

Diplomatic Capacity and International Cooperation*

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November 22, 2025

Abstract

A longstanding debate in international relations scholarship has questioned the importance of domestic bureaucracies in shaping the state’s foreign policy behavior. To reconcile competing views, we propose a conditional theory of bureaucratic influence: we argue that the extent to which bureaucratic preferences and capabilities shape foreign policy outcomes depends on political superiors’ costs of monitoring and oversight. When domestic politics place higher demands on leaders’ time and attention, bureaucrats operate with greater effective autonomy in the conduct of foreign policy; under these conditions, bureaucratic preferences and capabilities will be more strongly determinative of policy outcomes. Empirically, we draw on the most comprehensive existing dataset of U.S. diplomatic personnel to develop time-varying measures of embassy-level diplomatic capacity, based on the career histories and specializations of the individual officers assigned to each embassy. We pair these data with an underutilized dataset of over 5,000 U.S. bilateral executive agreements from 1989 to 2016, as a high-frequency measure of bilateral cooperation. Our analysis shows that higher-capacity embassies pursue more bilateral cooperation during U.S. presidential reelection periods, when presidential attention on foreign policy is diminished. We also find that the subject-matter expertise of individual officers affects the portfolio of issues in which embassies pursue bilateral cooperation under conditions of increased autonomy.

*Authors are listed in alphabetical order and contributed equally to the project. Nicholas Vassilas provided excellent research assistance. We thank Katherine Beale, Christopher Blair, Justin Canfil, Lula Chen, Michael Goldfein, Julia Gray, Naima Green-Riley, Michael Joseph, David Lake, David Lindsey, Haillie Lee, Michael-David Mangini, Phuong Pham, Elizabeth Saunders, Rachel Schoner, Dan Spokojny, Chiara Superti, Rachel Yu, Noah Zucker, and audiences at Columbia, Texas A&M, MIT, University of Chicago, UCSD, APSA 2024, IPES 2023, Texas Triangle 2024, and the Niehaus Center Workshop on Diplomats and Bureaucrats for providing helpful comments; and we thank the many current and former FSOs who have shared their experiences and insights about the foreign policy bureaucracy.

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A longstanding debate in international relations scholarship has focused on the importance of domestic bureaucracies in shaping the state’s foreign policy behavior. One strand of literature views intragovernmental politics as central to explaining intergovernmental relations, placing the incentives and capabilities of individual actors and organizations within government on equal analytical footing with the national interests of the state as a whole (Allison, 1971; Halperin and Clapp, 2006; Sagan, 1994). Modern manifestations of this genre of analysis point to a “blob” of like-minded foreign policy elites who push the government along a circumscribed policy trajectory despite changes in political leadership; or, more ominously, a “deep state” of career bureaucrats who shape foreign policy with no accountability or responsiveness to the will of the people’s elected representatives (Burchill, 2020; Cooper, Gvosdev and Blankshain, 2018; Jervis, 2020; Michaels, 2017). On the other side of the debate, some scholars have explicitly challenged the bureaucratic politics model of foreign policy analysis, highlighting the chief executive’s formal authority over their bureaucratic subordinates, or questioning the extent to which the historical record actually fails to conform to a unitary “rational actor” model (Krasner, 1972; Ball, 1974; Freedman, 1976; Bendor and Hammond, 1992; Welch, 1992). More commonly, IR scholars implicitly refute the importance of bureaucracies by simply omitting consideration of them from their analyses.

We contribute to this debate by emphasizing the conditional nature of bureaucratic influence in foreign policy. We argue that a bureaucratic organization’s influence over policy—that is, its ability to shape policy outcomes to reflect its preferences—depends not only on the organization’s capacity, but also on its autonomy. While political leaders hold formal authority over their bureaucracies, exercising that authority requires a costly expenditure of time and effort. Thus an organization’s autonomy will vary with the leader’s cost of monitoring and oversight. It follows that bureaucratic preferences and bureaucratic capacity will be most determinative of policy outcomes when leaders find it most costly to manage bureaucratic conduct and restrict bureaucratic autonomy.

We test our argument through an examination of U.S. embassy-level diplomats’ influence over bilateral relations with their host governments. Building on recent contributions in this area (Lindsey, 2017, 2024; Malis, 2021), we start from the premise that diplomats posted in foreign missions hold stronger preferences for cooperation with the countries to which they are assigned, relative to other actors in the foreign policy process. When diplomats have both the autonomy and the capacity to act independently, they will take the opportunity to pursue bilateral cooperation in

areas or in ways that political leadership in Washington would otherwise be unwilling to.

Empirically, we leverage a novel dataset of U.S. diplomatic personnel posted abroad—collected from over 150 recently digitized State Department directories ([Lindsey, Malis and Thrall, 2025](#))—to develop semi-annual measures of embassy-level capacity. To measure bilateral cooperation, we draw on a recently compiled (and as yet underutilized) dataset of U.S. international executive agreements signed between 1989–2016 ([Hathaway, Bradley and Goldsmith, 2020](#)). These agreements carry the same international legal status as treaties, and diplomats are heavily involved in their creation.¹ To operationalize variation in political leaders’ costs of oversight, we consider U.S. presidential reelections as periods in which the White House faces heightened demands on its time and attention, and in which embassies operate with relatively greater autonomy. Following [Xu, Zhao and Ding \(2025\)](#)’s “factorial difference-in-differences” framework, our research design aims to identify the causal interaction of embassy capacity and autonomy on bilateral cooperation.

Across a variety of measures of embassy capacity, we find support for our predictions. Reelection periods substantially increase the effects of embassy capacity on the signing of bilateral agreements: for instance, a one-standard-deviation increase in the number of officers at an embassy corresponds to an increase of roughly 18 percentage points in the rate of agreement signing, relative to a base rate of about 0.52 agreements signed in a typical country-half-year; analogous values for capacity measures based on individual officers’ career histories range from 8 to 15 percentage points. Similar patterns emerge when focusing on more disaggregated measures of embassy capacity, in the form of issue-specific attachés assigned to foreign missions. We consider alternative explanations for these empirical patterns—notably “political business cycles” in agreement signing, or attempts to “lock-in” policies in the face of potential leader turnover—and conduct additional mechanism tests to distinguish between them and our preferred autonomy-focused explanation.

This study makes several contributions to the literature on the domestic determinants of international relations. First, a fast-growing body of research examines the role of bureaucratic agents in shaping the state’s foreign policy behavior ([Jost et al., 2024](#); [Saunders, 2024](#); [Malis, 2024](#); [Lindsey, 2024](#); [Carcelli, 2024](#)); less attention has been paid, however, to understanding why and under what conditions the principal predominates, and bureaucratic factors recede into the background.

¹The overwhelming majority (around 95%) of U.S. international legal commitments over this period take the form of executive agreements, rather than “treaties” which require senate confirmation. See discussion in Section 2.3.

Our study advances this literature by providing a more direct investigation of the principal-agent relationship between the executive and its diplomatic agents operating abroad, highlighting the role of political *attention* as a key factor moderating bureaucrats’ influence over policy (Lindsey and Hobbs, 2015; Bubeck et al., 2025). We show that distracted leaders delegate more heavily to diplomats, and that higher-capacity embassies are better able to capitalize on their autonomy to shape international cooperation. Our findings thus suggest a middle road between the unitary actor and bureaucratic politics frameworks: leaders drive foreign policy decision-making when they have the bandwidth to do so, while inattention from above creates a vacuum that bureaucrats will step in to fill.

Second, we contribute to the literature on the consequences of individual-level diplomatic representation, which to date has focused almost exclusively at the ambassadorial level—using measures such as the presence or absence of an ambassador (Gertz, 2018; Malis, 2021), ambassadorial tenure (Arias, 2025), or ambassadors’ professional backgrounds and ideological dispositions (Kim and Fu, 2025; Scoville, 2019; Lindsey, 2023; Goldfien, 2023). Our measures, based on the career histories of *all* top-ranking diplomats at a given embassy, uncover important variation in the quality and quantity of diplomatic representation which is masked by an exclusive focus on the individual leader of a diplomatic mission. In addition, our data on the presence of attachés from external agencies allow us to measure *issue-specific* diplomatic capacity, and to study interagency dynamics within a diplomatic mission. Altogether, these measures allow for more precise accounting of whether and how bilateral diplomatic representation affects foreign policy outcomes. We hope that our novel measures of diplomatic capacity will also encourage further theorization on the causes and consequences of diplomatic representation, which had heretofore been limited by practical considerations of data availability.

Finally, our findings also contribute to a large literature in international political economy on the determinants of international agreements. Received wisdom in international relations scholarship holds that international agreements reflect the lowest common denominator among signatory state preferences (Downs, Rocke and Barsoom, 1996), which are themselves influenced (or at least informed) by domestic interest group pressure (Milner, 1997; Putnam, 1988). As a result, most theoretical and empirical studies identify either unitary governments (Baccini and Dür, 2015; Barthel and Neumayer, 2012; Elkins, Guzman and Simmons, 2006) or subnational interest groups (Manger,

2005; Thrall, 2021) as the actors who determine which agreements are created, with whom, and when.² In practice, however, governments delegate much of the work of creating international agreements to their diplomats stationed abroad, whose preferences and capabilities may diverge considerably from those of the other actors typically studied in this literature. By demonstrating the importance of these bureaucratic factors, we hope to stimulate new research on the bottom-up sources of international legal cooperation.

1 Theory

To understand the nature and extent of bureaucratic influence in foreign policy, we present a theoretical framework that builds from a number of foundational concepts in the literature on the political economy of bureaucracy: bureaucratic preferences, bureaucratic capacity, and bureaucratic autonomy. We consider each of these in turn, and discuss how they interact to shape foreign policy outcomes. Conceptually, the outcome we are interested in explaining is bilateral cooperation, defined broadly as mutual policy adjustments between states to meet one another’s demands (Keohane, 1984); we focus on bilateral agreements as a substantial and observable manifestation of bilateral cooperation.

1.1 Diplomatic preferences

An important foundation for our argument is the claim that diplomats tend to hold strong *preferences* for bilateral cooperation between their home and host states. There are two main reasons why diplomats tend to hold these preferences. First, diplomats have been shown to hold ideological commitments to deeper cooperation with their host states, arising from processes of selection and socialization (Malis, 2021). Sending governments may deliberately select diplomats who are sympathetic to their host governments, as a means of facilitating honest communication (Lindsey, 2023). Individuals with intrinsic preferences for cooperation may also be more likely to select into a diplomatic career path (Gailmard and Patty, 2007).³ Alternatively, diplomats stationed abroad may also be socialized, through repeated interaction with host state officials, citizens, and

²See Poulsen and Aisbett (2016) for a notable exception.

³Jost, Meshkin and Schub (2022) provide evidence of this sort of self-selection mechanism in the context of military officers’ preferences over the use of military force: the authors show that incoming officers at the U.S. Military Academy are preference outliers relative to the general population before training begins.

interest groups, into believing that their sending state’s relationship with the home state is uniquely important, and that deeper cooperation would advance the national interest (Wilson, 1989; Halperin and Clapp, 2006; Cooper, Heine and Thakur, 2013). As one empirical example of this sort of host-state favoritism, Lindsey (2024) shows that diplomats posted abroad are substantially more lenient in granting visa applications to citizens of their host states when compared to visa officers who physically reside outside the country. In the extreme, some diplomats come to sympathize more closely with the interests of their host state than with those of their own government (an affliction sometimes referred to as “clientitis” or “localitis”); this process occasionally manifests in conflict between U.S. diplomats stationed in host states that are themselves rivals, such as India and Pakistan.⁴

Second, aside from their genuine, intrinsic preferences, diplomats face professional incentives for advancing bilateral cooperation. One of the primary organizational goals of the U.S. State Department (like many foreign affairs agencies/ministries) is to maintain and strengthen diplomatic relationships. Diplomats who seek career advancement therefore have strong reason to align themselves with this goal by pursuing deeper collaboration, sometimes to the extent of failing to report on developments that might damage the bilateral relationship (Halperin, Clapp and Kanter, 2006). The successful negotiation of international agreements is a concrete signal that a diplomat has achieved deeper cooperation with their host. Qualitative evidence suggests that diplomats perceive the career benefits inherent in treaty-making (Poulsen and Aisbett, 2016): for instance, Constance Freeman, a former economic officer in the Foreign Service, recalls that “What I did in India, the project that was most interesting and that ultimately got [me] promoted... was I worked on a tax treaty.”⁵ All Foreign Service Officers are subject to an annual review process, in which they must “describe their most significant individual and collaborative accomplishments,” including “a factual description of outcomes achieved and how these outcomes advanced Mission or Department goals.”⁶

⁴Robert Goldberg, a former FSO stationed in New Delhi, spoke of this situation in an ADST interview: “Dean Hinton was the ambassador in Pakistan, and he and [U.S. Ambassador to India] Barnes were reporting very different perspectives on South Asia to the Department without engaging one another in a dialogue... the arguing seemed to suggest each had a vested interest in demolishing the arguments of the other.” Ernestine Heck, another FSO stationed in New Delhi, concurred: “...[A]ll sorts of ambassadors on both sides of the fence, I think, have been accused of clientitis... The India/Pakistan thing, though, because of the great divide, has been particularly egregious. If you have served in Pakistan very often, you see things from the Pakistani way.”

⁵ADST interview.

⁶See <https://eforms.state.gov/externalForms/ds5055-I.pdf>, and 3 FAM 2810: <https://fam.state.gov/fam/03fam/03fam2810.html>

Bilateral agreements constitute a measurable diplomatic output which diplomats are individually incentivized to produce.

These distinct preferences that in-country diplomats hold for bilateral cooperation can give rise to various forms of interest divergence between diplomats and their principals in Washington. On the one hand, intragovernmental dissension may arise over the terms that the U.S. should accept in a bilateral agreement: the embassy will typically be willing to grant greater concessions to a host government in order to bring negotiations to a successful conclusion, whereas other actors in Washington may be willing to let the negotiation fail if more demanding conditions are not met. Alternatively, disagreement between the embassy and Washington may simply pertain to the relative importance of different diplomatic objectives, and how the embassy's time and resources should be allocated: all else equal, the embassy will want to direct more of its energy towards bilateral diplomatic initiatives, whereas actors in Washington will prefer that the embassy expend effort on other objectives—such as larger, multilateral projects, or the management of commercial concerns for U.S. multinational corporations—which do not manifest in the signing of formal bilateral agreements.

1.2 Diplomatic capacity

The extent to which diplomatic preferences will translate into policy outcomes depends in part on the *capacity* of a diplomatic mission (Huber and McCarty, 2004; Ting, 2011). Advancing bilateral cooperation requires identifying mutual interests that might be advanced or problems that might be resolved through a new bilateral agreement; initiating and carrying out negotiations; and obtaining approval from all necessary stakeholders to sign the agreement into law. This is in addition to the range of routine tasks that embassies are responsible for performing on a day-to-day basis: processing visa requests, advising American businesses operating in their country, overseeing programmatic expenditures, relaying messages between their home and host government, managing VIP visits, and meeting with representatives from government, civil society, and the private sector to collect information on local conditions and report their findings back home, among other tasks (Dorman, 2011; Kopp and Naland, 2017). While diplomats within embassies generally hold preferences for advancing bilateral cooperation with their host government, they will vary significantly in their capacity to achieve that goal.

A number of factors affect an embassy’s diplomatic capacity; our focus is on observable indicators of human capital. As we detail below when describing the data and research design, we will consider the number of diplomats at post, the professional specializations of those diplomats, and their prior career experiences as determinants of diplomatic capacity. With greater capacity according to each of these measures, we expect that embassies will be better able to pursue new cooperative efforts and to see those initiatives through to completion, in the form of a signed bilateral agreement.

1.3 Diplomatic autonomy

Finally, we expect that the relationship between diplomatic capacity and bilateral policy outcomes will be conditional on the degree of *autonomy* that diplomats enjoy to pursue their preferred policy initiatives. For conceptual clarity, we will focus on an agency relationship between an embassy (the agent) and the White House (the principal), the latter representing the president and his top political and policy advisors.⁷

On the one hand, suppose that the White House is heavily involved in bilateral diplomacy, exercising close oversight of its diplomatic agents and restricting diplomatic autonomy. To the extent that there exists significant preference divergence between the embassy and political principals in Washington, as suggested above, we should naturally expect that the preferences of a highly engaged White House will hold sway, and a smaller share of the embassy’s time and resources will be directed toward the kind of bilateral initiatives that the embassy would prioritize if left to its own devices. Even in the absence of this sort of preference divergence, the White House’s direct involvement in bilateral diplomacy—bringing to bear the vast resources and political clout of the National Security Council, offices within main State Department, and other special envoys and representatives—may effectively crowd out the contributions of embassy-level diplomats, diminishing the marginal impact of embassy capacity on bilateral cooperation. On the other hand, imagine that the White House is entirely disengaged from foreign policy, and embassies are left to act with full discretion in managing bilateral relations. Under these conditions, we should expect

⁷In reality, of course, there are additional layers of bureaucracy between the embassy and the White House: embassies answer to their regional bureaus (led by an Assistant Secretary of State), who in turn answer to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and ultimately the Secretary of State. We can consider these intermediate actors to lie on a spectrum between the embassy and the White House, in terms of their capabilities and incentives with respect to bilateral diplomacy.

the occurrence (or not) of any bilateral cooperation to be entirely dependent on the embassy's capacity.

While diplomatic autonomy can reflect a range of structural or institutional factors, our particular interest is in variation due to presidential *attention*, which can fluctuate considerably over the course of a presidential term. This relationship between presidential attention and bureaucratic autonomy has long been recognized in the literature. In an otherwise scathing criticism of the entire bureaucratic politics paradigm, Krasner (1972, 168) grants the following:

All of this is not to deny that bureaucratic interests may sometimes be decisive in the formulation of foreign policy. Some policy options are never presented to the President. Others he deals with only cursorily, not going beyond options presented by the bureaucracy. This will only be the case if Presidential interest and attention are absent.

Given the vast number of diplomatic relationships that the U.S. maintains across the globe, and the opportunities that each poses for advancing bilateral cooperation, we suggest that there is in fact a substantial volume of consequential foreign policy activity for which presidential interest and attention are largely absent.

Anecdotal evidence supports the claim that, when the White House is distracted, diplomats have more leeway to pursue policies that align with their own preferences. For example, Ambassador Paul Gardner discussed how the Nixon Administration's preoccupation with the Vietnam War gave diplomats in Indonesia more leeway during the early 1970s:

Some of us believed that the reason [U.S. diplomats in Indonesia] were able to have what turned out to be a rather good policy ... was that the White House was completely absorbed with Vietnam at that time. So as long as you didn't tie something to Vietnam ... you didn't have all that amount of interest throughout Washington. **You were able to base policy a little bit more on the local imperative, without losing sight, of course, of your overall national aims.** We felt our national aims were best served this way.⁸

In a similar vein, Michael Ely recalls that during his time as Economic Officer in Algeria in the late 1960s, "you could never get clear instructions from Washington, because there was no clear

⁸ADST interview, p. 33. Emphasis added.

policy”. Under these conditions, Ely took the initiative to negotiate a \$28 million commodities agreement with a counterpart in the Algerian Foreign Ministry. Just before they could sign the agreement, a separate issue involving the expropriation of a U.S. citizen’s farm drew political attention to Algeria which prevented the deal from going into effect.⁹

To summarize, we expect that the capacity of a diplomatic mission will affect its ability to advance policy objectives that reflect its preferences; but that the relationship between diplomatic capacity and diplomatic outcomes will be conditioned by the degree of attention and involvement from political superiors.

2 Operationalization and Measurement

The previous section presented a theory relating diplomatic capacity, diplomatic autonomy, and bilateral cooperation. In this section, we explain how we operationalize each of these concepts, and the data sources we use to construct the variables in the analyses that follow.

2.1 Embassy Capacity

Empirical evaluation of our theory requires measures of diplomatic capacity that vary both across bilateral relationships, and within them over time. To operationalize this concept, past studies have used relatively coarse data on the level of bilateral diplomatic exchange—that is, representation at the level of chargé, minister, ambassador, or nonexistent (Bayer, 2006). More recent work has analyzed data made available by the U.S. State Department’s Office of the Historian to measure short-term vacancies in ambassadorial appointments, holding fixed the level of bilateral diplomatic relations (Gertz, 2018; Malis, 2021); or examined the credentials and career backgrounds of individual ambassadors (Goldfien, 2023; Kim and Fu, 2025; Scoville, 2019). Such measures mask important variation in embassy-level capacity because they do not consider the quality and quantity of diplomatic personnel within an embassy aside from the ambassador. In recent years, for instance, there have been at most 195 U.S. ambassadors serving abroad at any given time; in January 2020, there were 13,790 Foreign Service officers, approximately two-thirds of whom were posted abroad.¹⁰

⁹ADST Interview, p. 23

¹⁰See <https://afsa.org/foreign-service-numbers>.

Gaining a fuller picture of embassy-level capacity thus requires a more complete accounting of the personnel serving within embassies, as well as their individual levels of experience and expertise.

We improve on past studies by using the Key Officers of the U.S. Foreign Service (KOFS) data, introduced in [Lindsey, Malis and Thrall \(2025\)](#).¹¹ The KOFS data, compiled from a combination of digital and (prior to 1999) print telephone directories distributed by the State Department, contain detailed information about the key diplomatic personnel at each U.S. diplomatic mission, at (nearly) quarterly frequency, between 1966 and 2017. For all embassies, the KOFS data contain the names and positions of (1) the ambassador, if one is present; (2) the deputy chief of mission (DCM), second in command to the ambassador; (3) the most senior officers in each of the five “generalist” positions (political, economic, public, consular, and management) as well as “specialist” positions such as administration, information technology, and diplomatic security; and (4) representatives from other executive-branch agencies, such as Agriculture, Defense, or Commerce, who are assigned to the embassy. [Lindsey, Malis and Thrall \(2025\)](#) link officers across the publications, allowing us to track each individual officer’s movement across posts and positions over time.

For our analyses, we structure our data at two levels of aggregation: at the country-half-year level (or embassy-half-year level), and at the country-issue-half-year level; we discuss these choices in greater depth in [Section 3.1](#).

2.1.1 Aggregate Embassy-Level Capacity

We consider four separate measures of diplomatic capacity at the embassy-half-year level, all constructed from the Key Officers data: Embassy Size, Average Time in Post (ATIP), Average Time in Service (ATIS), and Average Time in Region (ATIR). Embassy size is a simple count of the number of officers listed under the embassy’s entry in the Key Officer publication. For the other three measures, we begin by analyzing the career histories of each Foreign Service generalist posted at an embassy (the Ambassador, Deputy Chief of Mission, and officers representing each of the five Foreign Service cones—Political, Economic, Consular, Management, and Public Diplomacy). For each officer-half-year, we calculate: (i) the amount of time they have spent in their current post; (ii) the total amount of time they have spent in the geographic region (that is, the number of quarters

¹¹The data are available on Davaverse: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/3IPF8Y>

Table 1: Descriptions of Embassy-Level Capacity Measures

Capacity Measure	Description
Embassy Size	Total number of Key Officers at the embassy
Average Time In Post (ATIP)	Among FSO Generalists at the embassy: average time since arriving at the current post
Average Time In Region (ATIR)	Among FSO Generalists at the embassy: average time previously served in posts within this geographic region
Average Time In Service (ATIS)	Among FSO Generalists at the embassy: average time since first appearance in the Key Officers data

in which they are listed in any mission—embassy, consulate, or other—in the region); and (iii) the time since they first appeared in the KOFS data, which we refer to as their “time in service”.¹² For the embassy-level measures, we take the mean of each individual-level measure across all Foreign Service generalists at a given embassy-half-year. We summarize the four measures in Table 1.

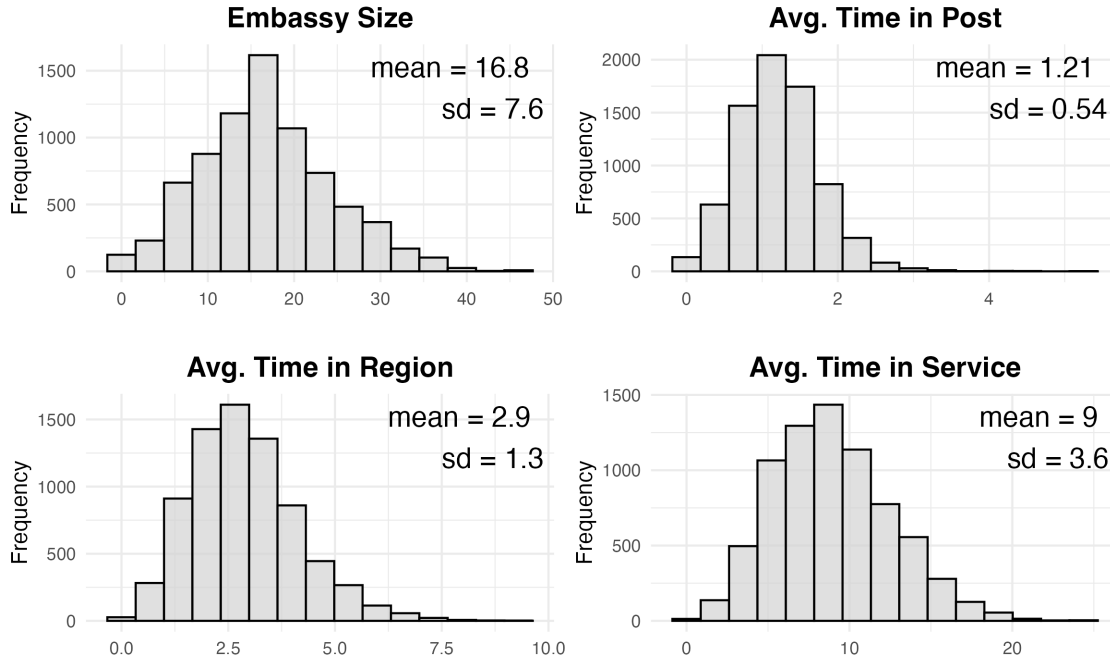
Each of our measures captures a distinct dimension of diplomatic capacity. The embassy size measure is meant to capture the number of diplomat-hours available to allocate across diplomatic tasks that the embassy seeks to perform. Average Time in Post (ATIP) reflects the aggregation of all officers’ knowledge of their host country’s political and social context, as well as their effectiveness working together as a team (which presumably would improve the longer they are in the same embassy together). Average Time in Region (ATIR) reflects the officers’ broader knowledge of the region they are operating in, as well as their experience working within their specific State Department bureaus (which are organized by geographic region). Average Time in Service (ATIS) reflects general diplomatic expertise, and general experience navigating the U.S. foreign policy process. The distribution of each capacity measure is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 2 visualizes the within-country temporal trends in each capacity measure for three neighboring U.S. embassies in Southern Africa. We see a general (though not strictly monotonic) upward trend in embassy size across the three countries; and for all measures, South Africa’s values appear to be higher on average than those of the other two countries. However, and importantly for our research design, we see considerable temporal variation in the three experience-based measures.

These short-term fluctuations reflect the fact that individual officers cycle in and out of embassy

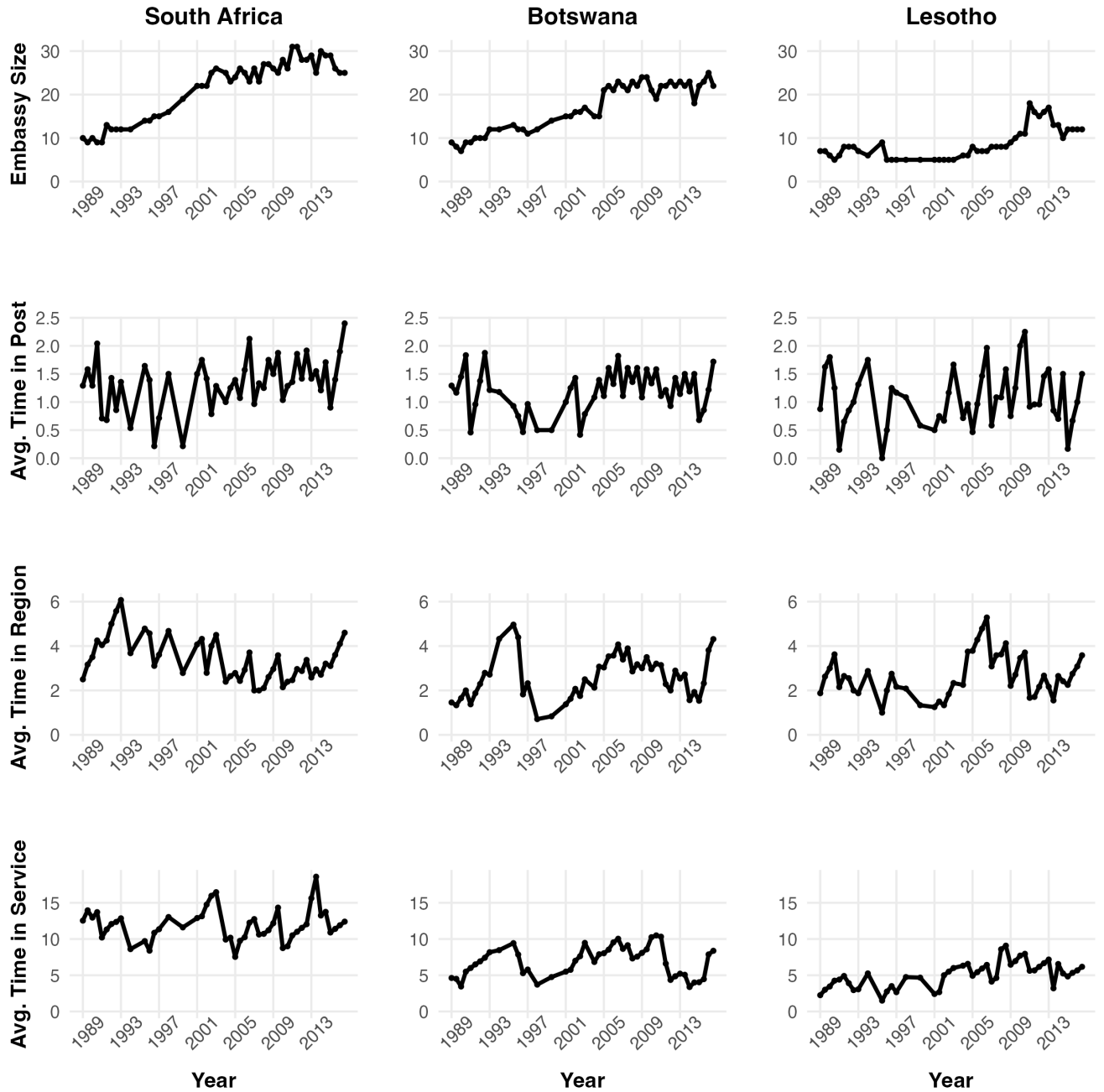
¹²Note that this measure of time-in-service will systematically undercount officers’ true time-in-service, because most officers will complete one or more tours before reaching a position that gets listed the Key Officers reports. Our measure should be highly correlated with the theoretical quantity of interest.

Figure 1: Distributions and Pairwise Correlations of Embassy-Level Capacity Measures



on a routine basis, with tours at a given embassy typically lasting two to three years. Specifically, variation in ATIP arises from the fact that the rotation schedules of the individual officers in embassy leadership positions are not spread out perfectly evenly over a three-year window. For ATIR and ATIS, given a finite number of positions and a finite pool of officers who bid for any specific assignment, an incoming officer is unlikely to have the exact level of experience as the outgoing officer they are replacing. Each position is “graded” for a specific rank of officer, but “stretch” assignments are common, with officers frequently filling positions above (“up-stretch”) or below (“down-stretch”) what their career experience would typically warrant (see [Lindsey, Malis and Thrall \(2025\)](#) for further discussion). Visual inspection of the trend lines in Figure 2 suggests that the experience-based measures fluctuate at a higher frequency than does a country’s strategic importance to the U.S., and further, that the patterns of temporal variation for different measures within a country show little relation to one another.

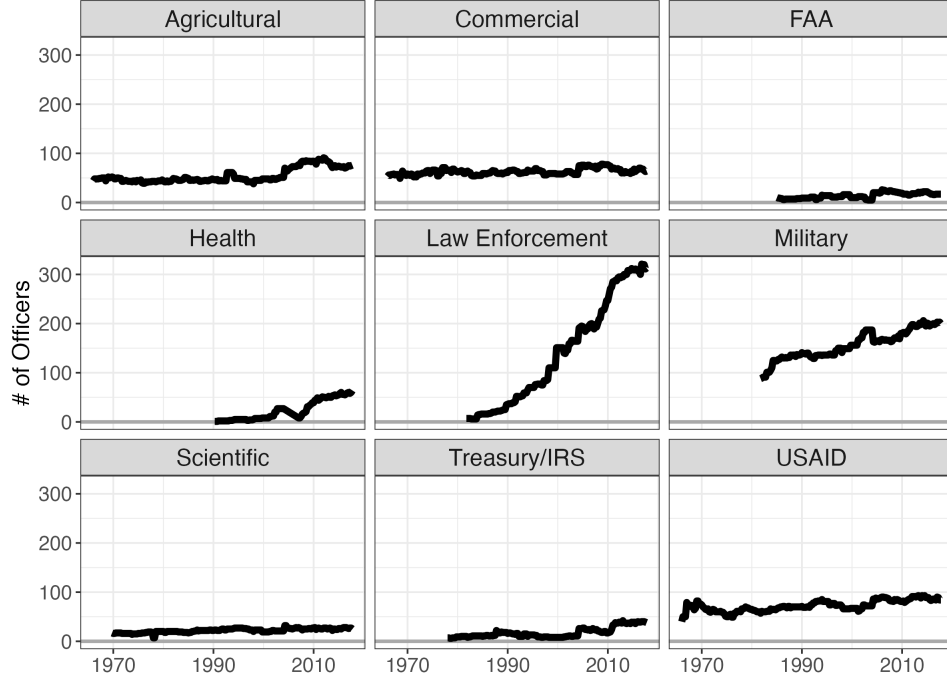
Figure 2: Temporal Trends in Capacity Measures for Select Countries



2.1.1.2 Disaggregated Issue-Level Capacity

In a separate set of analyses, we further disaggregate our data by issue area. In addition to the Generalist FSOs in embassy leadership positions, discussed in the previous section, the KOFS data also reports the presence of officers from external agencies (attachés, in diplomatic parlance)

Figure 3: External Attachés at Embassies, Over Time



at different embassies over time. This enables us to develop measures of which particular policy issues have dedicated diplomatic representation at the bilateral level, which we conceptualize as issue-specific embassy capacity.

Figure 3 plots the total number of attachés over time, focusing on nine of the most common that appear in the data. Notably, both military/defense attachés and law enforcement attachés (a category that includes officers of DHS, ICE, CBP, INS, DEA, FBI, and DOJ) show explosive growth over the period covered by the KOFs data. We also observe less dramatic growth in the presence of agricultural and health attachés in recent years, while commercial and aid attachés appear at a relatively high and stable rate over time. Our theoretical expectation is that an embassy with an FAA (Federal Aviation Authority) attaché, for instance, will be more capable of advancing bilateral cooperation on aviation-related issues as compared to an embassy without a dedicated aviation expert assigned to it, and especially so when attention from Washington on bilateral issues is limited.

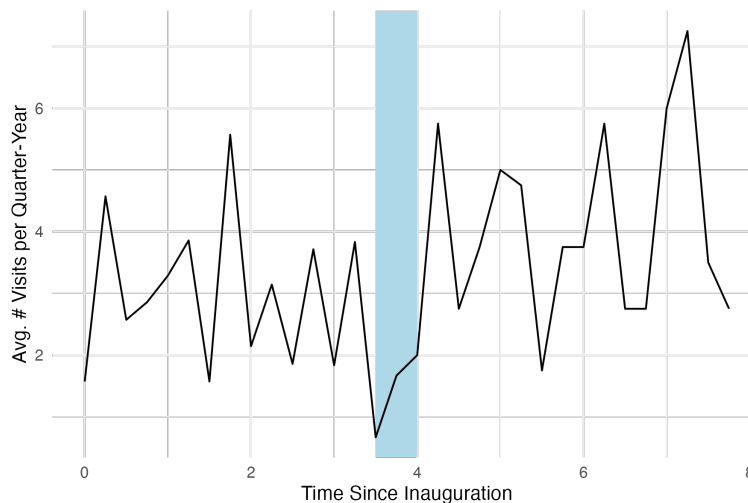
2.2 White House Attention

As discussed previously, we expect that that embassy-level diplomatic autonomy will increase when presidential attention on bilateral diplomacy decreases. There are a multitude of reasons why White House attention on a particular bilateral relationship would vary, many of which reflect the country’s strategic importance to the U.S. or the president’s particular foreign policy objectives. For the purpose of identifying the effect of White House attention on diplomatic outcomes, we want to isolate a source of variation in White House attention which is exogenous to those outcomes. Building from previous research, we will consider presidential reelection periods as providing this variation in attention.

Examining minute-by-minute records of meetings and phone calls from the President’s Daily Diary, [Lindsey and Hobbs \(2015\)](#) find that the amount of time the president spends on foreign policy drops significantly during the six months leading up to a presidential reelection, due to the heightened demands on the president’s time and attention imposed by the reelection campaign. In their analysis of presidential public papers and executive orders as well as congressional speeches and bills, [Bubeck et al. \(2025\)](#) find a similar drop in attention paid to foreign affairs during the six-month window surrounding U.S. presidential elections. Our own analysis of U.S. presidential travel abroad, visualized in [Figure 4](#), corroborates this pattern, with the lowest volume of travel occurring in the six months leading up to a presidential reelection.

We recognize that White House (in)attention is not the only reason that diplomatic behavior might change during reelection periods. At least two other factors warrant consideration. First, reflecting a logic of “political business cycles”, presidents may have a heightened demand for measurable diplomatic outputs in the run-up to an election, to demonstrate diplomatic competence or curry favor from domestic constituencies. Second, facing the risk of leadership turnover following the election, the executive branch may want to “lock in” any policy changes during this period by signing international agreements. We present empirical tests in [Section 3.4](#) that help adjudicate between these alternative mechanisms and our preferred autonomy-focused explanation.

Figure 4: U.S. Presidential Visits Abroad by Quarter-Year



Note: Figure indicates that presidential travel abroad falls to its lowest level during presidential reelection periods (between 3.5 to 4 years after inauguration, shaded in blue). Data from [Malis and Smith \(2022\)](#)

2.3 Bilateral Cooperation

To measure bilateral cooperation, we use a recently compiled dataset from [Hathaway, Bradley and Goldsmith \(2020\)](#) that contains the most comprehensive record of U.S. international executive agreements signed between 1989 and 2016. Under U.S. domestic law, international agreements have the legal status of either “treaties”, which require ratification from the Senate, or “executive agreements” which do not. Both types of agreement are equally binding under international law. Though Senate-ratified treaties receive considerably more scholarly attention than executive agreements, the vast majority (approximately 95%) of the United States’ international agreements since the 1930s have taken the form of executive agreements rather than treaties ([Bradley and Goldsmith, 2018](#)).

Executive agreements are an ideal measure of international cooperation for several reasons. These agreements represent serious, binding commitments on behalf of the U.S. to work with a partner state in pursuit of some mutual goal. At the same time, they occur at a fairly high frequency, with a wide range of partner countries: nearly all countries in our sample of analysis (159 out of 165) sign at least one agreement with the U.S., with the median country signing twelve agreements over the period.¹³

¹³The average rate of agreement signing in our sample is 0.52 agreements per country-half-year.

Table 2: U.S. Executive Agreements, 1989-2016: Topics and Example Subtopics

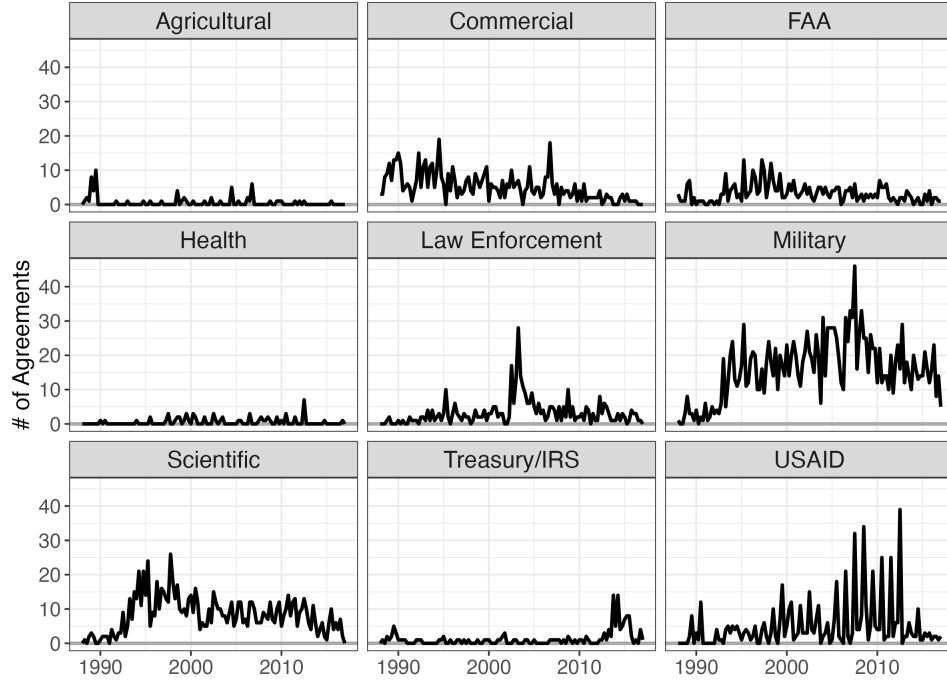
(a) Topics		(b) Subtopics (Defense)	
Defense	1635	Acquisition & Cross-servicing	355
Finance, Trade, and Investment	623	Status of Forces	290
Humanitarian	605	Information Exchange	
Science, Space, and Technology	549	& Information Security	254
Environment, Conservation, and Energy	495	Training & Assistance	219
Transportation and Aviation	393	Joint Initiatives & Projects	199
Law Enforcement	313	R&D, Testing	111
Nonproliferation	273	Alliances & Commitments	79
Educational Exchanges		Benefits	76
and Cultural Cooperation	174	Other	33
Taxation	138	Facilities & Bases	23
Diplomacy and Consular Affairs	126	Counterterrorism	10
Maritime	115		

Note: Panel (a) reports the distribution of bilateral agreements topics, as categorized in the [Hathaway, Bradley and Goldsmith \(2020\)](#) data. Panel (b) reports the subtopics within the “Defense” topic.

Our measure of executive agreements also provides a more comprehensive view of the range of substantive issue areas in which the U.S. cooperates with other governments. As the first panel Table 2 shows, the U.S. is an active collaborator in areas that have been traditionally studied by IR scholars (such as defense, trade, and investment) as well as those that have received substantially less attention (such as science/technology, transportation, and law enforcement). Digging more deeply into the subject matter of the agreements reveals an even more nuanced picture: among the 1,635 defense-related executive agreements concluded by the U.S., for instance, most of them pertain to important but routine areas of cooperation—such as the acquisition of military equipment, information exchange, and training of military personnel—rather than high-stakes negotiations over war and peace, arms control regimes, or other topics that receive the bulk of attention from scholars of international security. The substantive breadth of these agreements further enables us to conduct disaggregated analyses of the bureaucratic determinants of bilateral cooperation at the level of specific policy areas; Figure 5 demonstrates that there is considerable issue-level variation in agreement signing across nine issue areas which map onto the substantive domains of the embassy attachés that appear most frequently in our data.

Finally, and importantly for our purposes, there is good reason to believe that embassy-level

Figure 5: U.S. Executive Agreements Over Time, By Topic



Note: Treaty topics in this figure are based on our mapping of the (sub)topics from the original [Hathaway, Bradley and Goldsmith \(2020\)](#) data, to the frequently listed categories of embassy attachés in the Key Officers data.

diplomatic capacity matters for the creation and signing of executive agreements. According to legal scholar Jean Galbraith:

The president depends on agencies to carry out most international negotiations. The routine small-scale negotiations that make up the vast majority of international commitments are less exercises of presidential power than of bureaucratic power over which the president keeps a supervisory eye through his or her agents in the State Department and the White House. And even major negotiations can occur with relatively little oversight from the president. ([Galbraith, 2017](#), 1703)

While the State Department is not the only executive branch agency involved in international negotiations, the Circular 175 (C-175) Procedure requires that any agency seeking to negotiate an international agreement must coordinate with the State Department, and ultimately receive authorization from the Secretary of State (or designee).¹⁴

¹⁴See U.S. Foreign Affairs Manual, 11 FAM 720.

Table 3: Agreement Signatory, by Topic

Agreement Category	% Signed by Embassy	% Signed by State Dept.	# Agreements
Defense	46%	50%	308
Science, Space, and Technology	28%	47%	195
Environment, Conservation, and Energy	32%	48%	151
Law Enforcement	69%	93%	107
Transportation and Aviation	56%	79%	103
Humanitarian	33%	44%	90
Diplomacy and Consular Affairs	76%	100%	75
Finance, Trade, and Investment	58%	64%	73
Educational Exchanges and Cultural Cooperation	58%	90%	72
Taxation	86%	97%	69
Maritime	60%	97%	30
Nonproliferation	67%	89%	27

Note: Values in this table reflect our research team’s manual coding of signatories from a sample of agreements in the [Hathaway, Bradley and Goldsmith \(2020\)](#) data for which full agreement texts were available online.

To learn about which specific actors in the executive branch are actually negotiating executive agreements, we coded a subset of the agreements for which full text was available online to determine the identity of the officers who signed them on behalf of the U.S. government.¹⁵ Out of 1,393 agreements for which we identified signatories, we found that 666 (48%) were signed by embassy personnel (specifically, the ambassador, chargé, DCM, or lacking an individual signature but stamped with an embassy seal); 872 (63%) bore the signature of some officer of the State Department (including the aforementioned embassy personnel, the Secretary of State, or Assistant, Under, or Deputy Secretaries of State). Table 3 reports the signatories by agreement topic, showing that embassy personnel, and State Department personnel more broadly, are heavily involved in the creation of agreements across issue areas—even areas which we might intuitively expect to fall under the purview of other agencies, such as Defense, Law Enforcement, Finance, and Taxation. Thus, unlike major *treaties* (in the domestic legal sense)—for which the president is likely to send in a high-level representative, or a negotiating team from the office of the U.S. Trade Representative, for instance—the executive agreements are commonly negotiated and concluded by in-country

¹⁵We can consider this measure as a “lower bound” on the extent of embassy-level involvement in the creation of bilateral agreements, under the assumption that it is more typical for a higher-level official to sign their name to a document whose details were worked out by lower-level officials, rather than the reverse.

diplomats themselves.

3 Aggregate Diplomatic Capacity and Bilateral Cooperation

This section presents our analysis of aggregate embassy-level capacity and bilateral cooperation. The disaggregated issue-level analysis is presented in Section 4.

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Sample Construction

We conduct our main analyses on a sample of country-half-years, from 1989–2016. Countries are included in the sample if they host a U.S. embassy with at least three Generalist officers.¹⁶ The timespan of the sample, 1989–2016, is determined by the coverage of the executive agreements data.

The choice of the half-year temporal unit reflects a compromise between competing concerns. On the one hand, there is reason to believe that White House attention varies meaningfully over the course of the election year, and we want to allow our research design to detect that variation, with narrower temporal measures. On the other hand, while the Key Officers data is available at a quarterly frequency (or higher) for some years, there is less complete coverage for other years (particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the State Department was transitioning from print to online publications). Aggregating to the half-year level allows us to keep our measures at a fairly high frequency, while losing fewer periods due to missing Key Officers publications. For each half-year, we record the embassy capacity measures at the earliest point in the half-year that they are available, and we count the number of agreements signed throughout the half-year.

3.1.2 Theoretical Estimand and Identification

Following Lundberg, Johnson and Stewart (2021), we can define the theoretical estimand of our analysis as a unit-level causal quantity averaged over a target population. The target population is the set of all U.S. bilateral relationships (or more precisely, bilateral relationship-half-years) with

¹⁶Specifically, we include a country in the sample starting after the last year that we observe the embassy listing fewer than three Generalists. Results are consistent when using a cutoff of four or five Generalists instead.

embassy-level representation, as described in the previous section. From our theoretical discussion, the unit-level causal quantity of interest is the *causal interaction* of embassy capacity and presidential attention on the outcome of bilateral agreement signing.

Our research design follows the “factorial difference-in-differences” (FDID) framework developed by [Xu, Zhao and Ding \(2025\)](#). Under this framework, consider a presidential reelection as an “event”. All units (i.e. bilateral relationships) are “exposed” to this event in certain time periods, but we want to engage in counterfactual thinking about what would happen if a unit were not exposed during an event period. Now consider the effect of embassy capacity on the signing of bilateral agreements (if we could intervene on an embassy’s capacity in a given period, how would that change the number of bilateral agreements signed?). Our theoretical estimand—the causal interaction between embassy capacity and event exposure—asks how the effect of embassy capacity would vary if we could intervene on an embassy’s exposure to the reelection event, and the waning of presidential attention that accompanies it.¹⁷

The critical identifying assumption in this context is that embassy capacity is (conditionally) exogenous to the *trend* in potential outcomes before vs. during the event period (conditional on covariates, as we describe below).¹⁸ This is less demanding than an assumption of (conditionally) random assignment of embassy capacity with respect to potential outcomes (that is, potential rates of agreement signing, as a function of both capacity and event exposure). Intuitively, our design allows for there to be some unobserved confounding in the relationship between embassy capacity and agreement signing; but it requires that the degree of confounding is not greater during reelection periods than at other times in a presidential administration.

The most straightforward violation of this assumption would be if the U.S. government strategically manipulated embassy staffing to serve bilateral diplomatic objectives, *and* did so to a greater degree during reelection periods than at other times. In [Appendix A.1](#), we present multiple pieces of evidence against this possibility. First, we show that the rate of diplomatic turnover (that is, the portion of officers beginning a new assignment) is generally lower during reelection periods than at other times; this is consistent with the theoretical claim that political leadership in Washington

¹⁷Note that causal interaction is symmetrical in the two “factors” (here, capacity and attention). Thus our estimand can be equivalently expressed as either (i) the causal moderation of presidential attention on the effect of embassy capacity; or (ii) the causal moderation of embassy capacity on the effect of presidential attention.

¹⁸Specifically, we invoke the conditional version of [Xu, Zhao and Ding \(2025\)](#)’s Assumption 5 (“factorial parallel trends”).

is paying the least attention to foreign policy, and thus least likely to intervene on embassy-level staffing, during reelection periods. In addition, we report a series of balance tests, in which we regress each of our capacity measures on the interaction of various country-level covariates with reelection-period indicators (plus time-period fixed effects). We generally find insignificant effects for the interaction terms; this enhances the credibility of the assumption that embassy capacity is assigned (conditionally) independently of the trend in potential outcomes.

3.1.3 Estimation

We estimate several versions the following regression specification:

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta \text{Capacity}_{i,t} + \delta [\text{Capacity}_{i,t} \times \text{Reelection}_t] + \gamma_1 X_{it} + \gamma_2 X_{it} \times \text{Reelection}_t + \alpha_i + \tau_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

$Y_{i,t}$ denotes the number of agreements signed with country i in half-year t , and α_i and τ_t are country and half-year fixed effects, respectively. We consider each of the four capacity measures discussed above (embassy size, and average time in post/region/service). Reelection_t is an indicator for presidential reelection periods, coded as 1 for the second half of each president’s fourth year in office and 0 otherwise.¹⁹ The δ coefficient corresponds to the primary theoretical estimand of interest—the causal interaction of embassy capacity and presidential attention.

To enhance the credibility of our identifying assumptions, we include in the regression a set of time-varying country-level covariates, both on their own and interacted with the reelection indicator. These include: GDP and population (log transformed); V-Dem’s polyarchy index; an indicator for whether the host country is holding an election for the office of the chief executive; a categorical measure of whether the country’s chief executive is left-wing, right-wing, or centrist (or none of the above), interacted with U.S. presidential fixed effects, to account for the possibility that certain U.S. presidents are differentially likely to pursue cooperation with foreign leaders based on their ideology; and controls for the State Department’s hardship pay differential, and whether a post receives additional danger pay.²⁰

¹⁹For our sample, this means 1 for July–December of 1992, 1996, 2004, and 2012, and 0 otherwise.

²⁰Hardship pay is State’s determination of how (un)desirable living conditions are in particular states (Gray, 2018); for example, the current hardship pay differential is 0% in Florence, Italy; 25% in Beirut, Lebanon; and 35% in Kabul, Afghanistan. Danger pay is an indicator that a state is experiencing domestic conditions that may place diplomats at direct risk of harm.

For each measure of embassy capacity, we present six specifications: three OLS estimates, and three Poisson maximum likelihood estimates, with (i) time-period FE only, (ii) time-period FE and covariates (interacted with the event dummy), and (iii) both time-period FE and country FE, with the event-interacted covariates. All regressions report standard errors robust to clustering by country.

3.2 Results

Our main regression results are presented in Table 4. Each cell in the table represents a separate regression; so Panel A reports the six regressions with the Embassy Size capacity measure, Panel B reports six regressions with the Average Time In Post capacity measure, and so on. Across each panel, the Poisson results are substantively similar to the OLS results, so we focus our discussion on interpretation of the OLS results.

The first three columns of Panel A show a positive causal interaction of embassy size and presidential reelection on the signing of bilateral agreements. The point estimate is larger in magnitude when covariates are included, and changes little with the addition of country fixed effects. To understand the substantive magnitude of the effects, note that the embassy size measure has a standard deviation of approximately 7 officers. Thus a presidential reelection period magnifies the effect of a one-standard-deviation change in embassy size by about 17–20 percentage points—a large effect, relative to a sample average outcome of 0.52 agreements signed per country-half-year. Substantively, these results provide evidence in support of our core theoretical claim regarding the conditional nature of bureaucratic influence on foreign policy: when presidential attention to foreign affairs wanes, the gap in diplomatic output produced by better- vs. worse-staffed embassies widens considerably. When granted a greater degree of autonomy in the conduct of bilateral relations, high-capacity embassies are able to take advantage of that autonomy to pursue diplomatic initiatives in ways that lower-capacity embassies are not.

Next, we consider our second capacity measure, average time in post: do embassies in which the core generalist diplomats have been working together for a longer period of time—possibly strengthening their ability to work as a team, or simply reflecting aggregate effort expended on a shared diplomatic project—achieve greater bilateral cooperation during reelection periods? Panel B of Table 4 presents an analogous set of regression results to Panel A. Here we find no conclusive

Table 4: Embassy Capacity and Agreement Signing: Main Results

	OLS			Poisson		
<u>Panel A</u>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size × Reelection	0.018* (0.009)	0.029* (0.012)	0.025* (0.012)	0.015+ (0.009)	0.038* (0.016)	0.029+ (0.017)
<u>Panel B</u>	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Avg. Time In Post × Reelection	0.046 (0.109)	0.037 (0.098)	0.028 (0.083)	0.051 (0.168)	0.082 (0.162)	0.062 (0.144)
<u>Panel C</u>	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
Avg. Time In Region × Reelection	0.067+ (0.034)	0.062* (0.031)	0.067* (0.029)	0.099* (0.049)	0.114* (0.045)	0.115* (0.046)
<u>Panel D</u>	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
Avg. Time In Service × Reelection	0.027+ (0.015)	0.036* (0.017)	0.040* (0.017)	0.036+ (0.019)	0.058* (0.024)	0.058** (0.020)
Num.Obs.	6718	6718	6718	6718	6718	6677
FE: Half-year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓			✓
Controls × Reelection		✓	✓		✓	✓

Note: Each cell in the table corresponds to a separate regression (24 regressions reported in total). Country-half-year observations, for 165 countries, 1989–2016. Outcome is number of bilateral agreements signed (mean = 0.52, SD = 0.96, range from 0 to 15). “Reelection” denotes the half-year period during a U.S. presidential reelection (July through December, for years 1992, 1996, 2004, and 2012). See Table 1 for descriptions of each capacity measure. Controls include: (log) population; (log) GDP; State Department’s hazard pay and danger pay differentials; V-Dem polyarchy index; indicator for occurrence of election for chief executive in host country; and a categorical variable denoting the host government ideology (left, center, right, or other), interacted with U.S. president fixed effects. Standard errors robust to clustering by country. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

evidence of a time-in-post effect. While the coefficient estimates are positive across all specifications, the effects are imprecisely estimated and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Our next measure of diplomatic capacity evaluates the effect of region-specific experience among embassy officials: do embassies in which the core generalist officers have spent more time posted in the current region—potentially resulting in deeper knowledge of the region’s politics and culture, as well as greater familiarity with the State Department regional bureau—achieve greater bilateral cooperation during reelections? Panel C suggests that they do. The causal interaction estimate is consistently positive and statistically significant, and similar in magnitude across specifications. Substantively, reelection periods increase the effect of a one-standard-deviation (1.25 years) change

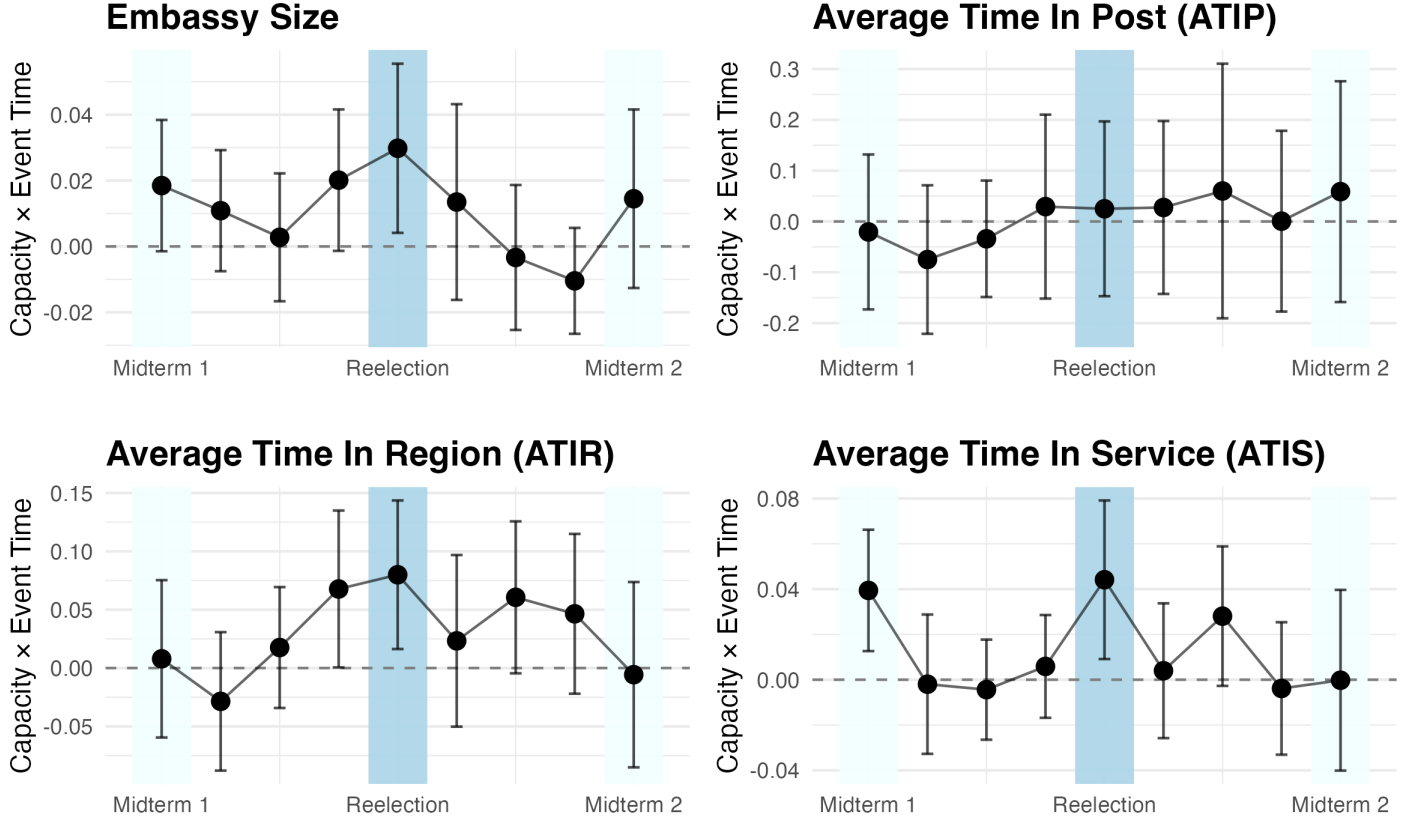
in ATIR by about 8 percentage points. While substantively smaller than the embassy size effect, we interpret this result as evidence that diplomats’ individual career experiences meaningfully affect their ability to advance bilateral cooperation.

Our final aggregate measure of embassy-level capacity is the average time in service among embassy leadership: do embassies in which the core generalist officers have had longer careers in the Foreign Service—reflecting both accumulated expertise in the general conduct of diplomacy, and the screening effect of having survived the competitive “up-or-out” promotion system—achieve greater bilateral cooperation during reelection periods? Again, the results presented in Panel D suggest that the answer is yes. The causal interaction between reelection events and ATIS is positive and statistically significant in all specifications (at $p < 0.1$ without controls, and $p < 0.05$ with controls). A one-standard-deviation (3.6 years) increase in ATIS corresponds to change of 13–14 percentage points in the rate of agreement signing.

To better understand the dynamic effects of embassy capacity across a president’s term in office, we also consider a set of event-study specifications. Specifically, we consider modifications of (1) with time-period indicators for five periods before and after the reelection (covering the first through the second midterm of a president’s tenure), with periods outside this window serving as the reference category. Results are reported in Figure 6.

The event-study results generally confirm what we found from the Table 4 regressions, with some additional nuances. The average time in post measure again shows consistently null effects. For the other three capacity measures, we find that their effect is largest in magnitude during the reelection period, consistent with our theoretical prediction. However, there is other temporal heterogeneity worth noting. For ATIS (and, to a lesser extent, embassy size), we observe spikes in the coefficient estimates during the president’s first midterm period. This is sensible, if presidents are similarly distracted from foreign policy during their first midterm elections as during their own reelection campaigns. In addition, for both embassy size and ATIR, we observe that the effect of capacity is increasing in the period immediately prior to what we define as the reelection window (that is, during the first six months of the president’s fourth year in office). This can again be reconciled with the claim that presidents begin to get distracted away from foreign policy earlier in their reelection campaign, rather than just in the second half of the year.

Figure 6: Aggregate Embassy Capacity and Agreement Signing: Event-Study Specifications



Note: Modifications of regressions from the third column of Table 4 (models (3), (9), (15), and (21)), with event-time dummies in place of the reelection dummy. See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

3.3 Robustness

We consider two additional sets of robustness checks. The first addresses potential concerns over the degree to which embassy-level diplomats are actually involved in the negotiation and signing of the agreements which serve as the outcome of our analyses. Recall from Table 3 that around half of the agreements that we hand-coded were signed by embassy personnel, but that this rate varies across agreement categories. We report regression results in Table A.1 using an alternative outcome measure: the number of agreements signed, weighted by the rate of embassy involvement in that agreement category.²¹ Results are similar to those reported in Table 4.

The second set of robustness tests clarifies the value-added of focusing on diplomatic represen-

²¹So for instance, by this weighted measure, a country-half-year with one taxation agreement signed will have a higher value than a country-half-year with one defense agreement signed, because embassy personnel are involved in 86% of taxation agreements vs. 46% of defense agreements.

tation below the level of ambassador. Our capacity measures in the main analyses are constructed based on the full leadership team of the embassy, including the Ambassador, DCM, and five generalist section chiefs (Political, Economic, Management, Consular, and Public Diplomacy). In Table A.2, we replicate the analyses with modified measures that exclude the ambassador. The findings are broadly consistent with what we observe in Table 4, with some effect sizes slightly attenuated.

3.4 Alternative Explanations

We now consider two alternative accounts that could explain why we observe a stronger role for diplomatic capacity in facilitating international cooperation during presidential reelection periods, and argue that the evidence supports our preferred autonomy-based explanation rather than these alternative accounts.

3.4.1 Political Cooperation Cycles

We argue that when presidents are campaigning for reelection, they tend to deprioritize foreign policy issues in favor of domestic ones. At the same time, a large body of research argues that incumbent leaders tend to increase government spending in the lead-up to elections to temporarily strengthen the economy and secure the support of key constituencies; this behavior creates “political business cycles” in a range of policy domains (Nordhaus, 1975; Schultz, 1995; Dubois, 2016). If it were the case that incumbent presidents see an electoral benefit in signing international agreements—because doing so signals diplomatic competence, for instance, or because some agreements lead to transfers to certain domestic interest groups—we would also expect to see increased treaty-making during reelection campaigns, and it would be no surprise if presidents systematically task the highest-capacity embassies with achieving it. While this alternative account still allows some role for diplomatic capacity, it counters our assertion that reelection campaigns increase diplomatic autonomy from the executive.

One point against this “political cooperation cycles” explanation is the fact that these agreements are concluded with little publicity or fanfare; indeed, Hathaway, Bradley and Goldsmith (2020) were only able to obtain the records that enter into their database after an extensive Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit and settlement with the State Department. In addition,

we test this alternative explanation in two separate ways. First, if presidents view international treaties as electorally valuable and they know that high-capacity embassies are best able to achieve cooperation, it stands to reason that they should attempt to manipulate diplomatic capacity in the run-up to elections so that it is highest in strategically important host states. However, the patterns reported in Figures A.2 and A.3 show that diplomatic capacity does not rise disproportionately during re-election periods in states with which presidents might particularly want to cooperate: democracies, top U.S. trade partners, those with closer ideological alignment, and so on. Unless presidents truly view cooperation with any partner state as equally electorally valuable—which we find highly unlikely—these results cast doubt on the political cooperation cycle argument.

Second, if presidents use international agreements to make transfers to domestic interest groups in the run-up to elections, we conjecture that some types of agreements are better suited to this goal than others. Specifically, we should see a disproportionate increase in agreements on economic issues like trade and finance that directly subsidize domestic interest groups relative to agreements on other issues (science, law enforcement, health) with less straightforward distributive consequences. However, Table A.3 shows that our results are driven by *non-economic* agreements. In fact, we find little differential effect of diplomatic capacity during re-election periods when restricting attention to signing of economic agreements. We interpret this as further evidence against the political cooperation cycles argument: while it is *a priori* plausible that leaders might attempt to boost international cooperation for electoral reasons, they do not seem to be targeting pre-election cooperation in a strategic manner.

3.4.2 Policy Insulation

In addition to their electoral performance, leaders also care about implementing their preferred foreign policy agenda. After a leader is unseated by a challenger from a competing party, the successor may take steps to undo what her predecessor has done in order to pursue her own preferred policies instead. If we make the reasonable assumption that completed international agreements are more difficult for a successor to undo than in-progress agreements, our results could be explained by incumbents responding to the risk of losing office by rushing to complete all in-progress agreements before the election (and again, that they find it easier to do so in higher-capacity embassies).

If the mechanism driving the patterns we observe during reelection periods is presidents' efforts

at policy insulation in the face of an increased risk of losing office, we should observe an even stronger effect of embassy capacity during lame duck election periods: not only is the incumbent herself going to lose office with certainty, but the odds that her party will lose the election are also higher. To test this, we modify regression (1), including the interaction between embassy capacity and a lame duck election indicator. The results, reported in Tables A.4–A.7, show that the heightened effect of embassy capacity during reelection periods does not similarly arise during lame duck election periods. We therefore find it unlikely that our results can be explained by executive attempts at policy insulation.

4 Issue-Specific Diplomatic Capacity and Bilateral Cooperation

The previous analyses demonstrated that aggregate diplomatic capacity, measured at the embassy level, has a heightened effect on aggregate bilateral cooperation during periods of decreased oversight and attention from the White House. Because both the Key Officers data and the executive agreements can be disaggregated by issue area, we can further investigate the effect of *issue-specific* diplomatic capacity on bilateral cooperation in the corresponding issue areas.

Our research design for the issue-level analysis builds from the research design from the aggregate embassy-level analysis. We disaggregate the sample of analysis from the country-half-year level to the country-issue-half-year level, for nine separate issue areas. We categorize the issue areas of the bilateral agreements to correspond with the categories of external embassy attachés, as depicted in Figures 3 and 5. Thus for each country-half-year, we have nine observations corresponding to the nine issue areas: Agricultural, Commercial, Transportation/Aviation, Health, Law Enforcement, Military, Scientific, Treasury/Taxation, and Aid. For each observation, we code an indicator for whether there is an attaché for that issue area assigned to the embassy during that half-year, and an indicator for whether any agreement in that issue area was signed.

As before, our theoretical estimand is the causal interaction of (issue-specific) embassy capacity and presidential attention on (issue-specific) agreement signing. We estimate a modified version of (1), with attaché presence as our issue-specific measure of capacity, and with separate specifications including city-issue and city-half-year fixed effects.

Results are reported in Table 5. We find similar effects across all all specifications, with different

Table 5: Issue-Specific Capacity and Bilateral Cooperation

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Attache $\times$ Reelection	0.013** (0.005)	0.013** (0.005)	0.010+ (0.005)
Num.Obs.	60462	60462	60462
FE: Half-year (HY)	✓	✓	
FE: Issue area	✓		
FE: Country	✓		
FE: Country-Issue		✓	✓
FE: Country-HY			✓
Controls	✓	✓	

Note: Country-issue-half-year observations, for 165 countries, 9 issue areas, 1989–2016. OLS estimates. Outcome is an indicator for whether any agreement was signed (mean = 0.046). “Reelection” denotes the half-year period during a U.S. presidential reelection (July through December, for years 1992, 1996, 2004, and 2012). Controls are the same as those listed in the caption of Table 4, plus embassy size. Standard errors robust to clustering by country. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

combinations of fixed effects. The first column includes country FE, issue-area FE, and half-year FE; the second column includes country-issue FE and half-year FE; and the third column includes country-issue FE and country-half-year FE, thus leveraging variation across the nine issue-areas within a given country-half-year. The causal interaction of issue-specific attachés and reelection periods on agreement signing is estimated to be between 1–1.3 percentage points—a substantively large effect, relative to the outcome mean of 0.045.²²

In sum, whereas the previous section found that aggregate embassy-level capacity influenced aggregate bilateral cooperation, the results presented here demonstrate that the relationship holds at an even more fine-grained level. Holding fixed the composition of the embassy leadership, and all aspects of the overall bilateral relationship, we still identify meaningful variation in issue-specific cooperation, as a function of the issue-specific attachés assigned to a given embassy. These findings further highlight the value of investigating the impact of diplomatic representation at the level of individual personnel, and taking account of their individual experiences and expertise.

²²This disaggregated rate of agreement is less than one-ninth of the average of the aggregate outcome (0.52) because some of the treaties contributing to the aggregate outcome did not fit a category that we could link to an attaché.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that diplomats’ ability to exert independent influence over foreign affairs is a function of both their *capacity* and their *autonomy*. Diplomats’ influence over policy is limited when leaders closely monitor and direct their actions, but grows when oversight weakens; however, only high-capacity embassies will be able to capitalize on conditions of relative autonomy by pushing for greater bilateral cooperation. We test this theory using both a novel measure of diplomatic autonomy—an indicator for whether the incumbent president is distracted from foreign policy by their reelection campaign—as well as several novel measures of diplomatic capacity at the embassy- and embassy-issue levels. Results support our conditional theory of bureaucratic influence: high-capacity embassies sign more bilateral agreements when the leader’s attention is consumed by domestic politics.

Our findings may help to rehabilitate the bureaucratic politics model of IR into a form that its critics find less objectionable. We do not disagree that bureaucrats, particularly rank-and-file diplomats, are subordinate to leaders and thus are rarely able to meaningfully deviate from their principals’ desired policies under conditions of standard executive oversight. At the same time, however, delegation of diplomacy occurs because leaders must divide their attention between foreign and domestic affairs; even outside of election campaigns, leaders cannot directly monitor all of their state’s bilateral relationships simultaneously, and this creates an opportunity space for diplomats to shape foreign policy. Future work in this vein might fruitfully draw upon insights from scholars of IO bureaucracy, who have argued that member states exert more influence over their IO bureaucrats in strategically important circumstances but leave them to their own devices otherwise (Copelovitch, 2010; Stone, 2004). For example, leaders might impose tighter monitoring on embassies when their host states are strategically important, creating oversight gaps in other states; this is a hypothesis that can be tested with the KOFS data.

Finally, our findings underscore not only the fact that “diplomats want treaties” (Poulsen and Aisbett, 2016), but that international agreements are in fact more likely to form in the presence of high-capacity diplomatic representation. The influence of diplomatic representation is largely absent from the large literatures on bilateral economic treaties in IPE and international law, primarily because most existing studies focus on high-level treaties—such as omnibus trade agreements and

bilateral investment treaties—for which states send boutique negotiators, bypassing embassy personnel. Yet, for the other 95% of U.S. international agreements (Bradley and Goldsmith, 2018), we demonstrate that diplomatic capacity is a variable that should not be overlooked: half of U.S. bilateral executive agreements are signed by embassy personnel, and we find robust relationships between diplomatic capacity and the creation of these agreements at the bilateral level. Analysts seeking to understand the proliferation and design of the vast majority of extant international legal commitments—those which do not make headlines but which sustain international cooperation across many issue areas—should give greater consideration to the role played by the bureaucrats tasked with their creation.

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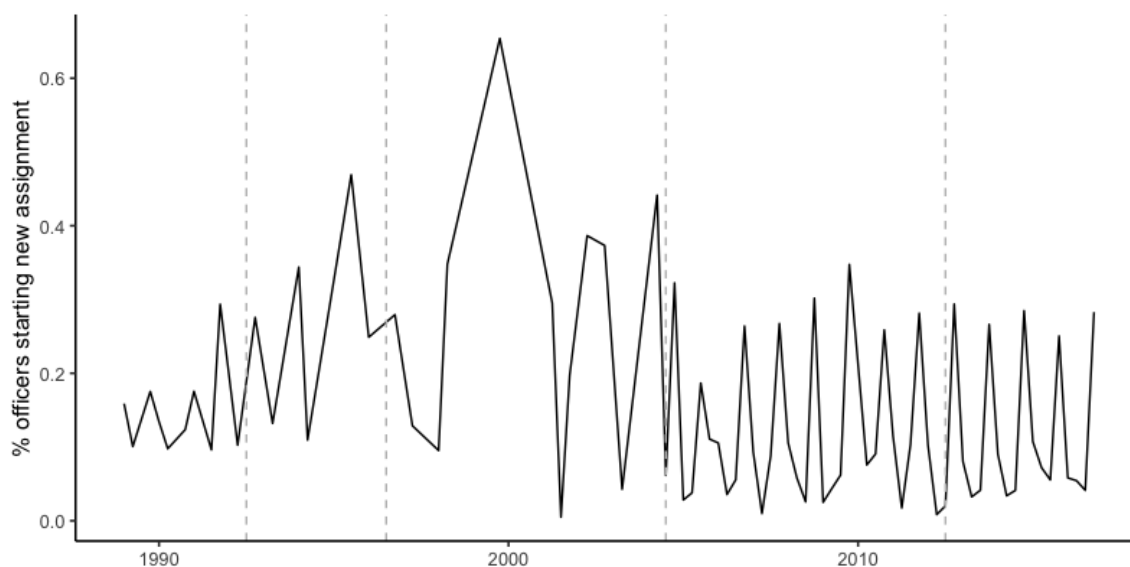
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Appendix

A.1 Identifying Assumptions

In this section, we present quantitative evidence in support of the plausibility of our identifying assumptions. First, Figure A.1 shows the portion of Generalist FSOs (Ambassador, DCM, and Political, Economic, Public Diplomacy, Management, and Consular section chiefs) who are starting a new assignment in each quarter-year. The dashed vertical lines denote the third quarter (July, August, and September) of each presidential reelection year in the sample (1992, 1996, 2004, and 2012). In each case, we see that the reelection period is a relative low point in embassy turnover. If the White House or the State Department were strategically manipulating embassy staffing around reelection periods, we would see turnover rates be relatively high during those periods.

Figure A.1: Portion of Officers Starting New Assignments



(We note that the three highest peaks in this figure arise as an artifact of missing data in preceding periods: there are no Key Officer entries in the data between 1994q2 and 1995q3; between 1998q1 and 1999q4; and between 2003q2 and 2004q2. Thus all officers who in fact started new assignments during these gaps (e.g. from 1994q3 through 1995q2) will be recorded as starting their assignments in the first quarter after the gap (e.g. 1995q3), according to this measure.)

Next, we report results from two sets of balance tests. In Figure A.2, we report regressions of

the form

$$\text{Capacity}_{it} = \beta X_{it} + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

for the four capacity measures and eleven different time-varying country-level covariates X_{it} (each covariate in a separate regression), along with time-period fixed effects. In addition to the covariates included in the main text analyses, the covariates reported here include the World Banks’ Women in Business and the Law index (WBL); the lagged number of treaties signed; bilateral trade flows with the US; and ideal point distance in UNGA voting. All covariates and capacity measures are rescaled to have a standard deviation of one, for interpretability.

Figure A.2 shows that the vast majority of these relationships are statistically significant and quite large in magnitude, in the expected directions: for instance, countries with larger economies and larger trade volumes have larger embassies staffed by more experienced officers, while the opposite is true of hardship posts and more ideologically misaligned countries. The “failure” of these balance tests suggest why it would be difficult to identify the effect of embassy capacity per se: even conditioning on these observable covariates, there would be strong reason to suspect that there remains some unobserved confounding which would undermine identification. This partly motivates our choice to instead target a causal interaction as our theoretical estimand.

We then estimate regressions of the form

$$\text{Capacity}_{it} = \beta_1 X_{it} + \beta_2 [X_{it} \times \text{Reelection}_t] + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

for the same set of capacity measures and covariates, and report the $\hat{\beta}_2$ estimates in Figure A.3. Here, we find much less imbalance: only a small portion of coefficient estimates are statistically distinguishable from zero (5 out of 44), close to what we expect by random chance. This supports our claim that, insofar as there is confounding in the relationship between embassy capacity and agreement signing, that confounding is not stronger during reelection periods as compared to other periods—especially after conditioning on a set of reelection-period-interacted covariates. Under this assumption, our regression specification can identify the causal moderation of reelection periods on the effect of embassy capacity on agreement signing (or, symmetrically, the causal moderation of embassy capacity on the effect of reelection periods on agreement signing).

Figure A.2: Balance Tests: Embassy Capacity and Covariates

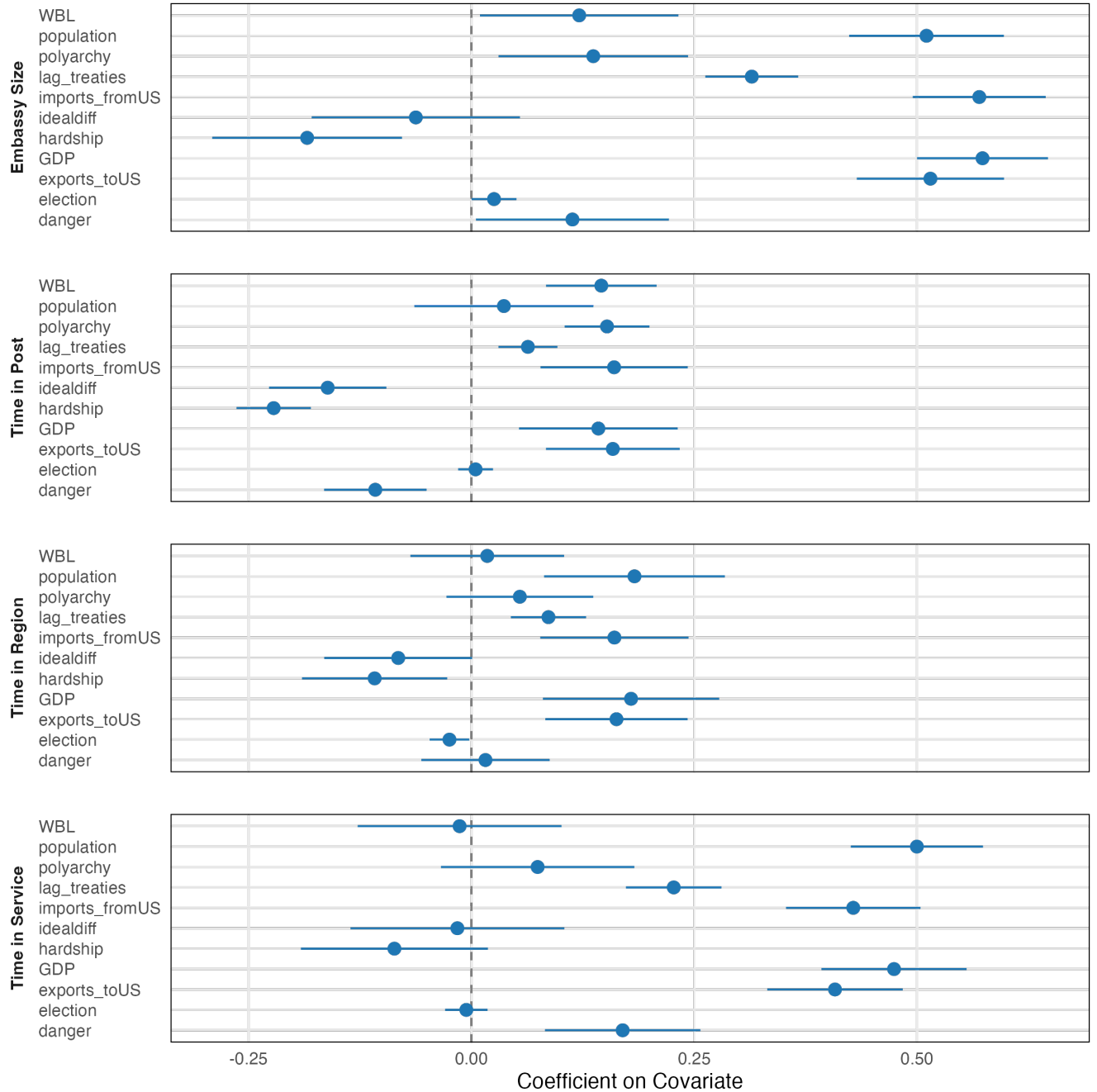
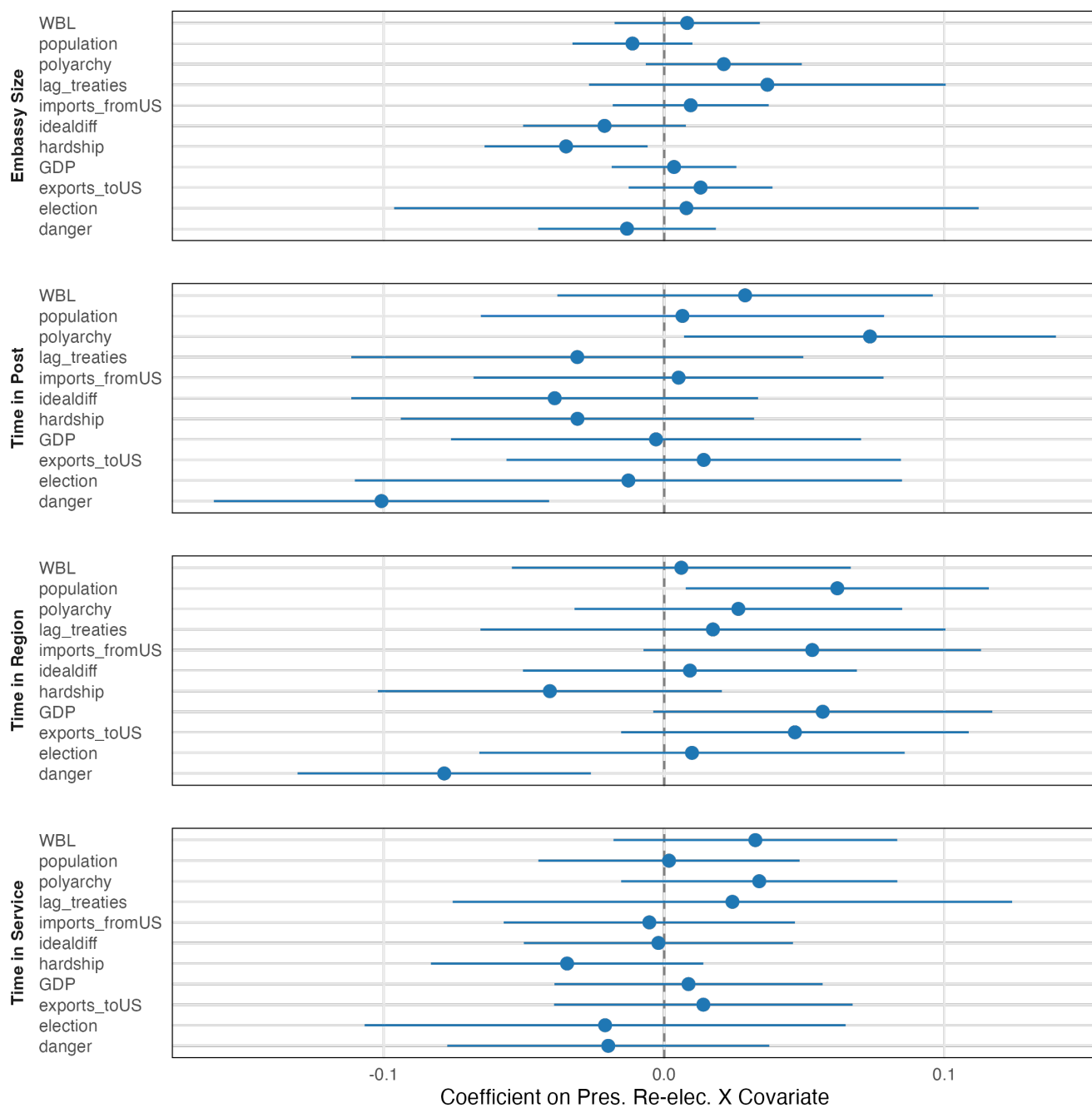


Figure A.3: Balance Tests: Embassy Capacity and Covariates $\times$ Reelection



A.2 Outcome Measures Weighted by Embassy Involvement

Table A.1 reports the first set of robustness check described in Section 3.3, modifying the outcome measure to account for variation in embassy involvement across different issue areas.

Table A.1: Embassy Capacity and Agreement Signing: Outcome Weighted by Embassy Involvement

	OLS			Poisson		
<u>Panel A</u>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size $\times$ Reelection	0.008+ (0.004)	0.014* (0.005)	0.012* (0.006)	0.014 (0.009)	0.039* (0.016)	0.031+ (0.017)
<u>Panel B</u>	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
ATIP $\times$ Reelection	0.019 (0.052)	0.014 (0.047)	0.008 (0.040)	0.045 (0.173)	0.063 (0.169)	0.041 (0.150)
<u>Panel C</u>	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
ATIR $\times$ Reelection	0.031+ (0.016)	0.031* (0.015)	0.034* (0.014)	0.101* (0.049)	0.122** (0.045)	0.122** (0.044)
<u>Panel D</u>	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
ATIS $\times$ Reelection	0.012+ (0.007)	0.018* (0.008)	0.020* (0.008)	0.036+ (0.020)	0.064** (0.024)	0.061** (0.021)
Num.Obs.	6718	6718	6718	6718	6718	6677
FE: Half-year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓			✓
Controls $\times$ Reelection		✓	✓		✓	✓

Note: Each cell in the table corresponds to a separate regression (24 regressions reported in total). Country-half-year observations, for 165 countries, 1989–2016. Modification of Table 4, with outcome being a weighted sum across treaty categories, weighted by the frequency of agreements being signed by embassy personnel (mean = 0.25, SD = 0.46, range from 0 to 6.05). See Section A.2 for further discussion of the outcome. See caption of Table 4 for further discussion of model specifications.

A.3 Capacity Measures Excluding Ambassadors

Table A.2 reports the second set of robustness check described in Section 3.3, modifying the embassy capacity measures to exclude the ambassador.

Table A.2: Modifications of Table 4 Results, Excluding Ambassadors from Capacity Measures

	OLS			Poisson		
<u>Panel A</u>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size (w/o Amb.) $\times$ Reelection	0.018* (0.009)	0.029* (0.012)	0.025* (0.013)	0.015+ (0.009)	0.039* (0.016)	0.029+ (0.017)
<u>Panel B</u>	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
ATIP (w/o Amb.) $\times$ Reelection	-0.002 (0.097)	0.005 (0.089)	-0.015 (0.075)	-0.028 (0.152)	0.053 (0.153)	-0.014 (0.136)
<u>Panel C</u>	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
ATIR (w/o Amb.) $\times$ Reelection	0.065+ (0.036)	0.056+ (0.033)	0.053+ (0.031)	0.084+ (0.044)	0.106* (0.045)	0.098* (0.043)
<u>Panel D</u>	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
ATIS (w/o Amb.) $\times$ Reelection	0.024+ (0.014)	0.035* (0.016)	0.034* (0.016)	0.033+ (0.017)	0.060* (0.024)	0.052** (0.020)
Num.Obs.	6718	6718	6718	6718	6718	6677
FE: Half-year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓			✓
Controls $\times$ Reelection		✓	✓		✓	✓

Note: Each cell in the table corresponds to a separate regression (24 regressions reported in total). Country-half-year observations. Each regression is a modification of the corresponding regression from Table 4, where each capacity measure reported here excludes the ambassador. See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

A.4 Outcome Measures Disaggregated by Electoral Value

Here we present another series of tests to adjudicate between our theorized mechanism and an alternative explanation focused on political business cycles. In Table A.3, we disaggregate the outcome measure into two different kinds of agreements: “economic” agreements, which we believe are most likely to generate short-term electoral benefits for the incumbent president, and “non-economic” agreements, which should be less immediately politically beneficial. The former category includes commercial, transportation/aviation, taxation, and agricultural agreements; the latter includes military, law enforcement, scientific, health, and foreign aid agreements. The results indicate that the main findings in Table 4 are driven exclusively by the non-economic, or electorally non-valuable, agreement categories, contrary to the logic of political business cycles.

Table A.3: Embassy Capacity and Agreement Signing: Disaggregated Agreement Outcomes

	All Agreements		“Economic” Agreements		“Non-Economic” Agreements	
<u>Panel A</u>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size $\times$ Reelection	0.018* (0.009)	0.025* (0.012)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.023** (0.008)	0.029* (0.012)
<u>Panel B</u>	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
ATIP $\times$ Reelection	0.046 (0.109)	0.028 (0.083)	-0.069* (0.030)	-0.087* (0.036)	0.163 (0.105)	0.162* (0.073)
<u>Panel C</u>	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
ATIR $\times$ Reelection	0.067+ (0.034)	0.067* (0.029)	0.004 (0.013)	0.005 (0.013)	0.100** (0.035)	0.095*** (0.027)
<u>Panel D</u>	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
ATIS $\times$ Reelection	0.027+ (0.015)	0.040* (0.017)	0.005 (0.005)	0.011+ (0.006)	0.031* (0.014)	0.038* (0.015)
Num.Obs.	6718	6718	6718	6718	6718	6718
FE: Half-year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country		✓		✓		✓
Controls $\times$ Reelection		✓		✓		✓

Note: Each cell in the table corresponds to a separate regression (24 regressions reported in total). Country-half-year observations, for 165 countries, 1989–2016. Models in the first and second columns reproduce the first and third models from the corresponding panels in Table 4. Third and fourth columns modify the outcome measure in the regressions, as a count of the agreements on “economic” topics (commercial, transport/aviation, taxation, agricultural). Outcome measure in the fifth and sixth columns is a count of only the agreements on “non-economic” topics (military, law enforcement, scientific, health, foreign aid). The “economic” vs. “non-economic” distinction is intended to capture agreements that are/not expected to produce electoral benefits for the incumbent U.S. president when signed during the reelection period. See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

A.5 Policy Insulation and Lame Duck Elections

Here we present a series of tests to adjudicate between our preferred autonomy-based explanation of the results in Table 4 and Figure 6, and an alternative explanation focused on policy insulation. As discussed in Section 3.4, if the main results are explained by presidents attempting to “lock-in” their diplomatic achievements in case a new president comes in and reverses course, we should expect that effect to be stronger during a president’s lame duck election period (7.5–8 years after entering office, when they are ineligible for reelection) as compared to the reelection period (3.5–4 years after inauguration).

The overlap in the coverage of the KOFs data and the executive agreements data requires a slightly restricted version of this test. Specifically, whereas four reelections occurred during our period of analysis (1992, 1996, 2004, 2012), only three lame-duck elections occurred (2000, 2008, 2016); and unfortunately, there are no KOFs publications available for the second half of 2000. Thus we restrict the reelection vs. lame-duck election comparison to the period of 2001–2016, where we have two of each type of election under two consecutive presidential administrations.

We estimate regressions similar to (1), but including a second “event” variable for the lame-duck election period; as in the main specification, we interact both event dummies with the respective capacity measure and with the control variables. Results are reported in Tables A.4, A.5, A.6, and A.7, with p -values reported for the difference between the two interaction terms. In all specifications with embassy size and ATIS, the difference between the coefficient on $[\text{Capacity} \times \text{Reelection}]$ is larger and significantly different from the coefficient on $[\text{Capacity} \times \text{Lame Duck Election}]$; for ATIR, the difference in effects is large in magnitude in the theorized direction, and statistically significant for the most demanding specification (column 3 of Table A.6, including controls and country FE). While not fully dispositive evidence in support of our autonomy mechanism, these findings are difficult to reconcile with one of the most theoretically compelling alternative explanations.

Table A.4: Embassy Size and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Emb. Size $\times$ Reelection	0.023* (0.010)	0.041** (0.013)	0.037** (0.013)
Emb. Size $\times$ Lame Duck Election	0.001 (0.007)	0.009 (0.009)	0.007 (0.009)
Num.Obs.	4785	4785	4785
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls $\times$ Reelection		✓	✓
p -value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.06	0.05	0.07

Note: Modification of the OLS results from Table 4, Panel A, including the interaction of Embassy Size with a Lame Duck Election indicator (denoting the last six months of a president's second term). Sample is restricted to years 2001–2016 (see discussion in Section A.5). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

Table A.5: Average Time In Post (ATIP) and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
ATIP $\times$ Reelection	0.064 (0.137)	0.140 (0.133)	0.112 (0.118)
ATIP $\times$ Lame Duck Election	0.170 (0.110)	0.163 (0.115)	0.089 (0.096)
Num.Obs.	4785	4785	4785
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls $\times$ Reelection		✓	✓
p -value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.52	0.89	0.87

Note: Modification of the OLS results from Table 4, Panel B, including the interaction of ATIP with a Lame Duck Election indicator (denoting the last six months of a president's second term). Sample is restricted to years 2001–2016 (see discussion in Section A.5). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

Table A.6: Average Time In Region (ATIR) and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
ATIR $\times$ Reelection	0.092+ (0.052)	0.105* (0.044)	0.088* (0.040)
ATIR $\times$ Lame Duck Election	-0.001 (0.035)	0.017 (0.035)	-0.011 (0.035)
Num.Obs.	4785	4785	4785
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls $\times$ Reelection		✓	✓
p -value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.15	0.13	0.05

Note: Modification of the OLS results from Table 4, Panel C, including the interaction of ATIR with a Lame Duck Election indicator (denoting the last six months of a president's second term). Sample is restricted to years 2001–2016 (see discussion in Section A.5). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

Table A.7: Average Time In Service (ATIS) and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
ATIS $\times$ Reelection	0.052* (0.022)	0.060* (0.024)	0.059* (0.024)
ATIS $\times$ Lame Duck Election	0.002 (0.013)	0.006 (0.013)	-0.006 (0.015)
Num.Obs.	4785	4785	4785
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls $\times$ Reelection		✓	✓
p -value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.04	0.05	0.02

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Modification of the OLS results from Table 4, Panel D, including the interaction of ATIS with a Lame Duck Election indicator (denoting the last six months of a president's second term). Sample is restricted to years 2001–2016 (see discussion in Section A.5). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.