

# Status and Influence in the Foreign Policy Bureaucracy

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## Abstract

What makes some bureaucrats more influential than others in shaping U.S. foreign policy? I argue that a bureaucrat's appointment status—whether or not she has received a presidential appointment and senate confirmation—serves as a coordination device to guide the behavior of other actors across the U.S. government and beyond toward that bureaucrat, ultimately determining the degree of influence she is able to exercise in the foreign policy process. I test the theory in the context of U.S. ambassadorial appointments, leveraging the State Department's routinized rotation schedule as a natural experiment to isolate exogenous variation in ambassadorial vacancy. Compared to presidential appointees, I find that acting officials play a less active role in internal advocacy over policy, as measured by diplomatic cable traffic; that they receive less access to top-level decision makers, as documented in presidential meeting schedules; and that they are less effective in getting their host countries' concerns onto the US foreign policy agenda, as indicated by written presidential orders, international agreements, and presidential diplomatic travel. The findings demonstrate that bureaucrat-level variation can create significant distortions in the allocation of time, effort, and attention across foreign policy issues.

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# 1 Introduction

In evaluating the U.S. government’s unpreparedness in the face of the September 11th attacks, the 9/11 Commission Report pointed to extended bureaucratic vacancies as a major contributing factor. “Since a catastrophic attack could occur with little or no notice,” the Commission wrote, such vacancies should be avoided so as to “minimize as much as possible the disruption of national security policymaking” that results.<sup>1</sup> In early September 2001, 43% of key national security positions in the Bush administration did not have a senate-confirmed appointee in place. Twenty years later, in September of the first year of the Biden administration, the analogous figure stood at 74%.<sup>2</sup>

This paper investigates whether and why the appointment status of individual bureaucrats affects foreign policy. In doing so, it aims to contribute to our broader understanding of the role of individual personnel and the nature of agency in the conduct of international relations. The core theoretical claim of the paper is that individuals within the foreign policy bureaucracy vary meaningfully in the influence they wield, and that this individual-level variation exerts an independent effect over the allocation of resources within the bureaucracy—specifically, the resource of political principals’ time and attention across foreign policy issues. To operationalize the concept of individual influence, I focus on appointment status as one observable indicator: all else equal, an individual who has received a presidential appointment and senate confirmation will be more influential in the policy process than an acting official serving in the same role. I assume that officers across the bureaucracy, on average, want the issues of concern to them to receive more rather than less attention from their superiors; thus I hypothesize that presidential appointees will be more successful than acting officials in attracting high-level attention for the issues under their purview.

Empirically, I focus on U.S. chiefs of foreign missions—that is, bilateral ambassadors and the acting officials who serve in their absence—and draw upon a range of archival sources to document the exercise of influence within the bureaucracy. From a corpus of diplomatic cables, I find a decrease in the volume of cable traffic from embassies overseen by acting officials as compared to appointed ambassadors, an effect that is concentrated among cables of a politically sensitive nature. From the President’s Daily Diary, I find that acting officials are far less likely to receive access to the president in the form of a direct meeting or phone call. Finally, I find that the president is

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<sup>1</sup>Kean and Hamilton (2004, 422)

<sup>2</sup>Williamson (2021)

less likely to conduct a diplomatic visit with a country, less likely to mention a country in a written presidential order, and less likely to sign an international agreement with a country, when that country does not have an ambassador in place.

Altogether, the evidence tells a story of acting officials playing a less proactive role in internal policy advocacy; gaining less access to senior officials; and ultimately receiving less high-level attention for their policy concerns. Variation in the influence wielded by individual officials within the foreign policy bureaucracy alters the allocation of time, effort, and attention across policy issues, ultimately affecting which foreign policy problems are addressed, which opportunities are seized upon, and which issues go ignored. The findings highlight intragovernmental delegation as an important and under-appreciated factor shaping the state’s foreign policy behavior.

## 2 Institutional Context of Appointments and Vacancies

Since the end of World War II, the the executive branch of the U.S. federal government has been staffed by approximately two million civilian employees.<sup>3</sup> Filling the top ranks of the workforce are around 4,000 presidential appointees, of which around 1,200 are positions requiring presidential appointment and senate confirmation (“PAS” positions).<sup>4</sup> When there is no senate-confirmed appointee filling a PAS position,<sup>5</sup> one of two things can happen: the position can remain vacant, or the president (or relevant department head) can appoint an interim official to serve in an “acting” capacity.

### 2.1 Vacancies and Actings in the General Case

For the majority of PAS positions, the duties of the office can be performed with full legal force by an acting official.<sup>6</sup> Restrictions on who can serve as an acting official, and for how long, are stipulated in the Federal Vacancies Reform Act (FVRA) of 1998:<sup>7</sup> generally speaking, an acting

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/data-analysis-documentation/federal-employment-reports/historical-tables/executive-branch-civilian-employment-since-1940/>

<sup>4</sup><https://presidentialtransition.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/12/Presidentially-Appointed-Positions.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Note that presidents can also make “recess appointments”—appointing an officer to a PAS position while the senate is in recess, and circumventing the senate confirmation process. These recess appointees are legally and functionally equivalent to senate-confirmed appointees, with the exception that their tenures are time-limited.

<sup>6</sup>Primary exceptions include entities led by multimember leadership teams, such as the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), which require a quorum of senate-confirmed leaders in order to execute certain responsibilities O’Connell (2020, 627–628).

<sup>7</sup>There are a small number of PAS positions that explicitly fall outside the scope of FVRA, including ambassadors, which are the focus of this paper’s empirical analysis; see discussion below. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-GAO-03-806/html/GAOREPORTS-GAO-03-806.htm>

officer can only be (i) a high-level civil servant who had served in the same agency for some time prior to the vacancy, or (ii) an individual who had previously received senate confirmation for a different PAS position; and they may only serve in the role for a period of 210 days (300 days for vacancies occurring at the start of a presidential administration, and the clock is reset when the president submits a nominee to the senate for confirmation).

Two considerations, however, undercut the legal bite of these restrictions. First, by exhausting all options for extension provided under the FVRA, a president can keep an acting official in office for up to two and a half years—roughly the same amount served by a typical senate-confirmed appointee, who faces no such statutorily-imposed time limits. Second, when the time limit for an acting official to occupy a given position is reached, the responsibilities of that office can generally be delegated downward to other offices. This workaround allows agency officials to engage in a somewhat absurd pantomime of compliance, as O’Connell documents in the case of Nancy Berryhill, the Deputy Commissioner of Operations at the Social Security Administration (SSA) who assumed the role of acting Commissioner for the first year of the Trump administration.<sup>8</sup> When the Government Accountability Office (GAO) notified the SSA of Berryhill’s noncompliance with the FVRA’s time limitations, Berryhill simply kept the job and dropped the title. “Moving forward,” Berryhill wrote to agency employees, “I will continue to lead the agency from my position of record, Deputy Commissioner of Operations.”<sup>9</sup>

In short, insofar as acting officials wield diminished influence within the bureaucracy relative to their presidentially-confirmed counterparts, the reason is unlikely to be found in the *de jure* limitations imposed on those officials.

## 2.2 Specific Case of U.S. Ambassadors and Chargés

The rules surrounding appointments and vacancies in the case of ambassadors—the focus of the empirical analysis below—differ in two key respects from the general case presented above. First, while ambassadorships are PAS positions, they explicitly fall outside the scope of the FVRA.<sup>10</sup> This means there are no statutory restrictions on how long an acting ambassador, formally referred to as a “*chargé d’affaires ad interim*” (colloquially, “chargé”), can serve.<sup>11</sup> Second, ambassadorships

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<sup>8</sup>O’Connell (2020, 634)

<sup>9</sup>Davidson (2018)

<sup>10</sup><https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-GAO-03-806/html/GAOREPORTS-GAO-03-806.htm>

<sup>11</sup>An agency-specific statute does stipulate that a chargé must be “a career member of the [Foreign] Service”, but explicitly authorizes the President to keep them in place “for such period as the public interest may require” (22 USC §3982(c)).

are unique among PAS positions in that their appointment requires confirmation not only from the U.S. senate, but also from the receiving foreign government. The following discussion expands on each of these points, and explains the sources of delay in filling senate-confirmed ambassadorships.

The process leading up to the commencement of an ambassador's tour of duty is an arduous one.<sup>12</sup> It begins with the president selecting a candidate from two separate short lists presented to him by his Secretary of State (for career appointees)<sup>13</sup> or by his White House staff, recently through the Office of Presidential Personnel (for non-career or "political" appointees). After being selected (but before being formally nominated), the candidate undergoes a lengthy internal vetting process, involving: a questionnaire for the White House's initial review; a background investigation for the purpose of obtaining a top-secret security clearance, typically requiring follow-up interviews with many of the candidates' personal and professional associates; a medical clearance; and a financial disclosure statement to be reviewed by multiple executive agencies to assess any potential conflicts of interest.

Once these internal hurdles are cleared, the candidate must receive formal approval, or *agrément*, from the host government. Each host government has its own internal process for handling requests for *agrément*, which may further delay the process—especially in the event that the host government denies the request, forcing the US administration to restart the selection process altogether. Denials of *agrément* are infrequent, though it is unclear exactly how infrequent, given that such denials are rarely made public when they do occur.<sup>14</sup>

After obtaining a full clearance from the US executive branch and from the host government, the nominee's name is then passed on to the senate for confirmation. The onus falls on the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee to schedule and conduct a confirmation hearing. This is followed by another series of written responses to questions requested by members of the committee, after which the committee votes on its recommendation. Once approved in committee, a vote is scheduled and held for the full senate's confirmation. Upon confirmation, the appointee takes part in a swearing-in ceremony, and finally proceeds to post and presents her credentials to her host government.

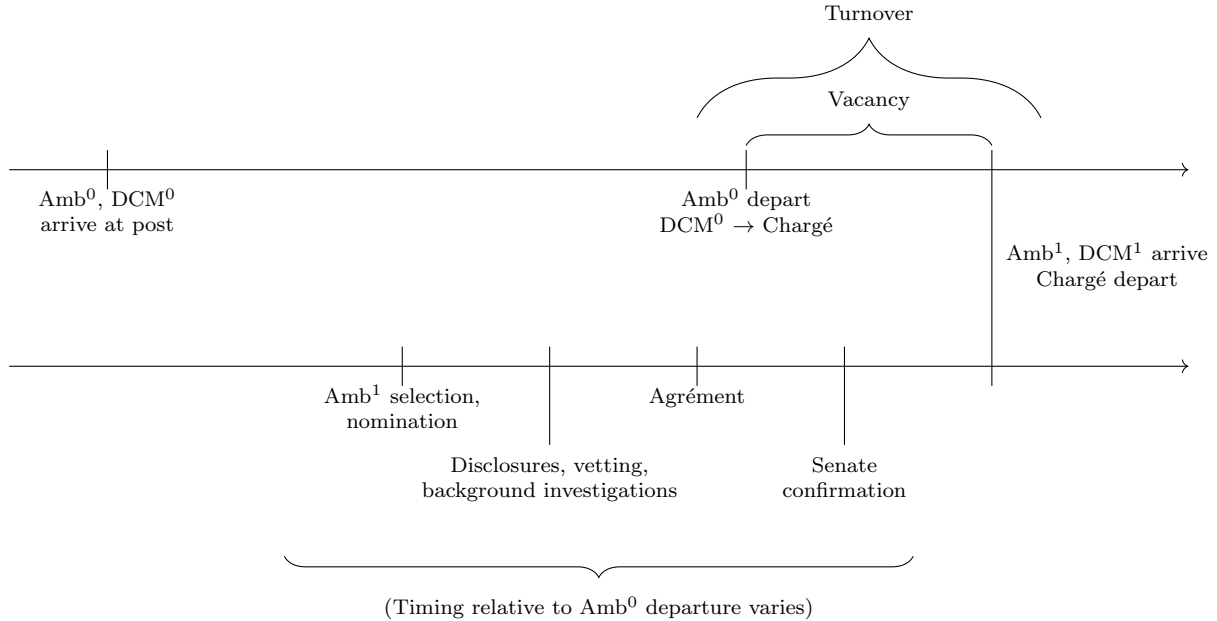
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<sup>12</sup>The discussion of administrative process follows primarily from Jett (2014, ch.3-4) and from Kopp and Gillespie (2011), with additional information drawn from the author's interview with former Director General of the Foreign Service W. Robert Pearson, June 2021.

<sup>13</sup>Rather than selecting candidates directly, the secretary typically passes along the recommendations given to him or her by a committee managed by the Deputy Secretaries and the Director General of the Foreign Service.

<sup>14</sup>As Kopp and Gillespie (2011, 68) explain: "Agrément involves a confidential message from the sending state to the receiving state: 'If we name Smith, will you accept him?' If the answer is no, Smith is never named and therefore never suffers rejection. In American practice today, when the president's choice seems controversial, the Department of State may ask an even more hypothetical question: 'If we were to ask you whether, should we name Smith, you would accept him, how would you reply?' If the answer is 'we would say yes,' then a formal request for *agrément* will follow."

Figure 1: Typical timeline of ambassadorial turnover



The ambassador begins her tour of duty with no fixed date of termination, but with a general understanding that the tour is to last for approximately three years. The State Department sets a departure date some months in advance of the three-year mark, and the ambassador makes arrangements to leave post on that date.

The ambassador typically chooses her own deputy chief of mission, or DCM—always a high-ranking foreign service officer (FSO)—who will serve alongside the ambassador for the duration of her tenure.<sup>15</sup> When the ambassador leaves post, the DCM usually assumes the role of chargé. (If not the current DCM, then another FSO will be brought in from outside the embassy to serve as chargé at the President’s or Secretary of State’s behest.) The chargé oversees embassy operations until the next ambassador arrives, at which point she usually rotates out to a new posting so as to make way for the incoming ambassador’s new DCM. A typical timeline of the appointment and rotation process is depicted in Figure 1.

The basic reason we observe routine and extensive vacancies in between one ambassador’s departure from post and her successor’s arrival has to do with the variability in the timing of each step of the appointment process.<sup>16</sup> The security clearance investigation or the review of the financial disclosure form can extend unpredictably. Agrément can be delayed by mundane

<sup>15</sup>The ambassador makes her selection from a list of qualified candidates presented to her by a “DCM committee” headed by the Director General (Kopp and Gillespie, 2011, 211).

<sup>16</sup>These are the main “non-strategic” sources of ambassadorial vacancy. In some instances, vacancies are used as an intentional diplomatic tactic, as discussed in the following section.

bureaucratic processes in the receiving government. The senate Foreign Relations chair can drag his feet in scheduling a hearing and a vote in committee, and the senate majority leader can do the same for the floor vote. And an especially preoccupied White House can create a bottleneck in getting the process started altogether.

At the same time, the State Department proceeds to remove ambassadors from post on schedule, seemingly without seeing any need to strategically adjust for delays that arise in filling the vacancies. This may be inevitable in some cases, for instance if the outgoing ambassador has been given another assignment or is set to begin a job outside of government which cannot be postponed. Otherwise the explanation may simply be habitual: the three-year rotation norm is deeply entrenched, and extensive vacancies are a routine part of the process—so the fact that a new ambassador will be delayed in arriving at post is not in itself seen as sufficient reason to delay her predecessor’s departure.

That this process regularly creates considerable stretches of vacancy is no secret. By Ambassador Dennis Jett’s assessment, “One thing on which there is general agreement. . . is that the appointments process is broken. It takes too long, puts the nominees in limbo for an indefinite period, and leaves positions unfilled for months on end.”<sup>17</sup> Yet there seems to be little sense of urgency on the part of any of the actors involved to meaningfully reform or improve the process. As a former director general of the foreign service explained: “I never was as concerned about the DCM running an embassy during a time when that was perfectly suitable for managing the whole range of normal activities. . . leaving aside of course politically sensitive issues that might require the ambassador.”<sup>18</sup> The upshot is the pattern we observe in Figure 2: in the course of normal diplomatic relations (a term I will define precisely in the following section), a typical ambassadorial rotation results in a vacancy of over three months in duration.

There are three technical points to consider before proceeding with the analysis. First, the present analysis will not draw a distinction between a vacant ambassadorship and one that is occupied by an acting official. For positions covered by the FVRA, the restrictions on acting officials carry a reporting requirement which enables analysts to distinguish between the cases of vacancy and interim occupancy.<sup>19</sup> There is no analogous reporting requirement accompanying the designation of a DCM (or other FSO) as *chargé*. But because there are also no restrictions on

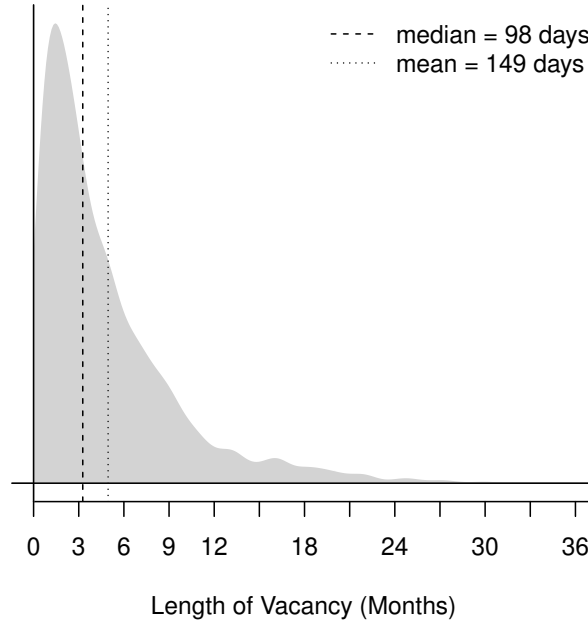
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<sup>17</sup>Jett (2014, 113)

<sup>18</sup>Ambassador W. Robert Pearson, interview with author, 30 June 2021

<sup>19</sup>See <https://www.gao.gov/legal/federal-vacancies-reform-act/federal-vacancies-prior-administration>. This distinction is the focus of a recent study by Kinane (2021).

Figure 2: Distribution of Vacancy Durations



*Note:* Nine outlying observations with vacancy durations ranging from 40 to 59 months (out of 2,661 total observations) omitted for visual clarity.

appointment lengths for chargés (and because every DCM, by virtue of being an FSO, is legally permitted to serve as chargé), the analysis takes as given that during an ambassadorial vacancy, the DCM assumes the role of chargé through a process that is essentially automatic.

Second, the analysis will not focus on the distinction between “career” and “political” ambassadors<sup>20</sup>—that is, ambassadors who are or are not members of the career Foreign Service—a distinction which has been the focus of some recent empirical research on US ambassadors<sup>21</sup> as well as presidential appointments more broadly.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the period of analysis, about 26 percent of embassies at any time are overseen by non-career ambassadors (as compared to 63 percent by career ambassadors and 11 percent by acting officials), corresponding to the tacit agreement between the State Department and successive White Houses for a 70/30 split between career and political appointments. Ambassadors of either type have the same statutory authority and are appointed through the same formal processes.

<sup>20</sup>Note that the term “politically appointed ambassador” is misleading: legally speaking, all ambassadors (career and non-career) are political appointees, in the sense that they are “principal officers” of the State Department whose appointment requires a presidential nomination and senate confirmation.

<sup>21</sup>Hollibaugh (2015); Jett (2014); Haglund (2015); Fedderke and Jett (2017)

<sup>22</sup>Hollibaugh, Horton, and Lewis (2014)



Third, of interest in the following analysis is not only the vacancy period itself, but what I will refer to as the entire “turnover” period—consisting of the vacancy as well as the periods shortly before one ambassador’s departure and shortly after the next one’s arrival (see Figure 1). As I discuss more thoroughly below, many of the challenges faced by an interim official will apply in similar measure to the experience of a presidentially-appointed ambassador at the very beginning or very end of her tenure. For the sake of brevity I will sometimes refer to the distinction between an ambassador and a chargé, but the reader should keep in mind that the comparison of interest is more generally between a mid-tenure ambassador on the one hand, and an interim, incoming, or outgoing chief of mission on the other.

### 3 Appointment Status and Influence

The preceding section outlined the reasons why acting officials across PAS positions covered by the FVRA face few *de jure* limitations on their ability to exercise influence in the policy process, and why acting chiefs of mission (COMs) face even fewer formal constraints. Instead, I argue that the primary difference between senate-confirmed and interim officials can be understood as deriving from their *informal* influence in the policy process. I present the argument regarding informal influence both in general terms and by reference the specific example of ambassadors and chargés.

#### 3.1 Informal Influence of Presidential Appointees

What determines a bureaucrat’s influence in the foreign policy process? I suggest that the influence of chiefs of foreign missions, and foreign policy bureaucrats more broadly, can be usefully decomposed into two dimensions: their *proactiveness*—their willingness to take autonomous action and to engage in internal policy advocacy; and their *effectiveness*—their ability to gain support from other participants and advance their issues through the policy process.

##### 3.1.1 Determinants of influence: Proactiveness

For any chief of a foreign mission, the option is available to behave as a “human fax machine”,<sup>23</sup> or as “merely a Washington messenger boy”. But anyone content to passively transmit messages between home and host government, writes Ambassador Ellis Briggs, “has no business being an

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<sup>23</sup>Blanchard (1998, 120)

ambassador.”<sup>24</sup> The effective conduct of diplomacy requires the chief of mission to take a proactive role in shaping foreign policy.

Halperin and Clapp point out that “the embassy has wide latitude to decide how and at what level in the host government to carry out an instruction from Washington”,<sup>25</sup> which ambassadors often exercise liberally. Writing from his perspective in Washington, Secretary of State Dean Acheson acknowledged that “authority fades with distance and with the speed of light.”<sup>26</sup> Henry Kissinger likewise observed that the diplomatic corps “will carry out clear-cut instructions with great loyalty, but the typical Foreign Service officer is not easily persuaded that an instruction with which he disagrees is really clear-cut.”<sup>27</sup>

Autonomous action by a chief of mission, however, need not imply contravention or disregard of a direct order from above. Just as often, there is no explicit order to be disobeyed. For instance, Ambassador William Attwood recounts his choice to grant a request for assistance to the Guinean government without instruction: “I made this offer on my own, knowing that Washington would have approved, but also would have been bureaucratically unable to get the approval to me in time had I requested it.”<sup>28</sup> According to Ambassador Karl Rankin, “An unwritten law in the Foreign Service is: Never ask for instructions from Washington if you can help it.”<sup>29</sup> And this state of affairs may be perfectly acceptable, even preferable, for all parties involved. Ambassador Edward Rowell recalls, as his final instruction before arriving at post, that “senior officials in Washington hoped they would not have to pay too much attention to Bolivia.”<sup>30</sup> Given the myriad international issues and relations that must be managed on a day-to-day basis, the effective conduct of foreign policy requires a considerable degree of delegation.

A significant source of a chief of mission’s discretionary authority is her statutory grant of “full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all Government executive branch employees in that country,” and the concomitant requirement that all such employees keep her “fully and currently informed with respect to all activities and operations” and “comply fully with all applicable directives of the chief of mission.”<sup>31</sup> With the proliferation of representatives from other agencies as part of the “country team”—military attachés, legal attachés, DEA officers,

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<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Halperin and Clapp (2006, 279)

<sup>25</sup>Halperin and Clapp (2006, 278)

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 280

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Clarke (1987, 131)

<sup>28</sup>Halperin and Clapp (2006, 289)

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 288

<sup>30</sup>Keeley (2000, 24)

<sup>31</sup>22 USC §3927 (a) and (b); Foreign Service Act (1980)

agricultural officers, and so on—the management task is no small feat; the larger embassies today include personnel from over two dozen federal agencies.<sup>32</sup> As Ambassador Briggs describes, “an appreciable part of [the senior embassy staff’s] time is devoted to preventing the representatives of other agencies, who invariably regard themselves as diplomats, from damaging the delicate machinery of international relations.”<sup>33</sup> Notably, the chief of mission’s statutory authority for direction and supervision carries with it the ability to deny clearance for any government employee to enter the country in an official capacity.<sup>34</sup> Thus even when the broad contours of policy are determined in Washington, the chief of mission is left with considerable leeway to determine how that policy will be implemented by personnel on the ground—and which personnel will be on the ground to implement it.

In addition to exercising discretion in the implementation of Washington’s instructions, a diplomat can also play an important role in advocacy and debate over the policy decisions that ultimately produce those instructions. Internal advocacy may involve persuading others of the rightness of one’s position over the substantive question at issue, or it may instead be a matter of altering the consequences of supporting or opposing one’s position. Participants in the policy process can employ strategies of lateral bargaining or logrolling, committing to support your initiative tomorrow in exchange for your supporting my initiative today.<sup>35</sup> Further, Halperin and Clapp suggest that presidential appointees enter their roles with a certain “account with the president”, which they draw on throughout their time in office. Participants may be able to obtain presidential support “simply by making an issue of personal privilege.”<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, participants may garner approval for their policies through the (implicit or explicit) threat of raising the costs of opposition. While the president nominally sits at the top of the governmental hierarchy, Bendor and Hammond suggest that his subordinates “may be able to hurt him politically if they disagree with his choices and make their disagreements known to outside supporters. Hence, the president may end up bargaining with subordinates not because they are intrinsically powerful but because their outside supporters can make life difficult for him.”<sup>37</sup> Saunders argues that the political costs of appointee dissent—in the form of public criticism, leaks, or resignations—largely remain “off the equilibrium path” because the president works to preempt them through strategic concessions to his appointees.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>U.S. Diplomacy Center (2018)

<sup>33</sup>Halperin and Clapp (2006, 36)

<sup>34</sup>Kopp and Gillespie (2011, 145)

<sup>35</sup>Halperin and Clapp (2006, 221)

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 125

<sup>37</sup>Bendor and Hammond (1992, 315)

<sup>38</sup>Saunders (2018)

### 3.1.2 Determinants of influence: Effectiveness

The second determinant of a participant’s influence over policy is what I refer to as effectiveness: holding fixed the objectives that a participant chooses to pursue, and the extent to which she works to pursue them (that is, her proactiveness), how successful will she be at accomplishing those objectives?

A diplomat’s effectiveness in influencing foreign policy is partially a function of the access she receives to high-level decision makers in her home and host government. At home, a chief of mission will not succeed in convincing her superiors to pay attention to her problems, or to implement her preferred solutions, if they do not grant her the opportunity to make her case. In country, without a direct line of communication to the highest authorities within the host government, she will be hindered in her ability to advance her policy objectives—or to even gain a full understanding of what objectives she ought to be pursuing.

Effectiveness in the policy process also depends on an official’s ability to exercise authority over her subordinates. The authority of any bureaucrat “rests directly upon the acceptance or consent of subordinates. . . since bureaucratic compliance cannot be achieved by fiat.”<sup>39</sup> For employees outside of the Foreign Service, decisions over promotion and retention are ultimately made in their home agencies, not by the ambassador who seeks to direct and coordinate them. The ambassador is thus “only nominally in full control of those beneath him” and “must rely above all on persuasion and authority to maintain coherence and discipline in an overseas mission.”<sup>40</sup> The ambassador’s reliance on informal means of exercising authority is especially clear in the case of lateral stakeholders in the policy process, who are not even nominally positioned below the ambassador on an organizational chart. In dealing with these officials, the ambassador’s influence depends on her ability to draw on favors from her political network, or to leverage the “shadow of the future”, in order to build coalitions of support based on multilateral logrolling and commitments of reciprocity.

## 3.2 Diminished Influence of Acting Officials

How is a foreign policy bureaucrat’s influence affected by their appointment status? I argue that the diminution of influence experienced by an acting official, relative to a senate-confirmed presidential appointee, derives precisely from the common understanding among participants in the policy process that the acting official lacks influence. The logic is circular, but self-sustaining as

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<sup>39</sup>Krause, Lewis, and Douglas (2006, 772)

<sup>40</sup>Halperin and Clapp (2006, 273)

equilibrium behavior.

The argument builds from the notion that each of the elements of bureaucratic influence outlined above are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The willingness of a superior to grant access to a given bureaucrat depends in part on the superior’s perception of the latter’s effectiveness and proactiveness, and hence usefulness to the superior. The bureaucrat’s ability to gain support from lateral stakeholders depends in turn on the access she receives to higher-level officials, and on her willingness to draw upon her “account” with those officials, in order to advance future policy objectives. Her authority over her subordinates depends on her ability to leverage her influence with other actors across government and beyond, in order to make professional rewards and punishments for those subordinates conditional on their compliance with her directives. And the influence she wields with her host government is both a determinant and a consequence of her influence with these various actors within her home government. According to historian and former NSC staffer James Thomson, “The most ominous complaint that can be whispered of a bureaucrat is: ‘I’m afraid Charlie’s beginning to lose his effectiveness.’”<sup>41</sup> Losing the perception of influence means losing influence; it is conceptually impossible to differentiate the two.

In simple game-theoretic terms, this situation represents a coordination problem: actors interfacing with a given bureaucrat can coordinate on a “high-influence” or a “low-influence” equilibrium, and their choice is rendered optimal by other actors doing the same. What is required is a source of common conjecture as to which choice actors across different departments and agencies, and even across different national governments, will coordinate on. My claim is that, within the context of U.S. foreign missions, an individual’s appointment status provides such a coordination device.<sup>42</sup>

This concept of appointment status as a coordination device comports with Calvert’s theory of leadership as a means to resolve “derived” coordination problems—enabling players to “agree on a particular system, pattern, or convention according to which members will behave. . . yielding some gains over myopic play and preferred by all members over searching for an alternative system.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Calvert suggests that “Coordination is at the basis of many presidential actions: structuring incentives and arguments to induce desired behavior among subordinates and other politicians; resolving conflicts among interests. . . and the creation of new goals and beliefs”.<sup>44</sup> The commonly

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<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Halperin and Clapp (2006, 90-91)

<sup>42</sup>The interpretation of appointment status across different institutional contexts is a question we return to in the paper’s concluding section.

<sup>43</sup>Calvert (1992, 12)

<sup>44</sup>Calvert (1992, 19)

understood distinction between presidential appointees and internally assigned bureaucrats provides one potential resolution to the derived coordination problem of determining who ought and ought not be granted authority in the foreign policy process.

From casual empirical observation, actors throughout government do seem to interpret a presidential appointment and senate confirmation as a sign of presidential backing and legitimation. For even highly competent acting officials, writes O’Connell, “[e]xceptional management skills do not substitute for this ‘seal of approval.’”<sup>45</sup> Pearson similarly explains that the key factor distinguishing an appointed from an internally-promoted official is that “the White House ‘owns’ this person. . . so their reputation is riding on [him or her] as well.”<sup>46</sup> The common understanding of presidential backing emboldens an appointee to carry out her role more actively and assertively, and prompts other actors to grant her greater deference than they otherwise might. Acting officials, in turn, internalize their perceived lack of authority, and adjust their behavior accordingly.

### 3.3 Implications of Influence

The preceding argument yields the implication that acting officials will be less influential in the policy process as compared to presidential appointees. To find evidence of an individual official wielding influence in any specific instance would require knowledge of what outcome that officials sought to bring about, what outcome would have occurred in the absence of their action, and what outcome did occur given their action. Finding such evidence at a large scale requires making some approximations and simplifying assumptions.

The following analysis makes two important assumptions: first, that foreign policy bureaucrats wish to attract more rather than less attention from top-level officials on the issues of concern to them; and second, that the issues of primary concern to U.S. chiefs of foreign mission are issues of bilateral policy between the U.S. and their host government. Under these assumptions, if, all else equal, a country receives more attention from top-level U.S. officials when it has a presidentially appointed U.S. ambassador in place rather than an acting official, we can interpret that difference as evidence of ambassadors successfully exercising influence in the foreign policy process.

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<sup>45</sup>O’Connell (2020, 698)

<sup>46</sup>Interview with author, 30 June 2021.

## 4 Empirical Evidence

The theory presented above outlined a number of observable implications of the exercise of influence within the foreign policy bureaucracy. The empirical analysis will focus on the subset of these implications for which I have been able to identify relevant data sources to operationalize the concepts of interest. Specifically, I examine how ambassadors and chargés differ in (i) the proactiveness with which they engage in internal advocacy over policy; (ii) the access they receive to the president; and (iii) the attention they are able to garner for bilateral policy concerns.

The research designs employed below aim to isolate conditions under which the appointment status of the U.S. chief of mission to a foreign country can reasonably be considered as-if-random with respect to the outcomes of interest. The general approach to doing so will involve restricting the sample to conditions of normal diplomatic relations, and focusing on variation in appointment status that arises from the routinized three-year ambassadorial rotation schedule, both of which are discussed in greater depth in Malis (2021).<sup>47</sup>

### 4.1 Status and Advocacy: Evidence from Diplomatic Cables

For systematic evidence of internal advocacy efforts, I examine a corpus of diplomatic cables. “Cable traffic” has long been considered the “heart and soul” of the State Department.<sup>48</sup> According to one study of the department’s organizational culture: “Boiled down to specific tasks, the most direct expression of policy is a written report. Words and paper take on enormous importance in the life of the State Department.”<sup>49</sup> James Wilson further explains how diplomats perceive this essential task of the organization:

When any action may have policy implications and thus be subject to political criticism after the fact, people taking those actions will have a natural tendency toward caution. The central constraint on those diplomats who perform the reporting task is the constant awareness that the written word is policy and thus is subject to close and often hostile scrutiny.<sup>50</sup>

Variation in the volume and kind of cable traffic emanating from a given embassy at a given point in

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<sup>47</sup>Specifically, the data from Malis (2021) code instances when the U.S. and a given country have explicitly downgraded or severed diplomatic relations, or when ambassadors have been withdrawn as a means of diplomatic sanction. These cases are omitted from the present analysis.

<sup>48</sup>Rosati and DeWitt (2012, 182)

<sup>49</sup>Warwick (1980, 86)

<sup>50</sup>Wilson (1989, 40)

time reflects both attributes of the personnel involved in drafting and approving the cables, and the broader political and economic conditions in which those personnel are operating. Holding fixed the latter, an increase in cable traffic is indicative of diplomats proposing policy initiatives, questioning or pushing back against instructions from Washington, or inserting themselves in internal policy debates as active participants rather than passive observers—behaviors representing the sort of proactiveness that presidential appointees are more likely to exhibit as compared to acting officials. A basic testable hypothesis that follows is that during ambassadorial vacancies, we will observe fewer cables overall being sent from the embassy experiencing the vacancy, and in particular, fewer cables on more substantive and politically sensitive topics (as will be defined below).

The cable data come from the US National Archives’ Central Foreign Policy File (CFPF).<sup>51</sup> The CFPF contains records of 3.2 million cables, constituting the near-universe of cable traffic to and from all overseas missions from July 1973 through December 1979.<sup>52</sup> For 2.1 of the 3.2 million cables, the CFPF includes full cable texts and metadata. The remaining 1.1 million cables are not released in full, either for reasons of security or confidentiality, or because of technical problems with digitizing the message texts; however, the metadata for these cables are available.

For the present analysis, I scraped the metadata of all 3.2 million cables, which includes for each cable: the date that the cable was drafted or sent; where the cable was sent to and from; the classification level assigned to the cable when drafted; and a set of labels, or TAGS (an acronym for Traffic Analysis by Geography and Subject), also assigned to the cable when drafted. Each cable had to be assigned at least one subject matter TAGS label, from a standardized list of several dozen such labels, which are grouped into nine top-level categories: Administration, Business, Consular, Economic, Military/Defense, Operations, Political, Social, or Technology/Science. From this metadata, I constructed several variables at the country-month level, which generically take the form  $Y_{i,t,m}^{j,c}$ , indicating:

- the number of cables sent from country  $i$  in month  $m$  of year  $t$ , in subject category  $j$  and classification category  $c$ ;
- $j$  takes on values for each of the nine categories listed above, as well as a value for all categories combined, and a “substantive” category (pooling Business, Economic, Military/Defense, Political, Social), and a “procedural” category (pooling Administration, Consular, and Opera-

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<sup>51</sup><https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=4073&cat=WR43&bc=,s1,fd>

<sup>52</sup>Omitted from the collection are “temporary records”, which are not of “sufficient historical value or other value to warrant preservation...past the time they are needed by the creating agency for administrative, legal, or fiscal purposes”.



tions, and Technology/Science);<sup>53</sup>

- $c$  takes on two values: all cables, and only classified cables (i.e. cables labeled as “secret”, “confidential”, or “limited official use”).<sup>54</sup>

Generally we should expect to see a lower overall volume of outgoing cables during vacancies, and in particular, a lower volume of substantive cables, and a lower volume of classified cables.

Identifying cables’ classification status serves two related purposes for the present analysis. First, we can intuitively think of a high classification level as an indicator that the cable’s content is in some sense important or politically sensitive, likely pertaining to the sort of controversial policy debates which an ambassador would be more willing to engage in than would an acting official. In addition, the classification level itself can affect a cable’s reception and influence. As one ambassador describes, “It’s a Washington game. It doesn’t matter what it says.” By assigning a high classification level to a cable, the sender causes “the value of the currency to rise”, effectively “ensur[ing] its distribution to the most senior policy officials in the U.S. government—and a demand by people who are not included in the initial distribution that they be allowed to read it.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, the classification level does not merely reflect the content of the message, but can actually have a causal impact on its reception. Both factors lead us to expect that, relative to a chargé, an ambassador is more likely to report on subject matter that objectively warrants classification, and to “inflate” the classification level of her reporting in order to widen its audience and its impact.

I estimate models of the following form for each outcome measure via OLS:

$$\log(Y_{i,t,m}^{j,c} + 1) = Vac_{i,t,m}\beta + \left( \sum_{k=1}^6 \log(Y_{i,t,m-k}^{j,c} + 1) \right) \phi + \left( \sum_{k=1}^6 Vac_{i,t,m-k} \right) \gamma + X_{i,t-1}\theta + \tau_{t,m} + \tau_{t,m} \times \pi_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t,m} \quad (1)$$

where:

<sup>53</sup>While the individual TAGS labels were assigned by the cable’s author, the grouping of these categories into “substantive” versus “procedural” was based on my own judgment. The best guide available in making this coding decision was that the National Archives designated the categories of Economic, Military/Defense, Political, Social, and Technology/Science as automatically satisfying the “sufficient historical value” criterion for preservation, whereas cables from the other categories were subject to deletion. Upon closer inspection of the Technology/Science sub-categories, I judged that they did not characterize the type of subject matter that acting officials would be reluctant to report on. In contrast, the Business category pertains to the kind of commercial diplomacy which is of particular interest for the present analysis.

<sup>54</sup>For example: consider a cable with tags PINS (Political Affairs-Internal Security) and SHUM (Social Affairs-Human Rights) and classification level “secret”. This cable would add one to the count for each of  $Y_{i,t,m}^{S,classified}$ ,  $Y_{i,t,m}^{P,classified}$ ,  $Y_{i,t,m}^{substantive,classified}$ ,  $Y_{i,t,m}^{all,classified}$ ,  $Y_{i,t,m}^{S,all}$ ,  $Y_{i,t,m}^{P,all}$ ,  $Y_{i,t,m}^{substantive,all}$ , and  $Y_{i,t,m}^{all,all}$ . Note that “limited official use” is the lowest of the three classification levels; repeating the analyses with “classified” cables defined to only include “secret” or “confidential” yields larger and more precise effect estimates than those reported in the bottom panel of Figure 3.

<sup>55</sup>Keeley (2000, 52-53)

- $Vac_{i,t,m}$  is an indicator for whether there was any vacancy in the US ambassadorial post in country  $i$  in month  $m$  of year  $t$ ;
- $X_{i,t-1}$  is a vector of lagged covariates at the country-year level, including population, GDP, imports from and exports to the US, economic and military aid from the US (all log-transformed), UNGA ideal point distance from the US, and V-Dem’s polyarchy index;
- $\tau_{t,m}$  is a year-month fixed effect, and  $\pi_{i,t-1}$  is an indicator for whether the most recent ambassador in office was a career or political appointee.<sup>56</sup>

Results are reported in Figure 3. The top panel reports results using outcome measures that do not disaggregate by classification status, while the bottom panel restricts attention to classified cables. In the top panel, the evidence is partly consistent with expectations. The first row, where the outcome pools cables across all subject matter categories, reports a negative and marginally significant ( $p < 0.1$ ) estimate of the effect of vacancy on outgoing cable volumes. The magnitude of the effect is relatively small: the point estimate is -0.021, which corresponds to about 0.09 standard deviations of the unexplained variation in the outcome (that is, the standard deviation of the residuals of a regression of the outcome over all covariates other than vacancy). When restricting attention to the cables of the “substantive” subject labels (Business, Economic, Military/Defense, Political, and Social), we obtain an estimate that is larger and statistically significant, whereas the effect for all other (“procedural”) categories is smaller and insignificant. Looking more closely at individual categories, some results are consistent with expectations, while others—notably the near-zero point estimates for Military and Political categories—are not.

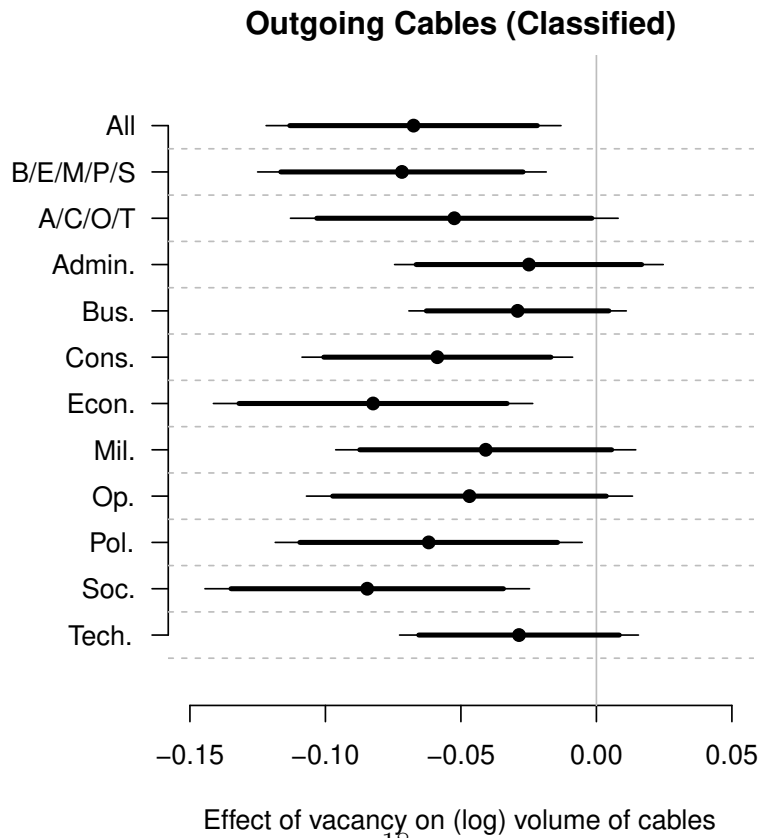
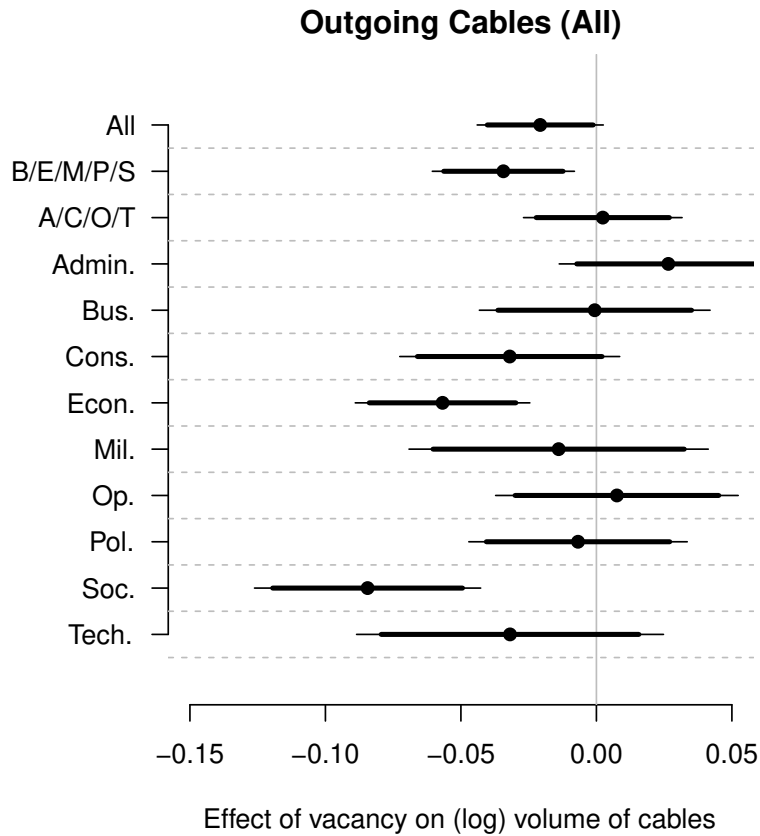
Turning to the lower panel, where we restrict attention to classified cables, the results fall more closely in line with expectations. The effects for all cables, as well for the pooled “substantive” category, are statistically significant and larger in magnitude than above; for all classified cables, the point estimate of -0.067 amounts to roughly 0.18 standard deviations of unexplained outcome variation. Considering individual subject categories, three of the five substantive categories—Economic, Military/Defense, Political, and Social—have the largest point estimates (all of which are significant at  $p < 0.05$ ) among the individual categories, though the effect for the Business and Military categories are smaller and insignificant.

Taken together, the results are consistent with the theoretical expectation of acting officials playing a less proactive role in internal advocacy as compared to presidentially-appointed ambas-

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<sup>56</sup>Results reported here do not include country fixed effects, but are nearly identical with country FE included.

Figure 3: Effect of vacancy on outgoing cable volume, 1974-1979



*Note:* Point estimates and 90%-CI and 95%-CI from standard errors robust to two-way clustering, by country and by year-month.  $N = 8,400$ , for approx. 120 countries across 72 months, 1974-1979.

sadors.

## 4.2 Status and Access: Evidence from the President’s Daily Diary

Separate from the question of proactiveness, ambassadors are also hypothesized to be more influential than chargés in shaping policy outcomes due to their *effectiveness* on the job—which depends in part on the level of *access* they receive to top-level officials.

When the option is available, participants in the foreign policy process generally stand to benefit from circumventing the official channels of policymaking and bringing their issues directly to the ultimate decision-maker. According to Halperin and Clapp, “The ideal situation for a senior participant is to be able to take a controversial issue to the president and get him to decide it without further recourse to other participants.”<sup>57</sup> One former White House staffer makes the point in starker terms, stating that for some participants, “there is only one fixed goal in life. It is somehow to gain and maintain access to the President.”<sup>58</sup> We should note that obtaining access to the president requires some measure of proactiveness, rendering presidential contact an imperfect measure to distinguish the two determinants of influence (proactiveness vs. effectiveness in the present framework); however, it is reasonable to assume that the primary constraint on presidential access is the president’s willingness to grant it, rather than a participant’s willingness to seek it.

To quantify the degree to which chiefs of mission enjoy access to the US president, I turn to the President’s Daily Diary.<sup>59</sup> These documents, maintained by the respective presidential libraries, record each president’s minute-to-minute activities, including the times, locations, and participants of all meetings and phone calls he conducted (though generally not providing any additional substantive content). The data that I use comes from a study by Lindsey and Hobbs,<sup>60</sup> who extracted the times and descriptions of each diary event from the original image files through optical character recognition (OCR).

Here I report a simple descriptive analysis, using the available presidential diaries from 1946 through 1990. Throughout this period, I identified a total of nine interactions (all in-person meetings) between a president and a chargé who was serving as interim chief of mission under normal diplomatic relations. Seven of the nine occurred when the president was visiting a foreign country during an ambassadorial vacancy; one was a briefing in the Oval Office in advance of the presi-

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<sup>57</sup>Halperin and Clapp (2006, 207)

<sup>58</sup>Quoted in Ibid., 90

<sup>59</sup><https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-presidents-daily-diary>

<sup>60</sup>Lindsey and Hobbs (2015)

dent’s hosting a foreign leader for a visit; and one was a meeting with a group of regional COMs (of which one was acting). Over that same period, I estimate that the president had approximately 1,500 interactions with presidentially-appointed ambassadors serving as chief of mission to a foreign country.<sup>61</sup> Taking account of the base rate of ambassadorial vacancies (11.1% over this period, under conditions of normal relations), we reach the following conclusion: conditional on each type of COM occupying the office, a president is over 20 times more likely to meet with a presidentially-appointed ambassador than with a chargé d’affaires ad interim.<sup>62</sup>

To be sure, this descriptive statistic alone does not constitute definitive evidence of presidents being more or less willing to grant access to COMs on the basis of their status. It remains possible that presidents have seldom had a reason to contact an embassy at the time that it is experiencing a vacancy, and that this would have remained the case in each instance were there an ambassador at post. But the sheer magnitude of the discrepancy in contact rates across COM types would seem to render this explanation unlikely. Rather, the notion that presidents do discriminate in granting access to participants on the basis of their status—specifically, their status as a presidential appointee as opposed to an internally-assigned State Department bureaucrat—is consistent with this empirical pattern, as well as other anecdotal and quantitative evidence presented throughout this study.

### 4.3 Status and Attention

Finally, we will examine the prediction that presidential appointees are more effective than acting officials in gaining top-level attention for their policy concerns. The analysis will incorporate several different measures of attention; we will first discuss each individual measure, and then explain the research design used to analyze their relationship with appointment status.

#### 4.3.1 Measuring Attention

**Written Presidential Orders (WPOs)** To measure high-level attention to a given bilateral relationship within the US government, I first examine a corpus of presidential documents, ac-

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<sup>61</sup>This number is an approximation, based on a hand-coded sample of one-tenth of the total diary entries which contained a fuzzy-string match of the word “ambassador”. Each entry was checked to confirm that the meeting was with a US ambassador currently serving as chief of mission to a foreign country (rather than a former ambassador, a current ambassador to an international organization, or a foreign ambassador to the US).

<sup>62</sup>Specifically, this value was computed as the risk ratio of  $\frac{Pr(\text{meet} \mid \text{ambassador})}{Pr(\text{meet} \mid \text{chargé})}$ , which rearranges to  $\frac{Pr(\text{ambassador} \mid \text{meet})/Pr(\text{ambassador})}{Pr(\text{chargé} \mid \text{meet})/Pr(\text{chargé})}$  and evaluates to 20.9.

cessed through the American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara.<sup>63</sup> From this source, I collected all documents grouped under the category of “Written Presidential Orders” (henceforth WPOs), which includes documents with the official designation of “Executive Order”, “Notice”, “Proclamation”, “Memorandum”, “Presidential Determination”, or “Directive”. To quantify political attention, the analyses focus on which foreign countries are mentioned in these documents and when.

There is considerable variety in the nature and subject matter of the documents in this collection. Some of the documents can be understood as acts of policy themselves: for instance, orders that set import restrictions, modify tariffs or grant preferential trade status, set immigration or refugee quotas, impose sanctions, extend or terminate legal designations such as temporary protected statuses or national emergencies, and so on. Other documents are not in themselves acts of policy, but rather make reference to some policy action that was recently completed or is underway. Others are more symbolic or expressive in nature, for instance proclaiming a national day or month dedicated to a particular topic, or commemorating a historical event pertaining to a foreign country. A commonality across these documents is that they reflect, in one way or another, presidential attention to a given bilateral relationship—attention which we expect diplomats in general to seek for their host government, and which an ambassador will be more successful in obtaining relative to an acting chief of mission.

To quantify the degree of presidential attention to a given relationship at a given point in time, I construct the measure  $WPO\ Mention_{i,m,t}$ , an indicator for whether country  $i$  is mentioned in any written presidential order in month  $m$  of year  $t$ . The full sample of WPOs over the period of 1946 to 2021 includes 11,991 documents, of which 2,850 mention at least one foreign country. Structured at the country-month level, we observe that 3,996 out of 111,600 country-months receive a WPO mention.

**Diplomatic Visits** As a second measure of presidential attention, I examine diplomatic visits, including both visits of the US president abroad and visits of foreign leaders to the US. The occurrence of a diplomatic visit to or from a given foreign country indicates, in a trivial sense, a degree of presidential attention paid to that country: for at least the duration of the visit, as well as some time spent preparing in advance, the president and his aides are forced to focus on a particular bilateral relationship and the relevant set of policy issues under consideration. But visits also serve

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<sup>63</sup>Woolley and Peters (2021)

a number of more substantive functions in the conduct of foreign relations. Face-to-face diplomatic meetings typically aim to produce some sort of “deliverable” (or to announce one which has already been produced in advance of the meeting). As Malis and Smith show,<sup>64</sup> given the nature of the power disparity between the US and most of its diplomatic partners, these deliverables typically take the form of a concession proffered by the recipient leader in exchange for a visit with the US president; systematically, the authors find that visits are reciprocated with grants of market access for US exporters and with closer voting alignment in the UNGA. In addition to (and, Malis and Smith argue, largely because of) the deal-making that accompanies them, diplomatic visits serve a valuable signaling function both to audiences within the recipient leader’s polity and to potential foreign adversaries. The authors show that the vote of confidence expressed by a visit with the US president serves to deter domestic challenges against the incumbent leader, and particularly irregular or extra-institutional challenges. In separate work, McManus shows that a US presidential visit deters foreign challenges as well, decreasing the probability that the recipient leader is subsequently targeted in a militarized dispute.<sup>65</sup>

Each of these considerations points towards presidential visits being a highly sought-after commodity among US chiefs of foreign missions. And indeed, a brief scan of the historical record reveals many instances of ambassadors advocating strongly for such opportunities for top-level engagement. The U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, for instance, cabled in 1959 that “It would be of tremendous advantage to me in advancing US position here if I could suggest to President Sukarno” that Eisenhower would include Indonesia in an upcoming Asia tour; to bolster his case, the ambassador cited the emergence of an “increasingly favorable attitude toward America and willingness [to] consider American points [of] view”, while at the same time “Indonesian leaders [are] rapidly awakening [to] danger of powerful and ruthless China”—making the present moment an especially “favorable time [to] make dramatic gesture”.<sup>66</sup> Shortly before Peruvian president Fernando Belaunde was deposed by his military in 1968, the U.S. ambassador in Lima emphatically pushed for a White House invitation for the Peruvian leader, hailing him as “one of the most outstanding democratic leaders in the hemisphere and a highly personable individual representative of the kind of new image in Latin American leadership which we are trying to cultivate”.<sup>67</sup>

In sum, we can understand presidential visits as a meaningful measure of presidential attention,

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<sup>64</sup>Malis and Smith (2019, 2021b,a)

<sup>65</sup>McManus (2018)

<sup>66</sup>FRUS: 1958-60v17/d231

<sup>67</sup>Walter (2010, 90). The White House in this case opted against the visit, but not for want of effort on the ambassador’s part.

which is driven in part by the chief of mission’s proactiveness and effectiveness—in advocating for the president to expend time and energy engaging with her host government, in persuading her superiors that such an engagement is worthwhile, and in facilitating the concessions or deals that constitute the visit’s deliverables. As a result, if acting officials are less influential than ambassadors, then the aggregation of interests in the foreign policy process should result in a lower probability of a country receiving a diplomatic visit during an ambassadorial vacancy.

Data on diplomatic visits come from Malis and Smith (2022), who collected the visit records from the State Department’s Office of the Historian and coded details of each visit which allow us to identify the relevant cases for the present analysis.<sup>68</sup> From this source I constructed two outcome variables:  $PresVisit_{i,t,m}$  and  $VisitinUS_{i,t,m}$ , indicators for (respectively) whether the U.S. president visited country  $i$ , or a leader of country  $i$  visited the U.S., in month  $m$  of year  $t$ .

**International Agreements** Our last set of indicators of top-level attention in the foreign policy process is the signing of international agreements. I draw on two data sources: the United Nations Treaty Collection (UNTC), and the U.S. Treaties and Other International Acts Series (TIAS), both collected and cleaned by Malis and Thrall (2023). UNTC covers 1946 through the present, while TIAS coverage begins in 1981. For both sources, most agreements listed will include multiple signing dates (i.e. one signing date for each party; plus sometimes additional signing dates for amendments/extensions etc.). I code  $UNTC_{i,t,m}$  and  $TIAS_{i,t,m}$  as an indicator for whether there is any signing of an agreement between the U.S. and country  $i$  in month  $m$  of year  $t$ , as reported in each respective source.

### 4.3.2 Empirical Specification

**Outcome Operationalization** Table 1 summarizes the various measures of attention used in the analysis.

Of conceptual interest in this analysis is a latent quantity—*attention*—which is not directly observable. We can think of each measure in Table 1 as one observable manifestation of this latent quantity. Following this framework, we can consider two ways to incorporate these measures into our empirical analysis. First, following Anderson (2008), I construct an inverse-covariance-weighted (ICW) index of attention, which is a weighted average of the individual measures with the weight

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<sup>68</sup>Specifically, I exclude (i) cases in which foreign leaders visit the U.S. for a multilateral conference but there is no record of a direct meeting with U.S. officials; and (ii) cases in which the U.S. president travels to a foreign country only for a refueling or rest stop, to visit U.S. troops, or to attend a multilateral conference without meeting with host country officials.



Table 1: Measures of Attention

Measure	Source	Coverage
Written Presidential Orders (WPOs)	Woolley and Peters (2021)	11,991 WPOs from 1946–2021, of which 2,850 mention at least one foreign country (3,996 country-months with at least one WPO mention from 1961–2016)
Diplomatic Visits	Malis and Smith (2022)	932 presidential visits abroad, and 2,406 visits in the U.S., from 1946–2019 (791 country-months with at least one visit from the U.S. president, and 2,095 with at least one visit to the U.S., from 1961–2016)
Treaties and Other International Acts Series (TIAS)	Malis and Thrall (2023)	2,495 agreements from 1981–2021 (2,529 country-months with at least one signing from 1981–2016)
United Nations Treaty Collection (UNTC)	Malis and Thrall (2023)	13,255 agreements from 1946–2022 (8,335 country-months with at least one signing from 1961–2016)

on each measure inversely proportional to that measure’s covariance with the other measures. Intuitively, this approach upweights measures that are less correlated with other measures (and thus contribute more independent information), while downweighting measures that are more highly correlated with the others. Second, as a technically simpler approach to achieving the same goal, I construct a measure that is an indicator for whether any of the attention measures take on a value of one for a given country-month. The ICW index is normalized to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one, and the dummy variable has a mean of 0.126.

**Sample Selection** Following Malis (2021), the sample of analysis will be restricted to conditions of normal diplomatic relations, defined as conditions in which (i) the U.S. has recognized a country’s independence and begun exchanging ambassadors; (ii) the U.S. and that country have not formally severed or downgraded relations; and (iii) I have found no evidence that either country is deliberately leaving their bilateral ambassadorial post vacant as a means of diplomatic sanction (which can happen without a formal downgrading or severing of relations). Restricting the sample to conditions of normal diplomatic relations can be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for credibly estimating an all-else-equal comparison of country-months with ambassadors vs. *chargés* in place, as discussed further below.

I report results separately for two temporal ranges: first for the Reagan through Obama admin-

istrations (1981–2016), and second for the Kennedy through Obama administrations (1961–2016). There are a number of reasons for focusing on the Reagan-to-Obama period: coverage for the TIAS data begins in 1981, and other outcome measures (WFO mentions and diplomatic visits in or out of the U.S.), on average, take on a value of one for a substantially larger portion of countries in this period as compared to the pre-Reagan period; and further, as discussed below, the standardized three-year ambassadorial rotation schedule was more closely adhered to beginning in the Reagan administration.

**Casual Identification** The goal for the analysis is to identify the effect of the chief of mission’s appointment status on high-level attention, holding fixed all background conditions that may affect both variables. One approach would be to estimate the contemporaneous relationship between appointment status and attention, from a model analogous to (1). This approach, however, would be biased in the presence of unobservable confounders or reverse causality—that is, if countries receiving more attention in the U.S. foreign policy process were systematically either more or less likely to experience a vacancy in the U.S. ambassadorial post.

To circumvent this problem, I use an identification strategy that builds from the analysis in Malis (2021). As discussed in that study, ambassadorial appointments of around three years in duration have been the norm throughout most of the last century, and this norm has been followed with increasing regularity over time. According to Jett, “The Reagan administration was the first to impose a strict three-year rule”;<sup>69</sup> though we see in Figure 4 that the rule has not always been followed to a tee, an examination of appointment lengths over time does reveal substantially lower variance after 1981 than before.<sup>70</sup>

The standardization of ambassadorial appointment lengths is depicted in the top panel of Figure 4. We see that the tenures are fairly tightly clustered with a peak just below the three-year mark. Thus following Malis (2021), we can use the entrance of an ambassador into office as a plausibly exogenous predictor of vacancy approximately three years later. If we observe that attention decreases around three years after an appointment, but not earlier or later, we can interpret that as evidence that the ambassadorial vacancy caused the decrease in attention, rather than both being driven by some unobserved confounder. Unlike the previous study, which reports a two-stage instrumental variables (IV) analysis, here I separately report the “first stage”—the effect of a cur-

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<sup>69</sup>Jett (2014, 65)

<sup>70</sup>The higher variability in tenure lengths prior to the Reagan administration (combined with the limited temporal coverage of the cable data) is the reason I do not incorporate the three-year rotation schedule into the analysis of cable traffic, but rather estimate the contemporaneous relationship between vacancy and cable volumes, as per (1).

rent ambassadorial entrance on subsequent ambassadorial vacancy—and the “reduced form”, or the intention-to-treat (ITT)—the effect of a current ambassadorial entrance on subsequent attention.

**Estimating Equation** Given the empirical design described above, we do not have a clear prediction as to exactly which month (i.e. how many months after an ambassadorial entrance) we expect to observe a decrease in attention. Thus I report the outcome over a rolling window of  $\pm w$  months, for  $w = 1, 2, \text{ or } 3$ . For instance, for the observation of country  $i$ , month  $(m, t) = \text{June } 2000$ , the outcome  $Y_{i,t,m+37\pm 2}$  would capture the sum of the attention index for country  $i$  over the months May 2003 through September 2003.<sup>71</sup>

I estimate equations of the following form:

$$Y_{i,t,m+k\pm w} = \text{Enter}_{i,t,m}\beta + X_{i,t-1}\theta + \tau_{t,m} + \tau_{t,m} \times \pi_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t,m} \quad (2)$$

where:

- $\text{Enter}_{i,t,m}$  is an indicator for whether any ambassador entered office in country  $i$  in month  $m$  of year  $t$ ;
- $X_{i,t-1}$  is a vector of lagged covariates at the country-year level, including: population, GDP, imports from and exports to the US, economic and military aid from the US (all log-transformed), UNGA ideal point distance from the US, V-Dem’s polyarchy index, a lagged dependent variable (specifically, the sum of attention for this country over the previous 12 months), and a cubic polynomial for the total length of vacancy in this country over the previous three years;
- $\tau_{t,m}$  is a year-month fixed effect, and  $\pi_{i,t-1}$  is an indicator for whether the most recent ambassador in office was a career or political appointee.<sup>72</sup>

In this specification,  $k$  denotes the number of months after an ambassadorial entrance for which we estimate the effect of entrance on the outcome of interest. We repeat the estimation, iterating across values of  $k$ , and report estimates of  $\beta$  corresponding to each  $k$ .

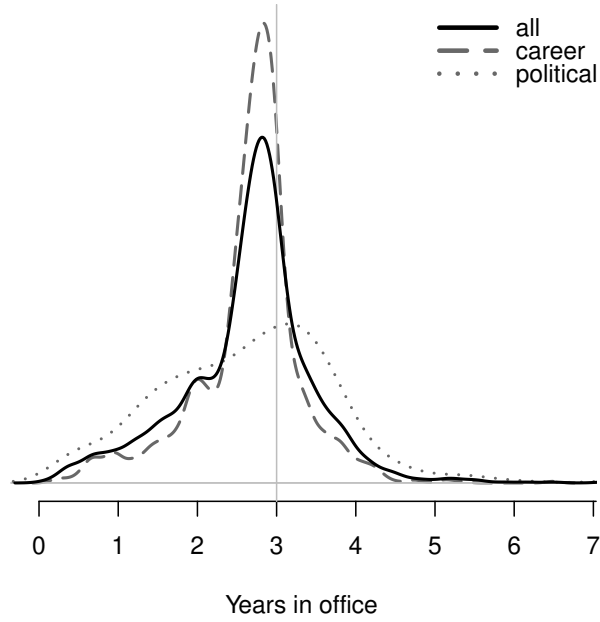
The top panel of Figure 4 also shows that the three-year rotation norm is more strongly followed for career ambassadors than for political ambassadors (that is, ambassadors who career members of the Foreign Service vs. those from other backgrounds). Additional analyses will replace the

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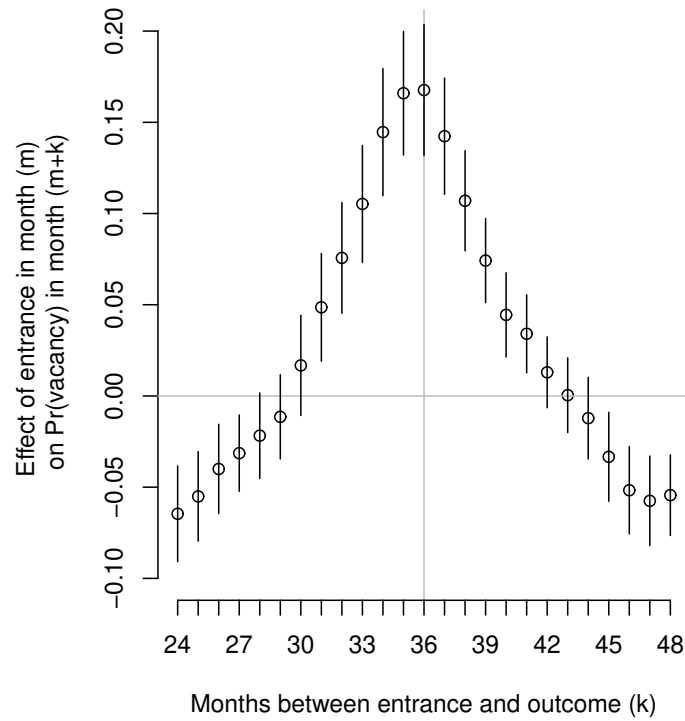
<sup>71</sup>The analogous dummy outcome would denote whether any of the attention measures took a value of one over the period of May 2003 to September 2003.

<sup>72</sup>Results reported here do not include country fixed effects, but are nearly identical with country FE included.

Figure 4: Ambassadorial Tenure Durations



(a) Tenures of all 1,778 ambassadors appointed between 1981–2016.



(b) Effect of ambassadorial entrance on subsequent vacancy, as estimated by Equation (2)

$Enter_{i,t,m}\beta$  term of Equation (2) with  $Career\ Enter_{i,t,m}\beta_c + Political\ Enter_{i,t,m}\beta_p$ , and report the estimates of  $\beta_c$ .

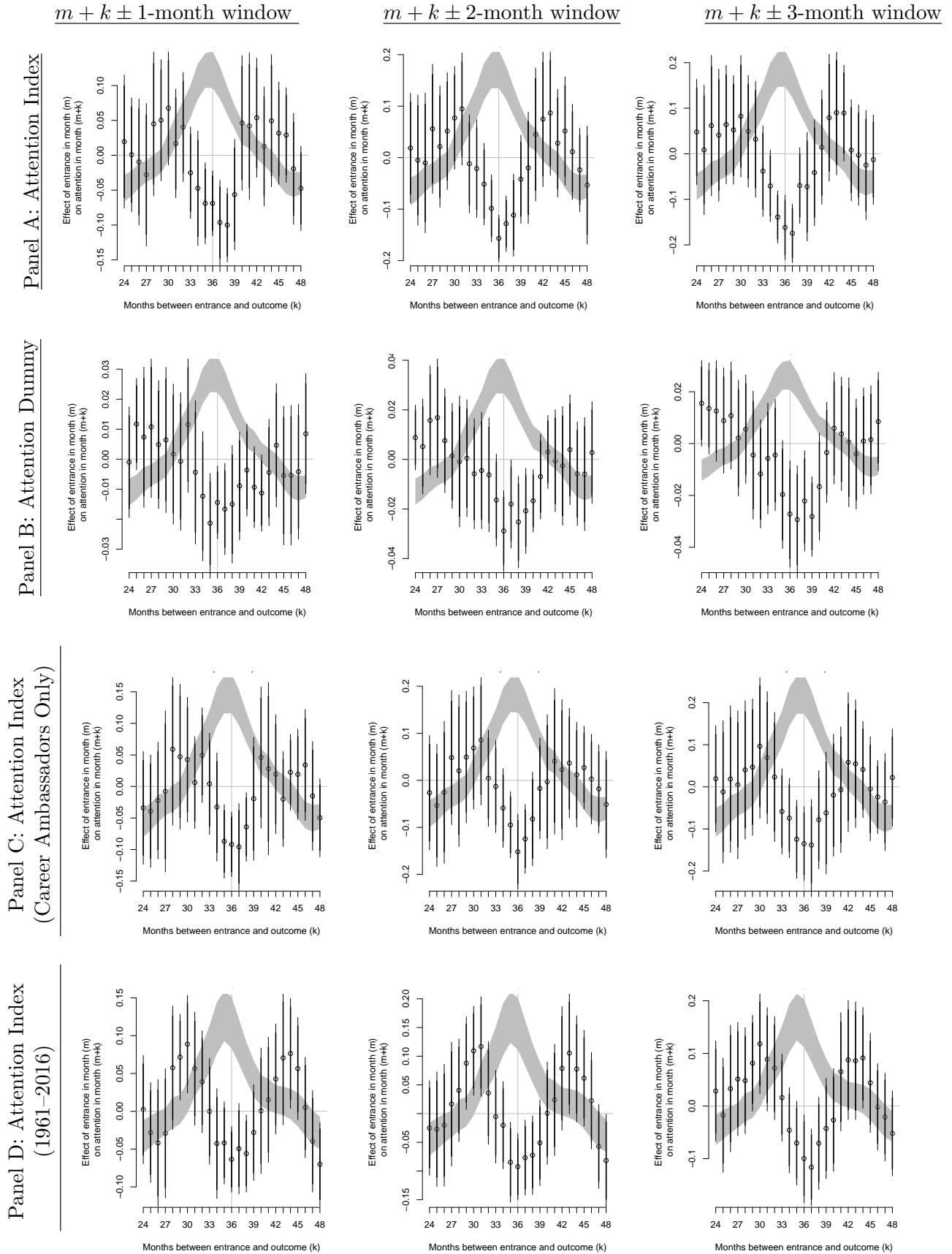
We can first estimate Equation (2) with the outcome variable  $Y_{i,t,m+k}$  being an indicator for whether there is any vacancy in ambassadorial post  $i$  in month  $m+k$ . The bottom panel of Figure 4 reports these results, with  $k$  varying from 24 to 48 months. The results indicate that an ambassadorial entrance in month  $m$  has a significantly positive effect on the probability of a vacancy occurring 31 through 41 months later, with the magnitude of the effect peaking at 36 months—consistent with the three-year rotation norm described above, and visualized in the density plot of ambassadorial tenures in the top panel of Figure 4.

### 4.3.3 Results

I estimate models in the form of Equation (2), focusing on the effect of ambassadorial entrance in month  $m$  on attention  $k$  months later, within a  $\pm w$ -month window. The results are presented in Figure 5. The points and vertical lines denote point estimates and confidence intervals for the marginal effect of ambassadorial entrance subsequent attention, with standard errors robust to two-way clustering, by country and by year. For visual reference, the gray shaded area denotes the 95% confidence interval for the effect of entrance on subsequent vacancy, as originally shown in the bottom panel of Figure 4.

The three columns correspond to different window lengths of the outcome measure. The first three rows restrict attention to 1981–2016, while fourth row includes 1961–2016. Rows 1, 3, and 4 use the ICW index outcome measure; row 2 uses the binary measure of attention. Rows 1, 2, and 4 use pooled ambassadorial entrance as the independent variable; row 3 restricts attention to career ambassadorial entrance.

Figure 5: Ambassadorial Vacancy and Attention



Note: Points are estimates from Equation (2) of the marginal effect of  $Enter_{i,m}$  on  $Attention_{i,m+k \pm w}$  (with each column corresponding to a  $w$  window of  $\pm 1, 2,$  and  $3$  months). First three rows restrict attention to 1981–2016; fourth row includes 1961–2016. Rows 1, 3, and 4 use the ICW index outcome measure; row 2 uses an indicator for any attention. Rows 1, 2, and 4 use pooled ambassadorial entrance as the independent variable; row 3 restricts attention to career ambassadorial entrance. Vertical bars are 90% and 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors robust to two-way clustering, by country and by year. Gray shaded curve denotes 95%-CI for the marginal effect of  $Enter_{i,m}$  on  $Vacancy_{i,m+k}$ , copied from Figure 4, rescaled for visual comparison.

The general pattern we observe across these specifications is that the curve of attention closely mirrors the curve of vacancy. For the shorter leads depicted in the figure (around 24 to 29 months), the effect of entrance on vacancy is negative, while the effect on attention is insignificant or positive in some specifications. As we move forward in time, the effect on vacancy becomes positive, peaking at 36 months then returning back to zero; during these months, the effect on attention decreases below zero, reaching a trough 35–37 months after entrance (depending on the specification), and then returning back to zero. In short, when ambassadorial vacancy becomes more likely, attention decreases.

It is worth emphasizing that this pattern is difficult to reconcile with an alternative explanation of endogenous assignment of ambassadorial appointments: this would require that ambassadors are more likely to be appointed in month  $m$  if there is an expectation of decreased presidential attention precisely 35–37 months—but no more or less—after the appointment. Instead, the much more sensible interpretation is that presidential attention to a given bilateral relationship decreases as a consequence of the ambassadorial post experiencing a vacancy. Chiefs of mission seek top-level attention for their host country’s concerns; during vacancies, they advocate less proactively, or their advocacy efforts are less effective, or both; and the result is that less attention is paid in the aggregate.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Extended Vacancy and Downgrading Relations

The results reported above show that, in the routine course of diplomatic relations, attention periodically wanes during a vacancy, creating distortions and inefficiencies in the foreign policy process. These effects, like all effects we can estimate, are “local” (Aronow and Samii, 2016)—in this case, local to the vacancies caused by the routine ambassadorial rotation process.

There are two ways we might extrapolate from these findings. First, we can reasonably speculate that these findings provide a lower bound on the distortions that follow from the extensive vacancies that occur during presidential turnovers (when vacancies can run substantially longer than the three-month average reported in Figure 2), as referenced by the 9/11 commission report. This extrapolation is particularly warranted if we believe that the primary drivers of an acting official’s diminished influence are her own lack of proactiveness and other actors’ unwillingness to grant her the deference and access they would grant a presidential appointee—rather than the official’s

competence or expertise, which we would expect to increase over the course of her tenure as chargé.

Second, while these results are obtained from analyses that restrict attention to normal diplomatic relations, they may be informative of the significance of severing or downgrading diplomatic relations. Downgrading relations is not merely a cheap-talk expression of disapproval of the target country; rather, it also has the direct first-order effect of creating bureaucratic conditions that materially hinder bilateral policy concerns from being addressed. These first-order effects provide the basis for, and are compounded by, any second-order signaling effects.

## 5.2 Bureaucratic Influence Across Contexts

The theoretical discussion above suggested that appointment status of a given bureaucrat can serve as an indicator of that individual’s influence within the bureaucracy. The empirical evidence presented supports the idea that such a phenomenon is at work in the context of U.S. foreign missions. Yet there is nothing automatic about this relationship: the fact that appointment status, by convention, denotes and confers influence within some institutional contexts need not imply that it does so in others.

A recent study by Kinane highlights cases in which acting officials seem to operate with just as much influence as their senate-confirmed counterparts. For instance, the author references Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Vanita Gupta, who “successfully spearheaded the [Obama] administration’s criminal justice reform efforts” and “whose leadership was praised by her colleagues”.<sup>73</sup> A notable feature of this case is that the Obama administration made a deliberate effort to confer a high-influence status upon Gupta despite her lack of senate confirmation: the Justice Department issued a press release announcing Gupta’s appointment to her acting role, praising her qualifications and expressing the Attorney General’s confidence in her;<sup>74</sup> administration officials told the Washington Post on background that the White House was “expected to nominate” Gupta for the permanent position,<sup>75</sup> though no nomination was ever actually sent to the senate during Gupta’s two-year acting stint. In contrast, no such attempts appear to have been made to elevate the stature of Jocelyn Samuels, who preceded Gupta in the same position in an acting capacity for over a year.<sup>76</sup> Looking at personnel records or an organizational chart from Eric Holder’s Justice Department, an outside analyst would not observe any difference between the

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<sup>73</sup>Kinane (2021, 602)

<sup>74</sup><https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-holder-announces-vanita-gupta-serve-acting-assistant-attorney->

<sup>75</sup>Horwitz (2014)

<sup>76</sup>From July 2013 to August 2012; see <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jocelyn-samuels-0b415919/>. I have found no DOJ press releases or news stories of any kind regarding Samuels’ appointment.



positions held by Gupta and Samuels; but one can reasonably speculate that department personnel at the time had a clear understanding as to which of the two actings held more influence in the policy process.

Even in the context of foreign mission chiefs, there can be some ambiguity in the mapping from appointment status to intragovernmental influence. The chief of mission serving in Liberia at the end of the country's first civil war, when the U.S. did not recognize the government (and thus did not maintain diplomatic representation at the ambassadorial level), held the official title of Chargé; yet he recounts that his role "was an Ambassadorial position in everything except name. Everybody called me Ambassador."<sup>77</sup> In a similar vein, presidents frequently appoint special envoys who lack senate confirmation but are nonetheless understood, both by foreign governments and by other U.S. officials, to be personal representatives of the president and to wield influence accordingly.

The preceding empirical analyses relied on the supposition that appointment status does provide a reasonable proxy for influence within the context of U.S. foreign missions—a supposition informed by qualitative knowledge of the context of analysis. Given this context-specific interpretation of appointment status, the analyses were able to document the exercise of influence within the foreign policy process, as evidenced by internal policy advocacy, access to top-level officials, and attention to country-specific concerns. The study of individual influence across different bureaucratic settings requires a theory of how individuals arrive at a common understanding of what determines influence within their institutional context.

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<sup>77</sup><https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Milam.William.B..pdf>. Note that because the empirical analyses restrict attention to conditions of normal diplomatic relations, this case and others like it are omitted from the sample.

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## 6 Appendix

Table 2: Effect of Vacancy on Outgoing Cable Traffic (All Cables)

	All		Substantive (BEMPS)		Procedural (ACOT)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Vacancy	-0.021*	-0.019	-0.034**	-0.030**	0.002	-0.001
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year-Month-Pol/Car FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	8,400	8,400	8,400	8,400	8,400	8,400

*Note:* “BEMPS” denotes cables with subject categories Business, Economic, Military, Political, and Social. “ACOT” denotes Administrative, Consular, Operations, and Technological/Scientific. All models include year-month FE interacted with an FE for the type of ambassador (career or political) the country most recently received. All models include the following covariates at the country-year level, lagged by one year: population, GDP, imports from and exports to the US, economic and military aid from the US (all log-transformed), UNGA ideal point distance from the US, and V-Dem’s polyarchy index. All models include as covariates: the sum of vacancy over the previous six months, and the logged sum of cables over the previous six months. Standard errors robust to two-way clustering, by country and by year-month. \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Table 3: Effect of Vacancy on Outgoing Cable Traffic (Classified Cables Only)

	All		Substantive (BEMPS)		Procedural (ACOT)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Vacancy	-0.067**	-0.070**	-0.072***	-0.074***	-0.052*	-0.053*
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year-Month-Pol/Car FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	8,400	8,400	8,400	8,400	8,400	8,400

*Note:* See caption from Table 2.