

Gender Discrimination in the U.S. Foreign Service

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Calvin Thrall (Columbia)

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Motivation

Deputy Under Secretary of State for Management William Macomber, 1971:

Women should get a fairer shake. . . I think the country is stupid if they don't find a way to tap the resources that are in women's heads.

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Secretary of State Antony Blinken, 2021:

[State's] greatest strength at home, but also abroad, is our diversity. . . [Y]ou're going to see over the next few years as well a real focus on making sure that we have a diverse workforce. We're going to recruit, we're going to retain, and we're going to be held accountable for that.

Motivation

What's at stake:

- ▶ Diplomats exercise autonomy, affect important policy outcomes (Lindsey 2017, Gertz 2018, Malis 2021, Lindsey 2024, Kim & Fu 2024, Thrall 2024, Malis & Thrall 2025)
 - ▶ discrimination \implies misallocation of resources

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What's at stake:

- ▶ Diplomats exercise autonomy, affect important policy outcomes (Lindsey 2017, Gertz 2018, Malis 2021, Lindsey 2024, Kim & Fu 2024, Thrall 2024, Malis & Thrall 2025)
 - ▶ discrimination \implies misallocation of resources
- ▶ Descriptive representation affects perceptions of legitimacy (Chow & Han 2023, McDowell & Steinberg 2024, Kao et al. 2025)
 - ▶ diplomatic under-representation harms US global influence, soft power

Overview

This paper:

- ▶ Introduce original dataset on U.S. embassy personnel
 - ▶ most comprehensive data (to our knowledge) on any diplomatic corps
- ▶ Application: identifying gender discrimination in U.S. diplomatic appointments
- ▶ Women face substantial promotion penalty at all levels
 - ▶ Not explained by gender (in)equality within host countries
 - ▶ Hard to reconcile with any explanation other than discrimination

Data

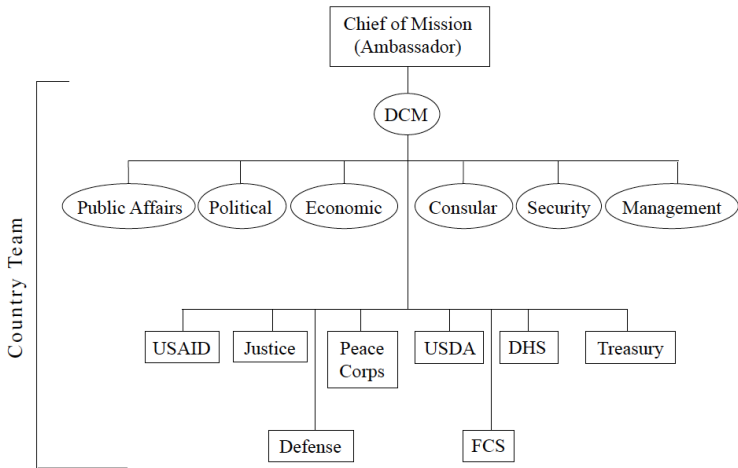


Figure 6.1
Organization of a Typical Mission

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United States Department of State

7X
b5
26
91
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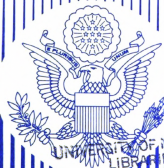
Key Officers of Foreign Service Posts

UNIV. OF MICH.

MAY 17 1991

Guide for
Business Representatives

January 1991



MAY 10 1991

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MOROCCO

RABAT (E), 2 Ave. de Marrakech; P.O. Box 120; APO N Y 09284; Tel [212] (7) 622-65; Telex 31005

AMB:	E. Michael Ussery	RSO:	Peter Stella
DCM:	Richard L. Jackson	AGR:	Andrew A. Duymovic
POL:	Michael C. Lemmon	AID:	Dennis Chandler
ECO:	David S. Robins	PAO:	Edward T. Penney
CON:	George W. Brazier III	ODA:	Col James E. Murphy USMC
ADM:	Alphonse Lopez	MLO:	Col Thomas E. Burch USAF

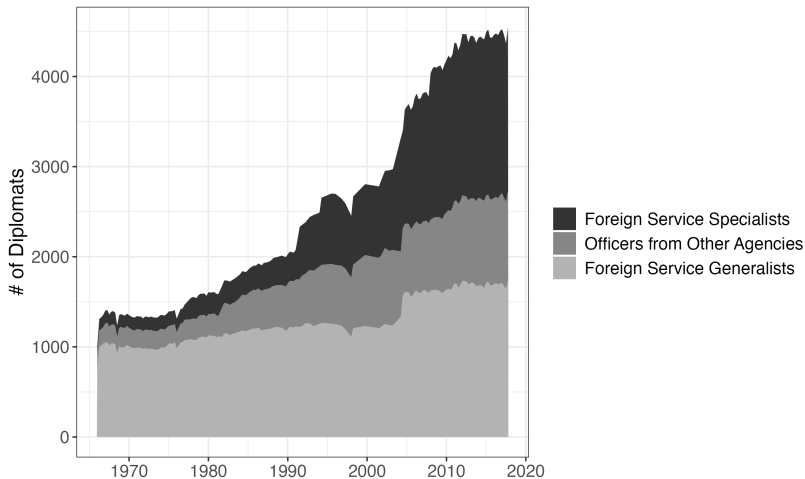
CASABLANCA (CG), 8 Blvd. Moulay Youssef; APO NY 09284 (CAS); Tel [212] 26-45-50

CG:	Timberlake Foster	ECO:	Allen S. Greenberg
LAB:	William H. Owen	CON:	Suella Pipal
POL:	Peter McDevitt	ADM:	J. Patrick Truhn
COM:	Samuel D. Starrett	BPAO:	Elizabeth Thornhill

MARRAKECH (US Information Service), Ave Echchouada, L'Hivernage B.P. 240; Tel [212] (4) 472-83

BPAO: Franklin Huffman

Officer Positions



Officer Positions

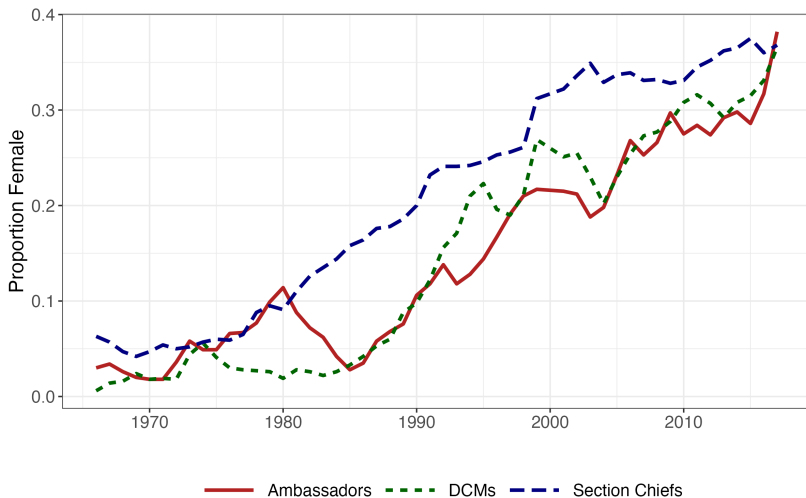
<u>Generalists</u>		<u>Specialists</u>		<u>External</u>	
Chief of Mission	38660	Administration	61016	Law Enf.	18763
Consular	33801	IT	35297	Military	17795
Political	30625	Security	17793	Commercial	15105
Public	29286	Operations	5881	USAID	12635
Economic	22526	Medical	123	Agricultural	11507
DCM	22177			Treasury/IRS	2758
Management	12344			Health	2065

Note: "Section Chief" = Generalists, excl. COM and DCM (for our purposes)

Application: Gender Discrimination

- ▶ use Mullen (2021)'s R package `gender` to code officer gender from first name
 - ▶ only ~5% coded with $<95\%$ confidence
 - ▶ (using $\text{Pr}(\text{female})$ in regressions)
- ▶ investigate nature and extent of gender disparities in appointment, promotion, and retention

Under-representation in the aggregate



Promotion & Retention: Research Design

Internal politics of U.S. diplomatic appointments

At what stage of the diplomatic career pipeline can we identify discriminatory appointment practices?

- ▶ Has this changed over time?

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Focus on movement across ranks:

- ▶ Section Chiefs:
 - ▶ Political, Economic, Public, Consular, Management
- ▶ DCMs (including POs at CGs)
- ▶ Ambassadors

“Ranks”, for our analysis

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- ▶ **Ambassador**
- ▶ Assistant Sec., Under Sec., etc.

Note: FSOs typically spend 2/3 of time in foreign missions

- ▶ we don't observe them while in US
 - ▶ country desk officer, officer director, Deputy Asst. Sec., staff of high-level officials, etc.

Appointment process

Ambassadors: ~70% career FSOs, 30% “political appointees”

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Everyone else:

- ▶ internal assignment panels, bidding/matching process

Movement across ranks

		What % eventually become:	
		DCM	Amb
Among: first-time:	Section Chiefs	22	8
	DCMs	-	20

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		What % were previously:	
		Section Chief	DCM
Among first-time:	DCMs	76	-
	Ambs (career)	61	64

Promotion and Retention

Do women face a “penalty” in promotion and retention?

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Our approach:

- ▶ focus on **office-QY** (rather than officer-QY) as unit of obs.
- ▶ how likely is this office-QY to lead to a promotion (or exit) in the next five years?
- ▶ does this change if we manipulate the gender of the occupant?

Promotion and Retention

- ▶ unit of analysis: office-QY
- ▶ outcomes:
 - ▶ **promotion**: office occupant holds higher office sometime in the next five years
 - ▶ **leaving**: office occupant does not appear in the data after five years from now

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- ▶ country-level covariates
 - ▶ # officers at U.S. missions in the country
 - ▶ UNGA voting distance from US, $\log(\text{CINC})$, danger pay, hardship pay, female cabinet ratio (FCR)

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- ▶ individual-level covariate:
 - ▶ years since tenure (FE)
- ▶ heterogeneity over time:
 - ▶ interact treatment (and covariates) with “decade” dummies
 - ▶ “80s” = 1982–1991, “90s” = 1992–2001, “00s” = 2002–2012

Results

Promotion – Section Chiefs

	DV: Promoted within 5 years (mean = 0.15)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
female	-0.030*** (0.008)	-0.023** (0.008)	-0.025* (0.012)			
female × 2000s				-0.040** (0.012)	-0.034** (0.012)	-0.030+ (0.016)
female × 1990s				-0.031* (0.012)	-0.026* (0.013)	-0.028 (0.019)
female × 1980s				-0.005 (0.014)	0.006 (0.014)	0.007 (0.008)
Num. Obs.	74210	74210	36747	74210	74210	36747
FE: QY	✓			✓		
FE: MT-position	✓			✓		
FE: MT-position-QY		✓	✓		✓	✓
FE: Mission-decade		✓	✓		✓	✓
FE: Tenure-years			✓			✓
C-Y controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Exit – Section Chiefs

	DV: Exits service within 5 years (mean = 0.48)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
female	0.028* (0.013)	0.030* (0.013)	0.069*** (0.018)			
female × 2000s				0.052** (0.017)	0.051** (0.017)	0.065** (0.022)
female × 1990s				-0.008 (0.022)	0.008 (0.022)	0.076** (0.025)
female × 1980s				0.001 (0.023)	-0.002 (0.024)	0.077+ (0.044)
Num. Obs.	68156	68156	32793	68156	68156	32793
FE: QY	✓			✓		
FE: MT-position	✓			✓		
FE: MT-position-QY		✓	✓		✓	✓
FE: Mission-decade		✓	✓		✓	✓
FE: Tenure-years			✓			✓
C-Y controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Promotion – DCMs

	DV: Promoted within 5 years (mean = 0.20)				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
female	0.046* (0.021)	0.080*** (0.020)	0.072** (0.026)		
female × 2000s				0.028 (0.027)	0.065* (0.026)
female × 1990s				0.058+ (0.033)	0.074* (0.034)
female × 1980s				0.126+ (0.068)	0.175* (0.067)
Num. Obs.	18370	18370	7369	18370	18370
FE: QY	✓			✓	
FE: MT-position	✓			✓	
FE: MT-position-QY		✓	✓		✓
FE: Mission-decade		✓	✓		✓
FE: Tenure-years			✓		
C-Y controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Summary of Results

So far we've seen:

- ▶ Among section chiefs:
 - ▶ women face promotion penalty of 2–3pp (15–20%)
 - ▶ women are more likely to exit service by 3–7pp (6–14%)
 - ▶ both disparities increasing over time

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 - ▶ both disparities increasing over time
- ▶ Among DCMs:
 - ▶ women face a promotion **bonus** of 5–8pp (25–40%)
 - ▶ narrowing over time
 - ▶ (not shown: no difference in rates of exit from service)

Summary of Results

Our explanation:

- ▶ High levels of discrimination at lower ranks (into SC, and from SC \rightarrow DCM) \implies women DCMs much higher quality than men DCMs, on average
- ▶ But still some degree of discrimination at DCM \rightarrow Amb stage

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Will show more evidence supporting this explanation

- ▶ and other evidence that is inconsistent with plausible alternative explanations

Alternative Explanations

Candidate explanation: Host-country conditions

One plausible explanation:

- ▶ many patriarchal countries around the world where female diplomats could not operate effectively
⇒ U.S. responds by appointing fewer female diplomats

Candidate explanation: Host-country conditions

Reflects conventional wisdom:

- ▶ “[Pakistan] was the place I really wanted to go... [but] the word came back that neither the ambassador nor the DCM nor the political counselor felt that it was a reasonable assignment. **A woman could not do substantive work in Pakistan.**”
- ▶ “I chose ... to go as a consular officer to Medan, Indonesia, where we had a consulate. I was turned down by the panel. At that time, the ‘panel’ was supposed to be a secret process, but I learned subsequently from someone who had been a member of the panel that the argument against my assignment had been that was **I was a woman, it was a Muslim country, I could not be effective, even as a very junior officer**, so I didn’t get the job.”
- ▶ “A lot of Indians felt very uncomfortable dealing with a woman and made no bones about it. The first time I met the Chief of Police he stared and said, **‘I can’t believe the United States of America would send a woman to do this job!’**”

Candidate explanation: Host-country conditions

We consider two measures of host-country gender conditions:

- ▶ Pct. of women in executive cabinet (Whogov)
 - ▶ Female cabinet ratio (FCR)
- ▶ Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) Index (World Bank)

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Two separate analyses, at country-year level:

- ▶ does FCR/WBL predict gender of ambassadors the host country receives, from countries *other* than U.S.
- ▶ does FCR/WBL predict gender of U.S. diplomats sent to this country

Candidate explanation: Host-country conditions

	DV: Pct. Female among Incoming Ambs.			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
FCR	0.213*** (0.032)	0.116** (0.042)		
WBL			0.162*** (0.014)	0.105** (0.039)
Num.Obs.	930	930	930	930
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE		✓		✓
R2	0.372	0.637	0.443	0.637
R2 Adj.	0.367	0.556	0.438	0.556

Candidate explanation: host-country conditions

	DV: US Amb is Female		DV: US DCM is Female		DV: Pct. Female among US SCs	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
FCR	0.056 (0.185)	-0.014 (0.259)	0.044 (0.167)	0.092 (0.265)	0.101 (0.075)	0.028 (0.105)
R2	0.053	0.299	0.080	0.276	0.256	0.446
R2 Adj.	0.046	0.143	0.074	0.114	0.250	0.323
	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
WBL	-0.161+ (0.091)	-0.163 (0.240)	0.045 (0.083)	0.046 (0.199)	-0.052 (0.039)	-0.090 (0.094)
R2	0.058	0.299	0.081	0.275	0.256	0.447
R2 Adj.	0.051	0.144	0.074	0.114	0.250	0.324
Num.Obs.	930	930	930	930	930	930
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE		✓		✓		✓

Candidate explanation: Host-country conditions

Richard K. Fox, first EEO director at State:

"the feeling ... went beyond the Arab countries. There weren't many women going to Latin America; they weren't going to the Far East. The only place women were assigned in those days was to Africa. There weren't even many women serving in European posts"

Candidate explanation: Preferences/self-selection

Another plausible explanation:

- ▶ Women more likely than men to self-select out of Foreign Service between SC and DCM
 - ▶ in part due to having children

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Hard to disprove conclusively, but:

1. Key Officers are a very highly self-selected group already
 - ▶ 2% of those who take FS exam are offered a position in FS
 - ▶ ~40% of commissioned FSOs reach Key Officers
 - ▶ pre-SC tours not very appealing; salary \$<\$75k

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- ▶ Women more likely than men to self-select out of Foreign Service between SC and DCM
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 - ▶ 2% of those who take FS exam are offered a position in FS
 - ▶ ~40% of commissioned FSOs reach Key Officers
 - ▶ pre-SC tours not very appealing; salary $\$ < \$75k$
2. Compare SCs with 20+ years tenure
 - ▶ at least 45 y/o, past the age of having children

Candidate explanation: Preferences/self-selection

Recall: promotion rates of male vs. female Section Chiefs

	DV: Promoted within 5 years (mean = 0.15)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
female	-0.030*** (0.008)	-0.023** (0.008)	-0.025* (0.012)			
female × 2000s				-0.040** (0.012)	-0.034** (0.012)	-0.030+ (0.016)
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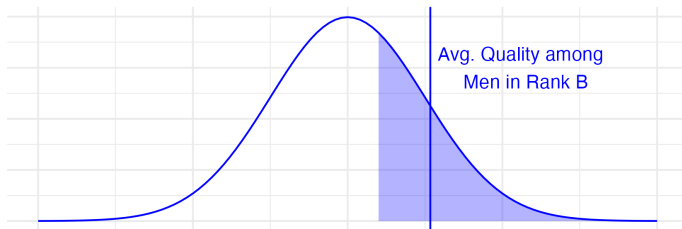
Candidate explanation: Preferences/self-selection

Restricting sample to SCs who have been tenured for ≥ 20 years:

	DV: Promoted within 5 years			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
female	-0.129*** (0.035)	-0.128*** (0.035)	-0.132*** (0.035)	-0.134** (0.041)
Num. Obs.	7027	7027	7027	7027
FE: QY	✓	✓		
FE: MT-position	✓	✓		
FE: MT-position-QY			✓	✓
FE: Mission-decade				✓
C-Y controls		✓	✓	✓

Discrimination

Quality of Men in Rank A who reach Rank B



Quality of Women in Rank A who reach Rank B



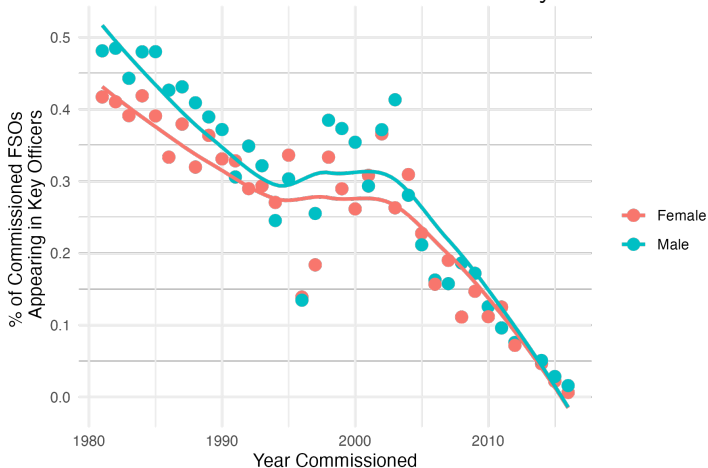
Discriminatory selection into SC, and from SC to DCM

Why does the female promotion penalty from SC→DCM appear to be *increasing* over time?

Discriminatory selection into SC, and from SC to DCM

Why does the female promotion penalty from SC→DCM appear to be *increasing* over time?

- ▶ because selection *into* SC less discriminatory over time



Gender-neutral selection from DCM to Amb?

Is the higher rate of female DCMs reaching Amb, actually just gender-blind selection (net of earlier discrimination)?

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Is the higher rate of female DCMs reaching Amb, actually just gender-blind selection (net of earlier discrimination)?

- ▶ Suppose WH is selecting Ambs purely on quality
 - ▶ (+ other factors orthogonal to gender)
- ▶ Because of SC→DCM discrimination, female DCMs are higher quality than male DCMs, on average
- ▶ This should imply: female Ambs are assigned to more “important” embassies, on average

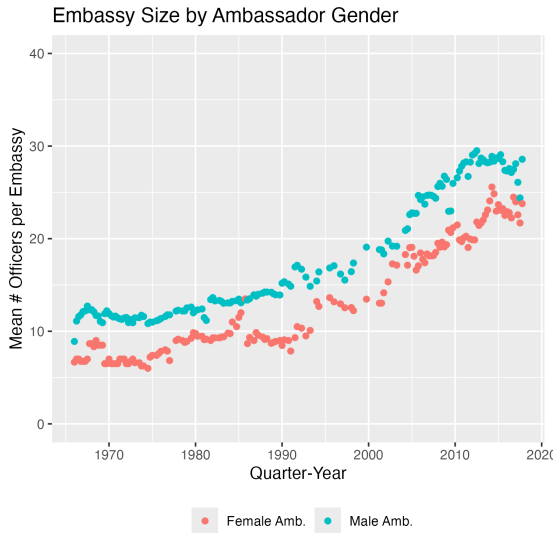
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Proxy for embassy importance: number of Key Officers listed

Female Ambassadors assigned to smaller embassies



Implicit Quota System

Charles Stuart Kennedy, diplomatic historian and former DCM:

This has also been one of the stumbling blocks about the ambassador and DCM relationships. You really shouldn't have two women there.

Theresa A. Healy, Amb. to Sierra Leone, 1980–1983

*The thing that was most disappointing is that the assignment to Saigon fell through. . . I am convinced, because a woman was not wanted in the job. I have no proof of this, but from comments made to me by an acquaintance. . . to the effect that **there are two female officers in Saigon and Saigon thinks it has its quota**; it doesn't want another woman.*

Implicit Quota System

	DV: DCM is female			Pct. female among SCs		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
female amb.	-0.035 (0.023)	-0.056* (0.023)	-0.041+ (0.022)	-0.007 (0.013)	-0.025+ (0.013)	-0.025* (0.012)
Num.Obs.	12773	12773	12773	13690	13690	13690
FE: QY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓			✓
C-Y controls		✓	✓		✓	✓

Thank you!

- ▶ David Lindsey (Associate Professor, Baruch College)
- ▶ Matt Malis (Assistant Professor, Texas A&M University)
- ▶ Calvin Thrall (Assistant Professor, Columbia University)

Key Officers data available soon at Measuring American Diplomacy

- ▶ <https://measuringdiplomacy.github.io/>