for their agenda proposal. Such an individual may be recognized as part of an epistemic community<sup>59</sup> and is more likely to be taken seriously by their counterparts. A diplomat with substantive expertise developed over time will also be familiar with relevant institutional precedents, which they can cite in their proposing memo and which can contribute to voting support,<sup>60</sup> and can make more compelling arguments in their formal statements introducing the measure, as well as in their informal lobbying of other delegates. Third, diplomats’ abilities to effectively navigate formal procedures to add new items to the institutional agenda require prerequisite knowledge of these obscure rules,<sup>61</sup> having learned about matters such as voting rules, deadlines, norms and procedures for submitting agenda items. The earlier example of Aiken illustrates the relevance

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<sup>57</sup>Pouliot 2016; Power 2019.

<sup>58</sup>Schia 2013; Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2015.

<sup>59</sup>Haas, 1992, 2-3.

<sup>60</sup>Arias 2025.

<sup>61</sup>Schia 2013.

of diplomatic experience in the case of agenda-setting: Aiken utilized his social networks, his mastery of institutional rules, and his substantive issue knowledge in his efforts to add non-proliferation to the UN agenda, leveraging the advantages gained during his experience.

Even if diplomatic experience contributes to success in agenda-setting, how impactful is experience likely to be relative to state power, and why is it specifically likely to matter in agenda-setting compared to other types of policy activities such as sponsoring or voting on resolutions? I argue that power-based explanations of IO politics are likely to have less traction in explaining who sets the agenda compared to later-stage activities, which means that diplomatic experience could play an important explanatory role. While large powers can exert influence in the late stages of the policymaking process, I argue that they are less likely to do so in the early stages of policymaking because these activities are more difficult to monitor and control, and further, that large powers may *benefit* to some degree by not overtly controlling agenda-setting processes. Early-stage activities such as proposing agenda items are temporally distant from policy outcomes and can be highly technical, and thus receive little media attention—despite their importance. In contrast, later-stage activities such as resolution politics are more visibly linked to policy outcomes, which results in greater attention in the media. Since actors focus their resources where success is most likely,<sup>62</sup> late-stage activities should receive more scrutiny by powerful states. In resolution voting, for example, it is easy to observe how others vote. This enables powerful states to 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. However, interviews with diplomats suggest early- and late-stage activities require similar levels of resources and effort.<sup>63</sup>

Large powers do not ignore early-stage activities but because they are more difficult to

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<sup>62</sup>Baumgartner and Jones 1993.

<sup>63</sup>E.g., Interview 40.

monitor, may struggle to prevent small powers from exploiting this structural opportunity. These activities, though less visible, create path dependencies that are hard to later change, shifting the status quo towards the agenda-setter's preferences.<sup>64</sup> While major powers can exercise influence over the final decision in the later stages of policymaking, by that point, concessions are difficult to avoid. Early agenda-setting also shapes issue framing, which can fundamentally shape the way an issue is considered.<sup>65</sup>

As noted in the previous section, major powers may also choose not to tightly control agenda-setting activities because small state satisfaction contributes to institutional legitimacy.<sup>66</sup> In the UN, for example, small states are wary of the concentration of power by powerful members.<sup>67</sup> Powerful states need IOs to retain legitimacy so that they can serve their foreign policy goals and promote the rules-based international order from which they benefit. IOs rely on member state participation for relevance and legitimacy.<sup>68</sup> When small states actively participate in IO decision-making processes, it boosts the 'throughput' legitimacy of IOs,<sup>69</sup> the acceptability of internal decision-making processes and bureaucratic

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<sup>64</sup>Romer and Rosenthal 1978; Shepsle and Weingast 1987; Cox and McCubbins 2005.

<sup>65</sup>Chong and Druckman 2007.

<sup>66</sup>Stone 2011; Arias 2022.

<sup>67</sup>Binder and Heupel 2015.

<sup>68</sup>Gray 2018.

<sup>69</sup>Hurd 2008; Schmidt 2013; Arias, Clark and Kaya 2025.

practices to participants.<sup>70</sup> This insulates IOs from institutional decay<sup>71</sup> and state exit.<sup>72</sup> For these reasons, some IOs have actively cultivated the participation of weak states and compensate them with decision-making power.<sup>73</sup> Thus major powers may *choose* not to tightly control the agenda, as the costs of censorship may outweigh the benefits.

Powerful states' ability and willingness to monitor and control behavior circumscribes the contexts in which diplomatic experience can influence outcomes. In late-stage activities in which monitoring is efficient, power can be deployed to obtain favorable outcomes, and even experienced, influential diplomats have 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—or major powers do not wish to do so—experienced diplomats *do* have an opportunity to set the agenda toward their states' preferred outcome. To summarize, I argue that diplomatic experience is relevant and applicable in agenda-setting influence, and further that it is uniquely relevant in agenda-setting relative to later-stage policy activities, as power-based logics are less likely to apply.

***H<sub>2</sub>: More experienced diplomats are more likely to engage in agenda-setting than those with less experience.***

Combining both theoretical claims provides a compelling picture of diplomacy and agenda-setting in IOs: Structural features give small power diplomats the *opportunity* to influence

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<sup>70</sup>Throughput legitimacy centers the ideas and deliberative actions of the participating actors as the means by which legitimacy is constructed and can be cultivated through specific institutional mechanisms including agenda setting, leadership selection, and day-to-day management (Corbett, Yi-Chong and Weller, 2018).

<sup>71</sup>Buchanan and Keohane 2006.

<sup>72</sup>von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019.

<sup>73</sup>E.g., Stone, 2011; Corbett, Yi-Chong and Weller, 2018; Arias, Clark and Kaya, 2025.

the agenda of IOs, while experience allows them to take advantage of this opportunity in advancing their states' policy goals. As noted previously, I lay out two specific scope conditions: diplomatic experience is less likely to matter on issues that are major foreign policy priorities to great power, and may decline in its utility at the extreme ends of diplomatic longevity.

## Agenda-Setting in the UNGA

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

There are several features of the GA specifically that make it a good case to examine the effects of diplomatic experience on agenda-setting. First, there are agenda-setting *politics* taking place. The outcomes relate to important foreign policy interests of states, and because only a finite number of items can be included in the time-limited agenda of the GA, agenda proposals are subject to contestation and competition. States have heterogeneous preferences about what items to include on the agenda: 44% of all agenda items proposed are contested (that is, not adopted unanimously), with an average of 10 state diplomats participating in the debate. Agenda items at the UN tend to remain on the agenda and are rarely removed once they are added, with debates and meetings held on the item as each year. For many of the issues proposed, GA resolutions are adopted, 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 itself of great importance to states.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>[Hurd, 2008](#), 112-117.

Second, the setting facilitates empirical analysis. The GA’s agenda-setting process is formalized and well-documented, and all states have equal standing to participate.<sup>75</sup> Proposals represent the full universe of potential agenda items, which in many empirical settings is unobservable. Finally, because GA proposals are filed months in advance of the September meeting, they are insulated from the influence of external events—for example, only a small proportion of agenda proposals concern emergency aid relief.<sup>76</sup>

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. I download these records as well as any addenda or corrections from the UN Digital Library and extract 1,500 unique proposals 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.

Ultimately, most proposed items are included on the agenda (87%); I therefore focus on proposing as the outcome of interest. Failed agenda items tend to be highly politicized

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<sup>75</sup>More details on the agenda-setting procedure are in Appendix Section 1.1. This process is distinct from the main committee operations, and proposals are not subject to approval by the main committees.

<sup>76</sup>This relatively long bureaucratic process for agenda-setting is distinct from other UN organs like the Security Council, which proceed more rapidly ([Mikulaschek, 2021](#)). Issues on the agendas of the GA and SC generally do not overlap ([Arias, 2022](#)).

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 experience noted earlier: skillful diplomacy matters, but may not matter enough to overcome very strong preferences of powerful states, though this set of issues is expected to be narrow.<sup>77</sup>

Descriptively, the median number of proposals by a country in a given year is 2, and over the time series is 21. Proposals have a median of 17 co-sponsors. 588 proposals (13%) are sponsored by only one country, which obtain a nearly identical success rate compared to proposals with more than one sponsor.<sup>78</sup> Proposal topics vary across important substantive questions. Defense and peace, public lands (colonial territorial disputes), international affairs,<sup>79</sup> 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

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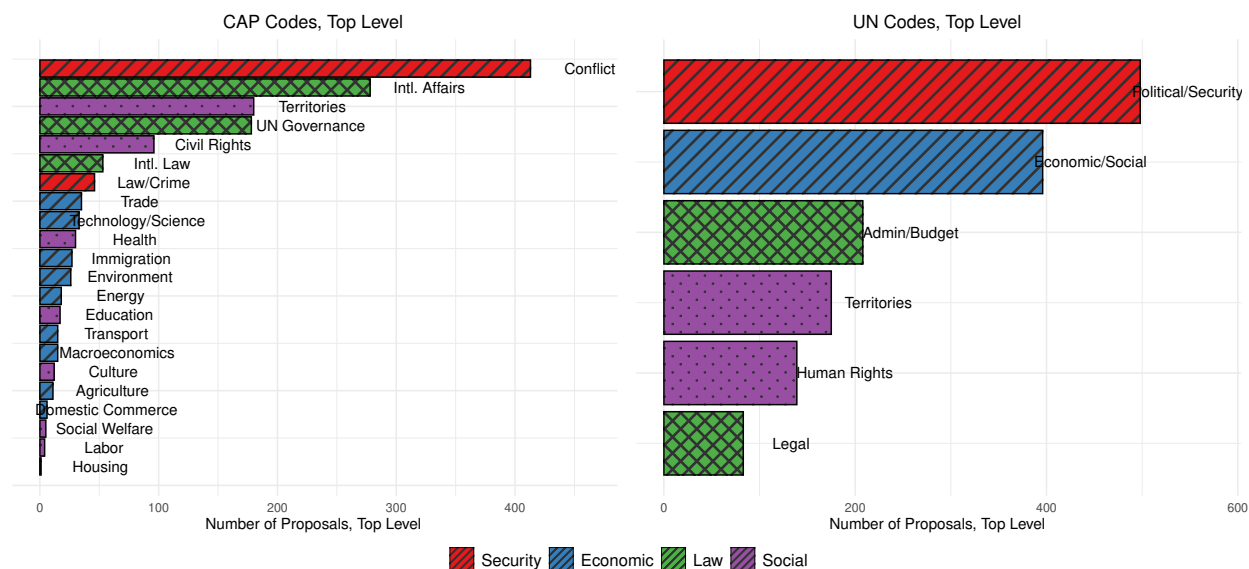
<sup>77</sup>Given the dearth of empirical analysis of agenda-setting in IOs, we lack a baseline to assess how competitive the GA is relative to other institutional contexts. Future work should explore the relative contestation of IO agendas, though because diplomats are strategic actors and ascertain the preferences of their colleagues before proposing new agenda items, it may be unrealistic to expect that agenda-setting will be extremely competitive—i.e., that one would observe a high rate of proposal failure—in any institution.

<sup>78</sup>Contrast this with co-sponsorship of GA resolutions, for which drafts *start* with an average of 55 sponsors between 2009 and 2019 (Seabra and Mesquita, 2022). This suggests that, as expected, small power influence is attenuated in later stages of policymaking, requiring more coalition-building to obtain success.

<sup>79</sup>This topic includes foreign aid, resource exploitation, Law of the Sea, development, international finance, regional issues, human rights (general), human rights (country-specific),

economic and social questions (Figure 2, right).

Figure 2



Overall, proposals are not dominated by powerful states (the most frequent proposers are listed in Table A-2). 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 set 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 correlation between GDP and the number of proposals submitted by a country is just 0.11, and 0.27 with population (see Figure A-2). This demonstrates that the opportunity to organizations, terrorism, diplomats, and population.

influence the agenda does exist for small powers, and I assert that by acquiring diplomatic experience, they can take advantage of this opportunity.

## Diplomatic Experience and Agenda-Setting

### Measuring Diplomatic Experience

I operationalize diplomatic experience with a measure of tenure in the UN. As discussed above, it is only via experience in a specific institutional milieu that a diplomat develops the social network, substantive expertise, and institutional knowledge necessary to operate effectively. While experience in other IOs might support the development of generalized diplomatic skills, it can contribute little to specific institutional and social environment of the UN. Furthermore, while support staff in the state's permanent mission may facilitate the development of substantive and institutional knowledge, only the Permanent Representative themselves may raise new agenda items, and the social environment of agenda-setting politics occurs almost exclusively at the ambassador-to-ambassador level.<sup>80</sup>

Following this logic, I use the annual [Blue Book listings of Permanent Missions to the UN](#) to capture the name of every country's Permanent Representative and first deputy, creating a database of 21,159 entries from 1946 to 2019.<sup>81</sup> To construct the tenure measure, I sum the total 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 accounts for the experience of the Ambassador's core 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,

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<sup>80</sup>Future work may seek to relax or empirically validate these assumptions.

<sup>81</sup>At the UN, the Permanent Representative is almost always an ambassador; I use these terms interchangeably.

which occurs often.<sup>82</sup>

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—that may be relevant for understanding diplomatic effectiveness.<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, a detailed smaller-scale analysis sheds some light on demographic patterns. The profiles of the ambassadors did not suggest major commonalities, with one exception: prior diplomatic experience. Generally, 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.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, their backgrounds suggest that most UN ambassadors are sincere actors with career incentives aligned with serving as effective policymaking agents, rather than seekers of patronage.<sup>85</sup>

## Predicting Tenure

Descriptively, I observe support for the expectation that small power diplomats are more likely to have more diplomatic experience than large power diplomats ([Hypothesis 1](#)): All of the 25 countries with the longest diplomatic tenure are small powers (see Table A-3). To further probe the relationship between state power and diplomatic experience, 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

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<sup>82</sup>Interview 48.

<sup>83</sup>E.g., [Arias and Smith, 2018](#); [Haglund, 2015](#).

<sup>84</sup>An additional test of selection can be found in the empirical analysis.

<sup>85</sup>[Goldfien, 2024](#). See Appendix Section 2. Future work may fruitfully expand on this empirical approach to assess biographical data on international diplomats.

GDP.

In addition to these key measures of state power, I include explanatory variables that may also explain multilateral policymaking effectiveness. 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.<sup>86</sup> 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 listed in the Blue Book.

At the state level, I represent different dimensions of a state’s embeddedness in the multilateral system. I include the number of IOs in which a country is a full member, associate member, or observer and the number of years of UN membership. I include a count of the number of alliances a country is a member of per year and for a stricter measure of alliances, 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. Finally, democratic regimes may be better positioned to advocate in IOs, which I capture using the Polity2 measures of regime type. Missing data are interpolated using Amelia, averaging estimates over 5 imputations.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Towns and Niklasson 2017.

<sup>87</sup>Results were robust to listwise deletion. Figure A-1 shows that missingness is not system-

All independent measures are summarized in Table A-1. I present results from a linear regression model to predict the count of agenda proposals. To address potential autocorrelation, in the appendix I estimate a separate model with each predictor and the main results were consistent (see Tables A-7 and A-9, Figures A-4 and A-5). 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 control variables to mean 0 and standard deviation 1 to ease the interpretation of results.

In line with my 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. A 1% increase in GDP corresponds to a 6% decrease in tenure, while a 1% increase in population corresponds to a 44% decrease in tenure.<sup>88</sup> 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.

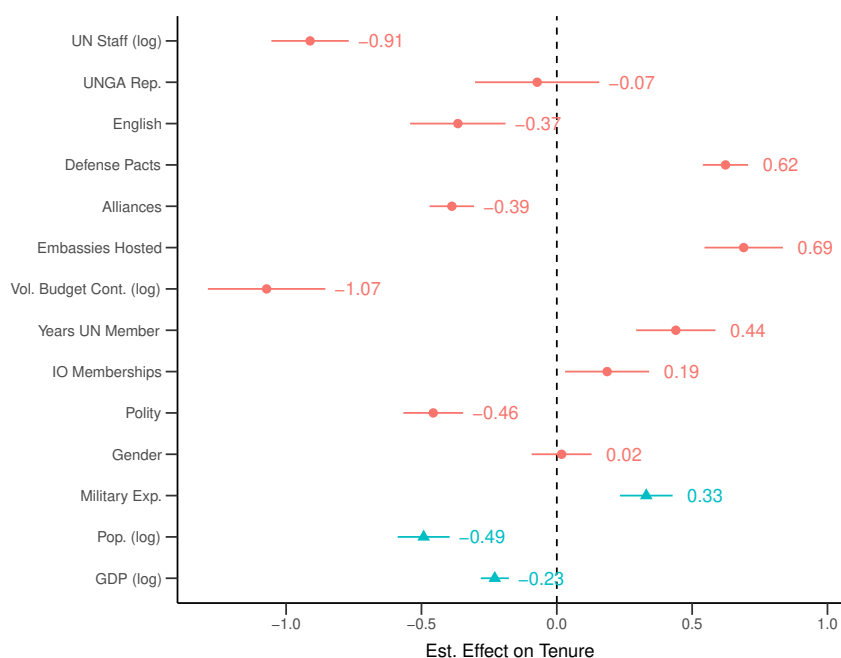
In addition to these key theoretical predictors, the relationships between tenure and the other independent variables are mixed. Importantly, democratic states are less likely to have long-serving ambassadors compared to authoritarian states. This finding is not surprising, as democratic states are more 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 author-

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atically correlated with regime type or GDP, though is related to years because of different time coverage in the various datasets.

<sup>88</sup>Full tabular results can be found in Table A-6.

Figure 3



itarianism. 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 experience helps to explain states' success in influencing the IO agenda.

## Explaining Agenda-Setting

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.<sup>89</sup> Based

<sup>89</sup>As mentioned previously, this measure is preferable to a strict count of consecutive ambassador years because it accounts for the experience of the Ambassador's core diplomatic

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.

Per [Hypothesis 2](#), I expect that states represented by more experienced diplomats are more 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 experience as the key predictor of interest.

In line with these expectations, [Figure 4](#) shows that countries with experienced ambassadors are 8.1 percentage points more likely to propose an agenda item than those with novice ambassadors.<sup>90</sup> Proposals submitted by experienced ambassadors are also 6 percentage points less likely to be contested during the debate ( $p = .03$ ). Ambassador gender and English as a first language are not significantly related to proposing. Once again, relationships with the state-level measures are mixed. To examine 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.

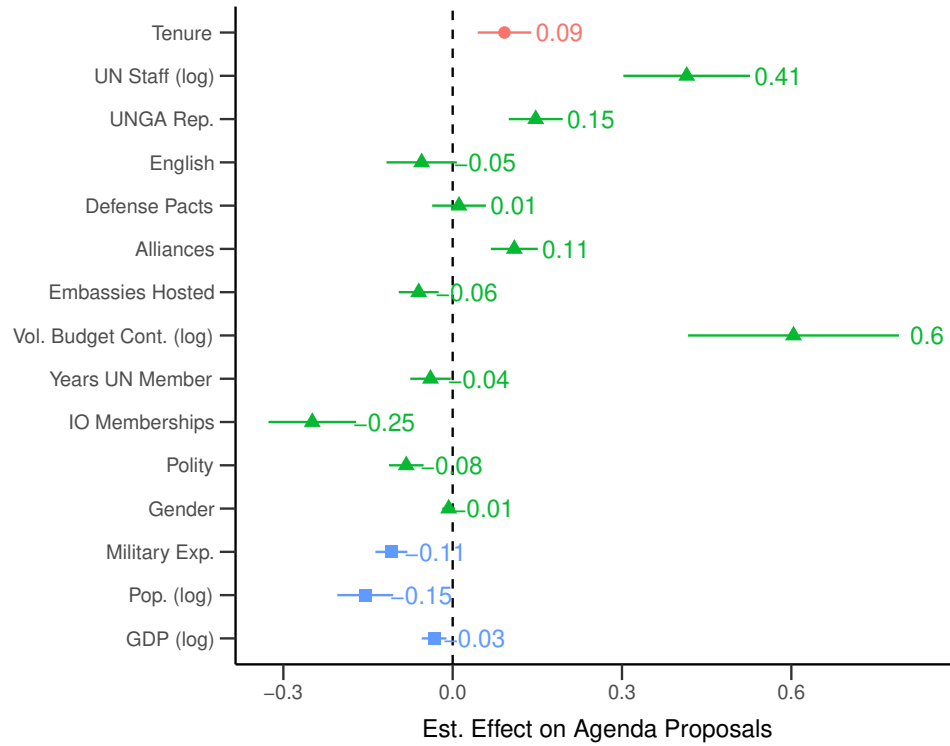
Even after controlling for measures of material power, diplomatic experience is a significant predictor of agenda-setting. GDP, population, and military expenditure are not  

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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 often. Results are directionally robust to alternate specifications of experience, including an indicator of whether *either* the ambassador or deputy has 3 years experience, and whether the ambassador has 3 years experience, ignoring deputies ([Table A-11](#)). [Figure A-3](#) shows the distribution of experience across countries and years.

<sup>90</sup>Full tabular results can be found in [Table A-8](#).

Figure 4



consistently related to agenda-setting across models, though in a majority of models, GDP and population are negatively associated with agenda-setting, while military expenditure is more often positively related. The magnitude of the effect of power is modest: A 10% change in GDP or population results in an expected change in agenda-setting of less than 1%. Though material power matters, its effects are smaller and less predictable than those of tenure and most other measures of institutional embeddedness.

Small powers are not necessarily uniquely positioned to maximize diplomatic experience. I interact ambassadorial tenure with the measures of smallness and do not observe a significant effect of this interaction (Table A-13). The independent effect of tenure remains significant in all of the models, but the interaction effects do not achieve statistical significance.<sup>91</sup> While small powers may have more diplomatic expertise (see Table A-3), these

<sup>91</sup>I also estimate the main model on a subset of only small powers and observe the same pattern

results suggest that any state with diplomatic experience 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 multi-lateral 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 agenda-setting influence—and is larger than the magnitude of the effect of the number of embassies hosted.

The effects of tenure on agenda-setting capacity are non-linear over time. 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 (Table A-12, Models 1 and 2). To further probe this nonlinearity, I estimate a model with tenure divided into three-year bins, omitting 0-3 years of experience as the reference category. Tenure is positively associated with agenda-proposing across all bins, but the effect is largest and is only statistically significant in the years 6-9 bin (Table A-12, Model 3), and results are similar in a model with smaller 2 year bins. I also estimate a nonparametric Generalized Additive Model (GAM) with a spline (5 knots) on the tenure predictor, and find that the marginal effectiveness of tenure increases until approximately 8-9 years of experience, and subsequently begins to decrease. The results held across several different knot specifications and in both Poisson and OLS specifications of the GAM (Figure A-9). Taken together, these results suggest a 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 become outdated. If there is a ‘sweet spot’ in terms of maximizing the ability to influence agenda-setting, it appears to be 6-9 years of experience.

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

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of results as in the whole sample.

existing theories would predict. Major powers still engage in agenda-setting by proposing items and blocking agenda proposals that contravene important foreign policy priorities. 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 experience can be a tool for small powers to gain influence.

## Ambassadorial Turnovers and Deaths

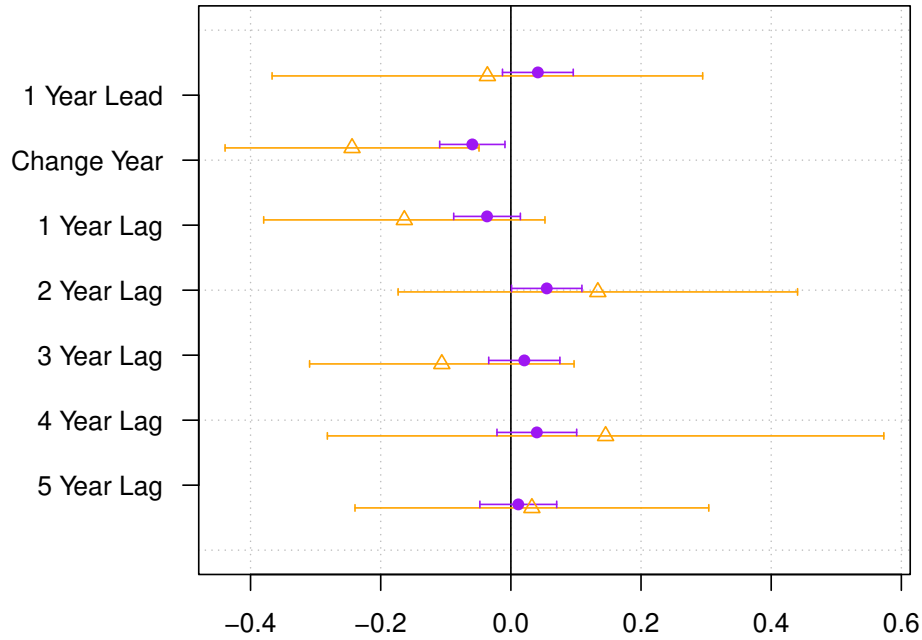
To isolate the causal relationship between tenure and agenda-setting, I specifically examine cases of turnover and leverage an exogenous source of variation in ambassadorial turnover: deaths. Turnovers would be expected to serve as a shock to the Mission’s institutional knowledge and social positionality 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 expertise 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. This measure is an indicator for country-years when the summed experience is reduced from 3 or more years to 0. 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 experience.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>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

Figure 5



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 expertise, 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.<sup>93</sup> To measure this phenomenon, I use UN meeting records, which announce when an ambassador has died in the post.<sup>94</sup> I extract these records and create the death indicator

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different from 0.

<sup>93</sup>Urquhart 1998.

<sup>94</sup>See [here](#) for an example.

following the same procedure as for the turnover indicator described above.<sup>95</sup> Although rare, 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 than a typical turnover, but even in the case of death, diplomatic expertise recovers over time.

In both cases of deaths and turnovers, the results appear to be driven by replacements of experienced ambassadors. Per my expectations, we would observe a stronger shock when a more experienced diplomat is replaced. In the Appendix (Figure A-13), I observe the anticipated effect in the analysis of all cases of turnovers when splitting the sample of turnovers between experienced (more than three years tenure before turnover) and inexperienced. Among both groups, there are no pre-treatment trends. The expected pattern — reduced effectiveness in the change year, followed by recouping effectiveness-only holds for the experienced group.<sup>96</sup> Buttressing this finding, the results of the turnover and death analyses are robust to a stricter cutoff of 5 years of experience (Figures A-12 and A-14).

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<sup>95</sup>Table A-15 shows that states that experience ambassadorial deaths and those that do not are balanced across relevant measures such as Policy and GDP.

<sup>96</sup>In the case of turnovers caused by deaths, deaths of both experienced and inexperienced ambassadors result in a negative shock to diplomatic experience, likely because the unanticipated loss by death of a an ambassador – even if they are relatively inexperienced – poses a challenge to the diplomatic efficacy of the mission, though these comparison groups are smaller and are thus the results may be underpowered.

## Robustness

It could be the case that ambassadors who show early promise are those who go on to serve for long careers, making their observed effectiveness a result of selection based on initial skill rather than expertise developed over time. To assess this possibility of selection effects, I compare the agenda-setting effectiveness of ambassadors who eventually serve for longer than the median tenure to those who do not in the years in which both groups are inexperienced (i.e., the first three years of service of both groups). If long-tenured ambassadors are selected because of their skill, we should observe a significant difference between the agenda-setting prowess of these two novice groups. However, Table A-14 shows that there is no statistically significant difference in agenda-setting behavior between novices who do and do not go on to have long tenures, providing additional evidence that the effects of tenure are a result of the accumulation of diplomatic expertise over time rather than selection. This test assuages concerns that the effectiveness of an ambassador could predict both their tenure and their agenda-setting success.

I conduct additional tests to predict both tenure and agenda proposing. Across all 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-6—A-8. 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, and sixth, I include both country fixed

effects and the full set of country-level controls. Seventh, I estimate a negative binomial model to account for overdispersion. Eighth, I replace year fixed effects with time trends to capture potential temporal dynamics. Ninth, I test alternate measures of power. I test several measures of small power status based on political constructs rather than material resources. As Maass 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.”<sup>97</sup> I also replace the material measures of power with other commonly used measures, including Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) scores, an indicator for great power status derived from the CINC scores (the 5 most powerful states in each year), and the Material Military Power (MMP) measure constructed by Souva.<sup>98</sup>

I conduct three additional robustness tests on agenda-setting. First, I estimate a model only on the agenda proposals related to security issues as a proxy of major powers’ foreign policy priorities. As mentioned in the previous discussion of issue-based scope conditions, these topics may be of greater priority to major powers, and therefore power-based logics are more likely to operate on such matters. Second, I exclude procedural and commemorative proposals 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.<sup>99</sup> 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 is negatively related to tenure in 5/8 tests and GDP is negatively related in 6/8 tests, while military expenditures are positively related in 6/8 models. All of the politically

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<sup>97</sup>Maass, 2009, 66.

<sup>98</sup>Souva 2023.

<sup>99</sup>Stone 2011.

constructed indicators of smallness are strongly and significantly related to tenure, while the alternative measures of power (CINC, MMP, and Great Power) are negatively related. For the agenda-setting models, in all cases, the direction and statistical significance of the effects hold. In 15/17 robustness test, the magnitude of the effect is substantively the same, and in the three 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 power diplomats are more likely to have more experience, and diplomatic experience is positively related to success in agenda-setting.

I also examine another type of external shock to diplomatic experience: governmental changes. When a new government takes office, a priority is often replacing existing bureaucrats with individuals more in line with the new party. There is not evidence of an independent effect of party changes on influence that is not moderated by ambassadorial experience. Figures A-10 and A-11 show that, as in the case of ambassador death, ambassadorial turnovers that coincide with elections where the incumbent is replaced reduce agenda-setting influence, while a placebo test of such elections alone does not affect diplomatic experience.

Across these tests, I show that even after accounting for power, diplomatic experience 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 power diplomats 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.<sup>100</sup>

The example of Aiken’s non-proliferation proposal illustrates that small power diplomats are independent proposers and that experienced diplomats can even be effective at setting the agenda against great power preferences. Aiken 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 and 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.<sup>101</sup> British diplomats echoed these assessments.<sup>102</sup> Given that several major powers opposed 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,<sup>103</sup> pushing back on such narratives. Indeed, Ireland’s diplomacy was regarded as

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<sup>100</sup>E.g., [Alesina and Dollar, 2000](#); [Vreeland and Dreher, 2014](#); [Carter and Stone, 2015](#). A standard approach to testing for great power influence—and its inverse, the importance of neutrality—would be to include alignment scores [Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten, 2017](#) as a predictor. However, because such scores are based on voting on UN resolutions, they are endogenous to activities on setting the UN agenda and are thus inappropriate measures in this context.

<sup>101</sup>[Telegram From US Department of State](#), October 5, 1958.

<sup>102</sup>[Telegram From US Department of State](#), October 14, 1958; [Memorandum of Conversation](#), “Irish Disarmament Resolution at 14th General Assembly,” with British Note Attached, September 1, 1959.

<sup>103</sup>[Manathunga, 1996](#), 102.

being strongly independent,<sup>104</sup> and there was no evidence of systematic consultations with other states in advance on the non-proliferation proposal.<sup>105</sup>

Interviews with diplomats corroborate the independence of diplomatic proposals and suggest that they are not 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.<sup>106</sup> 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. 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.<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusion

Lyne et al. argue that "[i]n the study of IOs, the consensus view is that small states do not affect IO behavior in significant ways."<sup>108</sup> Challenging such assumptions, I theorize that

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<sup>104</sup>Dorr 1996.

<sup>105</sup>Chossudovsky, 1990, 112.

<sup>106</sup>Interview 20.

<sup>107</sup>E.g., Björkdahl, 2007; Panke, 2010.

<sup>108</sup>Lyne, Nielson and Tierney, 2006, 56.

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 diplomatic experience—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. I show that smaller powers are more likely to have experienced diplomats than large powers, and that diplomatic 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 experience. These findings contribute new empirical evidence to existing work on small states in IOs,<sup>109</sup> and provide new means of understanding why some small state actors are more influential than others.

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,<sup>110</sup> even as scholarship develops a growing understanding of the relevance of individual bureaucrats and diplomats in international negotiations.<sup>111</sup> 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 in IOs.

The ability to influence the IO agenda in the early stages of policymaking is substantively important. These activities can yield 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 establishes issue frames and creates path dependence in bureaucratic institutions. This can shift the final outcome closer

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<sup>109</sup>E.g., [Cooper and Shaw, 2009](#); [Thorhallsson, 2012](#); [Panke, 2013](#).

<sup>110</sup>[Conrad and Monroe 2021](#); [Xu and Weller 2018](#).

<sup>111</sup>E.g., [Clark and Zucker, 2023](#); [Heinzel, 2022](#); [Hardt, 2014](#).

to the preferred outcome 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' preferred outcomes and from the status quo. These results are especially important for the foreign policies of small states, which lack the resources and alternative options available to powerful states. In this way, diplomatic experience can be considered a particularly effective "weapon of the weak."

These data represent the first attempt to quantitatively measure diplomatic skill at scale, yet are nevertheless somewhat coarse measures; future work should strive to measure diplomatic expertise with greater nuance. Drawing on the literature on leader effectiveness and disposition,<sup>112</sup> 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 and examinations of informal networks may also prove a fruitful avenue for future research, building on findings that heads of state with prior relationships may collaborate more.<sup>113</sup> Such avenues could further illuminate the specific mechanisms of diplomatic experience—social networks, substantive expertise, and bureaucratic knowledge.

Future work should test the generalizability of these expectations across different contexts. The logic of my theory of diplomatic experience is not specific to the context of the UN: Because the diffusion of institutional structures from the UN to other IOs is likely,<sup>114</sup> 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 experience more likely to be influential. This implies that institutions such as the EU and

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<sup>112</sup>E.g., Horowitz, Stam and Ellis, 2015; Saunders, 2011.

<sup>113</sup>Krcmaric, Nelson and Roberts 2020.

<sup>114</sup>E.g., Sommerer and Tallberg, 2019.

WTO are likely cases for diplomatic experience to matter, whereas the IMF is a less likely case. Such studies could also allow for analysis of the fungibility of diplomatic experience across different institutional settings. Future research may also examine how the role of small states in agenda setting might diminish if major powers—such as the US, China, or Russia—no longer prioritize preserving institutional legitimacy, and thus no longer view the inclusion and support of small states as essential to sustaining international organizations.

I contribute a more accurate understanding of IO politics—which, by accounting for the whole of the policymaking process, shows that 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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