What makes some United Nations votes important to the U.S.?

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Abstract:

Since 1984 the U.S. State Department's annual *Voting Practices in the United Nations* report to Congress has identified some United Nations General Assembly votes from the previous year as important to the United States. In principle, these votes are "on issues which directly affected important United States interests and on which the United States lobbied extensively." Yet not all outcomes for votes listed as important appear consistent with extensive lobbying. Many are unanimous decisions without votes or, alternatively, cases where the U.S. failed to garner significant support. This paper characterizes and classifies important votes to better understand the range of factors that drive State Department designations. Some designations may be for domestic U.S. audiences; treating these votes differently would allow researchers to better measure U.S. foreign policy goals in empirical analyses.

I. Introduction

Researchers use United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voting behavior when studying international political economy because the data are available over a long period of time and for essentially all countries. What exactly one should do with these data…well, that's where it gets interesting! Unlike the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the UNGA cannot authorize the use of force or impose sanctions. Research has shown that support in the UNSC for a country's international actions (even if this support did not carry the day) can be important for domestic politics (Chapman & Reiter 2004; Mikulaschek 2019); we don't yet have any such result for support in the UNGA.

Nonetheless, at least some countries appear to care about UNGA decision-making. Since 1984, the U.S. State Department has reported to Congress on UNGA voting, providing a list of decisions the U.S. considered important and on which the U.S. purportedly lobbied other countries extensively. Some of these are consensus measures; others are roll-call votes. In most cases, these are UNGA resolutions that passed but occasionally are amendment, paragraph or motion votes or votes on items that did not pass. Some topics are clearly high priority for the United States and its allies, such as support for Palestinian political rights, condemnation of Israel, and declarations concerning the limitation of weapons (some of which the U.S. uses; others that it condemns).

Erik Voeten and coauthors have used overlap on voting measures across different UNGA sessions to construct variables locating country positions in an ideology space. One problem interpreting the results as capturing preferences or ideology is vote-buying; the voting records used to construct this space include cases where votes were influenced by side-payments or by vote trading and therefore do not accurately reflect underlying preferences about the issues. Andersen et al. (2006) suggest using the U.S. "important vote" list as the cases where there was vote-buying (and thus

not reflecting underlying state preferences) and all other votes as the cases where there was not (and thus better reflecting state preferences).

Yet simply eliminating all important votes from an analysis of the UN is likely inappropriate, too. State Department reports often argue that positions on important votes reflect other countries' level of support for the U.S. more accurately that positions on other votes--rather than implying that the U.S. is buying votes. The second *Voting Practices in the United Nations* report includes U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick's testimony to Congress summarizing the nature of U.S. lobbying activities (U.S. State Department 1985, 4):

> To the end of maximizing support for U.S. positions on such issues, U.S. Representatives seek: (1) to anticipate and identify such issues well in advance of the General Assembly; (2) to communicate our concern to friendly and neutral nations; (3) to inform them of the facts surrounding the issue; (4) to solicit support and help in dealing with these issues in the upcoming General Assembly.

Kirkpatrick argues that it is alignment on important votes (sometimes called key votes) that should be analyzed (U.S. State Department 1985, 4):

> In analyzing the voting records of countries with response to U.S. values and interest, special weight should be given to the ten Key Votes. The level of coincidence between U.S. and others on all votes reflects the extent to which the U.S. and the other nations share objectives and values in the world arena, but it cannot legitimately be regarded as reflecting the level of support for the U.S., any more than coincidence can be legitimately regarded as reflecting support for the Soviet Union. <u>The only votes that can legitimately be read as a measure of support</u>

for the United States are those which we identified as important to us, and on which we lobbied other nations. [emphasis original]

Kirkpatrick sees a UN of competing blocs, with votes of the bloc often determined by those few with strong preferences. Only the U.S. is without a bloc. If the U.S. does not expend effort to inform other countries about the issues (and about the intensity of U.S. preferences), countries will vote with their blocs without giving the issues careful consideration.[1] Kirkpatrick argues that only countries in the Soviet bloc are unmovable; countries in other blocs ("friendly and neutral nations") can be convinced to move to the U.S. position.

A close reading of the State Department reports reveals a clear attempt to corral Congress, to limit its attempts to dictate foreign policy and especially aid allocation. The State Department repeatedly points out that the statistics on voting coincidence provide an incomplete picture of U.S. relations with other countries. There is a tension between continuity—to allow comparison over time—and change needed to maintain control over policy. Various reports respond to pressure from Congress over the low level of support in the UN by factoring in consensus decisions, and there is a recent trend to generate more minimal documents with relatively little discussion of the issues.

To underscore that the list of supporters on important votes should not be the sole determinant of U.S. policy, the reports argue for a broader perspective. The initial idea was a "top ten" list. Yet early reports underscore the limitations of the list, mentioning other relevant items that did not make the top ten and hence were left out. The State Department eventually expanded the list to

[1] An example of this comes in a Second Committee vote on draft resolution A/C.2/46/L55. In statements following the vote (condemning the use of trade sanctions), the U.S. representative argues that the use of trade sanctions is "a matter which international law left to each country's discretion." Following this, the delegate from Cyprus stated that "as the draft resolution had been submitted by the Group of 77, of which his country was a member, his delegation had voted for it." Next, the delegate from Kuwait stated that "his delegation had voted in favor of the draft resolution despite reservations regarding some paragraphs because it had been proposed by the Group of 77, of which his delegation was very proud." (A/C.2/46/SR.58, English version, page 12)

include as many as 31 recorded votes (the latter during the Trump administration) and consensus decisions. The voting coincidence statistics reported sometime include these to underscore to Congress that the U.S. was not as isolated as other statistics made it appear (and that countries receiving U.S. aid had voting coincidence figures greater than 50%--if consensus items were included). In short, whether an issue is listed as important or not may depend on whether the list was restricted to a "top ten" or allowed to vary.[2]

Given these changes in size and the role of the list in managing the relationship between the administration and the Congress, the range of issues considered varies over time and may also reflect domestic political changes. There are clearly cases where the important vote choices are hard to understand otherwise. What is the role of lobbying on consensus issues? In 19 cases, the U.S. is the only country voting against an "important" resolution; could U.S. lobbying be that ineffective? In nine other cases, the U.S. designated a vote as important but itself abstained on the measure.

This paper examines roll-call voting patterns in the UNGA to better understand the nature of the U.S. important vote list. Section II presents examples where the same resolution is put to a vote over several years and raises questions about whether there is any evidence that U.S. did in fact lobbied other countries to influence their vote in these cases. Section III examines all roll-call votes during this period (1983-2022); a range descriptive statistics suggest that behavior on important votes is different than behavior on other votes in some circumstances but not in others. Section IV

[2] An example of this is a recurrent resolution titled "Prevention of an arms race in outer space." The wording of the resolution was nearly identical in 1988 (Resolution A/RES/43/70) and 1989 (Resolution A/RES/44/112); the U.S. voted against it both years. However, the vote on the resolution was not one of the 10 important votes listed for 1988 but was one of the 16 important votes listed for 1989 (the first year where the list was not a "top ten" list).

uses panel data on repeated resolutions to determine when an important vote designation changes voting behavior (evidence of lobbying or vote buying) and when it does not. Section V concludes.

II. Is this what lobbying looks like?

The political nature of the report highlights the political nature of the important vote list. Some issues seem to remain on the list for domestic political reasons, rather than serving any real foreign policy function. A prime example is the annual vote regarding the U.S. embargo of Cuba.[3] From 1992 to 2015 and from 2017 to 2019, this remained on the State Department list. Cuba introduced draft resolution A/47/L.20/Rev.1 in the General Assembly on 24 November 1992. This followed two substantial increases in the severity of the embargo earlier that year. On 18 April 1992, a Bush administration executive order (18 April 1992) forbade vessels engaging in trade with Cuba from entering U.S. ports. Then on 23 October 1992 Bush signed into law the Cuba Democracy Act that included even more extensive restrictions. The EU made clear its opposition to this law prior to passage. Nonetheless, when the draft resolution condemning the embargo came before the UNGA on 24 November 1992, eight EU members abstained and one (Greece) did not vote; only two (France and Spain) voted against the U.S.[4] The graph below summarizes the overall voting on this measure from 1992 to 2019[5]:

[3] The U.S. trade embargo on Cuba was introduced by President John F. Kennedy in February of 1962 (U.S. State Department, 2024).

[4] Non-EU member Lebanon voted against the U.S. but subsequently informed the UN secretariat that it wished its vote be amended to "abstaining."

[5] The gap in the graph reflects an initiative in the late Obama administration to engage the Cuban government; the resolution was dropped from the important vote list for 2016 (and the U.S. abstained on the vote) but reappeared in 2017 under the Trump administration. A draft resolution on this topic was not brought to a vote at the UNGA in 2020 but rather in the spring 2021 portion of session 75; this was not included in the U.S. important vote list. The draft resolution was not put to a vote in session 76 but it did reappear in sessions 77 and 78. U.S. important vote lists for these latter two sessions are not yet available.

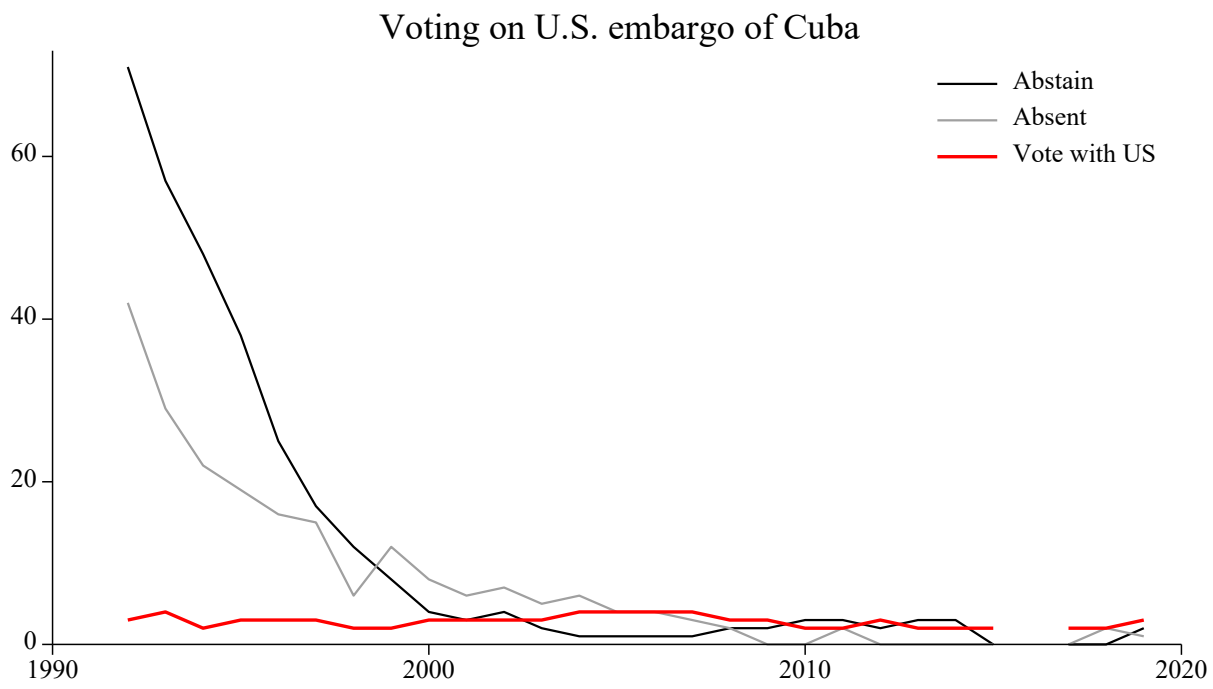

Figure 1

From a foreign policy perspective, it is not clear that the persistent important designation accomplished anything. The State Department has made a point of highlighting the value of absences and abstentions: "As is evident in the lobbying of the United States before crucial votes are taken, abstentions and deliberate absences can be of great help to United States interests." (U.S. State Department 1989, I-5) Nonetheless, votes in support the U.S. position have not budged over nearly three decades while the number of countries avoiding a vote against the U.S. declined dramatically. Even the EU members that had abstained initially quickly shifted to voting against the U.S. (Belgium and Greece in 1993, Denmark and Luxembourg in 1994, Ireland, Italy, and Portugal in 1995, and finally Germany and the Netherlands in 1996).

It seems likely that keeping the embargo vote on the important list reflects U.S. domestic politics and the need to placate the anti-Castro bloc within the U.S. Analysts typically point to the Cuban-

American vote in Florida and the state's history as a swing state in presidential elections (Sesin 2021) and to conflict between Congress and the administration for jurisdiction over the issue (Haney& Vanderbush 2005). According to Lustick (2019, 58):

> The decisiveness of American domestic politics on U.S. behavior at the UN with regard to Israel is equaled only by the exceptional pattern of U.S. voting on the issue of the embargo on Cuba. Substantively, Cuba and Israel have virtually nothing in common. What they do share is that they both have a strategically positioned, extremely influential, single-issue lobby active in Washington. The domestic politics imperative behind U.S. policy in these cases is nicely illustrated by the contrast between militant American opposition to the principle of international boycotts against Israel and Washington's lonely stance in favor of the embargo on Cuba.

Votes related to UN advocacy for Palestinians provide another instructive example. These include votes on the UN's Division for Palestinian Rights (DPR), which serves as the Secretariat of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP), and votes on the CEIRPP itself.[6] Between 2003 and 2020, the U.S. routinely listed votes on resolutions related to these as important. As Figure 2 illustrates, the U.S. position (voting no) has never enjoyed much outright support, despite whatever lobbying the U.S. has done. In this case, we see little change over time, although we do see significantly more abstentions and absences (averaging 58 abstentions and 22 absences) than for votes the U.S. did not designate as important during this

[6] Resolution 3376 (XXX) "Question of Palestine" (passed 10 November 1975) "[d]ecides to establish a Committee on the Exercise of the inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People composed of twenty Member States to be appointed by the General Assembly at the current session."

period (averaging 18 abstentions and 19 absences).[7] Yet these resolutions also appear in years the U.S. did not designate them important (1993-2002) and voting patterns show only small differences. Thus, while the number of abstentions and absences is high for these votes, it is not clear whether this is due to being designated as important votes.

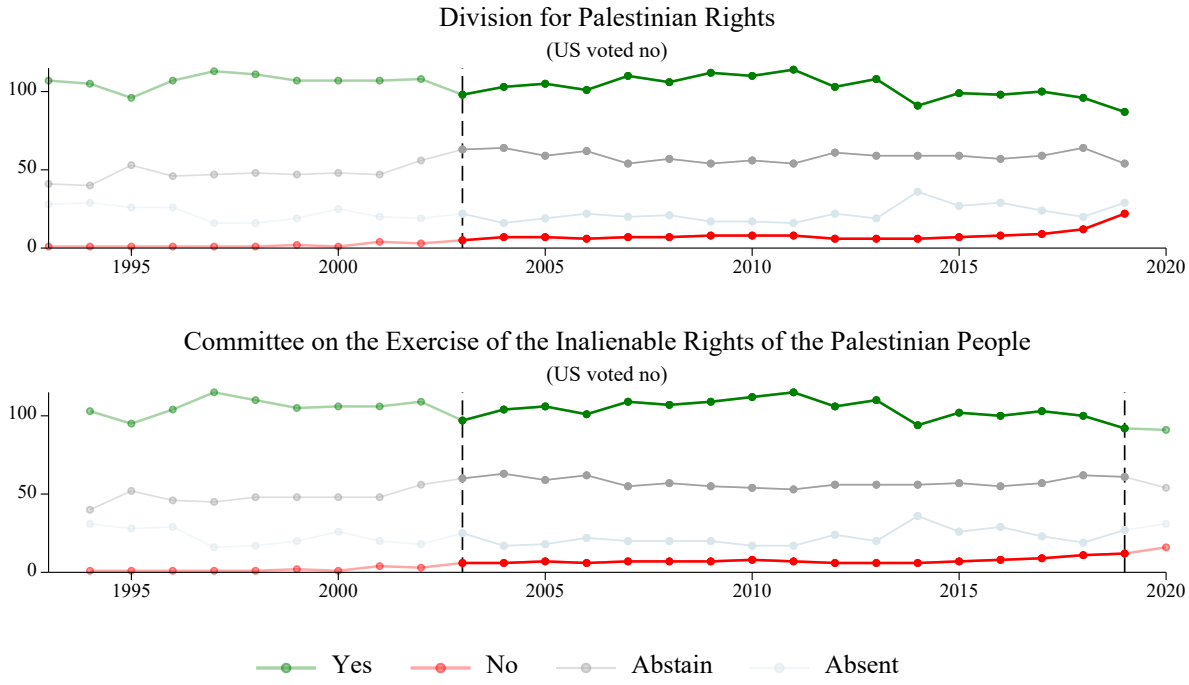

Figure 2

Votes related to UN promotion of elections have a more varied history of important designation (see Figure 3). There is no clear pattern between the important vote designation and support for the U.S. position.

[7] Differences are statistically significant comparing the number of countries abstaining/absent on either DPR or CEIRPP resolution votes and on non-important votes during this period. This is based on a t-test of the equality of means, using unpaired data and allowing for unequal variances across samples (since the "non-important vote" sample is far larger than the DPR or CEIRPP samples). P-values for these tests are: DPR abstain versus non-important vote abstain: p=0.0000; DPR absences versus non-important vote absences: p=0.0181; CEIRPP abstain versus non-important vote abstain: p=0.0000; CEIRPP absences versus non-important vote absences: p=0.0085. Two-sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov likewise reject equality of distributions.

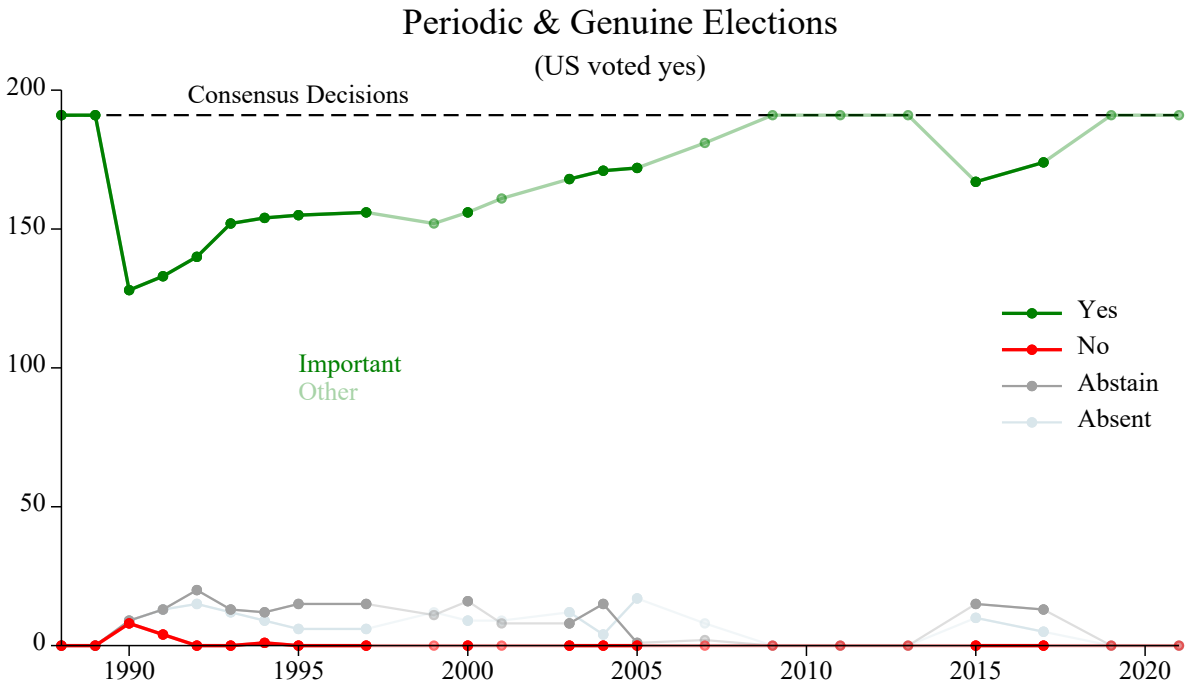

Figure 3

Thus for these select cases with repeated votes on the same resolutions, there is little evidence that the important vote designation (and the heightened level of lobbying that this should reflect) impacts support for the U.S. position.

III. Descriptive Analysis of Individual Roll-Call Votes

This section broadens the focus from a handful of examples of votes on repeated resolutions to look at all 4,672 resolution-related roll-call votes where the important vote classification is available (Fjelstuhl et al. 2022). This includes 3,473 resolutions plus 49 motions, 128 amendments, and 1,022 separate votes (also called paragraph votes) related to these resolutions. While the previous section provided little evidence the important vote designation impacts voting, using the full dataset there is evidence that, at least for a subset of votes, the important vote list does reflect

the Congressional mandate that the State Department report identify votes on which the U.S. lobbied intensively.

Figure 4 examines the distribution of vote margins, demonstrating that it looks quite different for important votes and other votes. In particular, the share of decisions where the vote margin was less than 50 is substantially larger for the votes identified by the State Department as important. Narrower margins might reflect cases where the U.S. was on the losing side but managed to win over other countries to its position, therefore shrinking the margin of victory. Alternatively, the U.S. may have supported a borderline measure and helped secure a narrow majority via its lobbying efforts. Of course, other stories can explain these patterns, too.

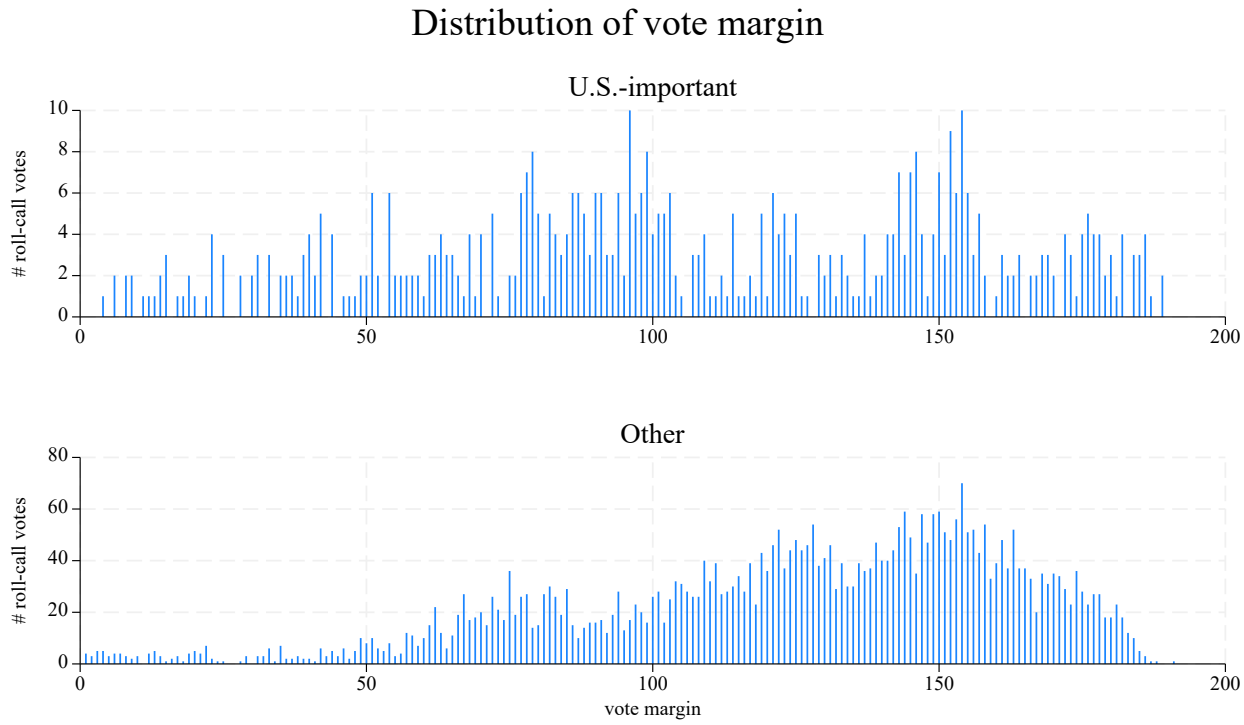

Figure 4

What about cases that are not obviously the outcome of a traditional lobbying effort (e.g., do not match a swing voter model)? What are plausible alternatives that still might include U.S. lobbying

of other countries? In the cases above where the U.S. is alone (or nearly so), it may be that winning even one additional vote has foreign policy value. Figure 5 presents the distribution of "no" votes when the U.S. voted against a measure; the upper panel covers important votes; the lower panel covers other votes. If the U.S. were attempting to win over at least a few countries to its position via lobbying on important votes (but not on other votes), we would expect to see more cases with a few additional countries voting "no" together with the U.S. on important votes but not on other votes. This pattern is not at all evident in Figure 5; the distributions look remarkable similar.[8]

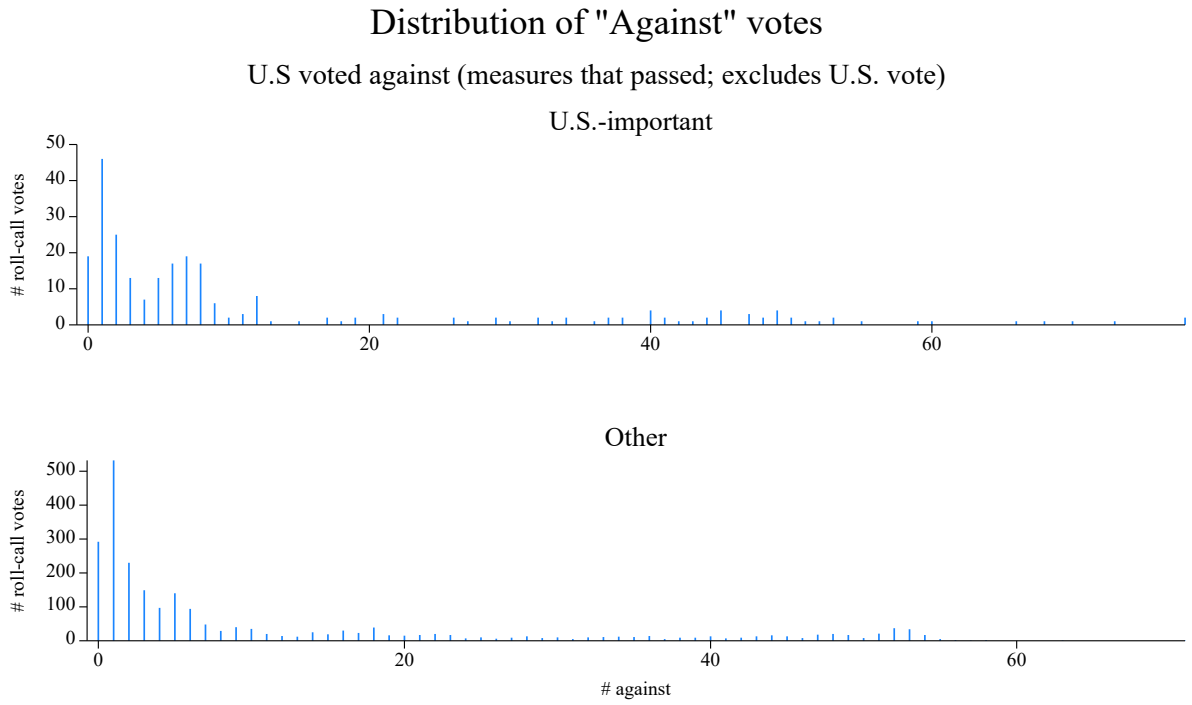

Figure 5

Alternatively, convincing some other countries to abstain may have value (as the quote from the 1989 State Department report suggests). Here, the data do lend some support. Figure 6 presents

[8] A two-tailed difference of means t-test (as described above) fails to reject the null (p=0.0622)); the mean number of no votes is 13 for important votes and 11 for other votes during the same period.

the distribution of abstentions when the U.S. is on the losing side of a vote; the upper panel is for U.S. important votes and the lower panel is for other votes. The upper tail is substantially larger for important votes, suggesting that countries abstain rather than voting against the U.S. more frequently on important votes than on other votes.[9]

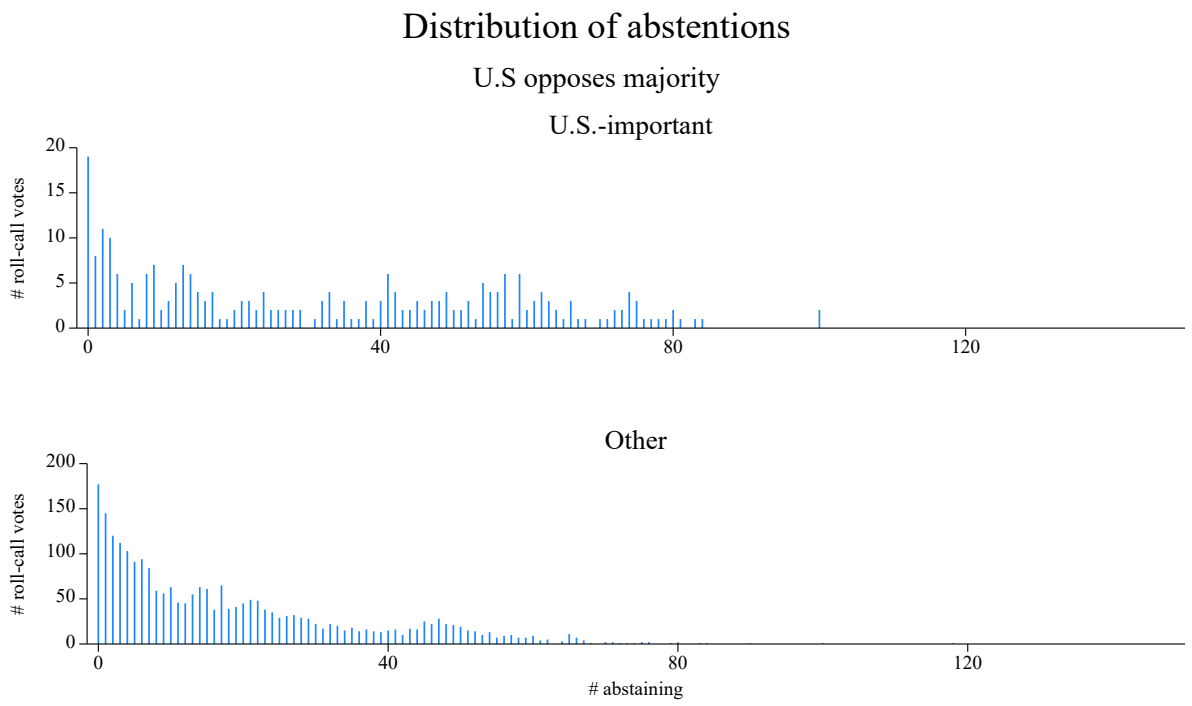

Figure 6

Looking at the distribution of absences when the U.S. opposes the majority, there are somewhat more absences for important votes than for others; the difference in the means of the distributions is statistically significantly (p=0.0024). Looking instead at strategic absences (Morse and Coggins 2024; see below for precise definition) results in a distribution with substantially more

[9] This is confirmed by a two-tailed difference of means t-test (p=0.0000); the mean number of abstentions is 32 for important votes and 18 for other votes during the same period.

observations in the upper tail, and the means for important and other votes are clearly different (p=0.0000).

The description above shows that important votes as a group are different—at least in some dimensions—and provides some evident of successful lobbying in that countries are more likely to abstain or be absent rather than voting against the U.S. position on issues important to the U.S. It also shows that vote margins are narrower on important votes. While there remain many aspects of the set of important votes that are difficult to rationalize, the larger issue is whether any of these patterns are causal, i.e., reflect the impact of the U.S. designation or U.S. lobbying. It may be, for example, that the State Department gravitates toward resolutions that by their nature are likely to have smaller margins, more abstentions, and more absences. In other words, these patterns might exist even if the U.S. took no action.

IV. Panel Analysis of UNGA voting

To better address these questions of causation, this section provides a panel analysis. As noted above, many UNGA resolutions repeat from one year to the next; in some cases, a resolution appears every other year or every third year (following attempts to allow time for the UN to tackle new issues). Bailey et al. (2017) use this repetition as the basis for their ideal point calculations. Brazys and Panke (2017) use it to explore when countries change their positions in the UNGA.

I identify repeated resolutions based on the title and text of resolutions, drawing on the linked resolutions identified by Bailey et al. (2017), unique matching of resolution titles across sessions (after eliminating variations in spelling), and extensive hand-matching.[10] In all cases, resolutions

[10] My source for resolution titles is the United Nations Digital Library (UNDL). Since this only covers resolutions that passed, my sample excludes failed resolutions.

are considered equivalent across years only if the U.S. vote is unchanged.[11] Since the question of interest is U.S. important vote designation, I again limit the time period to 20 September 1983 - 31 December 2022 when that designation is available in the U.S. State Department's annual *Voting Practices in the United Nations* report. In addition, since matching is by resolution (and since most important votes are final passage of a resolution), I limit votes to the final passage of resolutions.

The UNGA-DM database (Fjelstul et al. 2022) contains 3,473 recorded roll-call votes on the final passage of resolutions during this timeframe. The approach outlined above matches 2,780 of these votes to 389 distinct resolutions that are repeated across sessions. The resulting panel is unbalanced as the number of repetitions ranges from 2 sessions (for 102 distinct resolutions) to 40 sessions (1 distinct resolution titled "Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples"). The average number of repetitions is 7. Within the panel dataset, 440 votes (131 distinct resolutions) had an important vote designation by the U.S. State Department; the average number of repetitions in this group is 9. 2,340 votes (366 distinct resolutions) did not have an important vote designation; the average number of repetitions in this group is 6. One hundred and eight distinct resolutions (1,128 votes) were sometimes designated as important and sometimes not; the average number of repetitions in this group is 10.

To assess whether the important vote designation impacts countries' voting decisions (i.e., whether there is effective lobbying by the U.S.), Table 1 examines the impact of important vote designation on the number of UNGA members voting with the U.S. The dependent variable is the log of the number of countries voting the same as the U.S. ("in favor," "against," "abstaining," or "not

[11] This is true even if the text of the resolution is unchanged. See, for example, the 2016 vote condemning the U.S. embargo of Cuba, where the U.S. abstained rather than voting against.

voting").[12] The specification includes session fixed effects (i.e., time fixed effects) as well as resolution fixed effects, reflecting the panel nature of the data. t-statistics are based on resolution-clustered standard errors. All specifications include the log of the number of countries eligible to vote to address potential heteroskedasticity (since the dependent variable is the sum of a varying number of underlying indicator variables).

Column (1) includes all 2780 votes. The important vote designation is associated with a 17% higher voting coincidence with the U.S.[13] Since the sample includes only resolutions that passed (and typically by wide margins), different factors may influence voting coincidence when the U.S. votes yes as compared to when it votes no. Column (2) restricts the sample to the 521 cases where the U.S. voted yes. In this sample, the important vote designation appears irrelevant; the estimated coefficient is small, negative, and not statistically significant. Column (3) restricts the sample to cases 1,813 where the U.S. voted no. For this sample, the important vote designation is highly relevant. The important vote designation is associated with a 30% higher voting coincidence with the U.S.; this result is statistically significant ($p = 0.003$). This suggests that lobbying by the U.S. can influence countries to vote against resolutions when they otherwise would not have.

This difference is not because of the nature of the resolution (which is unchanged from one session to the next). Thus, these panel estimates address one challenge to causal inference. Of course, it is

[12] Fjelstul et al. (2022) report both the original vote for each country and an amended vote in the event that the delegation later informed the UN Secretariat that it wished to have its vote recorded differently. Only the original vote is official in the sense of being counted to determine the outcome of the roll call. Since countries might strategically change their vote *ex post*, I use the original vote. However, in a handful of cases the U.S. amended its vote. Since this likely reflects an error on the part of the U.S. delegate—rather than a strategic ploy—I use the amended vote for the U.S. During this time period, the U.S. amended 0.27% of its votes while other member states amended 0.44% of their votes. Fjelstul et al. (2022) distinguish between "not voting" and "not voting (suspended)" (where suspensions are most often for unpaid fees); see also Morse and Coggins (2024). Throughout the analysis, I omit countries that are suspended. Here and below, I add one before taking logs to avoid log of zero.

[13] Since the coefficient estimate is greater than 0.1 in absolute value, I use the exact formula for the marginal effect in a log-linear specification: $e^{\hat{\beta}} - 1 = e^{0157} - 1 = 0.17$.

possible that events that lead the U.S. to designate a resolution as important also impact how countries vote on that resolution, independent of U.S. lobbying. To account for this, Table 2 drops China and Russia from the sample used to calculate the dependent variable and instead includes separate indicators for these countries voting the same as the U.S. These variables may reflect significant world events that could impact both how other countries vote and whether the State Department considers a vote important.[14]

When looking at all votes, cases where Russia votes together with the U.S. correspond to a 56% higher voting coincidence with the U.S. for other countries; the effect is not statistically significant for China. Looking at cases where the U.S. voted in favor, the Russia effect shrinks to 6% but is still statistically significant; the effect for China is small and again not statistically significant. The situation is different when the U.S. votes against a resolution. The Russia effect is smaller and no longer statistically significant, but it is the reverse for China. In these cases where both China and the U.S. voted no, voting coincidence between the U.S. and other countries (excluding China and Russia) is 300% higher.

Regarding the impact of important vote designation, the estimates hardly change from Table 1. For important votes, voting coincidence is 18% higher overall, not economically or statistically significantly impacted when the U.S. votes in favor, but 29% higher when the U.S. votes against.[15] This further suggests that in the case the U.S. opposes a resolution the important vote designation

[14] For example, observing China or Russia shifting from voting with the U.S. to voting against the U.S. reflects the sort of geopolitical changes that might trigger an important vote designation.

[15] Results are essentially the same (for the coefficient estimates for China, Russia and important votes) if the regression includes either the China variable or the Russia variable but not both. As in this case, for all specifications reported below results for important votes are essential unchanged if the regression includes the variable for China, the variable for Russia, or both.

and the lobbying that goes with it have an impact on other countries votes, convincing some of them to join the U.S. in opposition.

As noted above, the State Department not only values countries voting with the United States but also values countries not voting against the U.S., i.e., by abstaining or not voting. Table 3 examines abstentions. The dependent variable is the log of number of countries abstaining; the sample is restricted to cases where the U.S. did not abstain (i.e., voted yes or no).[16] The set-up is otherwise the same as in Table 1: Column (1) is all cases where the U.S. voted; Column (2) is when the U.S. voted yes; and Column (3) is when the U.S. voted no. The number of countries abstaining ranges from 33% to 39% higher when the vote is designated important; the effect is statistically significant in all cases. Results are similar in regressions that control for Chinese and Russian voting relative to the U.S.

Another way not to vote against the U.S. is by not voting at all. Of course, there are many reasons UN members do not vote (pressing neither the "in favor" nor the "against" nor the "abstaining" buttons). These include, most notably, not being present at the meeting. Following Morse and Coggins (2024) to differentiate between cases like this and strategic absences (where the delegate chooses not to vote), I apply three conditions. First, I determine whether the delegate voted at all that day. If yes, then I consider any absences that day to be strategic. Second, if the only votes that day were ones the U.S. lost, then I also classify absences for those votes as strategic, too. Finally, if the delegate subsequently indicated that they wanted a position to be recorded, the absence is not strategic.[17]

[16] There are two cases where the U.S. chose not to vote (and did not subsequently indicate that it had wished to vote). These were both resolutions on the Antarctic, one in 1982 and one in 1983.

[17] Morse and Coggins (2024) provide a detailed analysis of strategic absences. Their definition only considers the first and third parts of the definition above. Across the 2,436 votes they cover, Morse and Coggins (2024) report an average of 6.2 strategic absences, with the value ranging from 0 to 70. Across the 2,780 votes in my estimation sample, using

Table 4 examines these strategic absences. The dependent variable is the log of strategic absences. Column (1) includes all votes where the U.S. had a position (yes or no). In this context, the important designation is associated with 18% more strategic absences, *ceteris paribus*. If we look just at cases where the U.S. voted yes (Column (2)), the change associated with important vote designation is substantially smaller and not statistically significant. Conversely, looking just as cases where the U.S. voted no (Column (3)), the change associated with important vote designation is larger (27% more strategic absences) and is statistically significant.[18]

The analysis above strongly suggests that the U.S. does indeed lobby other countries to influence their behavior on at least some votes the U.S. reports as important. Countries are more like to vote "no" with the U.S. when the U.S. lobbies them to do so. They are also more likely to intentionally skip votes on resolutions when the U.S. designates the vote important and the U.S. itself votes "no." Finally, regardless of whether the U.S. is for or against a resolution, other countries are more likely to abstain when the U.S. identifies a vote on a draft resolution as important than they are on the same resolution when the U.S. does not identify the vote as important. Thus, looking at either voting in line with the U.S. or strategic absences, it is only in cases where the U.S. votes "no" that we see evidence of lobbying.

Only when looking at abstentions is there an effect when the U.S. votes "yes." Breaking this down further by looking at positions taken by China and Russia, the result is driven surprisingly by votes where none of these countries votes against the resolution. This suggests that countries which

my definition there are an average of 7.6 strategic absences, ranging from 0 to 127. In this last case (A/RES/63/13 in 2008 related to a nuclear test ban), 64 countries voted in favor, the U.S. alone voted against, and no countries abstained. However, subsequently another 11 countries informed the secretariat that they had intended to vote in favor; that list included Japan, the Netherlands, and the UK, suggesting these were not "capacity-related absences" (Morse and Coggins 2024). This might argue against the third criterion in the definition. However, results do not depend on whether this criterion is used.

[18] Using all absences rather than just strategic absences yields important vote effect estimates that are small and fail to reach statistical significance at standard levels.

otherwise would have voted no instead abstaining. This is consistent with Morse and Coggins (2024) if these countries are considering either abstaining or not voting in response to the important vote designation. Morse and Coggins argue that abstaining may be costly when the U.S. and Russia are on opposite sides, thus making not voting more attractive. In cases where the major rivals are on the same side, the cost of abstaining may be lower.

V. Conclusion

The above analysis provides a framework and some guidelines to differentiate between different categories of votes that are designated as important by the U.S. State Department. As the earlier discussion suggests, some designations reflect U.S. geopolitical interests and include extensive lobbying and information campaigns to influence votes in the UNGA. Other designations may instead reflect U.S. domestic politics and therefore, given limited resources and limited tolerance by other nations, do not include serious lobbying efforts.

Analyzing the link between the State Department designating a resolution as important and voting patterns on that resolution runs the risk of bias because of a selection effect. Unmeasured characteristics of the resolution may influence both the State Department selection decision and UNGA members voting decisions. The panel analysis presented in Section IV examines repeated resolutions, i.e., resolutions that come up for a vote in more than one session of the United Nations General Assembly. Using a panel regression that includes resolution-specific fixed effects compares how voting changes from one session to another for resolutions whose "important designation" changes with how voting changes from one session to another for resolutions with no change in designation. Further controlling for voting by other major powers (Russia and China) strengthens identification by controlling for resolution-specific time-varying confounders.

In broad brush terms, the estimation results reject the hypothesis that important vote designation is purely about domestic politics, with no real lobbying and no impact on voting. While there is no evidence that lobbying pushes resolutions over the threshold to pass with any regularity, there are discernable impacts on voting (and not voting). That said, most of the changes seen are in cases where the U.S. opposed the resolution, convincing more countries to join the U.S. in opposition, or at least not vote against the U.S. position. This suggests that future researchers using alignment with the U.S. on important votes to analyze other geopolitical outcomes (such as U.S. aid flows, trade negotiations or lending by international financial institutions) might do well to narrow their attention to cases where the U.S. voted no.

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Table 1: Voting with the US

	(1) All	(2) US-yes	(3) US-no
Important Vote	0.155**	-0.0251	0.262***
	(2.43)	(-1.43)	(3.04)
Observations	2780	521	1813
Unique Resolutions	389	84	231

Dependent variable = # voting with US (log). All specifications include total number of votes (log), resolution fixed effects, and session fixed effects. t-statistics in parentheses based on resolution-clustered SEs. * 0.10 ** 0.05 *** 0.01

Table 2: Voting with the US with additional controls

	(1) All	(2) US-yes	(3) US-no
Important Vote	0.168***	-0.0170	0.251***
	(2.70)	(-1.04)	(2.95)
China same as US	0.166	0.0196	1.393***
	(1.27)	(0.84)	(8.49)
Russia same as US	0.443**	0.0593**	0.208
	(2.46)	(2.17)	(1.18)
Observations	2780	521	1813
Unique Resolutions	389	84	231

Dependent variable = # voting with US (log). All specifications include total number of votes (log), resolution fixed effects, and session fixed effects. t-statistics in parentheses based on resolution-clustered SEs. * 0.10 ** 0.05 *** 0.01

Table 3: Abstaining

	(1) All	(2) US-yes	(3) US-no
Important Vote	0.303***	0.286**	0.326***
	(4.69)	(2.31)	(4.17)
Observations	2334	521	1813
Unique Resolutions	315	84	231

Dependent variable = # abstaining (log). All specifications include total number of votes (log), resolution fixed effects, and session fixed effects. t-statistics in parentheses based on resolution-clustered SEs. * 0.10 ** 0.05 *** 0.01

Table 4: Strategic Absences

	(1) US-yes or no	(2) US-yes	(3) US-no
Important Vote	0.167**	0.0724	0.240***
	(2.28)	(0.55)	(2.82)
Observations	2334	521	1813
Unique Resolutions	315	84	231

Dependent variable = # strategic absences (log). All specifications include total number of votes (log), resolution fixed effects, and session fixed effects. t-statistics in parentheses based on resolution-clustered SEs. * 0.10 ** 0.05 *** 0.01