



Country or leader? Political change and UN General Assembly voting

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ABSTRACT

We investigate empirically changes in voting in the United Nations General Assembly consequent to leader turnovers over the 1985–2008 period and find evidence that governments with new rulers are more supportive of the United States on important votes. We consider the explanations that might underlie our empirical result, including material gain and ethical motivations. In contrast to our findings on key votes, our results show that voting on non-key votes in the General Assembly does not robustly shift towards the U.S. following leader change. We therefore conclude that material gain is the most likely reason for the observed pattern.

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1. Introduction

Recent research has focused on the role of leaders in shaping state behavior. Economists and political scientists have built rich theoretical models and detailed empirical tests of both what affects leadership survival and the impact of leadership survival on macroeconomic and political outcomes. These works have provided important insights on the political-economic consequences of leader change and on how these consequences depend on leader-specific characteristics.

In this paper we advance the literature by evaluating whether domestic leader turnovers affect a country's voting coincidence with the United States in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). UNGA voting with the U.S. has important consequences on the amount of development aid a country receives, as well as on the number of World Bank projects and IMF programs it obtains (Thacker, 1999; Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Andersen et al., 2006). Recent research by Hillman and Potrafke (2012) shows that voting in the UNGA can facilitate autocratic repression. UNGA voting is thus consequential, and being able to predict systematic changes in UNGA voting following leadership turnover important. Despite the importance of this question, its dynamics are not well-understood (Carroll et al., 2010).¹

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¹ In work following this one, Carroll et al. (2010) investigate the importance of leaders' support from different societal groups for how leader change affects a country's foreign policy position. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2012) provide an excellent survey of the related literature.

We thus evaluate whether and to what extent changes in who leads a country affect that country's voting behavior in the UNGA. Since 1983 the U.S. State Department has classified votes within the UNGA as “key” or “non-key” for the United States.² This classification allows us to separate domestic preferences from foreign policy positions. Our expectation is that non-key votes are sincere statements of preferences,³ while key-votes reflect the country's position on foreign policy.⁴

We find that countries with new leaders vote more frequently in line with the U.S. on key votes, on average. Leadership changes are thus more likely than not to lead to closer ties between a country and the United States. This result implies that domestic leaders have the leeway to design domestic and foreign policy according to their preferences, which is of deep theoretical and practical importance. Realist theories of international relations stress how states focus on national security within an anarchic international system. Individual leaders are constrained within this system and the structure of the international system largely determines the behavior of states. Leadership changes, unless accompanied with changes in the structure of the international system, should have little impact on the foreign policy position of states.

We find that leaders are able to shift the foreign policy positions of their country. That is, leaders do matter. However, our results imply more than that. They show that incentives affect how leadership transitions affect foreign policy. On average, we find that nations become more “friendly” with the United States in the wake of leadership change. This result is in line with recent work by McGillivray and Smith (2004). McGillivray and Smith argue that the United States, while targeting a country, can impose punishment for misbehavior until a certain leader is removed from power. Once a new leader emerges, sanctions are lifted. This leader-specific punishment gives citizens the incentives to replace leaders with “tarnished” international reputations, thus providing incentives for leaders to maintain good reputations in order to survive in office. Our result is also in line with an alternative explanation, where the United States may be taking less extreme, and possibly more “moral” positions on international issues than the average country. Leaders might have been replaced by their electorate for reasons of “unethical” behavior. Replacing less “moral” leaders, these new leaders might vote more in line with countries representing positions that are more “moral” than the average country's position. We try to differentiate these two explanations by investigating voting on unimportant votes either. On these non-key votes, we do not find a systematic shift towards the United States. To the extent that new leaders vote more “morally” on key and non-key votes alike, the evidence is thus more in line with the model of McGillivray and Smith.

We outline our theory, data, and analysis in Sections 2–4. The final section concludes and draws policy implications.

2. Leadership change and UNGA voting

There is a resurgent interest in the role of individual leaders for political and economic outcomes. Using assassinations as a source of random leadership change, Jones and Olken (2005, 2009) find that leadership change can affect economic policy and outcomes, democratization, and conflict. Leadership death is associated with shifts in growth rates and monetary policy. McGillivray and Smith (2004) find that leadership change in authoritarian regimes leads to a major decline in trade while leadership change in democratic regimes has little impact on trade.

One reason for these major policy changes is that individual leaders play a major role in determining policies.⁵ Characteristics and capabilities of leaders affect policy choices. In the literature on central banking and monetary policy, leader attributes such as education (Göhlmann and Vaubel, 2007), career ambitions (Adolph, 2004), and cognitive complexity (Thies, 2004) have been linked to better performance. This can be expanded beyond technocratic roles to more general political leadership. For example, Besley et al. (2005) find that the education of Indian politicians is systematically linked to performance, specifically in limiting individual opportunism. In another example, Dreher et al. (2009) find that the educational and professional background of the head of a government matters for the implementation of market-liberalizing reforms.⁶

In this paper we build on this previous research by focusing on how U.S. influence affects a country's foreign policy position through examining voting behavior in the UNGA. The UNGA is an ideal environment for exploring how leadership change affects foreign policy positions. While the UNGA is generally considered a weak institution, it is a relatively unique environment where we can easily observe the relative policy positions of essentially every nation in the world in the same institutional setting.⁷ Debates in the UN General Assembly can be the center of high politics or can also be used for politicians to grandstand, such as Chavez's infamous speech calling President Bush the devil.⁸ Numerous scholars have pointed out that countries that are allied

² Note that the classification is published in a report after voting took place. However, key votes are defined as “votes on issues which directly affected United States interests and on which the United States lobbied extensively” (e.g., U.S. Department of State, 2008). Given extensive lobbying it seems straightforward that it is known to other countries' representatives in advance which votes will be important to the United States.

³ Or at the very least, these are policy positions taken by politicians for domestic reasons, absent of U.S. political pressure. See also Anderson et al. (2006).

⁴ As has been pointed out by the U.S. Department of State (1985), examining UNGA votes makes it possible “to make judgments about whose values and views are harmonious with our own, whose policies are consistently opposed to ours, and whose practices fall in between.” A report from the same department in 2000 states “a country's behavior at the United Nations is always relevant to its bilateral relationship with the United States, a point the Secretary of State regularly makes in letters of instruction to new U.S. ambassadors” (quoted in Andersen et al., 2006). A recent paper from the Heritage Foundation argues that “A country's record in General Assembly non-consensus votes is a means of measuring its support for U.S. diplomatic priorities” and goes on to discuss strategies of influencing UNGA votes (Schaefer and Kim, 2008).

⁵ This can also be due to different leaders representing different groups in society. For example, Pande (2003) shows that the reservation of political mandates for members of disadvantaged castes and tribes in India has increased targeted transfers to these groups. See also Carroll et al. (2010).

⁶ Education of lower-ranked officials can also matter. For example, Chwioroth (2012) shows that the presence of officials with similar professional training as the staff of the IMF increases the size of the loans the Fund agrees to provide to a country.

⁷ See Dixon (1981).

⁸ “Chávez Calls Bush ‘the Devil’ in U.N. Speech.” David Stout. *New York Times* Sept 20, 2006.

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