

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

Christopher Kilby

Villanova University

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Abstract:

Since 1984 the U.S. State Department's *Voting Practices in the United Nations* report to Congress has designated some United Nations General Assembly votes as important. 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 are for domestic U.S. audiences; treating these votes differently allows researchers to better measure U.S. foreign policy goals in empirical analyses, as demonstrated by replications studies.

[Note to selection committee: Paper is very incomplete. Final product might be appropriate for a poster.]

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 difficult! Unlike the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the UNGA cannot authorize the use of force or the imposition of 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 UNGA support.

Nonetheless, at least some countries appear to care about UNGA decision-making. Since 1984, the U.S. State Department has reported to the U.S. Congress on UNGA voting, providing a list of votes the U.S. considered important and on which the U.S. lobbied other countries extensively. Some of these are consensus measures; others are by roll-call vote. 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. For example, the U.S. identifies a December 9, 1997, failed proposal by Yemen as an important vote: "Proposal by Yemen that the amendment (A/52/L.59) to the draft resolution (A/52/L.53) should be treated as a new proposal, not an amendment. Rejection of the proposal resulted in the draft resolution on enhancement of Palestinian status not being put to a vote. The draft resolution would have conferred upon the Palestine Liberation Organization the same rights and privileges of participation in the General Assembly as those conferred upon member states, except voting and candidature." (page 41, *Voting Practices in the United Nations*, 1997) Another example comes from 2001. A draft resolution titled "Effects of the Use of Depleted Uranium in Armaments" would have requested the United Nations (UN) Secretary General to

commission a report on this topic; it was voted down 45-54-45 (with the U.S. voting against). Both are clearly high priority issues for the United States.

Erik Voeten and coauthors have used overlap on voting measures across different UNGA sessions to construct measures 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 all other votes as the cases where there was not.

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 than position 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:

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 that should be analyzed:

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. The only votes that can legitimately be read as a measure of support 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. Kirkpatrick argues that only countries in the Soviet bloc is unmovable; countries in other blocs (“friendly and neutral nations”) can be convinced to move to the U.S. position.

State Department documents illuminate a number of other salient points. The 1989 report (page I-5) highlights 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.” While reports discuss in which votes the U.S. position prevailed, an equal amount of ink is split on vote margins and how they change from year to year. There is also a clear attempt to corral the 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 reflection of U.S. relations with other countries. There is a tension between

continuity (so that statistics can be compared over time) and changes needed to capture shifting issues. 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.

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. From 1992 through 2019, this remained on the State Department list. The graph below summarizes voting over that period:

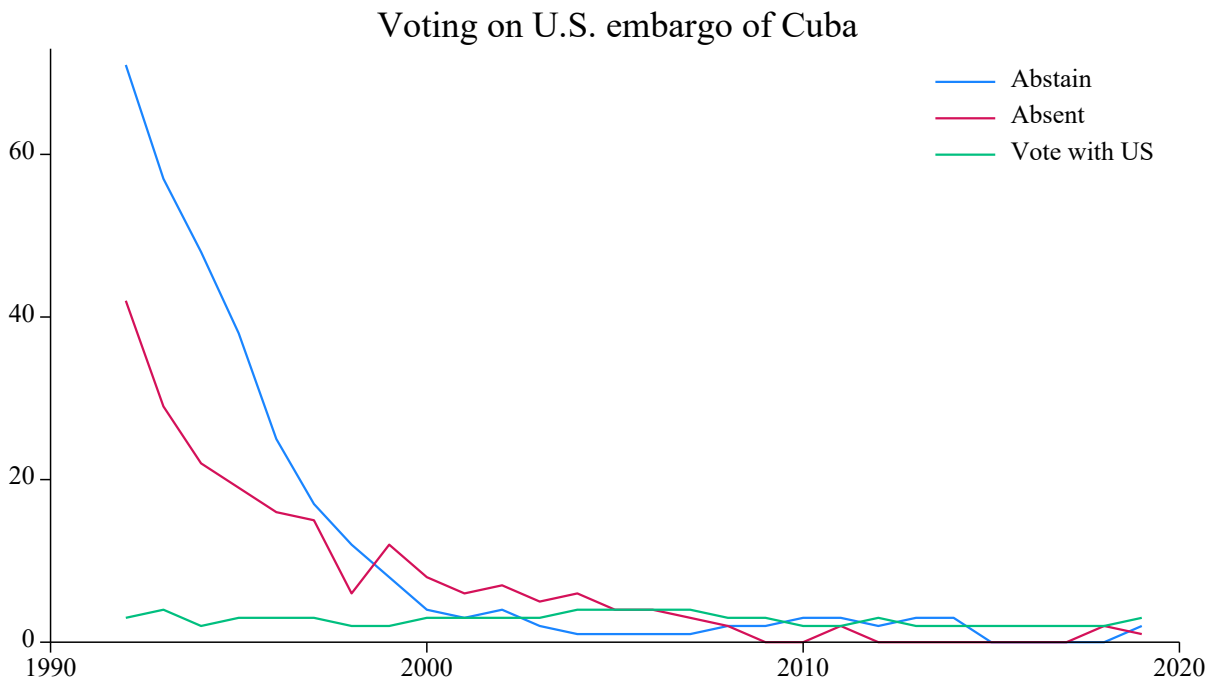


Figure 1

From a foreign policy perspective, it is not clear that the important designation accomplished anything. Votes in support the U.S. position haven't budged over nearly three decades while the

number of countries avoiding a vote against the U.S. declined dramatically. 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.

Another issue is the length of the list (and by extension what is included). The initial idea was a “top ten” list. Yet early reports mention other relevant items left off; the State Department eventually expanded the list to include consensus votes and as many as 31 recorded votes (during the Trump administration). Given this variation in size, 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. For example, in 19 cases, the U.S. is the only country voting against a resolution. In nine other cases, the U.S. designated a vote as important but itself abstained on the measure.

Despite these challenges, there is some 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. There is evidence that important votes are different in some ways. Figure 2 shows that the distribution of vote margins looks quite different for important votes and other votes.

## Distribution of vote margin

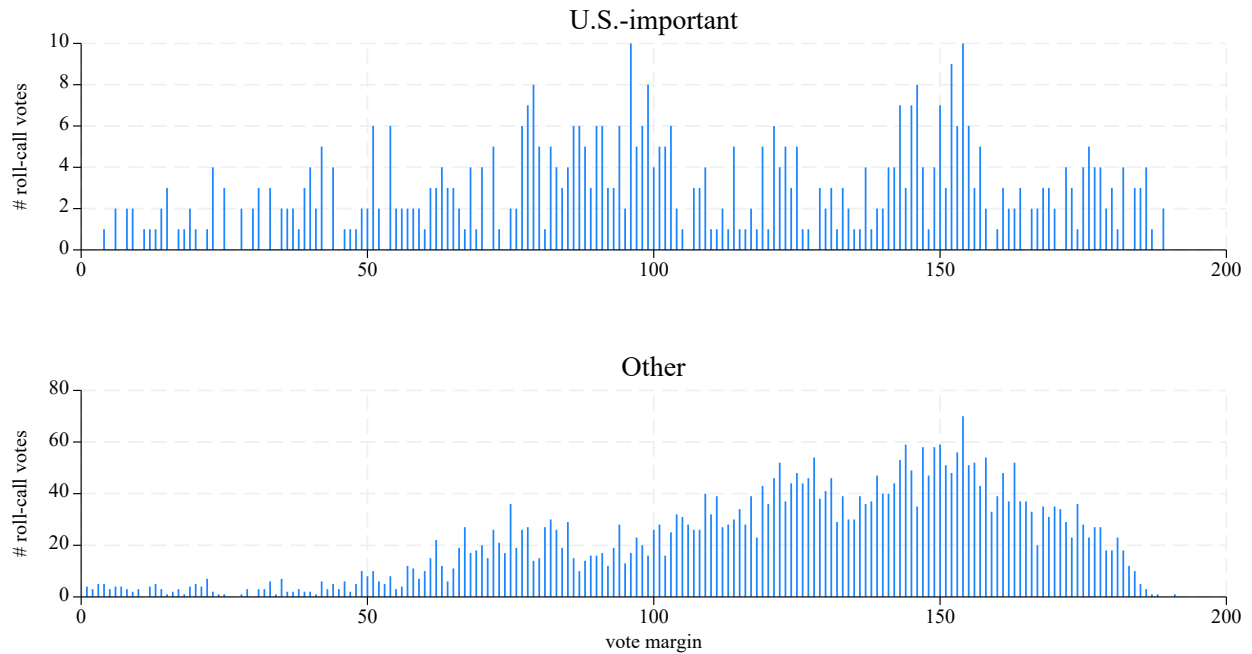


Figure 2

For cases that aren't obviously the outcome of lobbying, what are plausible alternatives that still include U.S. lobbying of other countries? In the cases above where the U.S. alone (or nearly so), it may be that winning even one additional vote has foreign policy value. Figure 3 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 3; the distributions look remarkable similar.

## Distribution of "Against" votes

U.S. voted against (measures that passed; excludes U.S. vote)

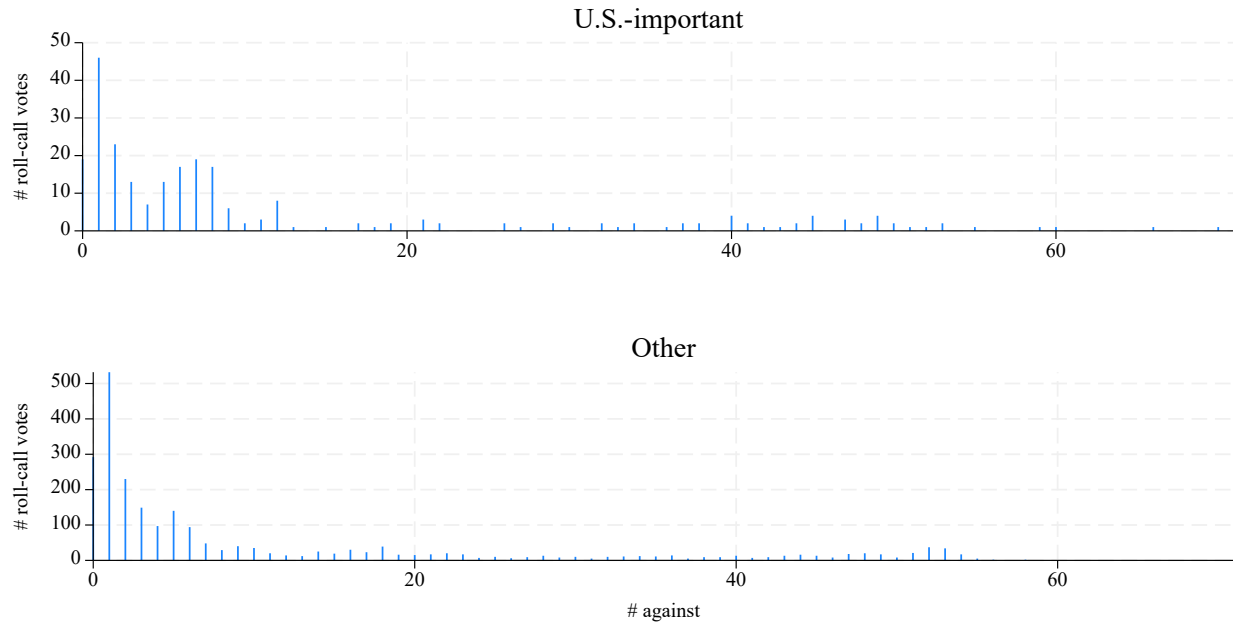


Figure 3

Alternatively, convincing some other countries to abstain may have value (as the quote above suggests). Here, the data do lend some support. Figure 4 presents 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> No such patterns holds for absences.



## Distribution of abstentions

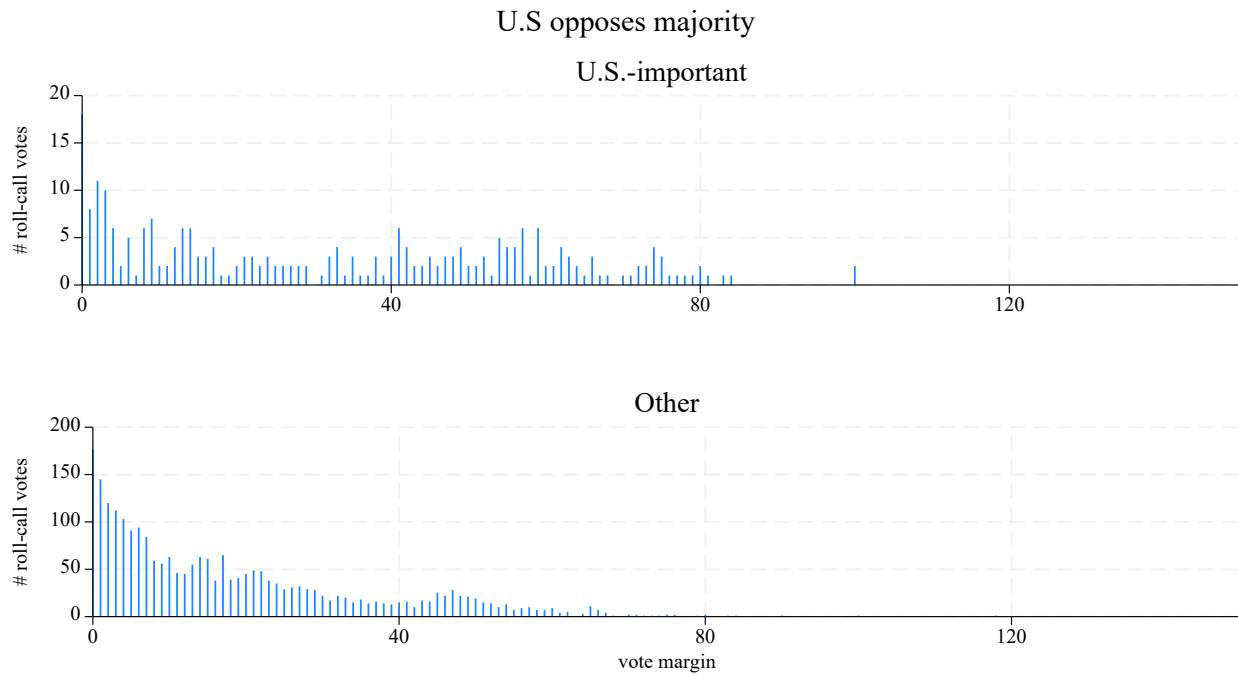


Figure 4

The description above shows that important votes as a group are different and provide some evidence of successful lobbying in that countries are more likely to abstain rather than voting against the U.S. position on issues important to the U.S. However, there remain many aspects of the set of important votes that are difficult to rationalize. While its own position on these votes may be important to the U.S. (domestically or internationally), it is not clear that the U.S. is trying to influence the probability a draft resolution is approved despite being labeled as important. It might be worthwhile to distinguish between cases where the U.S. really attempts to influence other countries' votes and other cases where the "important" label may be serving a different function.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There is already a literature regarding the impact of UN voting on U.S. domestic politics. See Chapman (2007, 2011), Chapman & Reiter (2004), Fang (2008), and Mikulaschek (2019).

Once we acknowledge that winning is not the only goal of a vote-buyer, it probably does not make sense to consider all voters to be equal (despite the UNGA's one-country, one-vote system). In some cases, the votes of specific countries may be particularly valuable to the vote buyer. For example, support from an Arab or Islamic country may be particularly valuable on a Middle Eastern issue. Support of major western allies is important in other settings. This may be captured in the distance from the country's ideal point in many cases; in other cases, perhaps some other proxy would be appropriate.

As Voeten notes, many UNGA draft resolutions (or similar draft resolutions) are repeated from year to year. On such measures, how often and under what circumstances do countries switch their positions? One could imagine this is more likely when there has been a change in government (because the new government has different preferences or, because it is new, faces lower costs to switching) but this might also go along with a concerted effort to influence the new government. [WILL INVESTIGATE THIS FOR IMPORTANT VOTES THAT REPEAT.]

Outline of rest of paper:

- Identify vote designations primarily for domestic audiences & eliminate from important vote group
- Replicate several studies that use important votes (Wang 1999, others)

## References

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