Diplomatic Capacity and International Cooperation*

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Abstract

A longstanding debate in international relations scholarship has focused on 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 effects of bureaucratic preferences and capabilities on foreign policy outcomes are conditional on the degree to which political superiors are paying attention to foreign policy. 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 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.

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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, with the incentives and capabilities of individual actors and organizations within government placed 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—is a function of the organization's capacity and 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 cooperation 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 do.

Empirically, we leverage a novel dataset of U.S. diplomatic personnel posted abroad—collected from over 150 recently digitized State Department telephone 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 constitute 95% of all U.S. international agreements during this time period, they carry the same international legal status as treaties, and diplomats are heavily involved in their creation. 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 moderation (or causal interaction) of autonomy on the effect of embassy capacity.

Across a variety of measures of embassy capacity, we find support for our predictions. Reeleection 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.

In addition to advancing the study of bureaucratic influence in foreign policy, our findings contribute to a long literature in international political economy on the determinants of international agreements. It is received wisdom in international relations scholarship that international agreements reflect the lowest common denominator among signatory state preferences (Downs, Rocke and Barsoom, 1996), which are themselves determined (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.[1] 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, due to both selection and socialization (Malis, 2021). On on the one hand, sending governments may deliberately select diplomats who are sympathetic to their host governments, as a way to facilitate honest communication (Lindsey, 2023). Individuals with intrinsic preferences for cooperation may also be more likely to select into

[1] See Poulsen and Aisbett (2016) for a notable exception.

a diplomatic career path (Gailmard and Patty, 2007).[2] Alternatively, diplomats stationed abroad may also be socialized, through repeated interaction with host state officials, citizens, and interest groups, into believing that their sending state's relationship with the home state is uniquely important and that deeper cooperation would further the national interest (Wilson, 1989; Halperin and Clapp, 2006; Cooper, Heine and Thakur, 2013). Empirically, 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"); this process occasionally manifests via conflict between U.S. diplomats stationed in host states that are themselves rivals, such as India and Pakistan.[3]

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 bilateral 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, and there is some qualitative evidence that diplomats perceive the career benefits inherent in treatymaking (Poulsen and Aisbett, 2016). For instance, Constance Freeman, a former economic officer in the Foreign Service, recalled 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."[4] Bilateral agreements constitute a measurable diplomatic output which diplomats have an incentive to produce, independent of the agreement's policy value for the

[2] Analyzing military officers' preferences over the use of military force, Jost, Meshkin and Schub (2022) show that incoming officers at the U.S. Military Academy are preference outliers relative to the general population before training begins.

[3] Robert 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."

[4] ADST interview.

bilateral relationship or the broader national interest.

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 ability of diplomatic missions to utilize their capacity in furtherance of their policy preference will depend on the degree of *autonomy* they enjoy to pursue 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.[5]

On the one 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 the occurrence (or not) of any bilateral cooperation to be entirely dependent on the embassy's capacity. Alternatively, suppose the White House is heavily involved in a bilateral issue, 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. In this case, we should expect the top-down efforts to effectively crowd out the contributions of embassy-level diplomats, diminishing the marginal impact of embassy capacity on bilateral cooperation.

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 occupation with the Vietnam War gave diplomats more leeway in Indonesia during the early 1970s:

[5]In 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.

> "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."[6]

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 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.[7]

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,

[6] ADST interview, p. 33. Emphasis added.
[7] ADST Interview, p. 23

representation at the level of chargé, minister, ambassador, or nonexistent (Bayer, 2006). More recent work has analyzed data made available by the State Department's Office of the Historian to measure short-term vacancies in U.S. 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, 2022; Scoville, 2019). Such measures mask important variation in embassy-level capacity because they do not account for the expertise and experience of diplomats 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.[8] Gaining a fuller picture of embassy-level capacity thus requires a more complete accounting of the personnel serving within embassies, as well as their 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). 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; (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.

[8] See https://afsa.org/foreign-service-numbers.

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

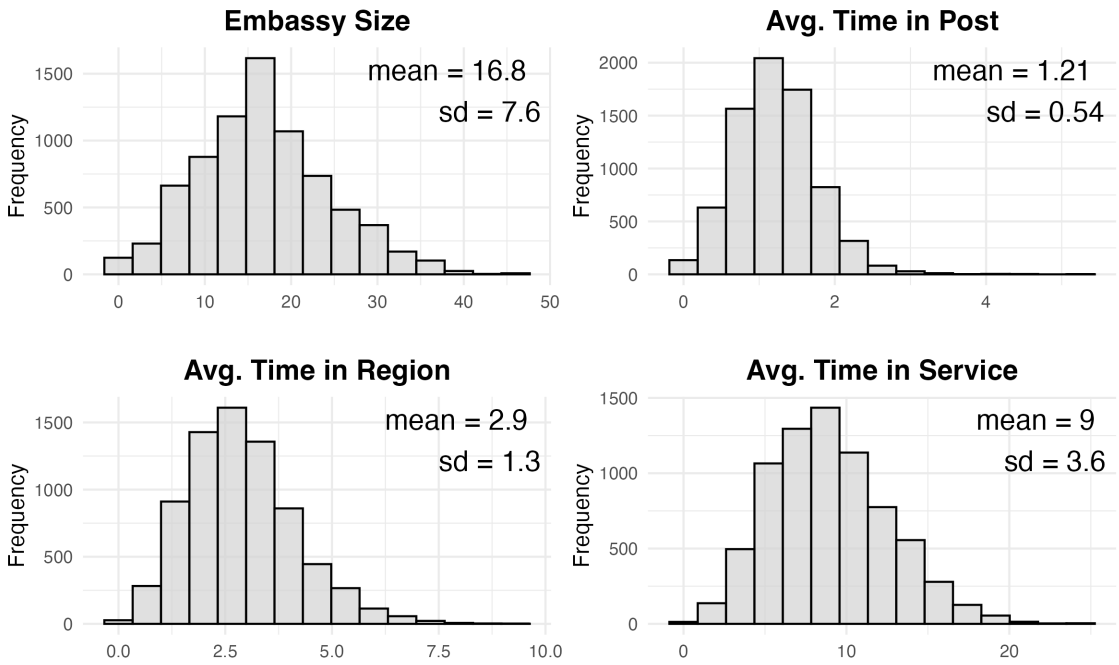
2.1.1 Aggregate Embassy-Level Capacity

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 a given 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 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 Key Officers data, which we refer to as their "time in service".[9] 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

[9]Note 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



Pairwise Correlations:

	Emb. Size	ATIP	ATIR	ATIS
Emb. Size	1			
ATIP	0.11	1		
ATIR	0.19	0.46	1	
ATIS	0.39	0.19	0.49	1

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, along with the pairwise correlations between them.

Figure 2: Temporal Trends in Capacity Measures for Select Countries

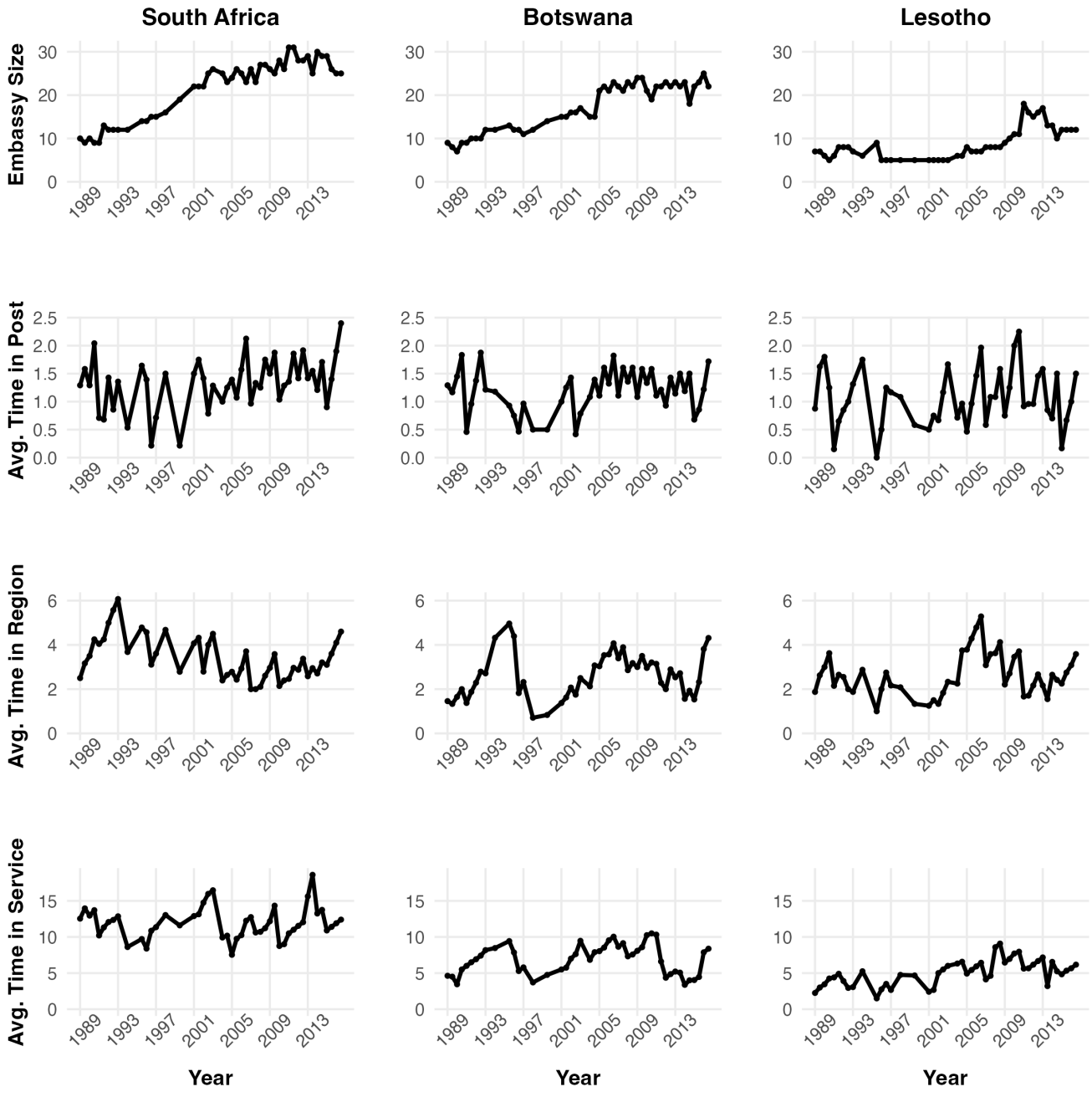


Figure 2 visualizes the within-country temporal trends in each capacity measure for three neighboring U.S. embassies in Southern Africa. We see a general (though not strictly monotonic) upward trend in embassy size across the three countries; and for all measures, South Africa's values appear to be higher 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.

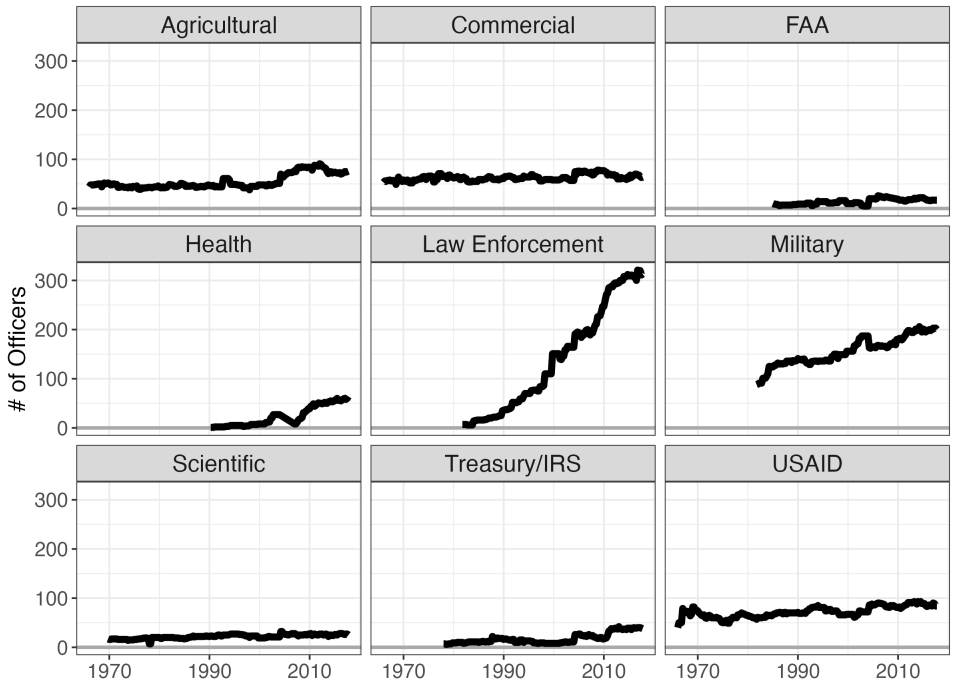
These short-term fluctuations reflect the fact that individual officers cycle in and out of embassy on a routine basis, with tours at a given embassy typically lasting two to three years. Specifically, variation in ATIP arises from the fact that the rotation schedules of the individual officers in embassy 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.

2.1.2 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) 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 somewhat less dramatic growth in the presence of agricultural and health attachś 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

Figure 3: External Attachés at Embassies, Over Time



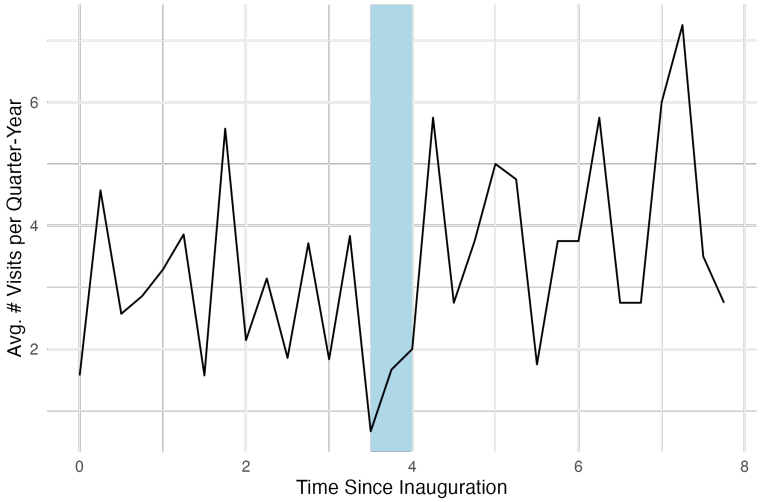
is limited.

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

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)

their analysis of presidential public papers and executive orders as well as congressional speeches and bills, Bubeck et al. (2022) 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 note 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.

2.3 Bilateral Cooperation

To measure bilateral cooperation, we use a recently compiled dataset from Hathaway, Bradley and Goldsmith (2020) that contains the near-universe of U.S. executive international agreements

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

(a) Topics

Defense	1635
Finance, Trade, and Investment	623
Humanitarian	605
Science, Space, and Technology	549
Environment, Conservation, and Energy	495
Transportation and Aviation	393
Law Enforcement	313
Nonproliferation	273
Educational Exchanges and Cultural Cooperation	174
Taxation	138
Diplomacy and Consular Affairs	126
Maritime	115

(b) Subtopics (Defense)

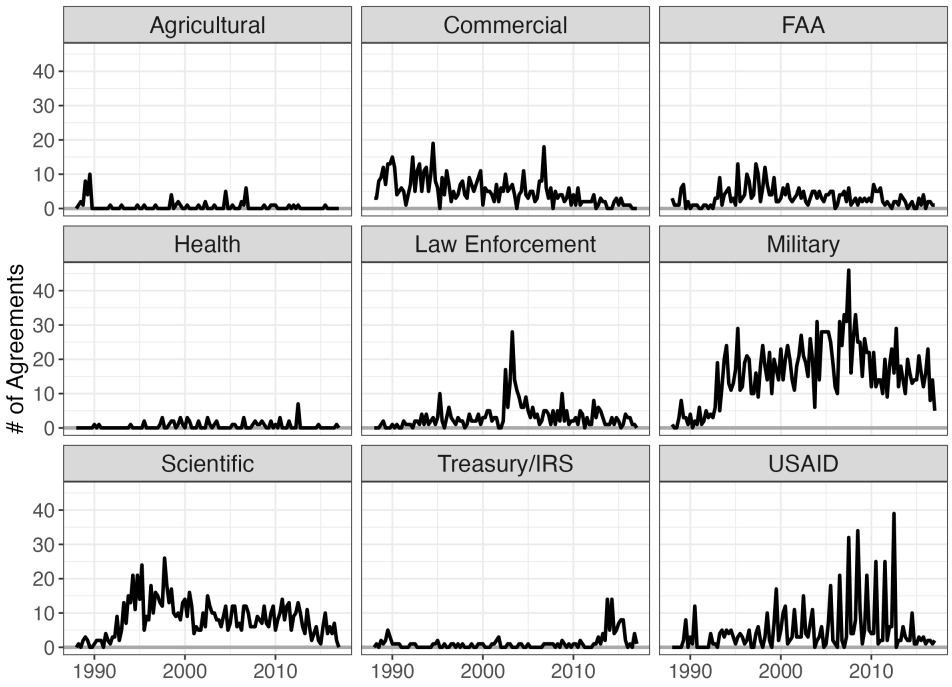
Acquisition & Cross-servicing	355
Status of Forces	290
Information Exchange & Information Security	254
Training & Assistance	219
Joint Initiatives & Projects	199
R&D, Testing	111
Alliances & Commitments	79
Benefits	76
Other	33
Facilities & Bases	23
Counterterrorism	10

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.

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. First, they represent serious, binding commitments on behalf of the U.S. to work with a partner state in pursuit of some mutual goal. Second, executive agreements are used to collaborate across a very broad range of policy issues; as 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). Executive agreements can therefore be used to gain a comprehensive picture of U.S. bilateral cooperation, and they can also be disaggregated to study cooperation in specific policy areas.

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.

Since treaties must be ratified by the Senate, a process requiring both time and political capital, executives are unlikely to pursue them for all but the most important agreements. A third benefit of executive agreements, then, is that they allow us to capture a more complete spectrum of cooperative activities. For example, Table 2 demonstrates that among the 1,635 defense-related executive agreements concluded by the U.S., most of them pertain to important but relatively 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. This also allows for higher-frequency measures of bilateral cooperation than can be achieved by studying treaties; as Figure 5 demonstrates, the U.S. is quite active in several different issue areas on an annual basis.

Finally, and importantly for our purposes, there is good reason to believe that embassy-level diplomatic capacity matters for the creation and signing of executive agreements. According to the Circular 175 (C-175) Procedure, any U.S. agency seeking to negotiate an international agreement

Table 3: Agreement Signatory, by Topic

Agreement Category	% Signed by Embassy	% Signed by State Dept.	# Agreements
Defense	0.46	0.50	308
Science, Space, and Technology	0.28	0.47	195
Environment, Conservation, and Energy	0.32	0.48	151
Law Enforcement	0.69	0.93	107
Transportation and Aviation	0.56	0.79	103
Humanitarian	0.33	0.44	90
Diplomacy and Consular Affairs	0.76	1.00	75
Finance, Trade, and Investment	0.58	0.64	73
Educational Exchanges and Cultural Cooperation	0.58	0.90	72
Taxation	0.86	0.97	69
Maritime	0.60	0.97	30
Nonproliferation	0.67	0.89	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.

must coordinate with the State Department, and ultimately receive authorization from the Secretary of State (or designee).[10] To learn about which 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. (We 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.)

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

[10] See U.S. Foreign Affairs Manual, 11 FAM 720.

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 U.S. Trade Representative, for instance—the executive agreements are commonly negotiated and concluded by in-country 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.[11] 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. One 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.

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

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 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. 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.[12]

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).[13] 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 strategi-

[12] Note that causal interaction is symmetrical in the two "factors" (here, capacity and attention); thus our estimand can by equivalently expressed as either (i) the causal moderation of presidential attention on the effect of embassy capacity; or (ii) the the causal moderation of embassy capacity on the effect of presidential attention on agreement signing.

[13] Specifically, we invoke the conditional version of Xu, Zhao and Ding (2025)'s Assumption 5 ("factorial parallel trends").

cally 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 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.[14] 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

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

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".[15]

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 17–19 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 and oversight on foreign affairs wanes, the gap in diplomatic output produced by better- vs. worse-staffed embassies widens considerably. In other words, when granted a greater degree of autonomy in the conduct of bilateral relations, high-capacity embassies are able to take advantage of that

[15] Hardship 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.

Table 4: Embassy Capacity and Agreement Signing: Main Results

	OLS			Poisson		
Panel A	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size	0.016+	0.027*	0.024*	0.013	0.036*	0.028+
× Reelection	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Panel B	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Avg. Time In Post	0.040	0.034	0.031	0.047	0.084	0.078
× Reelection	(0.102)	(0.091)	(0.079)	(0.163)	(0.158)	(0.138)
Panel C	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
Avg. Time In Region	0.066*	0.061*	0.070*	0.103*	0.114*	0.123**
× Reelection	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.028)	(0.048)	(0.045)	(0.044)
Panel D	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
Avg. Time In Service	0.025+	0.035*	0.041*	0.034+	0.057*	0.058**
× Reelection	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.019)	(0.024)	(0.020)
Num.Obs.	6801	6801	6801	6801	6801	6751
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 164 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. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

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 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

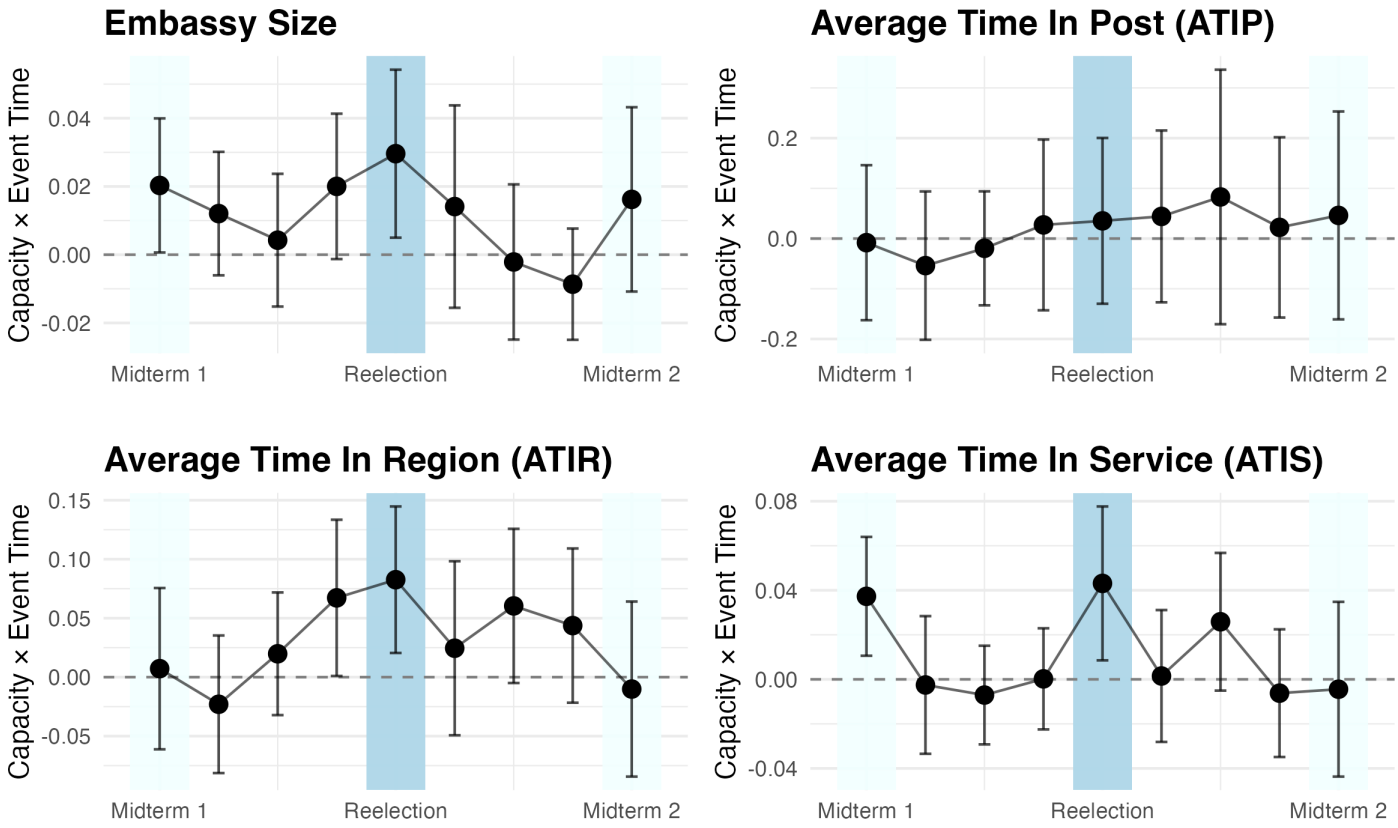
embassy officials: do embassies in which the core generalist officers have spent more time posted in the current region—potentially resulting in deeper knowledge of the region's politics and culture, as well as greater familiarity with the State Department regional bureau—achieve greater bilateral cooperation 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 13–15 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 embassy size and ATIS, 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

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



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 can 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.

3.3 Robustness

We consider two additional set 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 that are the outcome of our study. 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.6 using an alternative outcome

measure: the number of agreements signed, weighted by the rate of embassy involvement in that agreement category.[16] Results are similar to those reported in Table 4.

The second set of robustness tests clarifies the value-added of focusing on diplomatic representation 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.7, 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 the president is campaigning for re-election, 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 to be the case that incumbent presidents see an electoral benefit in signing international agreements—because it signals diplomatic competence, for example, or because some agreements lead to transfers to specific 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

[16] So 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.

role for diplomatic capacity, it counters our assertion that reelection campaigns increase diplomatic autonomy from the executive.

We test this "political cooperation cycles" 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.5 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 increased treaty-making during re-election periods is the increased threat of losing office, we should observe an even *stronger* effect during lame duck election periods; not only is the incumbent herself going to lose office with certainty (as she can't run again), but the odds that her party will lose the election are also higher.If policy insulation drives our results, lame duck presidents should sprint to prepare for partisan turnover. However, that is not what we find; Tables A.1–A.4 show that there is no similar effect of diplomatic capacity on agreement signing during lame duck election periods, and that the difference between reelection vs. lame-duck election effects are statistically significant across most specifications. 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, affects aggregate bilateral cooperation during election periods. 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.

Results are reported in Table **??**. We find similar effects across all all specifications, with different combinations of fixed effects. The first column includes country FE, issue-area FE, and

Table 5: Issue-Specific Capacity and Bilateral Cooperation

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Attache × Reelection	0.014**	0.013**	0.011*
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Num.Obs.	61740	61740	61740
FE: Half-year (HY)	✓	✓	
FE: Issue area	✓		
FE: Country	✓		
FE: Country-Issue		✓	✓
FE: Country-HY			✓
Controls	✓	✓	

Note: Country-issue-half-year observations, for 164 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.

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 and 1.4 percentage points—a substantively large effect, relative to the outcome mean of 0.045.[17]

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 diplomatic representation at the level of individual personnel, and taking account of their individual experiences and expertise.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that diplomats' ability to exert independent influence over foreign affairs is a function of both *autonomy* and *capacity*. Diplomats' influence over policy is limited when

[17]This 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.

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, constructed from a much more detailed dataset on embassy personnel than has previously been available (Lindsey, Malis and Thrall, 2025). Results support our conditional theory of bureaucratic influence: high capacity embassies sign more bilateral agreements, meaningful forms of institutional cooperation that constitute binding international law, but only when the leader is distracted by a reelection campaign.

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 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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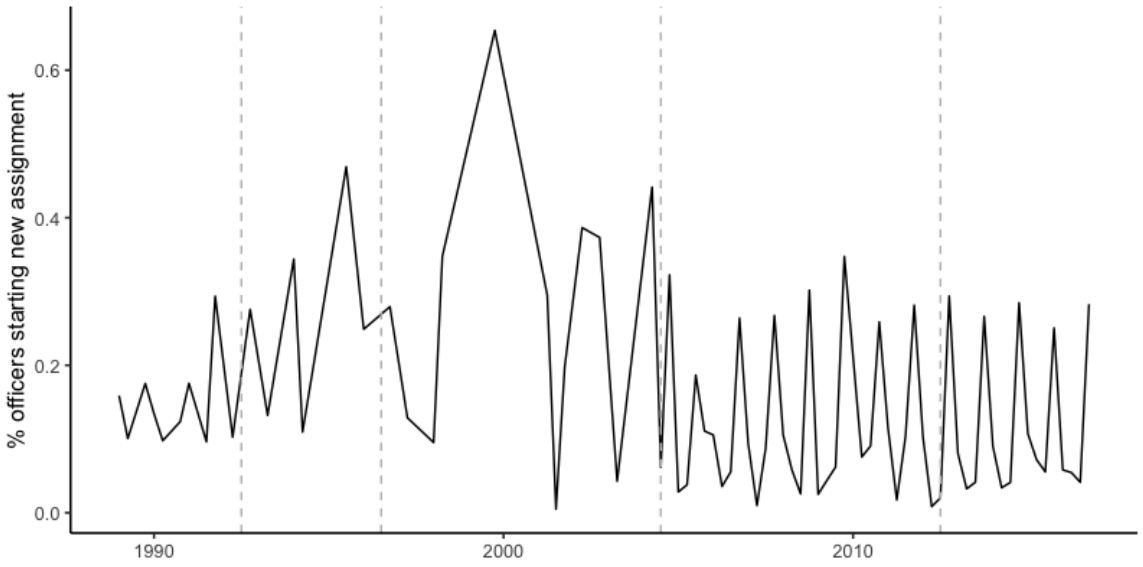
Appendix

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 should 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 in during these gaps (e.g. in 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, and why we instead target a causal interaction as our theoretical estimand: even conditioning on these observable covariates, there would be strong reason to suspect that there remains some unobserved confounding which would undermine identification.

We then estimate regressions of the form

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

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

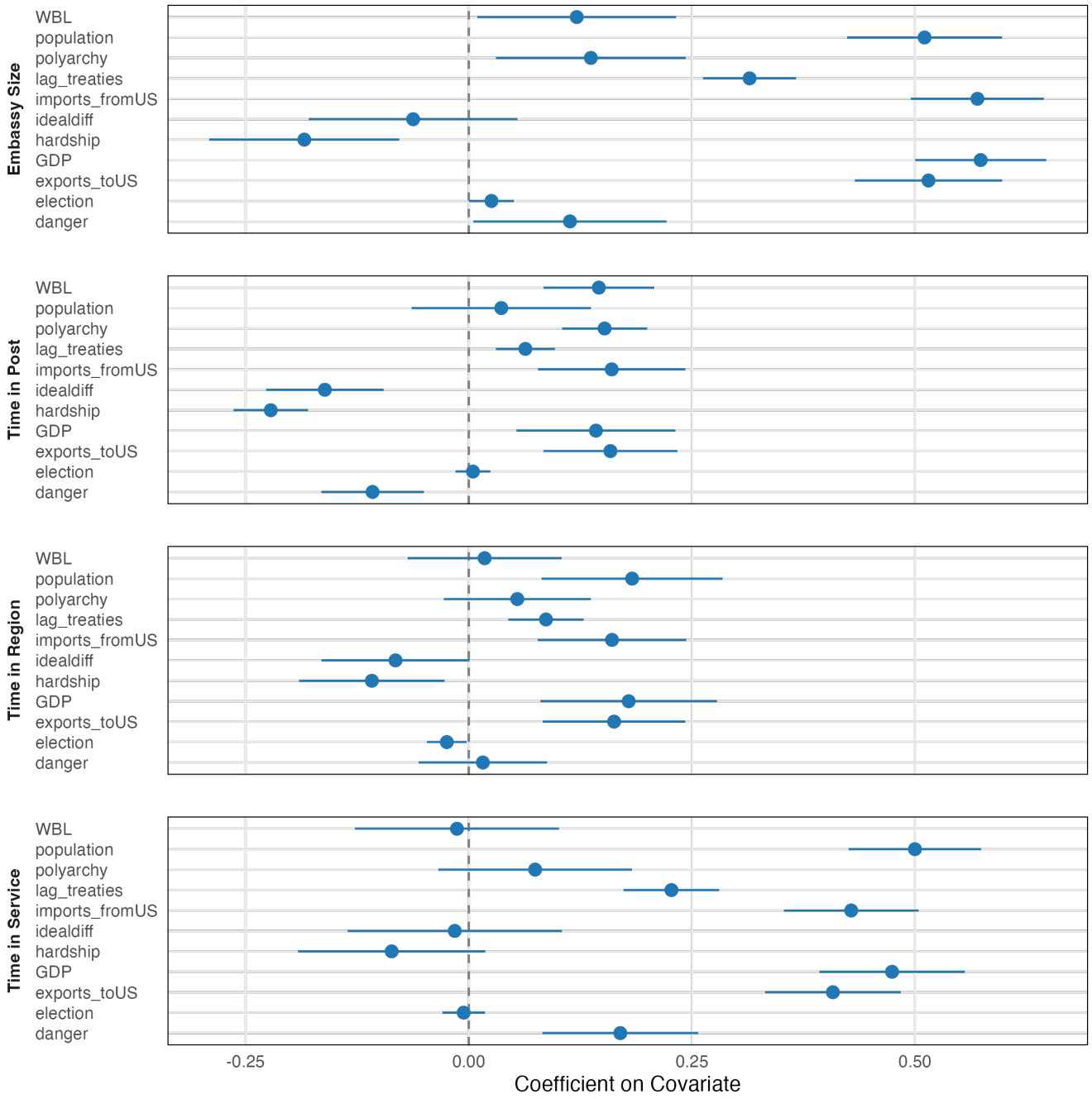
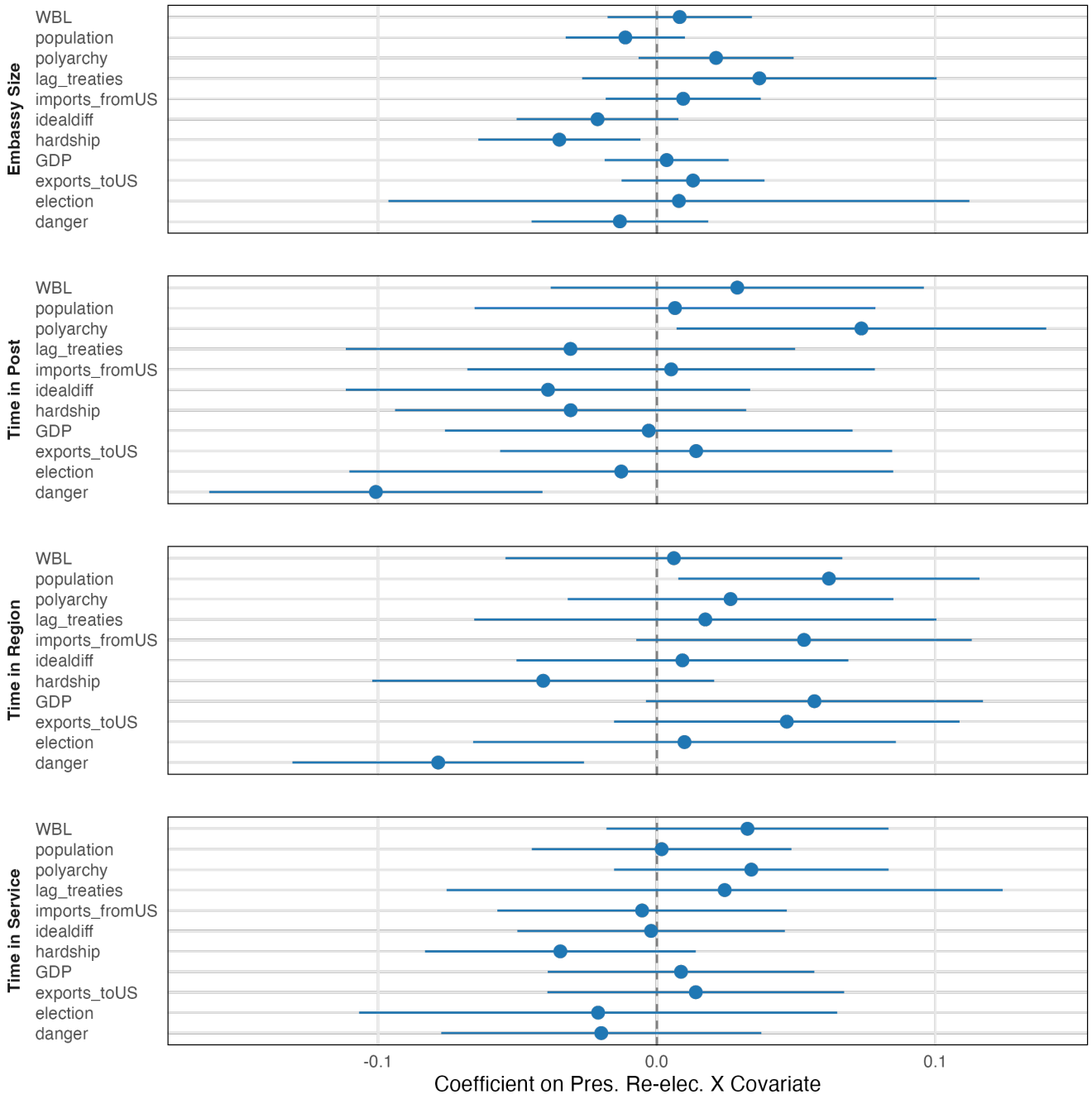


Figure A.3: Balance Tests: Embassy Capacity and Covariates × Reelection



A.2 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.1, A.2, A.3, and A.4, 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 [Capacity $\times$ Reelection] is larger and significantly different from the coefficient on [Capacity $\times$ 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.3, including controls and country FE). While not fully dispositive evidence in support of our autonomy mechanism, these findings are hard to reconcile with one of the most theoretically compelling alternative explanations.

Table A.1: Embassy Size and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Emb. Size × Reelection	0.023*	0.041**	0.037**
	(0.010)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Emb. Size × Lame Duck Election	0.000	0.009	0.006
	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Num.Obs.	4728	4728	4728
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls × Reelection		✓	✓
p-value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.05	0.05	0.06

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.2). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

Table A.2: Average Time In Post (ATIP) and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
ATIP × Reelection	0.052	0.141	0.105
	(0.139)	(0.134)	(0.118)
ATIP × Lame Duck Election	0.156	0.153	0.072
	(0.109)	(0.116)	(0.095)
Num.Obs.	4728	4728	4728
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls × Reelection		✓	✓
p-value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.54	0.95	0.82

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.2). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

Table A.3: Average Time In Region (ATIR) and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
ATIR × Reelection	0.090+	0.101*	0.085*
	(0.052)	(0.045)	(0.041)
ATIR × Lame Duck Election	-0.006	0.011	-0.017
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Num.Obs.	4728	4728	4728
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls × Reelection		✓	✓
p-value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.14	0.12	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.2). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

Table A.4: Average Time In Service (ATIS) and Agreement Signing: Reelection vs. Lame Duck Election Periods

	(1)	(2)	(3)
ATIS × Reelection	0.052*	0.060*	0.060*
	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.024)
ATIS × Lame Duck Election	0.000	0.004	-0.008
	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Num.Obs.	4728	4728	4728
FE: Half-Year	✓	✓	✓
FE: Country			✓
Controls × Reelection		✓	✓
p-value for $\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2$	0.03	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.2). See caption of Table 4 for additional details.

A.3 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.5, 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.5: Embassy Capacity and Agreement Signing: Disaggregated Agreement Outcomes

	All Agreements		"Economic" Agreements		"Non-Economic" Agreements	
Panel A	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size × Reelection	0.016+	0.024*	-0.002	-0.001	0.020*	0.027*
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.008)	(0.011)
Panel B	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
ATIP × Reelection	0.040	0.031	-0.063*	-0.080*	0.146	0.150*
	(0.102)	(0.079)	(0.030)	(0.034)	(0.098)	(0.069)
Panel C	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
ATIR × Reelection	0.066*	0.070*	0.006	0.007	0.094**	0.092***
	(0.033)	(0.028)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.033)	(0.027)
Panel D	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
ATIS × Reelection	0.025+	0.041*	0.004	0.010+	0.030*	0.039*
	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Num.Obs.	6801	6801	6801	6801	6801	6801
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 164 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.4 Outcome Measures Weighted by Embassy Involvement

Table A.6 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.6: Embassy Capacity and Agreement Signing: Outcome Weighted by Embassy Involvement

	OLS			Poisson		
Panel A	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size × Reelection	0.007+	0.013*	0.012*	0.013	0.038*	0.030+
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Panel B	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
ATIP × Reelection	0.017	0.014	0.012	0.046	0.073	0.064
	(0.049)	(0.043)	(0.038)	(0.168)	(0.164)	(0.144)
Panel C	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
ATIR × Reelection	0.031*	0.031*	0.036**	0.106*	0.125**	0.133**
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.048)	(0.045)	(0.042)
Panel D	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
ATIS × Reelection	0.012+	0.018*	0.021**	0.033+	0.063**	0.061**
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.019)	(0.024)	(0.021)
Num.Obs.	6801	6801	6801	6801	6801	6751
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 164 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.4 for further discussion of the outcome. See caption of Table 4 for further discussion of model specifications.

A.5 Capacity Measures Excluding Ambassadors

Table A.7 reports the second set of robustness check described in Section 3.3, modifying the embassy capacity measures to exclude the ambassador.

Table A.7: Modifications of Table 4 Results, Excluding Ambassadors from Capacity Measures

	OLS			Poisson		
Panel A	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emb. Size (w/o Amb.) × Reelection	0.016+	0.027*	0.024*	0.013	0.036*	0.028+
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Panel B	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
ATIP (w/o Amb.) × Reelection	-0.008	0.000	-0.013	-0.033	0.048	-0.002
	(0.092)	(0.084)	(0.072)	(0.148)	(0.151)	(0.131)
Panel C	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
ATIR (w/o Amb.) × Reelection	0.060+	0.051	0.055+	0.086*	0.104*	0.106*
	(0.033)	(0.032)	(0.030)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.041)
Panel D	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
ATIS (w/o Amb.) × Reelection	0.022+	0.033*	0.034*	0.030+	0.058*	0.052**
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.024)	(0.020)
Num.Obs.	6801	6801	6801	6801	6801	6751
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. 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.