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Information and access to United Nations diplomatic missions

Peter M. Aronow[a,b], Molly Offer-Westort[c], Lauren E. Pinson[d] and Ana C. Perez-Gea[e]

[a]Department of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA; [b]Department of Biostatistics, Yale School of Public Health, New Haven, CT, USA; [c]Department of Political Science and Department of Statistics, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA; [d]Department of Statistics, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA; [e]Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, New York University, New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

United Nations (UN) diplomats play an important role in international policy, yet there is a scarcity of evidence and theory on their preferences and behaviour. We report the results of an online field experiment designed to identify the revealed preferences of diplomats. In particular, we investigate whether and how diplomats will provide access to outside organizations based on offers of information. We contacted diplomats by email and randomized offers of information on either peer missions or world affairs. While offers of information on peers garnered nearly 45% more responses indicating interest than offers of information on world affairs, response rates across both treatments were low, and the difference is only 3.3 percentage points. Our estimated treatment effects of assignment to the peer as compared to world affairs treatment are not statistically significant. Our experiment failed to provide evidence that these types of informational offers facilitate differential access to UN diplomats.

KEYWORDS

International organizations; United Nations; diplomats; information; field experiments

JEL CLASSIFICATION

C9; D78; D83; F53

I. Introduction

International organizations play an essential role in the arena of international politics, yet there has been little research on how decisions are made within these institutions. This article works to address this gap, using an experiment on the revealed preferences of United Nations (UN) diplomats. A better understanding of diplomat preferences will help researchers to understand how these actors shape the policies of the institutions in which they work.

Information and access

The question motivating our research is what facilitates access to UN diplomats. Diplomats are constrained in the time they can allocate to engaging with other parties interested in UN policy. Thus, in deciding which parties to engage with, they consider how these parties can help them achieve their goals. In the context of American politics, Kalla and Broockman (2015) ask whether donations to political campaigns secure preferential treatment from lawmakers. They find that policymakers made themselves available for meetings more often when they were told that prospective attendees were donors. As a parallel to Kalla and Broockman, we investigate whether and how diplomats will provide access to outside organizations when the organization can offer them valuable information.

Diplomats' objectives are to participate in the UN in ways that advance their own interests and the policy priorities of their country. To do so, they must gather and process information relative to UN decisions, which is costly and difficult. For this reason, diplomats may find a natural ally in organizations with whom they share priorities. There is evidence that lobbyists in the United States operate in this way, providing information to assist allies in shared objectives (Hall and Deardorff 2006).

To test this, we conduct an experiment in which we contact diplomats and offer them information in return for agreement to participate in a pilot programme. The type of offer is randomized over information on peers at the UN and world affairs. As responding to requests for contact is costly for diplomats, variation in response rate across informational categories will reveal diplomat preferences over types of information. We select these two categories of information (peer versus world affairs), as they will provide insights into how diplomats

CONTACT Peter M. Aronow peter.aronow@yale.edu

operate. If diplomats care mostly about their peers at the UN, this indicates that outside organizations that already have broad networks at the UN will be able to gain access to missions. If diplomats are more interested in gaining information on world affairs, organizations that have deep research capabilities will be able to gain access. A caveat with this approach is that we are not able to measure what information diplomats already have. Thus, what we are learning is not simply what information diplomats care about but what *additional* information diplomats care about.

II. Methodology

Prior to the experiment, the research team conducted unstructured interviews with former diplomats, UN Permanent Mission employees and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that engage with missions. Based on information gained in these interviews, the intervention was designed so that contact would appear similar to other email contact missions might receive from NGOs or other outside organizations.

We contacted by email all 189 UN Permanent Missions from member states that had current diplomatic relations with the United States at the time of the intervention. Emails were addressed to the office of the Permanent Representative of each mission. We used the email addresses and titles as listed in the UN Blue Book.[1]

While emails were addressed to the Permanent Representatives (or the highest ranking, listed member of the mission) themselves, we expect that in most if not all missions, administrative assistants or other mission staff will be the first reader and may directly respond to the email. As this is the normal channel through which contact is made from outside organizations, this is our channel of interest. Emails were sent in a random order over 3 days.

In the emails, we invited UN Permanent Representatives to participate in a pilot programme to 'bridge the gap between academics and policy makers' on behalf of 'a group of researchers at Yale University'. All subjects were invited to take a short survey, and in return, findings from the survey were shared with those who participated.

The relevant line in the peer treatment email reads, 'We would like to invite you or a representative of your mission into a pilot program wherein we have Yale research assistants *collect anonymous short surveys from representatives of UN missions and then report these findings to participants*. In so doing, we hope to help provide useful information to you about *your peers at the UN* that might be otherwise difficult to collect' (emphasis added). In the world affairs treatment, 'produce research briefs on the topic of your choosing based on an anonymous short survey' and 'world affairs' were substituted for the italicized text. Of the 189 missions contacted, 94 were randomly assigned the peer treatment and 95 the world affairs treatment.

Table 1. Response by treatment.

		Any response		Interest response	
	Countries	Count	Per cent	Count	Per cent
Peers	94	10	10.64	10	10.64
World affairs	95	10	10.53	7	7.37

'Per cent' columns represent count as a percentage of countries assigned to respective treatment group. 'Interest' responses are a subset of 'any' responses.

Analysis was conducted with treatment assignment blinded. Our outcome of interest is response to emails. We code separately 'interest response' for emails that had some indication of interest, and 'any response', for any type of reply to the email, including interest responses, notification of a change in the Permanent Representative and declination to participate. Table 1 shows number and percentage of responses by treatment group.

Country data

We follow Fisman and Miguel (2007) in selection of control variables, and use the replication files for their article as a source for data on these variables (Fisman and Miguel 2015). As expected given randomization, we find no statistically or substantively significant differences in covariate balance between the two groups. For missing covariate entries, we follow Lin, Green, and Coppock (2015) and use mean imputation.

III. Results

We conduct an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of the outcomes on an indicator for assignment to peer treatment. The model we estimate is

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Peers + \boldsymbol{X}\gamma + \epsilon$$

[1]Permanent Missions to the United Nations No. 305, April 2015.

Table 2. Ordinary least squares regressions: any response.

	Any response			Interest response		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment effect	0.001	− 0.010	−0.001	0.033	0.023	0.033
	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.046)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.043)
Control mean	0.105	0.111	0.106	0.074	0.078	0.074
	(0.032)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Country characteristics	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Region indicators	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

'Any response' indicator is the dependent variable for specifications 1, 2 and 3. 'Interest response' indicator is the dependent variable for specifications 4, 5 and 6. Heteroscedasticity-consistent SEs are reported in parentheses, using MacKinnon and White (1985) HC2 estimators; these estimators are generally conservative under a randomization model (Samii and Aronow 2012). 'Country characteristics' indicates inclusion of country-level covariates in the specification. Covariates are number of diplomats in the UN mission, corruption index, log per capita income, average government wage divided by per capita income, log weighted distance between country and US populations, log total trade with the USA and dummies for whether the country received US economic aid and US military aid. 'Region indicators' are dummy variables for the region in which the country is located: Africa, Asia, Europe, South America or the Middle East; North America is the excluded region.

where β_1 represents the peer assignment indicator, $\boldsymbol{X}$ represents the vector of covariates, including country-level covariates and indicators for region and ε is a disturbance with $E[\varepsilon|Peers, \boldsymbol{X}] = 0$. Note that, when covariates are not included, this estimator of β_1 reduces to the well-known difference-in-means.

We first report estimates without covariate adjustment (the difference-in-means), followed by specifications controlling for country-level covariates and indicators for region. Summary results for OLS regressions are presented in Table 2.

In Table 2, the coefficient on the peer assignment indicator in the unadjusted regression (1) shows that assignment to the peer treatment is associated with a 0.1 percentage point higher response rate, as compared to the world affairs treatment. As this is a simple difference-in-means, this is also reflected in the 'Per cent' column under the 'Any response' treatment in Table 1. Given the relatively large SE compared to the magnitude of the coefficient, this effect size is not different from zero at any conventional confidence level. The coefficient on the peer assignment indicator becomes negative when we adjust for country characteristics, and also when region indicators are included (regressions 2 and 3). However, while these coefficients are somewhat larger than in the unadjusted regression, they are also not statistically different from zero.

The coefficient on the peer assignment indicator in the unadjusted regression (4) shows that assignment to the peer treatment is associated with a 3.3 percentage point higher interest response rate, as compared to the world affairs treatment. This is also reflected in the 'Per cent' column under the 'Interest response' treatment in Table 1. This effect size is not different from zero at any conventional confidence level, and the effect size does not move significantly when adjusted for country characteristics and region indicators. We replicated our results using logistic regression (not presented here); again, we find no evidence of a strong effect of being assigned to the peer treatment over assignment to the world affairs treatment in any specification.

In summary, we find no difference in response rates across those assigned the peer and world affairs treatments: the coefficient on the peer assignment indicator is not different from zero at any conventional confidence level. This holds both for 'any response' and for 'interest response' outcome variables, and controlling for country-level covariates and region, in both OLS and logit models.

IV. Conclusion

While we were able to elicit responses from nearly 10% of subjects in both of our treatment arms, and we were able to garner slightly more interest in participation in our pilot programme with offers of information on peers relative to world affairs, we did not find a statistically significant difference in outcomes between the treatment arms. It is not possible to increase power of our experiment by expanding the sample, as we have sampled the full population of Permanent Missions of UN member states that have diplomatic relations with the USA. We are not able to reject the hypothesis of no treatment effect,

but we believe these results are of interest because of the targeted population in our experiment. Diplomats are a difficult population to access for the general population, and there is little evidence on why certain individuals and groups get access to diplomats, while others do not. We hope our experiment will provide a starting point for further research in this area, and a baseline for future estimates.

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