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

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**Abstract**

Populist leaders are generally agreed to be hostile to international organizations (IOs), yet the mechanisms through which this hostility reshapes global governance remain underexplored. We argue that populists undermine IOs through the strategic politicization of leadership and staff appointments. Because IOs rely on professional expertise to implement mandates and exercise authority, staffing decisions constitute a critical yet understudied site of contestation. Populist leaders prefer political appointees over technocratic experts, both to signal anti-elitism and to exert greater control over organizations they view as constraining national sovereignty. However, this strategy is conditional on state capacity, as poorer states cannot afford to forgo the opportunity to extract benefits from IO participation. We test this argument using new data on more than 1,600 senior appointments to the United Nations system from 1950 to 2022, combined with cross-national measures of populist leadership and state power. Across multiple specifications, we find that populist governments are significantly more likely to appoint under-qualified representatives, but only among powerful states. These findings highlight personnel politics as a central channel through which populism erodes institutional expertise from within, with important implications for the effectiveness and resilience of IOs.

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

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In March 2019 President Donald Trump nominated Kelly Knight Craft to become the United States' Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Craft is known for her brief ambassadorship to Canada and for declaring that she "believed in both sides of the science" on climate change.[1] Two months earlier, Trump installed David Malpass, a long-time critic of multilateral lending, at the helm of the World Bank.[2] Both posts are apex positions in global governance: they oversee multi-billion-dollar operations, sit at the center of crisis diplomacy, and customarily demand long resumes in multilateral negotiation or development economics. Craft and Malpass possessed neither.

Trump is not alone in appointing apparently underqualified individuals to important multilateral posts. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte tapped Teodoro Locsin Jr., a political commentator with scant diplomatic experience, to be Manila's voice at the UN;[3] Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro appointed the conspiracy-minded education minister Abraham Weintraub to the World Bank's Board;[4] and Hungary's Viktor Orbán has repeatedly tried to steer loyal partisans into EU posts.[5] Across the contemporary international order, certain executives appear willing to sacrifice technocratic credentials in favor of personal loyalty and ideological affinity.

We argue that placing such non-experts inside international organizations (IOs) is a strategy of populist contestation. Populism is defined by two core commitments: (1) anti-elitism, or the claim that "the people" are exploited by self-serving cosmopolitan elites, and (2) hyper-sovereignty, or the insistence that leaders, not outsiders, should exercise ultimate authority over their nation's affairs (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Multilateral institutions challenge both principles — they are staffed by technocrats including economists, lawyers, and scientists whose exper-

[1]Rummier, Orion. "Trump's UN ambassador pick said she supports 'both sides' of climate science." Axios. Feb 23, 2019.

[2]Trump Nominates Outspoken Critic David Malpass to Head World Bank. NPR. February 6, 2019.

[3]Parmar, Tekendra. "'Nazi Tweets' Spark Backlash Against Philippine U.N. Ambassador Teddy Locsin Jr." Time Magazine. Oct 5, 2016.

[4]"World Bank staff object to Brazilian nominee over racial comments." Reuters. June 24, 2020.

[5]Eccles, Mari, Eddy Wax, and Max Griera. "MEPs postpone decision on Hungar's Oliver Varhelyi." Politico. Nov 11, 2024.

tise carries epistemic authority, and they are designed to "prescribe [and] proscribe" state behavior (Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal, 2001, 762). From a populist viewpoint, IOs therefore constitute constraining bodies run by the elites they denounce.

Installing loyal but under-qualified representatives advances three populist goals. First, it places a sympathetic gatekeeper inside the organization, allowing leaders to undercut, monitor, or slow decisions that threaten national autonomy. Second, especially for strong states, such appointments degrade the professional capacity of the institution, which represents an indirect path to weaken it, as the professional expertise of diplomats is essential for effective IO policymaking (Arias, 2026). Third, to the extent the public is paying attention to these nominations, it signals contempt for IOs' expert culture and pleases constituents, who tend to share that contempt (see Handlin, Kaya and Günaydin 2023; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2024).

Yet not all populists can afford to politicize their staffing in these ways. We theorize a trade-off between ideological alignment with populist tenets and institutional leverage that hinges on national power. Leaders of weak states still need IO expertise to shape policy agendas within these institutions and unlock material resources; they therefore appoint credentialed professionals to realize such benefits despite populist rhetoric. Leaders of strong states possess enough structural power to secure influence and material benefits without highly qualified diplomats, freeing them to follow their anti-elite preferences. In other words, while states that lack structural power — populist or not — rely on gifted technocrats to influence and benefit from IOs, powerful states do not, and they can thus afford to politicize their appointments to such bodies.

To test these propositions, we assembled an original dataset on the professional backgrounds of more than 1,600 senior officials posted to the United Nations system (1950-2022) and merged it with cross-national measures of populist leadership and state power. Elite interviews with former UN personnel, U.S. and Brazilian diplomats, and EU staff complement this quantitative evidence. Our results suggest that populist executives are significantly more likely than non-populists to appoint under-qualified delegates and to choose individuals with tight partisan ties; further, the effect is driven almost entirely by powerful countries.

These findings speak to several bodies of scholarship. First, they extend the burgeoning literature regarding populism's impact on global governance, which focuses largely on withdrawal threats, budget cuts, and rhetorical attacks (Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019; Voeten, 2020*b*; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2025). We reveal a subtler but similarly consequential channel: personnel power. Second, we contribute to research on IO bureaucracies by demonstrating how domestic politics shape not only the mandates IOs receive but also the human capital they can deploy.[6] Finally, by identifying a previously underappreciated mechanism that impairs IO functioning, we refine theories of when and why international organizations succeed or falter (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Gutner and Thompson, 2010; Lall, 2017; Gray, 2018; Lundgren et al., 2023).

At a moment when collective responses to climate change, global health crises, military incursions, and financial instability are imperative, populist staffing strategies threaten to erode the very expertise on which effective cooperation depends. Understanding this pattern and the conditions under which it emerges is therefore critical for both scholars and practitioners of international politics.

## Expertise, Populists, and IOs

Many IOs rely on sprawling bureaucracies of multinational staff and national diplomats to develop policy and carry out their mandates. Leaders and diplomats delegate authority to such organizations (Pollack, 1997; Nielson and Tierney, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2006), with the caveat that they may require their policy agendas align with national goals (Stone, 2011; Graham and Serdaru, 2020). IO leaders, managers, and rank-and-file staff collect and standardize data, draft technical reports, design policy interventions, and police compliance, among other responsibilities. National diplomats subsequently evaluate these outputs and determine which policies to continue, expand, or eliminate, as well as the funding allocated to accomplish such goals. These functions

[6]For a review of this literature, see Clark, Dolan and Jost (2025).

underpin virtually every international institutions, from the World Health Organization.Both diplomats (representatives from member states) and bureaucrats (full-time staff of IOs) thus supply the informational and operational backbone on which multilateral cooperation rests (Clark, Dolan and Jost, 2025).

Who occupies these posts therefore matters a great deal. Indeed, a growing literature in international relations shows that specific individuals in IOs have divergent impacts on policy outcomes. National diplomats in multilateral organizations play a crucial role in advancing their states' foreign policy agendas when they have sufficient skill, experience, or leverage (e.g., Arias, 2026; Falzon, 2021; **?**; Hardt, 2014). More generally, individual IO officials influence multilateral surveillance (Goes and Chapman, 2024), research activities (Breen and Doak, 2021), institutional design (Johnson, 2014), and the stringency of loan requirements (Nelson, 2017). Such patterns accord with findings in domestic political contexts that leaders' and bureaucrats' identities and professional networks shape policy choices and compliance across a wide range of settings from foreign aid to military operations and bilateral diplomacy (Carcelli, 2024; Jost, 2024; Thrall, 2024; Casler and Jost, 2025). However, the influence of such individuals is often amplified in IOs because officials operate with considerable discretion in multilateral venues (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999).

This growing body of research that attests to the influence of individual diplomats in IOs is complemented by similar findings showing the agency of IO *bureaucrats* as well. For example, World Bank Task Team Leaders with prior field experience achieve higher program performance in investment projects (Heinzel and Liese, 2021; Honig, 2018). In the same vein, Bank programs with greater female representation on staff integrate gender mainstreaming more deeply into their work (Heinzel, Weaver and Jorgensen, 2025*a*). IMF bureaucrats, meanwhile, differ in the types of policy conditions they enforce (Lang, Wellner and Kentikelenis, 2024) and their propensity to emphasize climate change in policy recommendations (Clark and Zucker, 2024), influencing borrowers' reform trajectories. Similarly, in peace operations, planners who have commanded earlier missions reduce civilian casualties by deploying troops more strategically (Kim, Chae and Sandler, 2025). Taken together, these findings on diplomats and bureaucrats show that the characteristics of

IO personnel can have significant impacts on how well IOs operate, as well as the types of policies that IOs pursue.

As a result of the discretion and influence inherent to these roles, personnel decisions are often highly politicized. Governments understand that a savvy ambassador or department head can steer agenda-setting, fast-track national projects, and cultivate alliances inside the secretariat (Arias, 2026). Competition for the most influential positions, including UN ambassadorships and Board positions at the World Bank and IMF, is therefore intense. For borrowing states, having sympathetic figures in these positions can mean softer loan conditionality or quicker disbursement from international financial institutions (see Nelson 2017); for troop-contributing countries, having an experienced force commander can translate into fewer casualties in peacekeeping missions and more prominent roles in future assignments. Conversely, poorly vetted appointments can stall disbursements, sour field relations, erode the credibility of technical advice, and forfeit a state's foreign policy priorities if they fail to advance them on the institutional agenda (see Heinzel 2022). The question of who staffs IOs is thus not peripheral but central to the politics of global governance (Novosad and Werker, 2014; Parízek, 2017; Gray, 2018).

The officials that work in IOs can either be appointed directly by states (as in the case of UN ambassadors or World Bank Board members) or hired independently within IOs (as in the case of most operational staff). Generally speaking, the most important individuals in IOs (institutional leadership and those participating in decision-making bodies) fall into the former camp. Country leaders clearly have the most influence over these appointed individuals, though there is some evidence that powerful states can indirectly influence rank-and-file staff as well.However, because appointed posts are subject to direct control by member state principals, and because these individuals often have the most influence over governance and agenda-setting in IOs, they are our primary theoretical focus in this paper. As we discuss subsequently, our empirical focus is on UN ambassadors — appointees that are prone to politicization because they combine direct national control, agenda-setting and budgetary authority, and public visibility. These attributes make them an attractive target for leaders seeking both influence within IOs and observable breaks from technocratic

norms.

Generally speaking, member states value multilateral cooperation and wish to (1) benefit from their membership in IOs and (2) influence policymaking therein (e.g., Abbott and Snidal, 1998; Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal, 2001) . As such, they invest heavily in recruiting and appointing the most qualified candidates, who are often individuals with advanced degrees, extensive field experience, regional or issue-specific expertise, and global relationships (Neumann, 2012; Pouliot and Cornut, 2015). These officials increase the likelihood that the organization will deliver programmatic success and that their home governments will harvest tangible benefits: larger aid envelopes, more favorable dispute resolution outcomes, or greater agenda influence.

We argue that populist leaders face a unique calculus compared to their mainstream counterparts when filling posts at IOs. Because they position themselves against cosmopolitan elites and cast IOs as meddlesome constraints on popular sovereignty, populists can derive electoral and ideological benefits from signaling contempt for multilateral expertise (Carnegie and Clark, 2026). At the extreme, populists may obtain electoral benefits from withdrawing fully from IO participation. Many populists genuinely distrust the authority of experts, believing that specialized knowledge masks sovereignty incursion. Scholarship shows that populists are skeptical of experts and their research (Gauchat, 2012; Eichengreen, 2018). For example, populist leaders furnish less and lower quality information to global bodies, undercutting their ability to provide thought leadership (Carnegie, Clark and Zucker, 2024). They castigate technocrats as out-of-touch with the experiences of ordinary people and claim that scientists leverage their knowledge for exploitation (Brewer, 2016; Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017; van Kessel, Sajuria and Van Hauwaert, 2020); populists and their constituents are also uniquely susceptible to conspiracy theories (Norris, Cameron and Wynter, 2018).

In other cases, populists may privately value expertise yet recognize that open disdain for international technocracy resonates with supporters who feel marginalized by globalization. To that end, while non-populist publics tend to trust experts and believe that expertise and scien-

tific consensus should shape policymaking, populist constituents strongly disagree.[7] Appointing loyalists or otherwise working to attack and undermine IOs may resonate with such supporters (Carnegie, Clark and Kaya, 2024).

Whether for electoral or ideological reasons (or a combination of the two) populists thus have incentives to place non-experts in global bodies. Indeed, appointing a seasoned technocrat with a Ph.D. and previous posts as an ambassador at an IO undercuts the narrative that IOs infringe on states' sovereignty and primarily benefit elites, while electing a loyal political operative or celebrity donor reinforces it. Technocrats often embody the elite traits populists oppose. The typical IO bureaucrat carries advanced degrees from Western universities, rotates through elite organizations over the course of their career, has extensive social networks with other international diplomats, and makes decisions based on cost-benefit analyses and global best practices (see Weaver 2008; Chwieroth 2015). Installing a diplomat with limited technical background instead signals the leader's willingness to undermine the organization and elevates a trusted insider who can be counted on to defend the leader's domestic agenda inside what may be considered an ideologically hostile arena. While bilateral politically appointed diplomats are shown to not be systematically less effective than career ambassadors in the US case (Goldfien, 2024; MacDonald, 2021; Malis, 2021), in a technical multilateral organization in which they must contend with extensive agendas and highly experienced diplomats from other states, we suggest that political appointees are likely to be less effective than career diplomats in IOs.

Scholars have shown that populists employ similar strategies — that is, appointing less qualified loyalists instead of qualified, experienced experts — in domestic bureaucracies as a result of the anti-expert orientation. Bellodi, Morelli and Vannoni (2024) show that populists force technocratic government employees out, leading to a smaller share of government workers with postgraduate degrees. Sasso and Morelli (2021) similarly find that populists prefer "bad" bureaucrats that will faithfully implement their policies, while non-populists prefer "good" bureaucrats

[7] Qureshi, Fatima. 2019. "Global Survey Reveals What People around the World Think about Science." Princeton, NJ.: Editage Insights.

who act with discretion.[8]

These personnel decisions have meaningful impacts on global governance outcomes. Technocrats, like career economists or international lawyers, arrive at an IO with professional experience and awareness of global norms that make them highly effective independent actors (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015). Such individuals are also amenable to impartial advice from members of the IO's internal bureaucracy and compromise with other members of the diplomatic corps to reach productive agreements, which are precisely the qualities that IOs desire among their diplomatic corps — and sovereignty-minded populists seek to curtail. By contrast, a political ally who owes her position to presidential patronage is more likely to follow instructions from capital to stall unfavorable reports, leak sensitive negotiating drafts, or obstruct consensus that threatens the home government's freedom of action. In this sense, under-qualified appointees are a mechanism of control: they embed pockets of politicized influence inside organizations whose standard operating procedures prize technocratic autonomy. The erosion of expertise is therefore not merely symbolic, but a strategic consequence of efforts to reassert political authority over technocratic governance.

In sum, installing unqualified representatives in multilateral positions of power allows populists to simultaneously degrade an institution they distrust, tighten personal control over its day-to-day functions, and demonstrate their anti-elite bona fides. This is similar to strategies recognized in sociology of "organizational deviance," whereby opponents of an organization deliberately foster toxic environments (Likert, 1967; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). What looks like suboptimal personnel policy through a technocratic lens is, from a populist perspective, a strategy for weakening external constraints while consolidating domestic power.

[8]We do not claim that populists are the only types of leaders that politicize staffing. Autocrats, broadly speaking, may do so for patronage reasons, for example. Progressive or feminist leaders of democracies may politicize postings to accomplish a broader political agenda. What distinguishes populist governments is instead the interaction between anti-elite ideology and state power. Populists have distinctive incentives to reject technocratic expertise, but only governments with sufficient structural power can absorb the resulting costs.

## The Critical Role of State Power

While populist leaders have strong incentives to appoint loyalists and other under-qualified representatives to IOs, we argue they are often unable to absorb the material costs of doing so. The feasibility of politicizing IO appointments depends on whether a government can substitute structural power for the diplomatic skill and institutional credibility that technocratic representatives provide. Though a burgeoning literature recognizes the influence weak states can wield in IOs (Snidal et al., 2024; Morse and Coggins, 2024; Campbell and Matanock, 2024; Arias, 2026), we posit that populists are constrained in when they can under-qualified individuals to diplomatic posts within IOs if they govern relatively weak states.

In particular, we contend that weak states benefit from prioritizing technocratic skill over partisanship in their IO representatives even under populist rule. Following Snidal et al. (2024, 385), we define weakness as "a relative lack of power across one or more dimensions." Smaller economies, aid recipients, or countries dependent on other states for security typically lack the structural power to unilaterally mandate concessions from global bodies (see e.g., Stone 2011). Weak states do not have the same outside options as powerful states and must rely to a greater extent on IOs such as the UN to achieve their foreign policy goals and especially to obtain economic assistance (e.g., Voeten, 2001; Sending, Pouliot and Neumann, 2015). Instead, their influence in IOs stems from deft diplomacy, as through procedural fluency and coalition building (e.g, Arias, 2026; Thorhallsson, 2012; Baldacchino, 2023).

Powerful states, by virtue of their financial and military might, can afford to make a political statement by appointing unqualified representatives. IOs are likely to defer to them regardless of who they appoint (e.g., by ensuring their preferences are met when designing policies). IOs are critically reliant on such states for financial resources and legitimacy and would rather not risk pushing them to withdraw from global governance. It is no surprise, then, that powerful states (and their friends) tend to receive preferential treatment from global bodies (Copelovitch, 2010; Stone, 2011; Kersting and Kilby, 2018; Clark and Dolan, 2021). Moreover, even if IOs choose to spurn powerful states for appointing counterproductive officials, powerful states can often afford

to lose access to the material and social benefits IOs confer. Powerful states are less dependent on IOs for the provision of goods such as economic assistance or peacekeeping aid, and are therefore better able to waive the benefits of adept participation. In short, powerful states can substitute their structural clout for bureaucratic skill.

Illustrating this consideration by powerful states, when the United States under Donald Trump pushed David Malpass — a World Bank critic with limited development background — into the Bank's presidency, it likely did so knowing that American veto power and financial dominance would compel deference regardless of the nominee's resumé (Johnson, 2019). Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro could choose a foreign minister whose chief qualification was political loyalty, confident that Brazil's regional importance and agricultural heft would keep doors open in Geneva and New York.[9] For these governments, seating a non-expert signals an intention to obstruct or remake the organization; gaps in expertise can be filled later by career staff or papered over using power politics.

By contrast, less powerful states rarely possess the market size, military reach, or diplomatic bandwidth to bend other states to their will. IOs are thus uniquely beneficial to weak states, as they afford such states opportunities to amplify their voice and set global agendas, especially when they are represented by skillful, experienced diplomats (Arias, 2026). For example, inside bodies that operate based on consensus principles like the UN General Assembly, WHO, ILO, or most environmental treaties, small and mid-sized countries can raise issues (e.g., small-island climate vulnerability, tropical disease research) that would otherwise be ignored by great powers. Formal speaking slots and rotating leadership positions provide routine opportunities for weak states to place items on the global agenda and shape communiques and resolutions (see Mikulaschek 2016; Thorhallsson 2012; Corbett, Yi-Chong and Weller 2021; Allen and Yuen 2022; Arias, Clark and Kaya 2026). Notably, holding temporary positions of power within IOs, like seats on the UN Security Council, affords weak states bargaining leverage that allows them to obtain numerous material

[9] Stuenkel, Oliver. "Brazil's Anti-Globalist Foreign Minister Won't Get Everything He Wants." America Quarterly. Nov 19, 2018.

benefits in international affairs (Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland, 2009, 2015; Dreher et al., 2024).

Weak states can also create coalitions within IOs to counterbalance powerful actors. Many IOs' rules let weak states form blocking minorities or coalitions that can extract side payments from powerful states. In WTO negotiations, for example, the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group frequently extracts concessions on agricultural safeguards by coordinating votes and threatening consensus. Collective action raises the cost for a single major economy to disregard weak states' preferences (Corbett, Yi-Chong and Weller, 2021).

Further benefits for weak states of IO membership include access to impartial forums to litigate violations of international rules (Davis, 2004; Carnegie, 2015), the ability to request concessional loans and grants (as through multilateral development banks), the receipt of technical expertise (Breen and Doak, 2021), prestige (Malone, 2000), signals of credibility to investors and allies (Voeten, 2001), and diplomatic legitimation (Gray, 2013). In other words, less powerful members access resources on the international stage that help compensate for limited coercive or economic clout.

For this reason, leaders in weaker populist states confront a tangible trade-off: indulge ideological purity by appointing a non-expert loyalist, or send an expert who can extract concessions and amplify the country's otherwise modest voice. We argue that weak states should tend to favor competence over loyalty under these conditions. For example, Nicaragua under President Daniel Ortega has railed against "imperial" multilateralism but has routinely dispatched seasoned economists to the Inter-American Development Bank because low-interest loans are lifelines for domestic infrastructure.[10] A weak government's pragmatic need to obtain IO benefits tempers its ideological desire to curb staff expertise — while a political firebrand who does not speak the institutional language may satisfy a populist's domestic base, it will cost the state in terms of influence and literacy within an IO.

We therefore hypothesize that the interaction between domestic ideology and state power shapes whether states select non-experts or prioritize competence when appointing policy officials

[10]"Nicaragua sees hand of capitalism behind world's woes, calls for re-founded UN." UN News. October 1, 2015.

to IOs. Weaker states rely on technocratic credibility to punch above their weight, often selecting elite bureaucrats despite employing anti-elite rhetoric at home. Stronger states can afford to appoint less qualified individuals, using raw power rather than professional expertise to steer multilateral outcomes.

# A Focus on the United Nations

We center our empirical analysis on the United Nations because it is a highly salient and consequential IO that contains the two defining features of populists' resentment: elite authority and multilateral constraint. The UN is a governance hub through which states coordinate peace operations, negotiate sanctions, establish new norms in the human rights arena, set global health standards, and funnel billions of dollars in development assistance. Its General Assembly confers legitimacy on state behavior; its Security Council can authorize military action; its specialized agencies shape everything from aviation safety to intellectual-property enforcement. The UN's salience in international media and public opinion arguably renders it the most prominent of any IO. Furthermore, many weak states lack the diplomatic resources to represent themselves in all IOs and bilateral positions — the UN is such an important and central cite for policymaking that all states maintain permanent representation there.

In addition to being a substantively important case to understand for the reasons noted above, the UN is also a crucial test for the validity of our theoretical expectations. If populist leaders employ a strategy of strategically undermining IOs with non-expert appointees, they are most likely to do so in this premier IO. Furthermore, due to its centrality in the global governance landscape, diplomatic dynamics in the UN may influence other IOs through diffusion, socialization, emulation (E.g., Sommerer and Tallberg, 2019). In the conclusion, we discuss the particular conditions under which our expectations are more likely to hold in different IO contexts.

Unsurprisingly, the UN has been a prime target for populist backlash (Farrall, 2020). First, its procedures constrain unilateral action. Security Council resolutions impose binding obligations;

treaty bodies monitor human rights compliance; and budget committees can withhold funding from programs that violate financial integrity rules. Second, the organization is staffed by the archetype of the "global elite," namely unelected technocrats who are steeped in international law doctrine, enjoy bureaucratic insulation from member states, and often speak a professional dialect remote from everyday political discourse at home. For populist leaders who campaign on restoring national sovereignty and elevating "common sense" above expert rule, the UN epitomizes the foreign, aloof authority they condemn. Undermining it, whether by withholding dues, undermining consensus, or appointing loyal yet inexperienced envoys, allows them both to placate domestic constituencies skeptical of globalism and to reassert direct political control.

Inside the UN, diplomats (ambassadors) have consequential roles. They draft resolutions, bargain over line-item budget allocations, lobby for committee assignments, and cultivate coalitions that can swing pivotal votes. Much of this work is relationship-driven: lasting influence depends on knowing which delegate can unblock a stalled paragraph in the Fifth Committee at midnight, or which regional group is searching for a co-sponsor on a human rights resolution. Accumulated experience translates into reputational capital: A seasoned envoy who can cite past precedents, invoke informal norms, and anticipate Secretariat preferences often steers negotiations in ways that benefit the home government (Arias, 2026).

Elite credentials magnify these advantages (see Novosad and Werker 2014). Graduates of prestigious universities enter the UN with built-in networks that cut across national lines: former classmates may run peacekeeping budget units, advise the Secretary General, or staff influential NGOs. Shared professional languages, including legal doctrine, econometric evidence, and technocratic jargon, facilitate coalition building and signal competence to gatekeepers who control access to high-stakes drafting rooms. As a highly social environment (Johnston, 2008; Arias and Bare, 2025), these features are important for diplomatic influence.

While an apt theoretical fit, the UN is also an advantageous case for empirical reasons. UN ambassadors are relatively high-profile individuals, allowing us to gather rich biographical data on their professional backgrounds. This enables us to test how variation in professional pedigree

shapes state behavior and institutional outcomes, contingent on state power. Universal membership across countries and overtime also allow us to conduct broader quantitative analyses.

# Empirical Analysis

We utilize two primary dependent variables, both of which intend to capture the extent to which a UN ambassador is "elite" or not. To measure eliteness, we specifically focus on two common signals of competence that politicians use when assessing potential candidates for diplomatic appointments: educational backgrounds and professional experience (see Krcmaric, Nelson and Roberts 2020; Clark and Hanson 2025).

To obtain this data, we hand-code from volumes of the "Who's Who in International Affairs" volumes, which supply biographical information on prominent individuals like politicians and diplomats in international politics. From this information, we create two measures of eliteness. The first is a binary equal to 1 if an individual received their highest degree from an "elite" college or university.[11] We also construct a measure of how many years an individual has previously worked as a UN diplomat. More experience in the UN bureaucracy tends to indicate higher levels of bureaucratic competence (Arias, 2026). Populists tend to discredit technocratic expertise, such as prior diplomatic experience.

Our first key independent variable is a binary measure of whether a given leader is a populist, which comes from Funke, Schularick and Trebesch (2023). They identify leaders (executives) who claim to represent "true, common people" against "elites." They classify 1,500 leaders as populist or non-populist between 1900 and 2018 by digitizing 770 books, chapters, and academic articles on populism from the social sciences.

Our second key independent variable is a country's power, which we measure using GDP. We interact our populism indicator with (scaled) GDP and lag the independent variables by one

[11]We include the following universities: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Cornell, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Oxford, Cambridge, MIT, or Stanford. This builds on earlier approaches (e.g., Chwieroth 2009), but differs in that our focus is not specifically on top economics departments, but rather elite institutions in general. We believe these institutions are widely perceived to be elite.

year. We anticipate a negative coefficient on the interaction term since populist governments should be less likely to appoint qualified individuals with elite credentials as they become wealthier and more powerful.

We also control for key country- and leader-level variables. At the country-level, we include political measures, including V-Dem democracy scores (Coppedge et al., 2020), whether a state is a temporary member of the United Nations Security Council (Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland, 2009), and UN voting ideal point distance from the United States (Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten, 2017; Fjelstul, Hug and Kilby, 2025). We also include several economic measures, including U.S. aid receipts and inward FDI as a share of GDP. At the leader-level, we include an ideological measure that captures whether the leader subscribes to a right-leaning economic ideology, which corresponds with a belief that 'the state should rarely intervene in the economy to increase the freedoms of their citizens" (Herre, 2023).

In our analysis of UN ambassadorial appointments, we find evidence that populist governments appoint less qualified diplomats, particularly in more powerful states. Interaction plots depicting our main results appear in Figure 1. Complete results in table form appear in Table 1.

In Model 1, which examines the likelihood that a country appoints an ambassador with an elite educational background, we find that populist governments are 10.5 percentage points less likely to do so compared to non-populist governments. While GDP alone is not statistically significant in this model, the interaction between populism and GDP is significant and negative: for each unit increase in GDP, the negative effect of populism on elite appointments becomes 16.6 percentage points larger. Substantively, in a country with high GDP (1 standard deviation above the mean), populist governments are associated with a 27 percentage point reduction in the probability of appointing an elite-educated ambassador, compared to non-populist governments.

In Model 2, which predicts the number of years of prior UN diplomatic experience, GDP is strongly associated with more qualified appointments: a one-unit increase in GDP corresponds to an increase of 4.6 years of UN experience. However, the interaction term again shows that populism reduces this effect. Specifically, in higher-GDP countries, populist governments appoint

ambassadors with 1.5 fewer years of UN experience than their non-populist counterparts.

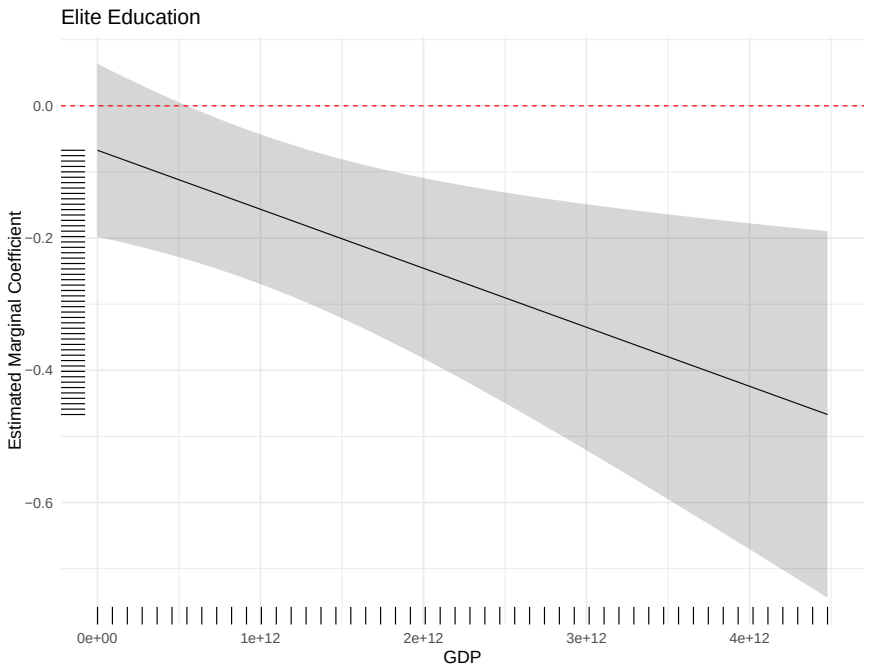
Together, these results support our core argument: powerful states can afford to appoint less qualified ambassadors, and populist governments take advantage of this discretion, especially in wealthier contexts where power and resources can substitute for individual diplomatic expertise.

Table 1: Predicting UN Ambassadorial Appointment

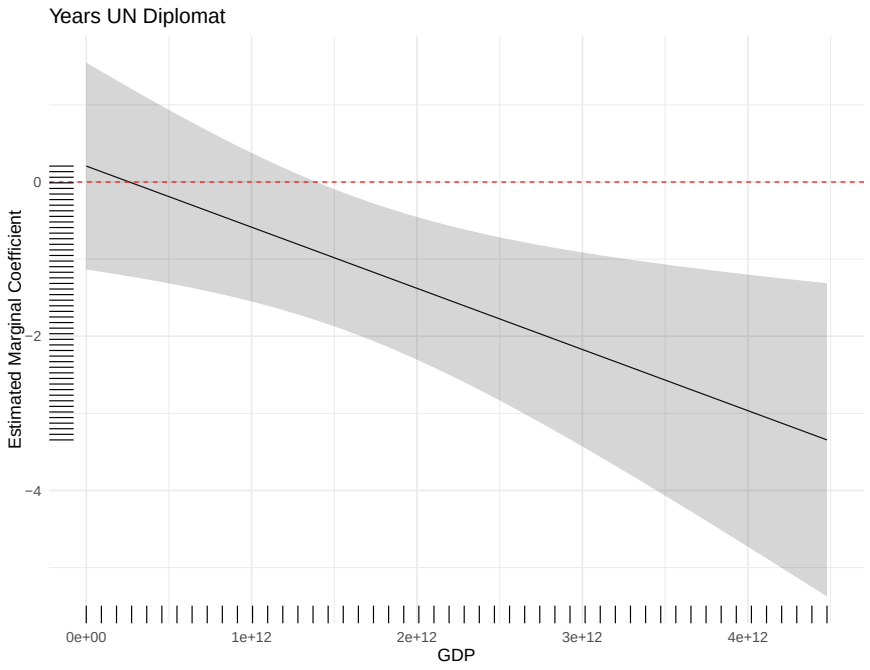
| DV: | Elite Education | Years UN Diplomatic Experience |
|---|---|---|
| Model: | (1) | (2) |
| *Variables* | | |
| Populism | -0.105* | -0.116 |
| | (0.061) | (0.589) |
| GDP | 0.601 | 4.61** |
| | (0.412) | (2.26) |
| Right Ideology | 0.044 | -0.065 |
| | (0.037) | (0.358) |
| Polyarchy | 0.075 | 0.183 |
| | (0.117) | (1.61) |
| US Ideal Point Diff. | 0.075 | 0.405 |
| | (0.052) | (0.623) |
| UNSC Member | 0.033 | 0.334 |
| | (0.078) | (0.690) |
| U.S. Aid | 0.003 | 0.053 |
| | (0.004) | (0.035) |
| FDI / GDP | 0.0004 | 0.013 |
| | (0.0008) | (0.011) |
| Populism × GDP | -0.166** | -1.49** |
| | (0.067) | (0.583) |
| *Fixed-effects* | | |
| Country | Yes | Yes |
| Year | Yes | Yes |
| *Fit statistics* | | |
| Observations | 730 | 730 |
| $R^2$ | 0.304 | 0.344 |

*Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses*
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

We conduct a battery of robustness checks to increase confidence in the validity of our




(a)




(b)

Figure 1: Main Interaction Results.

findings. The results for these tests appear in the supplementary appendix. First, we swap year fixed effects for a time trend (Table 2) and country fixed effects for region fixed effects (Table 3. These tests account for potential temporal trends in appointments and the fact that countries often organize themselves in regional blocs at the UN. Second, we utilize generalized linear model specifications since our dependent variables are either binary or count measures (Table 4). Third, we impute missing data on our control variables since they can be missing at high rates for developing countries (see Lall 2016, results appear in Table 5). Results on our key interaction terms are consistent directionally and in magnitude across all such specifications and achieve significance in the majority of cases.

# Conclusion

We have argued that populists undermine IOs by appointing less experienced officials to key positions within these bodies. Not all populists do so, however, as less powerful states face a trade-off between their ideological incentives to appoint less qualified individuals versus their desire to maintain power and influence through competent representation. We thus theorize that powerful states led by populists appoint less qualified individuals than do non-populists in such states. We do not expect such a relationship to hold for relatively weak states. We test this argument using new data on UN staff backgrounds, finding support for our theory.

We believe that our argument should generalize to other multilateral contexts, though the mechanism pertains primarily when an IO constrains member behavior, is visible to public audiences, and is staffed by individuals with elite backgrounds. Institutions that impose binding rules, monitor compliance, or unevenly allocate scarce resources — for example, the World Bank, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and European Union — threaten the populist commitment to sovereignty and heighten leaders' incentives to place loyal representatives who will blunt or politicize expert authority. By contrast, when an IO lacks enforcement capacity or is deliberately designed to minimize technocratic influence, such as populist-led institutions like

ALBA or the Visegrad Group, the pay-off from appointing loyalists is minimal. These bodies serve primarily as stages for symbolic grandstanding rather than sites of genuine rule production, so leaders may see little need to displace expertise ( see Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi 2021). The public salience of the IO also matters — while populists may appoint non-experts for ideological reasons, the electoral incentives to do so are strongest when publics are likely to observe and care about what happens within the organization. IOs like the UN, IMF, and EU are therefore better cases for our theory than more obscure or less visible institutions.

Our study advances several strands of international relations scholarship. First, we push forward the rapidly growing literature on populism and global governance. Existing work shows that populist leaders rarely dismantle major institutions outright; instead, they chip away at them through funding cuts, information withholding, or high-profile withdrawals (Voeten, 2020*a*; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2025; Carnegie and Clark, 2026). We uncover a quieter but consequential mechanism: the politicization of personnel appointments. By demonstrating that powerful populist governments deliberately populate IOs with loyalists who are unlikely to uphold technocratic standards, we reveal how populists can hollow institutions out from the inside while maintaining the veneer of multilateral engagement.

Second, the article enriches research on how states wield power within IOs. Prior studies emphasize agenda-setting, the exercise of voting power and vetoes, and the issuance of side payments as principal levers through which great powers shape institutional outputs (Davis, 2004; Kaya, 2015; Vreeland, 2019). We add to a growing body of work that highlights the politics of staffing as another part of this toolkit that states can weaponize to realize their preferred outcomes in IOs (Clark and Dolan, 2021; Fung and Lam, 2021).

Third, we contribute to the growing literature examining the diplomacy of small states and the importance of individual diplomats in IOs. Scholars have shown that small states are deft strategic actors within IOs, capable of leveraging diplomatic capital (Arias, 2026), access to rotating positions of authority (Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland, 2015; Arias, Clark and Kaya, 2026), and institutional rules and procedures (Morse and Coggins, 2024) to affect outcomes in global gover-

nance. We show that limited structural power constrains populists in weak states from politicizing multilateral appointments, as they privilege diplomatic skill over politics.

Finally, we contribute to broader debates about IO performance and resilience. Our findings add to scholarship that looks beyond formal rules or resource flows to examine the people who animate these organizations (Weaver, 2008; Honig, 2018; Heinzel, 2022; Heinzel, Weaver and Jorgensen, 2025*b*). We underscore variation in IO personnel, explaining when under-qualified individuals are chosen, with likely implications for the performance of these institutions. If a critical mass of powerful states appoints loyalists to a given IO, it could severely limit its ability to craft and enforce international rules. As populism remains pervasive in international politics, and populist leaders ramp up their attacks on key organs of global governance, such concerns loom large.

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**SUPPLEMENTARY APPENDIX**

**APPENDIX 1: ROBUSTNESS CHECKS**

Table 2: Year Time Trend

| DV: | Elite Education | Years UN Diplomatic Experience |
|---|---|---|
| Model: | (1) | (2) |
| *Variables* | | |
| Populism | -0.089 | -0.108 |
| | (0.057) | (0.562) |
| GDP | 0.559 | 3.72 |
| | (0.403) | (2.27) |
| Right Ideology | 0.048 | -0.087 |
| | (0.036) | (0.361) |
| Polyarchy | 0.092 | -0.025 |
| | (0.130) | (1.59) |
| US Ideal Point Diff. | 0.077* | 0.425 |
| | (0.044) | (0.579) |
| UNSC Member | 0.027 | 0.312 |
| | (0.073) | (0.641) |
| U.S. Aid | 0.003 | 0.069** |
| | (0.004) | (0.034) |
| FDI / GDP | 0.0005 | 0.013 |
| | (0.0009) | (0.010) |
| Year | -0.004** | -0.104*** |
| | (0.002) | (0.023) |
| Populism × GDP | -0.148*** | -1.27** |
| | (0.055) | (0.639) |
| *Fixed-effects* | | |
| Country | Yes | Yes |
| *Fit statistics* | | |
| Observations | 730 | 730 |
| $R^2$ | 0.277 | 0.317 |

*Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses*
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 3: Region Fixed Effects

| DV: | Elite Education | Years UN Diplomatic Experience |
|---|---|---|
| Model: | (1) | (2) |
| *Variables* | | |
| Populism | -0.054 | -0.508 |
| | (0.045) | (0.508) |
| GDP | 0.044* | 0.603 |
| | (0.020) | (0.373) |
| Right Ideology | 0.086** | -0.163 |
| | (0.029) | (0.352) |
| Polyarchy | 0.038 | 1.61* |
| | (0.051) | (0.659) |
| US Ideal Point Diff. | 0.003 | 0.813** |
| | (0.020) | (0.330) |
| UNSC Member | 0.045 | 0.511 |
| | (0.033) | (0.673) |
| U.S. Aid | 0.002 | 0.030** |
| | (0.001) | (0.009) |
| FDI / GDP | 0.0004 | 0.006 |
| | (0.0006) | (0.010) |
| Populism × GDP | -0.138* | -0.837 |
| | (0.057) | (0.549) |
| *Fixed-effects* | | |
| Region | Yes | Yes |
| Year | Yes | Yes |
| *Fit statistics* | | |
| Observations | 730 | 730 |
| $R^2$ | 0.070 | 0.124 |

*Clustered (Region) standard-errors in parentheses*
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 4: GLM Specifications

| DV: | Elite Education | Years UN Diplomatic Experience |
|---|---|---|
| Model: | (1) | (2) |
| | Probit | Poisson |
| *Variables* | | |
| Populism | -0.541 | -0.172 |
| | (0.567) | (0.324) |
| GDP | 3.96* | 2.50* |
| | (2.31) | (1.34) |
| Right Ideology | 0.541 | -0.011 |
| | (0.354) | (0.172) |
| Polyarchy | 1.32 | -0.186 |
| | (1.36) | (0.753) |
| US Ideal Point Diff. | 0.433 | 0.067 |
| | (0.594) | (0.297) |
| UNSC Member | 0.113 | 0.216 |
| | (0.542) | (0.310) |
| U.S. Aid | 0.018 | 0.024* |
| | (0.026) | (0.013) |
| FDI / GDP | 0.005 | 0.005 |
| | (0.004) | (0.003) |
| Populism × GDP | -1.36 | -0.641** |
| | (1.04) | (0.316) |
| *Fixed-effects* | | |
| Country | Yes | Yes |
| Year | Yes | Yes |
| *Fit statistics* | | |
| Observations | 302 | 682 |

*Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses*
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 5: Imputed Covariates

| DV: | Elite Education | Years UN Diplomatic Experience |
|---|---|---|
| Model: | (1) | (2) |
| *Variables* | | |
| Populism | -0.102* | -0.119 |
| | (0.059) | (0.559) |
| GDP | 0.034** | 0.679*** |
| | (0.017) | (0.194) |
| Right Ideology | 0.054* | -0.088 |
| | (0.030) | (0.301) |
| Polyarchy | -0.319** | 0.726 |
| | (0.148) | (1.21) |
| US Ideal Point Diff. | -0.028 | -0.052 |
| | (0.046) | (0.351) |
| UNSC Member | 0.019 | 0.115 |
| | (0.066) | (0.602) |
| U.S. Aid | 0.002 | 0.065* |
| | (0.003) | (0.034) |
| FDI / GDP | 0.0005 | 0.015 |
| | (0.0008) | (0.011) |
| Populism × GDP | -0.147** | -1.24* |
| | (0.057) | (0.736) |
| *Fixed-effects* | | |
| Country | Yes | Yes |
| Year | Yes | Yes |
| *Fit statistics* | | |
| Observations | 918 | 918 |
| $R^2$ | 0.323 | 0.347 |

*Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses*
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*