Beyond roll-call voting: sponsorship dynamics at the UN General Assembly

Abstract: Research on the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has often privileged analyses on voting patterns, i.e. how countries position themselves whenever a resolution is brought to a vote in each plenary session. However, voted resolutions comprise only a fraction of UNGA output, and much is still unknown about how countries behave *before* casting any votes. What takes place prior to and leading up to the adoption of resolutions? Even though the study of draft sponsorship remains underdeveloped, it can comprise a more valid empirical strategy to infer state preferences. This research note introduces the UN General Assembly Sponsorship Dataset, which encompasses the sponsorship behavior of every UNGA member from 2009 to 2019. We develop two novel empirical indices, priority and ownership, in order to ascertain draft relevance for each member state. We also use the new data to test longstanding arguments over vote-buying and North vs. South coalitions in the UNGA. Our findings confirm mainstream conclusions for the former but challenge prevailing assumptions on the latter.

Keywords: UNGA, sponsorship, roll-call voting, vote-buying, voting blocs, social network analysis

Introduction

Over the years, research on the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has privileged analyses on voting patterns. The usefulness of UNGA data appears evident, as it provides a "record of how the state wants to be seen by others, the international norms it finds acceptable, and the positions it is willing to take publicly" (Mattes et al. 2015, 284). Its broad mandate and regimental regularity allow to depict comprehensive portraits of country interests over time. Yet, features inherent to the voting process impose significant limitations. Notably, the largest share of UNGA output is never put to a vote, the share that does get voted is disproportionally concentrated on disputed topics, and voting is just the endpoint of a long and complex process.

Despite attempts to expose backstage intricacies, much remains unknown about what happens *before* voting (Panke 2013; Peterson 2006, 81-4). What leads up to the adoption of resolutions? How to identify relevant partners and topics based on observed behavior at the UNGA? We argue draft sponsorship can open new possibilities and refine previous assessments. If we consider sponsoring a "form of public position taking" that manifests ulterior political agendas, sponsorship throughout the drafting process becomes a valuable source of insight (Desposato and Kearney 2011, 536). Monitoring these steps in full increases our number of observations and provides a more accurate depiction of UNGA exchanges.

However, UNGA sponsorship has remained a marginal topic due to a lack of readily available data. Despite recent contributions (e.g. Finke 2021; Dijkhuizen and Onderco 2019; Hecht 2017; Pascoe and Bae 2021), further work is still required in order to harness the potential of sponsoring patterns. This research note demonstrates existing limitations in roll-call data and introduces the *UN General Assembly Sponsorship Dataset* (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MPQUE2) covering every member between 2009 and 2019.[1]

[1] The dataset covers 193 member states plus Palestine (a non-member observer state).

We develop two original indices, priority and ownership, and demonstrate their usefulness in reaching finer assessments of state preferences. We test the validity of our approach by revisiting two traditional areas of research, vote-buying and blocs at the UNGA, and by advancing a research agenda on the topic.

State preferences at the UN General Assembly

International organizations represent privileged venues for the study of state preferences. As the most inclusive organization in terms of membership and agenda, the UNGA has remained a longstanding focal point for such empirical forays. Early attempts to map voting blocs (e.g. Alker and Russet 1965), for instance, were followed by a post-Cold War focus on "West vs. the Rest" cleavages (e.g. Voeten 2000) and on the cohesion of political groupings (e.g. Burmester and Jankowski 2014). Voting affinity between countries, in turn, has been used as a proxy for shared substantive preferences (e.g. Potrafke 2009; Strüver 2016).

Overall, these contributions infer state preferences from *ex post* observable behavior. But given that state preferences are not directly observable, validity is compromised if insufficient attention is paid to the contextual environment. This is because "without more information about the strategic setting […] it is impossible to know how the behavior maps back to the preference" (Frieden 1999, 45). Two states might vote differently on a resolution, but what this reveals about their preferences might depend on their sensitivity to the topic, or on whether the resolution was authored by one of the two states or by a third-party. Tallying votes remains uninformative if we cannot establish how important voted items were to countries. Unfortunately, articles using off-the-shelf indicators rarely tackle the institutional idiosyncrasies of UN formalities.

The limits of roll-call voting

The use of votes to track cohesion among states incurs on three types of criticism. The first concerns sample size and selection bias. Only around 20-30% of resolutions receive a vote, with divisive topics often overrepresented (Häge and Hug 2016, 507). Indeed, resolutions on disarmament are on average three times more likely to be brought to a vote than resolutions on development, despite the latter accounting for a larger share of total output (Devin et al. 2020). This filtering can distort country profiling. Regional groups from the Global South, for example, are considered less cohesive based on their votes (Burmester and Jankowski 2014), when in fact disputed topics such as disarmament comprise only a fraction of their output, compared to numerous unvoted resolutions on development in which they cooperate. Voting results do not exhaust the track-record because resolutions can also be adopted by consensus, by acclamation, without objection or without any vote (Peterson 2006, 54). Furthermore, Häge and Hug highlight that "if the share of consensus decisions varies, affinity measures that do not take consensus decisions into account cannot reasonably be compared over time" (2016, 506). Progress has been made to account for oscillations in total votes per session, such as models controlling for agenda changes (Bailey et al. 2017). However, these advancements still rely on voting results and do not improve our knowledge of what lies behind a ballot.

A second criticism underlines that "studies that use UN voting data to measure common interests pay insufficient attention to the content of UN votes" (Voeten 2013, 54). An undifferentiated tallying of yeas and nays is uninformative over the importance countries attach to each vote. If resolutions cannot be distinguished based on content or procedural elements, inferences over substantive preferences are compromised. The need to weigh votes is acknowledged within the roll-call literature, but the fact such distinction of "important votes" has been extended to the US alone remains a shortcoming (Bailey et al. 2017).

Lastly, pre-voting dynamics are often neglected. Keohane argued states at the UNGA could influence outcomes by obstructing formal procedures; failure to recognize these predicaments "hinders our understanding of the UN and international organizations in general" (1967, 237). Gartzke and Schneider also warn that the "manipulation of votes" is understudied (2013, 46). Yet, this would require understanding how the process unfolds from start to finish to pinpoint the moments in which push and pull-forces can be observed. Such dealings are often at the core of key UN phenomena, such as vote-buying. However, voting results are static and ill-suited to capture such transactions – especially when lumped in yearly aggregates. It is therefore essential to monitor the drafting process at each step to obtain more granular evidence.

Sponsorship

Previous contributions have underscored that sponsorship can reveal state preferences, given how delegations "measure the relative values of direct or indirect sponsorship and critically appraise the various purposes to which the sponsorship process can be put, as well as the political ground that may be lost by injudicious entry into the list of sponsors" (Mower Jr. 1962, 661; Keohane 1967). Such studies nonetheless failed to incite subsequent interest. Existing work on sponsorship owes much more to US congressional studies. Insights from this literature can be partially adapted to the UNGA to establish the usefulness of this measure.

First, sponsoring is informative over the preferences of states because it is antecedent. It happens "before efforts by leaders or influential members to persuade members to change their positions and before any potential source of selection bias, including agenda control" (Desposato and Kearney 2011, 532; Wilson and Young 1997). This makes it a potentially richer source to capture the issue-space than tabled votes, as the latter may inherit selection bias

(Devin et al. 2020). Second, sponsoring is dynamic. Studies on coalition building recognize such processes play out across time: votes are preceded by sponsorship decisions, which are themselves preceded by signals from leading actors (Kessler and Krehbiel 1996, 556). This implies a temporal dynamic that must be accounted for when characterizing the push-and-pull forces within drafting. Lastly, sponsoring is a form of signaling: it reveals information about the message each actor wishes to convey and about their reciprocal perceptions.

As our goal is neither to explain the origins of state preferences nor to develop a full model of strategic behavior at the UNGA but to introduce a novel dataset, the argument connecting sponsorship to preferences is kept simple. We posit that states deem sponsoring as the realization of two non-excluding purposes: effecting and relating (Koger 2003, 230-31). Effecting concerns how a resolution is expected to *produce an outcome over a policy domain*, e.g. strengthening human rights (Chané and Sharma 2016) or democracy (Hecht 2017).

However, states do not just envisage substantive effects; some may even support resolutions banning the death penalty, despite the domestic use of capital punishment (Pascoe and Bae 2021). States might be indifferent to substantive effects because the UNGA is a soft-law body, which means enforcement is not ensured. The disproportionate habit of consensus also suggests delegates often agree on decisions for reasons beyond practical consequences. In fact, "sponsors of a resolution may have a goal, and opponents may object to certain provisions and lobby against them, but a great number of those involved in negotiations may not have strong feelings one way or another" (Laatikainen 2020, 40). Consequently, state interactions are sometimes guided by *relational* goals, with drafts functioning as nodes of interaction. The benefit of engagement resides more in signaling and building relationships than on the outcomes per se. Even though intervening factors can impact the consistency of empirical displays (e.g. autocracies may prove more erratic, understaffed missions might exhibit irregular

participation, see Panke 2013, Pascoe and Bae 2021), sponsorship decisions are essentially expected to reflect substantive and/or relational aims.

Recent studies have tapped into these aspects of sponsorship, from broad overviews of sponsorship networks at the UNGA to analyses of committee work (Chané and Sharma 2016; Smith 2017; Drieskens et al. 2014). Despite their relevance, they invite improvements on at least three fronts. Firstly, data were collected to answer topical questions (e.g. 'are the BRICS cohesive?', Dijkhuizen and Onderco 2019) and not to build and expand datasets iteratively, aiming to disseminate sponsorship metrics. Secondly, they exhibit a bias towards certain areas and actors, noticeably, the EU (Drieskens et al. 2014; Smith 2017) and human rights-related issues (Beauguitte 2011; Chané and Sharma 2016; Pascoe and Bae 2021). And thirdly, they fail to grasp the complexities of the drafting process, overlooking key intricacies that impact final results. A case in point concerns group sponsorship. As this research note will show, groups account for nearly 1/3 of UNGA production. Disregarding this output has led to significant underestimation of sponsorship totals.[2] Given these limitations, a thorough consideration of the drafting process is required.

Sponsorship at the UN General Assembly

Drafting and submitting resolutions

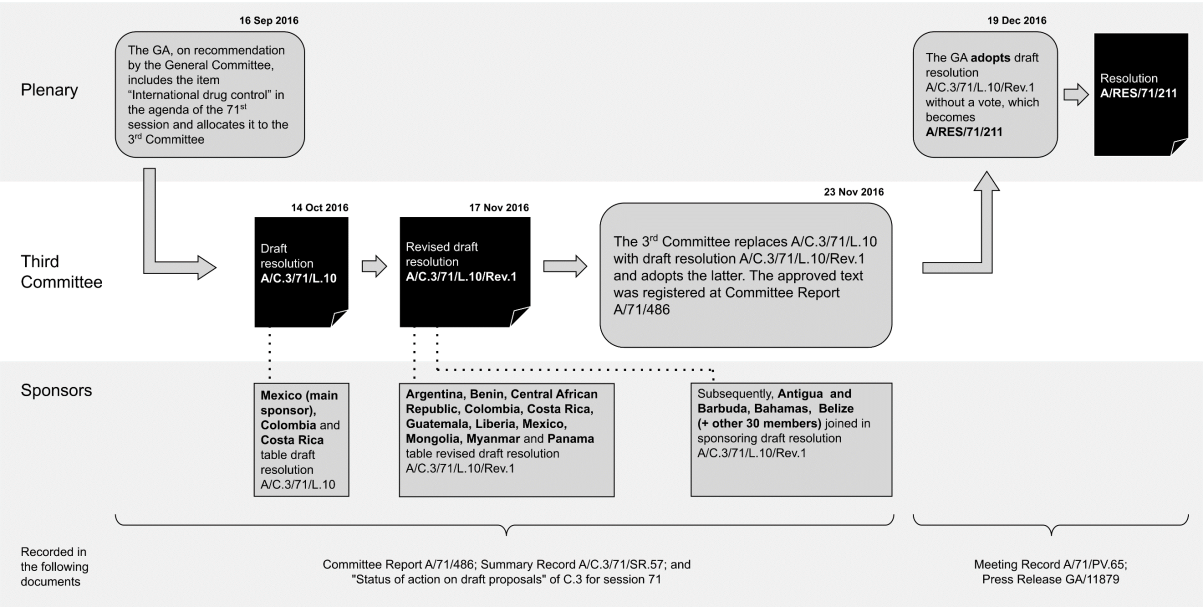
The chief elements of the drafting process can be broken down as follows. Every session, an item is put on the agenda, as previously discussed by the General Committee. Most draft resolutions are then initiated under one of such items by a member state, who becomes the

[2] Our dataset diverges 22% in total sponsors, with three time more sponsorship instances accounted for, when compared with Finke's (2021) data for 2009-2016. Dijkhuizen and Onderco (2019) are less exhaustive on data collection protocols, but their overall low draft count also suggest underestimation due to group omission.

"main sponsor" if it is the initiator, or "co-sponsor" for joint initiatives. Every proposition turns into a "L-Document" and is usually tabled in one of six committees: Disarmament and International Security (C.1), Economic and Financial (C.2), Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian (C.3), Special Political and Decolonization (C.4), Administrative and Budgetary (C.5), and Legal (C.6).

Various forms of consultations and negotiations take place at this point. But from the moment a L-Document is tabled, its potential outcomes multiply. Ideally, it will incite little to no dissent and will cruise through committee, before being adopted as a resolution. In such instances, the original L-Document will not suffer any change. But typically, L-Documents receive contributions that alter either their original sponsors, their content, or both. They may warrant a revision (Rev.), which might imply new content and sponsors, leading to a different L-Document beginning its own processual track. They can receive an addendum (Add.) to add new co-sponsors, an amendment (Amend.) or even a corrigendum (Corr.) to correct mistakes. These options can be combined any number of times. That is then registered in "Summary Records" and "Committee Reports", which contain the appraisal of drafts presented, reactions from members, voting results, and final decisions before drafts are taken up by Plenary. These reports have their own UN Document Symbol and often aggregate discussions involving separate propositions. L-Documents can also be withdrawn from consideration at any point. However, after they leave the committee and reach the Plenary, countries can still join as additional sponsors, even though such late adherences will not produce new L-Documents. This process is exemplified in Figure 1, which traces the trajectory of a resolution from draft to adoption.

Figure 1. Trajectory of an example draft resolution



Source: elaborated by the authors.

The complete snapshot is therefore complex, and the end result might just comprise the 'tip of the iceberg' given how "procedures have shifted from entirely formal to increasingly informal" (Peterson 2006, 85). Two consequences can be highlighted. First, the range of opportunities for member states to participate is wide, without major preconditions. In order to verify meaningful activity, one is required to 'separate the wheat from the tares', i.e. countries supporting mere amendments are not as significant as those involved from the start. Second, the number of final co-sponsors does not necessarily equate to the lot of original backers. They can be added through revisions and/or addenda, meaning foremost proponents can be masked behind numerous latecomers. Two novel indices, priority and ownership, offer sufficient detail to identify meaningful actors and drafts.

The priority and ownership indices

The *UN General Assembly Sponsorship Dataset* offers several metrics on sponsorship behavior. In this section, we bring forward two original indicators: priority and ownership.

We define priority as *the degree of urgency that a member attributes to a policy issue*. We measure this by monitoring how early (or how late) it engages with a draft. The earlier it associates itself, the greater the attributed priority. As explained, the drafting process offers several entry doors. Therefore, each country receives a score corresponding to how soon it joined a draft. Being an original author represents the highest priority, while joining after successive revisions and addenda reveals low priority (Kessler and Krehbiel 1996, 558). Some drafts may elicit more revisions, some less, meaning endorsement in subsequent rounds of revisions may warrant different interpretations, depending on the length of the drafting process.

Our approach accounts for such discrepancies by providing a relative and an absolute priority index. Relative priority ranges from 1 to 3: 1 if the country is an original sponsor (highest priority); 3 if it joined at the last available opportunity (lowest priority); 2 for cases in-between.[3] For the absolute version of the index, entries are coded: 1 for original sponsors, 2 for co-sponsors, and 3 for additional sponsors, plus 1 additional point per edit elapsed until the country adhered – e.g. if a country does not sponsor a root L-Document, but joins as an "additional sponsor" after 2 edits (a "Rev.1" and "Rev.2"), it receives 3+2=5.

We define ownership as *the proprietorship displayed by a member over a policy initiative*. Though this could be gauged through self-declarations, elite interviews or diplomatic lore, such heuristics tend to be excessively country-tailored, not to mention labor intensive, if applied to all members. Our main concern is to take the UNGA strategic setting into account

[3] Under normal circumstances, highest priority would equal "sponsor zero". For cases where this information was not available, score 1 was attributed to the earliest known sponsors.

when unpacking preferences behind the sponsoring act. Hence, we measure ownership through the number of countries joining in a draft. This allows to differentiate between propositions that reflect individual yearnings from those that embody widespread concerns by many members. We posit the less partners a country associates itself with, the more ownership it will display over a draft. Inversely, the more partners it associates itself with, the less ownership is conveyed (Fowler 2006, 461). Operationally, ownership takes the number of final sponsors as a denominator, so that an elevated number of participants yields a low ownership score.

Priority and ownership correlate in practice, since lengthier drafting means more opportunities for later entrance and thus more final sponsors (see Supplementary Materials). They are nonetheless distinct and complementary as priority is country-specific while ownership scores are shared among the sponsors of a draft.

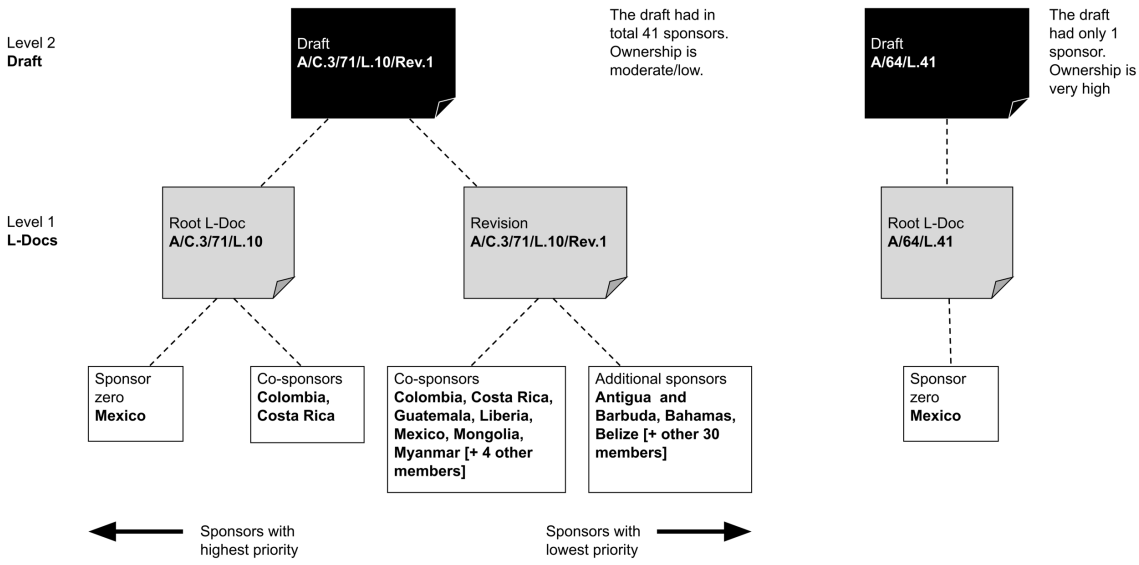
An important distinction on the different ways to interpret the volume of draft co-sponsors is warranted. Previous studies have resorted to the amount of supporters as tokens of "influence" or "leadership" at the UNGA (Panke 2013; Drieskens et al. 2014). Variables from our dataset counting the number of sponsors can be used under such rationale (e.g. comparing which countries attract more co-sponsors to their initiatives). Nonetheless, concepts such as "influence" only address country performance or success, and remain uninformative in matching a draft to the core interests of a country. Our understanding of ownership is not concerned with success rates but instead with detecting interest specificity. On that front, many endorsers may actually convey less authorial attachment. Working through large groups can mean diluting original preferences (Laatikainen and Smith 2020, 9), hence why the distinctiveness of a proposal should be expectedly higher when co-sponsors are fewer.

This is not to say that a draft cannot be both authentic and popular. In fact, the two indices can be combined to identify, for instance, a smaller group of original sponsors by their higher priority scores amid a widely supported draft. This could potentially reveal new "core

groups" in UN negotiations than those explored in previous case studies (Laatikainen and Smith 2020). Likewise, the indices can be used individually to assess specific issues – as it will be demonstrated with priority scores and vote-buying.

Figure 2 compares two sample drafts. The first draft (A/C.3/71/L.10/Rev.1) underwent a revision, which means sponsors backing the original L-Document scored higher priority, and sponsors supporting the revised L-Document scored lower priority. Given high participation, all countries scored moderate ownership. The second draft (A/64/L.41) had only one sponsor, Mexico, which scored high priority and high ownership. The use of both indices allows to indicate, for instance, that A/64/L.41 is very in tune with Mexican preferences, or that Colombia's engagement with A/C.3/71/L.10/Rev.1 is more significant than Bahamas' because of the former's priority.

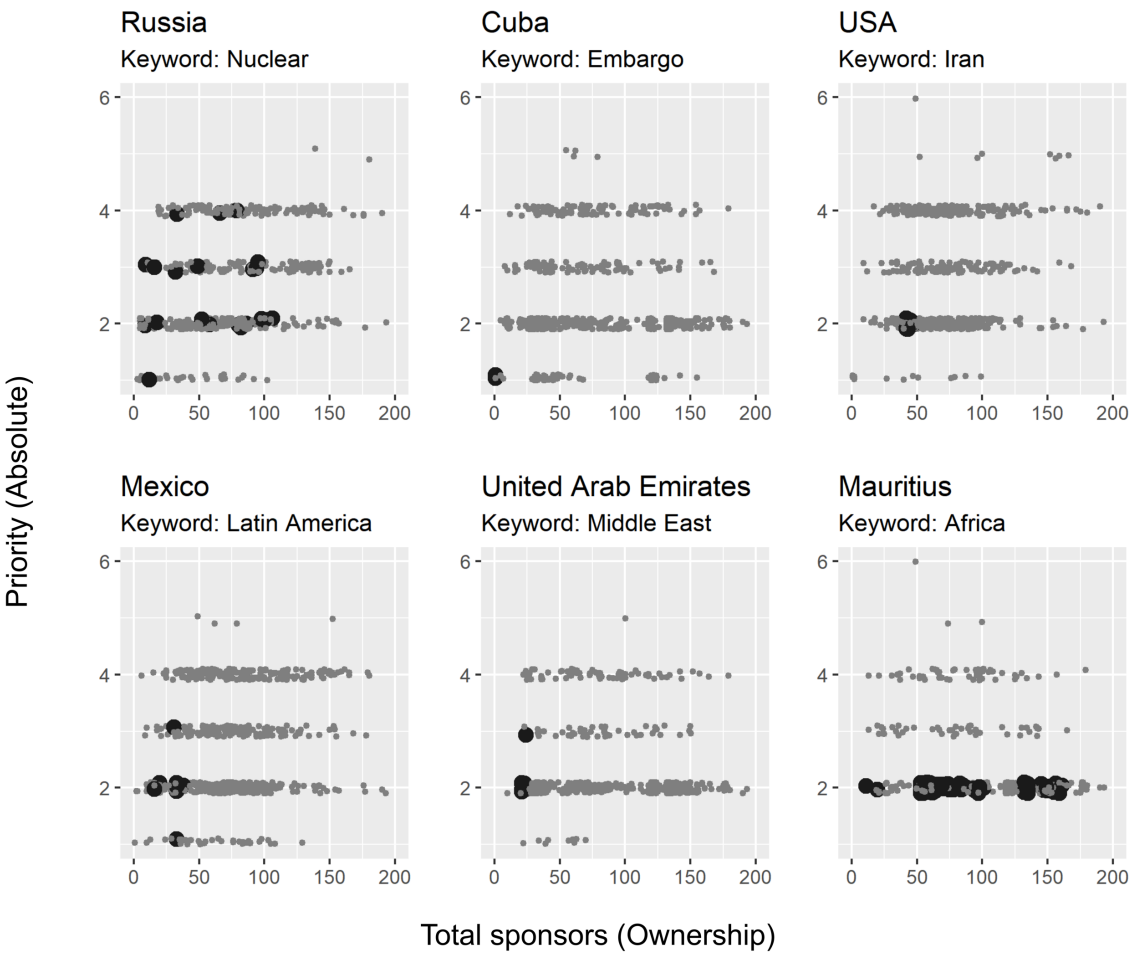
Figure 2. Attribution of priority and ownership scores



Source: elaborated by the authors.

Figure 3 exemplifies both indices at work. We plot the ownership and absolute priority scores for countries with different geographical contexts and sets of vital interests. We highlight drafts intuitively regarded as more relevant to national agendas (larger black dots). Such drafts figure in the lower left end of most graphs, indicating high priority (early adherence) and high ownership (few total sponsors), respectively, when compared to all resolutions endorsed. The combination of the two indices allows to identify how central each draft is to the underlying preferences, considering its urgency and originality. Results match intuitive expectations: topics that are characteristic of a country are urgent and start out with few endorsers (e.g. Cuba and its embargo); topics which, though important for a member, tap into concerns shared by other countries, move up and away in the plot (e.g. Russia is invested in proliferation issues but not exclusively; Mauritius joins Africa-related drafts early, often accompanied by the 50+ members of the African Group).

Figure 3. Absolute priority and ownership of UNGA drafts for a sample of countries



Source: elaborated by the authors. Keywords retrieved from draft titles. Jitter was applied.

Data and analysis

The *UN General Assembly Sponsorship Dataset* contains a total of 28 variables related to drafts metadata, and 194 variables to indicate sponsorship by each of the 193 members plus Palestine between 2009 and 2019. Metadata refer to draft identification and trajectory, related UN body, themes, dates, groups, and related documentation. The full list of variables, as well as a detailed description of the data-gathering process, is presented in the Supplementary Materials.

Data overview

From 2009 to 2019 (session 64 to 73), there were in total 3,586 L-Documents, of which 2,516 were root documents (with 156 amendments), and 1,070 revisions and addenda. These were sequenced into 2,518 items. We refer to these higher-level sequences of documents as "drafts" to differentiate them from the lower-level L-Documents. We present below a summary of drafts data.

The yearly volume of drafts gravitated around 250 per session. A breakdown per committee reveals that most workload starts within C.3, the Plenary, C.1 and C.2, respectively.

Table 1. Breakdown per committee

UNGA Committees	**Number of drafts**	**%**
1st Committee	551	22
2nd Committee	414	16
3rd Committee	640	25
4th Committee	159	6
5th Committee	18	1
6th Committee	106	4
General Assembly Plenary	630	25
Total	**2518**	**100**

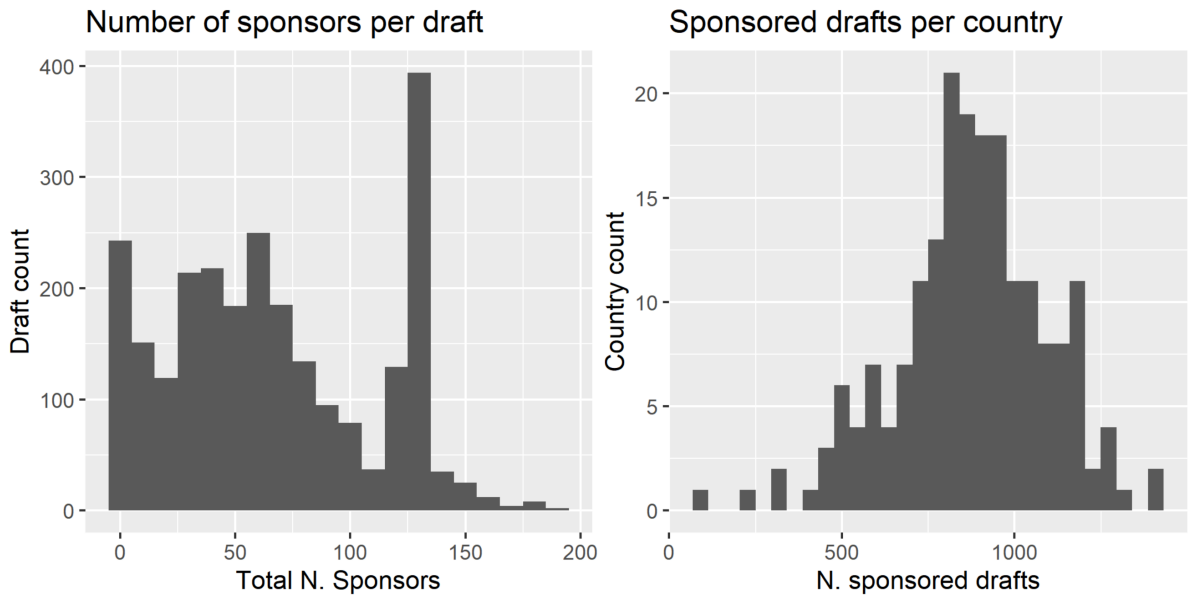
Source: elaborated by the authors.[4]

Regarding authorship, drafts started with an average of 55 sponsors and finished with approximately 67. For all 2,518 drafts, there were 31 instances of countries explicitly requesting their names be removed from the list of sponsors.

[4] A total of 996 L-Documents that did not mention states as sponsors were removed. The removals were not evenly distributed. The majority comes from C.5 (460), C.2 (258) and C.6 (106). See the Supplementary Materials for more information.

Figure 4 presents two plots on sponsorship frequency. The left plot shows the number of sponsors each draft garnered. It displays a 3-humps pattern: a first group of drafts with few sponsors, followed by a second with 60 supporters on average, and a third with around 120. The latter is the product of large caucuses such as the G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The right plot indicates the amount of drafts sponsored by all UNGA members. The average member endorsed around 870 drafts between 2009 and 2019. The country which sponsored most drafts during this period was Morocco (1406) and the least was Tuvalu (88).

Figure 4. Histograms of sponsors per draft and number of sponsorships per country



Source: elaborated by the authors.

Through manual coding, we identified whether groups participated in draft sponsorship. Results on Table 2 indicate the G77 as the most active UNGA caucus.

Table 2. Breakdown per group

Group	Number of drafts	%
No Group	1732	69
G77	424	17
African Group	147	6
NAM	105	4
Other groups	66	3
OIC	25	1
EU	19	1
Total	**2518**	**100**

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Drafts sponsored by the G77 accounted for 75% of all drafts circulated within C.2. Inversely, C.1 and C.3 had a higher ratio of drafts without group membership (approximately 3:2), though much of the work of the NAM and the African Group was allocated to these committees. These results demonstrate the extent of group activity and the potential bias from failing to account them. Lastly, drafts were also coded according to their outcome. In total, 53% were adopted without a vote, 29% were put to a vote and 13% were withdrawn – most of the latter comprising amendments. Having presented our data, we now test its applicability to vote-buying at the UNGA.

Using sponsorship and priority to test vote-buying

Existing literature on vote-buying has tested whether great powers succeed in coopting other states. In particular, studies have uncovered how the US uses aid and trade to guarantee votes (Dreher et al. 2008), with Chinese efforts recently undergoing similar scrutiny (Strüver 2016). However, most inferences of the kind incur on a key temporal obstacle, i.e. attempts to

influence votes precede voting itself. Strategies to address this predicament include considering Official Development Aid (ODA) flows as incentives prior to voting or as rewards/punishments after the vote (Carter and Stone 2015). But by using the calendar year as a time unit, these studies ignore multiple factors, beyond ODA disbursements, which can intervene during the 12 months leading up to the next vote. When attempting to improve this research thread, Brazys and Panke (2017) tested the likelihood of a country shifting votes between sessions. Although they found levels of GDP, ODA intake and autocracy to affect vote shifting, their dataset is monadic, meaning there is no evidence of *relational* influence from a great power impacting the behavior of a third country.

Sponsorship data allow to overcome these hurdles. If we accept cooptation can occur before voting takes place (Keohane 1967), then our absolute priority index becomes a useful tool. As each country is scored based on how soon it sponsored a draft, the list of endorsers can be sequenced chronologically, thus allowing to detect followership. By coding the precise moment each country joins a draft, the index pinpoints the instances a member endorsed a draft *after a great power did so*, and whether such prior endorsement had any effect on the former's decision. As stated, behavior at the UNGA might derive from substantive or relational concerns. A decision to sponsor arising from substantive preferences is responsive to *what* the draft stands for, whereas relational calculations emphasize *who* is backing the topic. If a topic is important for a country, we should expect priority to be high. If instead the country did not endorse a draft at an early opportunity (low priority), but only after great power signaling, this can be reasonably labeled a case of relational maneuvering. Rather than comparing behavior changes through broad yearly aggregates, sponsorship data allow to probe micro-interactions that take place in the space of a few days at the UNGA, providing denser empirical evidence to trace behavior back to either relational or substantive concerns.

We test vote-buying (or more aptly "sponsorship-buying") for P5 members with available ODA data: the US, France, the UK and China.[5] For all country x draft combinations, we coded whether each of the four powers joined a L-Document earlier (i.e. scored higher absolute priority, see Supplementary Materials for details). The resulting pattern is revealing. For instance, out of 2,518 drafts, Iran only adhered 10 times to initiatives with previous US sponsorship; Israel, in turn, followed the US on 71 occasions.

In order to systematically test the effect of early signaling on sponsorship, we turn to regression analysis. By arraying all combinations between the 2,518 drafts and 193 UNGA members (plus Palestine), we obtain a three-level hierarchical dataset, with yearly values for other independent variables. Some variables are indexed to countries (*i*) and drafts (*n*) pairs (e.g. the decision to sponsor), and others to drafts (*n*) (e.g. issuing committee) and years (*t*). Resolutions are nested within years, while countries are not nested (crossed). Similar to other legislator-decision datasets, ours presents layering and repeated observations (Brown and Goodliffe 2017). Accordingly, we employed a Generalized Linear Mixed-Effects Model (GLMM).

Our dependent variable is dichotomous: state's *i* choice to co-sponsor draft *n*. For all country-draft pairs, we added dummies to indicate whether the US, France, the UK and China had sponsored first. We expect early sponsorship to be a more effective cue for members which are targets of cooptation efforts, i.e. countries under heavy influence from a great power are expected to endorse a draft that was previously sponsored by said power. Operationally, early sponsorship by a great power is considered a *moderating variable*, to be interacted with other variables that discriminate target countries based on dependency levels.

[5] ODA data for the US, France and the UK from OECD QWIDS (https://stats.oecd.org/qwids/); for China from AidData.org. Russia was excluded as no ODA data are available.

Additional explanatory variables relate to spheres of influence of great powers: (1) belonging to specific geopolitical groups (for the US, NATO; for France and the UK, being a former colony or an EU member); (2) ODA dependency (ODA received from a great power, as a share of GDP); and (3) trade dependency (great power share in the country's total trade). By interacting these variables with the "great power sponsored first" dummy, we test whether early endorsement exerted differenced effects on UNGA members based on group adhesion and dependency levels. We expect this moderating effect to be significant and positive, i.e. the probability that a country will sponsor a draft following the lead of a great power is higher for ingroup, dependent countries. Outgroup and less dependent countries should be relatively unmoved by such signaling.

We included additional controls that might influence the likelihood of sponsorship relating to draft (number of sponsors, issuing committee) and country features (democracy). Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. GLMM with random intercepts and dichotomous dependent variable

	Dependent variable: country's *i* decision to co-sponsor draft *n*			
	US	France	UK	China
(Intercept)	-4.23 (0.23)***	-4.52 (0.21)***	-4.51 (0.21)***	-3.84 (0.29)***
Draft Level				
Total sponsors (% UNGA) *n*	9.44 (0.27)***	11.19 (0.34)***	11.10 (0.31)***	12.06 (0.41)***
C.2 *n*	-1.36 (0.19)***	-1.69 (0.24)***	-1.79 (0.22)***	0.65 (0.28)*
C.3 *n*	0.60 (0.16)***	0.89 (0.19)***	0.54 (0.18)**	0.53 (0.23)*
C.4 *n*	-0.25 (0.24)	0.62 (0.29)*	0.45 (0.27)	0.75 (0.34)*
C.5 *n*	-1.44 (0.69)*	-2.63 (0.84)**	-2.55 (0.78)**	0.82 (1.11)
C.6 *n*	-0.62 (0.28)*	0.47 (0.35)	0.27 (0.32)	-0.03 (0.45)
Plenary *n*	0.36 (0.16)*	0.62 (0.19)**	0.17 (0.18)	0.45 (0.23)*
Country level				
Democracy score *it*	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.05 (0.02)**
NATO *i*	-0.28 (0.36)			
EU *i*		-0.30 (0.35)	-0.19 (0.39)	
Former colony *i*		0.38 (0.12)**	-0.12 (0.10)	
G77 *i*	1.75 (0.15)***	1.83 (0.13)***	1.98 (0.14)***	-0.33 (0.18)

Ratio ODA/GDP *it*	-0.25 (0.55)	0.52 (1.71)	8.56 (3.26)**	0.03 (0.34)
Trade share *it*	-1.13 (0.23)***	1.69 (0.48)***	-1.16 (0.37)**	-0.26 (0.43)
Country-draft				
Grt. power spons. first *in*	-8.47 (0.08)***	-8.50 (0.08)***	-8.02 (0.08)***	-8.99 (0.13)***
Cross-level interactions				
NATO *i* * Grt. power spons. first *in*	4.17 (0.12)***			
EU *i* * Grt. power spons. first *in*		0.83 (0.14)***	0.63 (0.14)***	
Former col. *i* * Grt. power spons. first *in*		-0.89 (0.06)***	-1.45 (0.04)***	
ODA/GDP *it* * Grt. power spons. first *in*	1.63 (0.80)*	-19.25 (3.45)***	-62.04 (5.24)***	1.54 (0.82)
Trade sh. *it* * Grt. power spons. first *in*	1.58 (0.15)***	1.01 (0.46)*	4.34 (0.64)***	0.86 (0.57)
Num. obs.	243447	237237	235677	81438
Var: draft:t (Intercept)	6.49	9.77	8.31	7.72
Var: country (Intercept)	0.31	0.21	0.27	0.44
Var: t (Intercept)	0.10	0.00	0.01	0.00
***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05				

Source: elaborated by the authors. Regressors are not mean-centered and coefficients are not exponentiated.

Results for the US show the expected relation: Washington's early sponsorship had a higher impact in inducing followership from partners within NATO, with high ODA or commercial dependence. Inversely, US participation in a draft disincentivized sponsorship from countries outside NATO and with no sizeable ODA or trade dependency. For France and the UK, only trade dependency and EU membership warranted a loyal clique. Former colonies were in fact less likely to endorse if the two countries were already on board, and coefficients for ODA presented large negative values.[6] Lastly, Chinese influence displayed the expected positive effects, even if trade dependency was not relevant at a $p<0.05$ level ($p = 0.13$) and ODA/GDP was a threshold case ($p = 0.06$). This could be interpreted as a weaker sign of Chinese influence. Caution is nonetheless required when comparing with other powers due to

[6] Even though this negative result might have substantive meaning, it might also be owed to erratic participation by small GDP countries (Panke 2013).

data standards (Chinese ODA flows are measured differently from OECD donors) and behavior at the UNGA (routine Chinese participation in G77 drafts).

Robustness tests were carried out (shown in the Supplementary Materials) and point to the same trend: ODA dependency was significant for the US; trade was effective for the US, France and the UK; and former colonies were less prone to follow London. These findings confirm established results in terms of ODA flows and voting convergence correlating significantly for the US among G7 donors, and borderline significance for Chinese ODA (Dreher et al. 2008; Strüver 2016). Our results confirm known patterns of cooptation extend to sponsorship opportunities. This corroboration is significant if we consider that successful cooptation at sponsorship stage may preclude voting and consensual adoption phases. We now turn to voting blocs as a second traditional research area.

Beyond North and South: using priority and ownership as weights to detect blocs at the UNGA

Patterns of bloc voting have attracted considerable interest, as agreement indices, like the S-Score, became preferred measures of affinity between countries. However, as shown by Bailey et al. (2017), S-Scores can be skewed due to noise and chance, whereas ideal points counter this sensitivity by weighing resolutions based on their discriminatory potential. Although this solution controls for agenda changes, discrimination is based on one policy dimension for all countries ("attitude towards the US-led liberal order"), thus rendering this metric more systemic than bilateral in nature. Although the authors advise against using ideal points as "'common interest' writ large" (Bailey et al. 2017, 20), this warning has remained unheeded, as much empirical scholarship treats ideal point proximity like similar preferences.

Both S-Score and ideal points are built from voting data and hence inherit the aforementioned sampling bias. Using Social Network Analysis (SNA), we demonstrate how this bias affects previous findings on coalitions, and how sponsorship data overcome such limitations using sponsorship weighted by priority and ownership. SNA has become popular to detect communities within the UNGA (Beauguitte 2011; Macon et al. 2012; Dijkhuizen and Onderco 2019). Our data architecture enables such modeling, if countries are considered as vertices and drafts as connecting links.

Interactions between 193 UNGA members (plus Palestine) through 2,518 drafts were arranged as a bipartite network and projected onto a one-mode network. We employed two variants of the network. First, a simpler version, for which sponsorship at the bipartite network is binary, so that link weight at the one-mode projection is the resulting sum of shared sponsorships between country pairs. This network reflects simple frequency of interstate interactions, i.e. two countries are considered strongly connected if they co-sponsor several drafts together. Our second network is weighted by ownership and priority information. As previously indicated, joining early and with few co-sponsors is considered a display of draft relevance. Countries will therefore reveal a stronger bond when cooperating on important initiatives, and a weaker connection amid overcrowded, late-entrance drafts. Operationally, this is achieved if the weight of a draft *n* for member *i* is given by:[7]

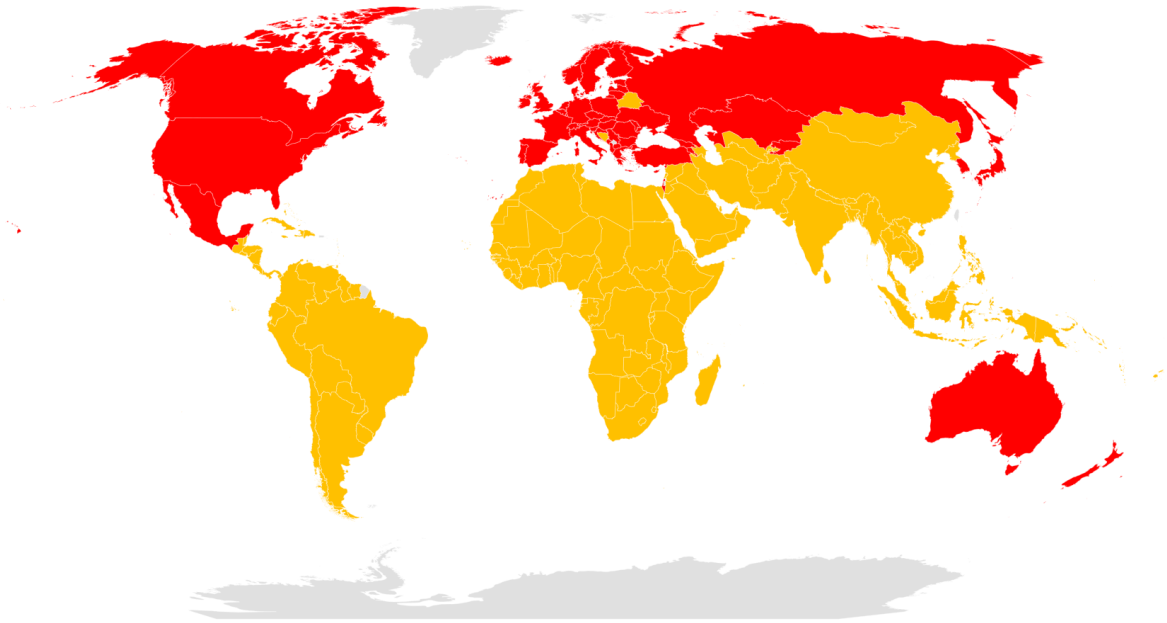
$$Weight_{ni} = \frac{Relative\ Priority_{ni}}{Ownership(Final\ Number\ of\ Sponsors)_n} \times 100$$

So that drafts with high priority and ownership become more relevant links between members.

[7] The relative priority index is inverted for this calculation, so that high priority receives a higher positive number (3) to represent a strong tie.

Both configurations were submitted to community detection algorithms.[8] For the simpler network, wherein sponsorship is binary, algorithms identified two communities. Except for a few Latin American and East European countries,[9] group assignment was consistent for all members. The two clusters correspond to the well-known North–South divide (Figure 5).

Figure 5. UNGA communities, based on binary sponsorship network



Source: elaborated by the authors.

This division echoes most roll-call voting scholarship. UNGA studies grounded on SNA (Macon et al. 2012) and on spatial models (Voeten 2000) also outline North-South poles.

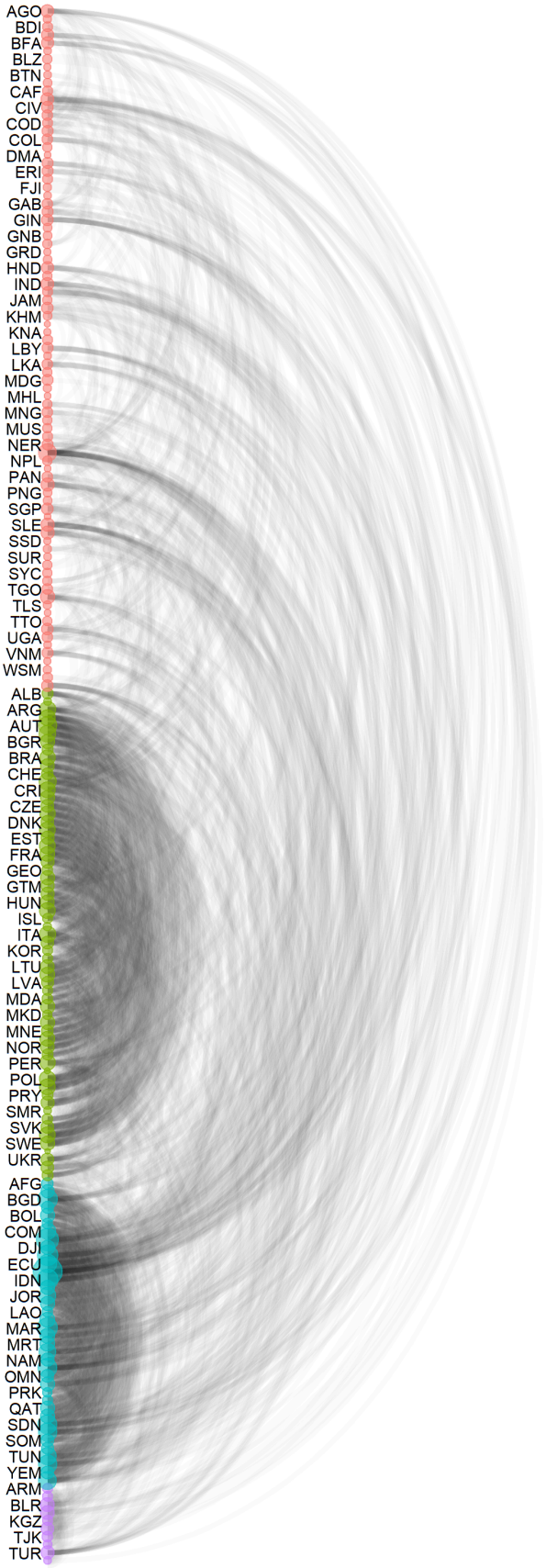
[8] Algorithms Fast and Greedy, Walk Trap, Louvain and Spinglass from the igraph R package.

[9] Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Belarus, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Peru, Paraguay, and Uruguay had varying classifications.

Hence, it would appear that sponsorship networks do not bring novel information on grouping patterns, if compared with previous analyses. However, our simpler network presupposes all instances of sponsorship weigh the same. Our weighted network, in turn, differentiates draft relevance based on ownership and priority, leading to a different result: four separate clusters.[10] These smaller communities disaggregate the massive North-South blocs into groups bearing substantive face validity. Figure 6 shows this four-cluster partition as an arc diagram, where color indicates group, arcs show the frequency of weighted co-sponsorships, and circle size represent vertex strength.

Figure 6. UNGA communities, sponsorship weighted by relative priority and ownership

[10] Results refer to the Spinglass algorithm. See Supplementary Materials for method selection and outcomes by other algorithms.


AGO
BDI
BFA
BLZ
BTN
CAF
CIV
COD
COL
DMA
ERI
FJI
GAB
GIN
GNB
GRD
HND
IND
JAM
KHM
KNA
LBY
LKA
MDG
MHL
MNG
MUS
NER
NPL
PAN
PNG
SGP
SLE
SSD
SUR
SYC
TGO
TLS
TTO
UGA
VNM
WSM
ALB
ARG
AUT
BGR
BRA
CHE
CRI
CZE
DNK
EST
FRA
GEO
GTM
HUN
ISL
ITA
KOR
LTU
LVA
MDA
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PRY
SMR
SVK
SWE
UKR
AFG
BGD
BOL
COM
DJI
ECU
IDN
JOR
LAO
MAR
MRT
NAM
OMN
PRK
QAT
SDN
SOM
TUN
YEM
ARM
BLR
KGZ
TJK
TUR

Source: elaborated by the authors. Only the top decile (greatest weight) of the full network (18,720 links) is displayed. Vertex strength (circle size) is calculated as the sum of adjacent links weights for each vertex.

The first and largest group (red in Figure 6) included 85 countries, 41 from Sub-Saharan Africa, 24 Asian, specifically from the Pacific region, and 19 from Latin America, notably Central America and the Caribbean. In other words, it broadly outlines the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of states. As the diagram suggests, within-group interaction by this bloc is less dense. The second group (green) has 61 members and resembles a Western bloc, albeit not just Euro-American: 45 members are from Europe and North America, 9 are South American and 7 are from varied locations (e.g. Australia, Japan, Israel). A third cluster (cyan, 38 members) concentrates countries from the Middle East and North Africa (17), Sub-Saharan Africa (9) and assorted members from Asia (North Korea, Pakistan) and Latin America (Cuba, Venezuela). This set can be roughly characterized as a NAM-centered caucus. Lastly, a fourth community (purple) includes only 10 members, all falling under a Central Asian or former Soviet rubric.[11]

Once the relevance of overcrowded, ritualistic drafts is discounted, the unity of traditional monolithic poles gives way to diversified interstate communities. No prior research identified such groups at the UNGA, meaning our findings reveal a novel picture in comparison to works that inductively arrived at North-South voting blocs (Macon et al. 2012) or that assumed formal groups or regional organizations to organically cluster at the UN (Burmester and Jankowski 2014; Laatikainen and Smith 2020).

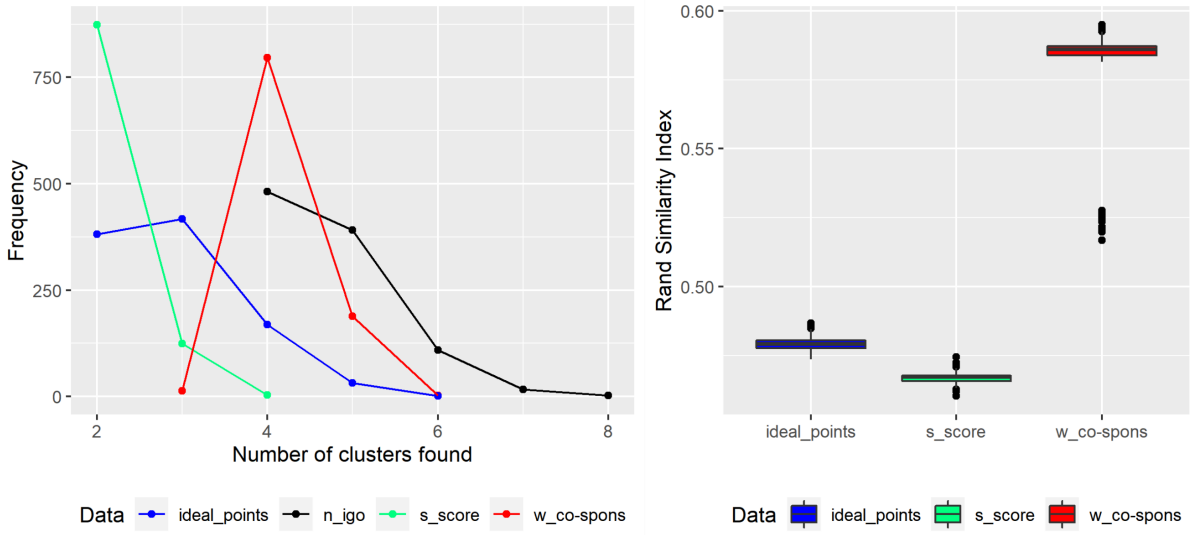
[11] For the full list of members, see Supplementary Materials.

To test whether these results represent a more reliable depiction of international politics than the North-South duality, we move beyond the confines of the UN. Focusing on common membership in international governmental organizations (IGOs) proves helpful in this regard. Even though mainstream IR theories differ on why IGOs are formed and on their consequences, they tend to agree that membership and interest alignment go hand in hand. Whether IGOs are seen as created by powerful states to differentiate friends from foes, as devices to catalyze cooperation, or socialization environments leading to value convergence (see Cogan et al. 2016), ingroup participants expectedly share more commonalities than outgroup states. Communities evidenced by common IGO membership should therefore constitute a useful indicator of common preferences and values, against which to compare UNGA data. The UNGA-derived groupings that most closely resembles IGO communities can be considered a valid depiction of global coalitions.

We used the COW IGO v3 data, averaging values for 2009-2014 into a cross-sectional dataset (Pevehouse et al. 2020). Counts of shared IGOs were considered link weights for country pairs. After 1,000 iterations of the Spinglass algorithm, the four-groups solution was found to be most common for the IGO network.[12] We ran the same number of iterations for three UNGA datasets: our weighted co-sponsorship network and two voting similarity indices (S-Score and Ideal Point Absolute Difference) (Bailey et al. 2017). We restricted the timeframe to 2009-2014 and the number of countries to 191 to match the COW dataset.

[12] Spinglass was used because it accepts negative links. These are present in the S-Score data.

Figure 7. Comparison of communities for voting similarity indexes, weighted co-sponsorship and number of shared IGOs



Source: elaborated by the authors. The Rand Index in the right panel compared all 1,000 iterations of the IGO clustering with each of the clusters for the three UNGA datasets. A Rand Index of 1 implies that two clustering solutions place all countries in the exact same groups (Rand 1971).

As shown in the left plot in Figure 7, the networks built around voting indices (ideal points and S-Score) predominantly yielded two to three groups, while the weighted co-sponsorship network was concentrated on four groups. The latter was also the prevailing amount for the COW IGO. Our co-sponsorship data proved closer to the IGO reference not only in number of clusters but in content, as shown by the higher cluster similarity index on the right plot. The use of priority and ownership as weights can therefore better distinguish ritualistic interactions from meaningful initiatives than previous voting scores.

Conclusion

Past research has acknowledged the lack of reliable large N data to measure the preferences of states during negotiation stages (Panke 2013, 30). Since sponsoring data cover a far broader corpus than voted resolutions, the *UN General Assembly Sponsorship Dataset* introduced in this research note offers a more encompassing portrait of UNGA politics. By proposing two original indices, we demonstrated how to profile member states according to their more relevant output and how to draw nearer to their actual preferences.

The ownership and priority indices provide a measure of what counts the most for each member state, without the need for country-specific heuristics. The precision afforded by the absolute priority index demonstrates which countries join at every stage of a drafting procedure, and whether great power influence has an impact in inducing sponsorship convergence. Tests confirmed this influence to occur, depending on country and mechanism (i.e. US and China via ODA, France and the UK via trade). The rationale behind existing literature on vote-buying is therefore extendable beyond voting data. Other traditional hypotheses, in turn, are challenged by our findings. Co-sponsorship patterns weighted by priority and ownership as measures of draft relevance reveal communities uncharted by previous bloc-voting studies. Far from statistical artifacts, such groups present external validity and depict more nuanced UNGA politics than the generic North-South division.

These insights can substantiate a new research agenda giving sponsoring dynamics its due centrality amid UNGA studies. We identify five promising lines of inquiry. First, identifying countries deemed thematic banner-carriers, based on different applications of priority and ownership scores. This can be achieved, for instance, by surveying which countries are "sponsor zero" for specific items. Second, identifying countries that occupy other strategic positions in multilateral norm-making, e.g. brokers who join mid-way and bring new sponsors

along. Third, reassessing previous findings on the cohesion of regional groups at the UNGA (c.f. Burmester & Jankowski 2014). Fourth, using the total volume of country output at the UNGA as a dependent variable, while considering factors such as national capacities, reputation, and the role of groups in driving productivity (c.f. Panke 2013; Pascoe and Bae 2021). And fifth, pursuing first-hand accounts (e.g. interviews with delegates) and examining of the content of resolutions to shed more light on the interplay between priority and ownership as credible indicators of draft relevance for countries.

Overall, notwithstanding its shortcomings, the UNGA comprises a unique arena that allows for long-term inferences over patterns of state behavior. A research agenda grounded in sponsorship dynamics can ultimately shed new light on the gamut of UNGA interactions and reframe our understanding of the importance of votes vis-à-vis other equally meaningful practices.

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