Shaping the liberal international order from the inside: A natural experiment on China's influence in the UN human rights council

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Abstract

Scholars have long discussed whether the rise of China poses a threat to the Liberal International Order. However, there are methodological challenges to studying the effect of a rising power on established norms. In particular, the participation of rising powers in the established order is not exogenously determined. To make an empirical contribution to this debate, we focus on Beijing's influence as a member of the Human Rights Council. We exploit the fact that China's membership in the Council is determined by an exogenous membership rule and implement a matching technique to test whether China has influenced the voting patterns of the other member states on identical recurring resolutions. We find that China's presence in the Council systematically alters the voting behavior of other states in favor of China's interest, and that this change is larger when it comes to the enforcement of human rights through international criticism. To delve into the mechanisms underlying these findings, we conduct in-depth interviews with experienced diplomats at the UN Human Rights Council.

Keywords

United nations human rights council, human rights, international organizations, China

Introduction

What are the implications of China's rise for the liberal international order? This question has generated contrasting arguments in the scholarly literature. On the one hand, it is argued that rising powers tend to challenge established norms, thereby shifting the focus to norms that align with their own preferences. On the other hand, proponents argue that rising powers, especially those actively engaged in international institutions, are more likely to undergo a process of socialization into existing norms, reducing their inclination to challenge them. China has been more active in its participation in liberal international institutions (Cai, 2010), while at the same time, it has been labeled a revisionist power (Jones, 2019; Kent, 2013). The third option then is for China to use multilateralism strategically, supporting or undermining it when it is in its national interest to do so (Kastner et al., 2018).

To shed further light on this debate, in this article, we examine the impact of China's presence on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). We do so using an original dataset we compiled to identify membership and voting patterns within the Council.

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Understanding the dynamics of China's engagement with the UN Human Rights Council can provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of international human rights governance and shed light on how China's influence affects the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide.

Several methodological challenges prevent scholars from identifying the causal link between China's rise and shifting international liberal norms. First, China's rise is not exogenous: changes in the normative environment can be related to Beijing's increasing influence in global affairs, as well as changes in the preferences of other actors. Second, in order to identify a "China effect," we need to distinguish China's normative preferences from strategic behavior or accommodation as well as from the homophily behavior of other countries. In this article, we exploit a natural experiment in which China's presence in the UNHRC is exogenously determined. We also exploit the fact that resolutions on different topics are repeatedly voted on by the same countries, and we can identify China's preferences over those resolutions even when Beijing is not a member of the Council. Our design overcomes previous difficulties in identifying a "China effect" in international norm-shifting.

Our findings demonstrate that China's Council membership alters the voting behavior of other states. When China is a member, states vote differently compared to when China is not present. In fact, the likelihood of voting against a resolution disliked by Beijing doubles for Council members. This effect is even more pronounced when voting on resolutions condemning the human rights records of specific countries. With China's Council membership, member states are on average 6 percentage points more likely to vote against a country-resolution opposed by China and 21 percentage points less likely to vote against a country-resolution supported by China. To gain deeper insight into these mechanisms, we conducted in-depth interviews with experienced diplomats at the UN Human Rights Council, further illuminating how China's membership influences international regimes and shapes the voting behavior of other states.[1]

China in the global human rights regime: Patterns and preferences

There is broad agreement that China (1) used to participate little in IOs and that (2) now it is more active in international institutions than in the past. However, there is no consensus on the implications of this increased participation for other states and the international order. It is unclear whether this participation will lead to the socialization of China into ILO norms (Greenhill, 2010; Ikenberry, 2011; Johnston, 2008) or the undermining of institutions from within (Christensen, 1996; Goddard, 2018).

If we compare the membership of Western countries in IOs with that of Beijing, we can see how the latter has caught up with liberal democracies in recent years (see Figure 1). However, this increased participation has not led to a socialization effect on the compliance and enforcement of human rights. In 2022, after years of investigation, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights of the United Nations adopted a critical report on Uyghur human rights abuses in China (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2022). The Chinese Permanent Mission condemned the report as "a perverse product of US and Western forces' coercive diplomacy" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2022). When the UNHRC voted on the resolution to discuss this report, it was rejected with 17 votes in favor, 11 abstentions, and 19 votes against, including China (A/HRC/51/L.6). On the same day, China voted against resolutions condemning Venezuela (A/HRC/51/L.41), Syria (A/HRC/51/L.18), and Russia (A/HRC/51/L.13), but in favor of resolution A/HRC/51/L.28 for a "global call for concrete action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance."

China's approach to human rights is characterized by relativism, which holds that the interpretation of human rights should be based on the specific circumstances of each country. This approach is evident in China's participation in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a UN mechanism that reviews the human rights records of all UN member states. In the UPR, China has been less likely to make country-specific recommendations and more likely to make general recommendations. This suggests that China believes that human rights standards should be interpreted and applied flexibly, rather than being applied universally. See Figure 7 in the Appendix for an empirical analysis of this.

The literature on voting patterns in the UN Human Rights is still in its early stages. Empirical analyses found that countries vote following national preferences instead of in voting blocs (Hug and Lukács, 2014). Moreover, it has also been documented that China represents one endpoint in the one-dimensional policy space of country preferences in the Council and that it actively promotes its own preferences in the Council (Dukalskis, 2023; Hug, 2016). However, less is known about the actual effectiveness of Beijing's efforts to shape the human rights regime.

We expect China to influence the human rights regime due to its ability to deploy both material and cultural resources in pursuit of its goal—the supply side—(Goddard, 2018; Inboden, 2021) and because other countries' willingness to follow an alternative leadership as a result of their grievances with the current international order—the demand side—(Broz et al., 2020; Dai, 2014). In particular, Council membership allows China to negotiate and trade votes and gives the Asian power a voice in the debates to persuade other countries. It follows that China influences
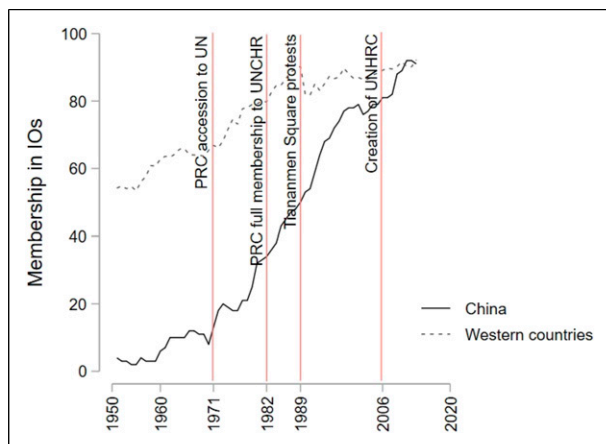
Figure 1. China's gradual participation in the LIO.
Source: Data on IO membership were retrieved from Pevehouse et al. (2020). Note: Western countries are the average participation of 18 Western countries.

other countries' votes in the UNHRC by making states vote less favorably on resolutions that are sensitive to Chinese interests, that is, resolutions that put sovereignty at stake.

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *China's membership in the UN Human Rights Council will increase votes against resolutions that China opposes.*
> **Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *China's membership in the UN Human Rights Council will reduce votes against resolutions that China favors.*

Empirical strategy

We exploit a natural experiment in which China's presence in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is exogenously determined by the Council's membership rules. Under these rules, members who may serve for a period of three years, are not eligible for immediate reelection after serving two consecutive terms, and are elected by a majority of the UN General Assembly in a direct and secret ballot. China took its seat every time it could and every time it ran. However, in 2013 and 2020, it had to temporarily leave the Council to comply with the membership rotation rule.

We can examine voting dynamics by comparing the behavior of member countries when China is present or absent. For example, from 2010 to 2012, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Uganda were members alongside China. However, in 2013, China was absent while these three countries continued their membership. This temporal variation allows us to examine the impact of China's absence on voting patterns. In addition, we take advantage of recurring votes on resolutions on different topics by the same countries. This allows us to identify China's preferences on

these resolutions even during periods when Beijing is not a member of the Council.

To test our hypothesis, we draw on a dataset compiled by the Human Rights Information and Documentation System (HRIDS) project. The sample comprises all resolutions that underwent repeated voting (in more than one session) by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) between 2006 and 2020. This dataset includes 1099 resolutions from 2006 to 2018 and provides detailed information on the resolution's title, topic, agenda item, and state voting behavior. We manually retrieved and coded the votes for the years 2019 and 2020 from the repository of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Our unit of analysis is resolution-country-year. The dependent variable captures the voting behavior of countries in the UNHRC, where a value of 1 indicates a negative vote and 0 indicates a positive vote or abstention for each resolution-country-year. We test the presence or absence of China in the UNHRC interacting it with how China voted for each resolution-year. Our hypotheses assert that the presence of China will exert an influence on the voting behavior of member countries when it comes to recurring resolutions, causing them to align their votes with Chinese voting preferences.

Between 2006 and 2020, the UNHRC adopted an average of 121 resolutions per year. Of these, approximately 24.7% were adopted through voting, while the rest were achieved through consensus (see Figure 2). We identified 69 countries that actively participated in voting on resolutions during both China's periods of membership and non-membership in the UNHRC.[2] In addition, we identified 34 distinct resolutions that underwent voting across multiple years, encompassing both China's membership and non-membership periods in the UNHRC.[3] This suggests that a significant number of countries are willing to vote on resolutions even when China is not a member of the UNHRC. This is important because it suggests that the UNHRC's agenda and ability to promote human rights are not solely determined by the presence or absence of China.

To further test China's influence on countries' votes, we also looked at resolutions that the literature has identified as being opposed by China: country-specific resolutions (Sceats and Breslin, 2021). As a robustness check, we classified each resolution into those on issues related to the situation of specific countries and those on other issues. This classification is straightforward, as the titles of the resolutions are very explicit when the resolution deals with the situation of a country, for example, "Situation of human rights in Eritrea"[4] or "Strengthening cooperation and technical assistance in the field of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela."[5] Of the total number of resolutions adopted, 46% are votes on country-specific situations and 54% are votes on other issues.[6] Among the country-specific resolutions, some are recurring, most notably Syria, followed by Belarus, Iran, and Burundi.[7]
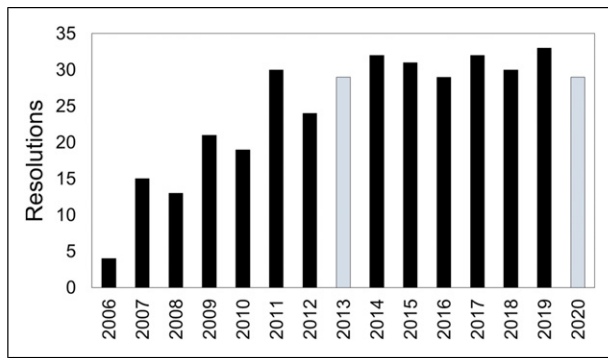
Figure 2. Number of resolutions voted at UNHRC by year.
Note: The years in which China was not a Council member are shown in grey.

To estimate China's influence on countries' votes in the Council, we divide the resolutions into those that China voted for and those that it voted against. From this classification, we assume that China supports or opposes the content of a resolution. We then compare this to how other countries voted on the same resolution.

We implemented coarsened exact matching (CEM) using China's membership periods in the UNHRC as the treatment variable. CEM is a statistical technique that categorizes variables into similar groups, reducing bias and allowing for more accurate causal inferences (Iacus et al., 2012). To conduct CEM, we matched resolutions based on their title and voting country, resulting in 25.6% of the observations being paired in 1489 strata.[8] Overall, we had 387 resolution-years available for comparison, which accounted for 31.29% of all resolution-country-year combinations. It should be noted that CEM has the limitation of yielding a relatively smaller number of observations, as not all countries in the sample had paired votes with and without China. However, we believe that this limitation is mitigated by the increased exogeneity of the treatment. Moreover, our CEM estimation is the most stringent as it directly compares the same resolution with and without China. We also explored alternative matching models, including a more relaxed approach that involved pairing observations with the 48 topics provided by HURIDOCS to increase the number of observations. Additionally, we tested a nearest-neighbor matching specification. Furthermore, we estimated the bare difference-in-differences without pairing observations. The more relaxed exact matching technique, nearest-neighbor matching, and the difference-in-differences design confirm our results while retaining more data. The results are available in Tables A8, A10, and A11 in the Online Appendix.

We considered additional variables that could potentially influence voting behavior. These variables included the liberal democracy index, which captures the influence of regime type on voting against human rights resolutions, as well as left-wing ideology, the degree of voting alignment with China in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), and economic dependence on China. Economic dependence was measured as the amount of credit provided by Chinese political banks and Chinese investment in each country (Agostinis and Urdinez, 2022; Custer et al., 2021; "FDI Markets", n. d.; Herre, 2023; Voeten, 2021).

To supplement our quantitative analysis, we conducted interviews with diplomats who serve or have served in their country's mission in Geneva. These interviews included both heads of mission and human rights officers within their respective missions, as well as a staff member of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The interviews were conducted between April 19, 2023 and May 30, 2023 and involved a total of 10 participants.[9]

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of our data. China's negative vote (39%) is higher than the average negative vote of other states (15%). This reflects its preference for a more conservative, Westphalian approach to human rights that resists the promotion of human rights through a multilateral arena.

Overall, our results show that China's presence in the UNHRC increases the probability that a country will vote against a resolution that China opposes and decreases the probability that a country will vote against a resolution that China supports, ranging from 2.8 to 10.7 percentage points, with a 95% confidence interval (Figure 3, left panel). This finding is consistent with our hypothesis that China is able to influence the vote of countries to align with Beijing's preferences within the UNHRC. Looking at resolutions that condemn a country's human rights record, we find that China exerts an even greater influence on other countries' votes. Our model estimates that China affects negative votes on resolutions that China votes against by between 2.7 and 8.5 percentage points, and between 14 and 28 percentage points on resolutions that China supports, with a 95% confidence interval (Figure 3, right panel).

Robustness checks

To test the influence of China and potential confounding factors on our previous results, we conducted six additional robustness tests (see Table A12 in the Appendix). Firstly, to assess whether the presence of China was actually generating the observed effects, we performed a placebo test by shifting the control year of when China was not a Council member from 2013 to 2014. In other words, we treated 2014 as a control year and 2013 as a treatment year, even though China was not a member of the Council in either year. The results of this placebo test showed a non-significant coefficient, indicating that the observed effects

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable name	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Country voted against a resolution	19,669	0.15	0.36	0	1
China voted in favor of a resolution	19,669	0.61	0.48	0	1
China is a member of UNHRC	19,669	0.86	0.34	0	1
Country's government is of leftist ideology	19,731	0.44	0.5	0	1
V-Dem liberal democracy index	19,669	0.46	0.27	0.01	0.88
Vote alignment with China at UNGA	17,384	0.79	0.11	0.49	1
Loans from Chinese banks (Million US$)	17,594	51.50	331.02	0	10,600
Chinese investments (Million US$)	17,594	920.05	1952.63	0	22,140
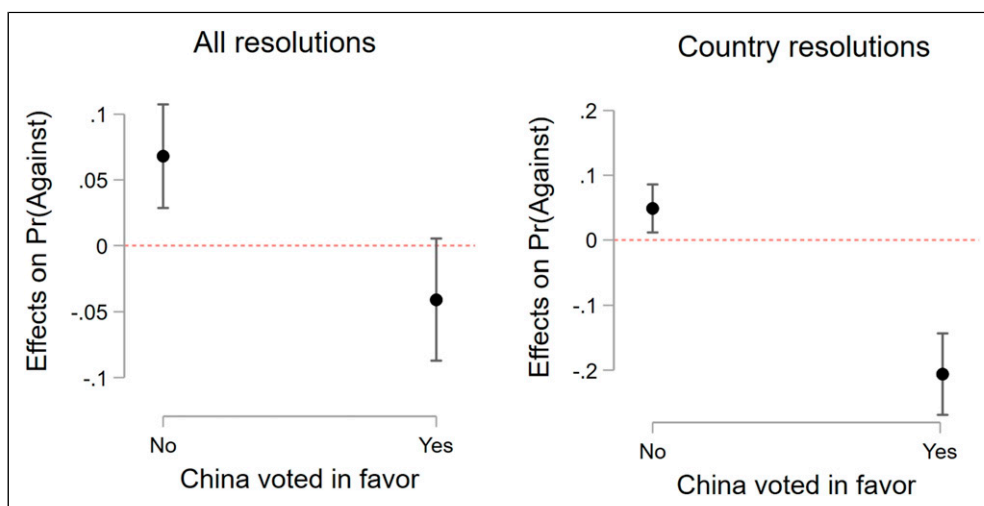
Figure 3. Average Marginal Effect of China's presence on other countries' voting on all resolutions (left panel) and on country-resolution (right panel).
Note: See Table A6 in the appendix for full results.

in previous tests disappeared when treatment years were "switched" to control years (see Figures 4 and 5). This suggests that the presence of China causes the observed effects.

Second, we introduce a hypothetical scenario referred to as the "placebo China." In this scenario, we alter China's actual voting behavior by assuming that it voted in favor of resolutions 15% of the time and voted against resolutions 85% of the time. This random assumption disregards the actual voting pattern of China and is implemented to assess the robustness of our analysis. Our analysis found no statistically significant differences. These findings, along with the insights from interviews that emphasize the significant impact of membership on influencing third-country voting (Interviews #1, #3, #4, #6, #7, #8, #9), further support our conclusions.

Furthermore, we examined the impact of India, another emerging power, on the voting behavior of other countries. India, unlike Russia or the US, has consistently held a
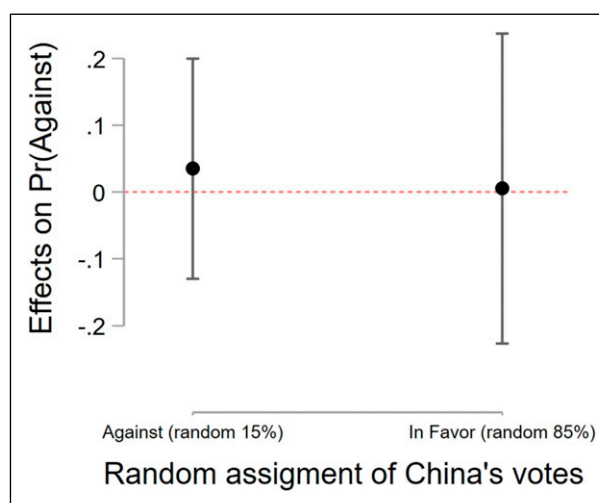

Figure 4. Average marginal effect of China's presence in the UNHRC when randomizing China's voting patterns.
Note: See Table A12 in the appendix for full results.

Council membership throughout all eligible years, similar to China. This characteristic makes India an ideal country for comparison. After conducting logistic regression and controlling for both the country and resolution, our findings revealed no evidence of countries aligning their votes with India's preferences when New Delhi is a Council member. This finding further emphasizes the significance of China's influence and its ability to shape the Council's priorities according to its own agenda.

Fourth, we performed a sensitivity analysis to assess the impact of changes in our model assumptions on predictions. The results (see Table A13, Figures1(a) and 2(a) in the appendix) indicate that the effect of China's presence at the UNHRC remains consistent even in the presence of

confounding factors multiple times stronger than the observed covariate of a country's liberal democracy index.

Fifth, we addressed the possibility that changes in resolution content could explain the observed effect of China's presence on other countries' votes. We conducted tests ensuring the same resolution length and content in the presence and absence of China (see Figures 3(a) and 4(a)). The findings reveal no correlation between China's presence in the Council and either the content or length of resolutions.

Lastly, we conducted a test to compare resolutions voted in treatment and control years, as well as those voted exclusively during treatment years. China's votes exhibited no significant differences between these groups of resolutions, indicating no systematic bias in the analyzed sample (Figure 6).
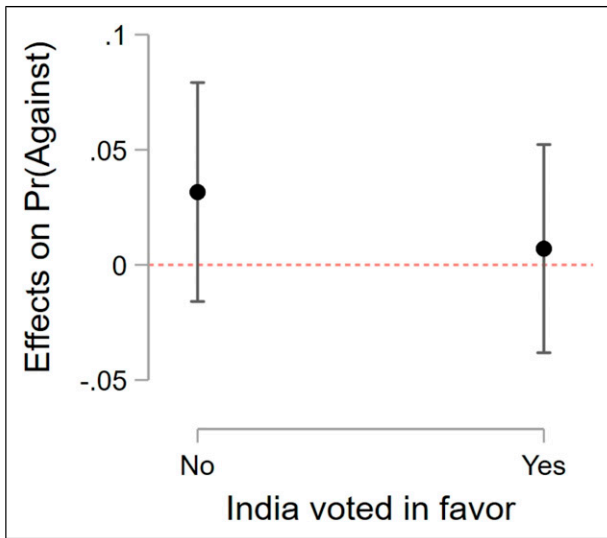
Discussion

We have provided compelling evidence of the impact of China's presence on the UNHRC on voting dynamics. Our findings reveal a statistically significant increase in the likelihood of member states altering their voting positions when China occupies a seat on the Council. This heightened influence is particularly noteworthy in resolutions pertaining to specific countries, which lends support to the argument that China tends to refrain from direct intervention in domestic affairs (Dukalskis, 2023; Foot, 2020).

Our findings have several policy implications. First, our interviews with diplomats and UN human rights officials revealed that every single vote holds importance, as it conveys a strong message about the level of consensus on a particular topic. The distinction between resolutions adopted with a large vote margin versus those with a narrow margin was emphasized by the interviewees, highlighting the power and universal agreement conveyed by consensus voting (Interviews #5 and #7).
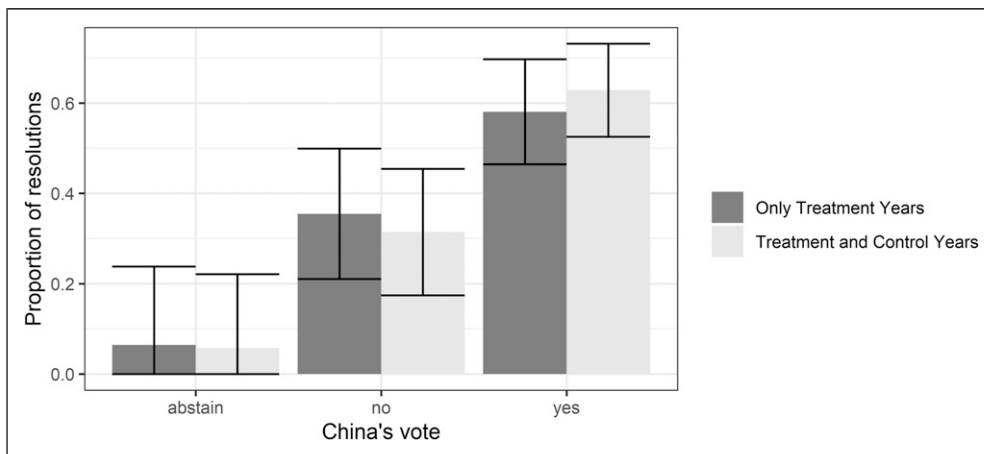

Figure 5. Average marginal effect of India's presence on other countries voting against all resolutions.
Note: See Table A12 in the appendix for full results.

Figure 6. Proportion of China's votes in resolutions included in our sample and those excluded from our analysis.

Second, several diplomats highlighted the prevalent practice of vote trading among countries, wherein reciprocal voting agreements are forged among Council members. As one diplomat (Interview #7) elucidated, there exists an unspoken understanding that "you vote for us here, we'll vote for you there; you abstain for us here and we'll abstain for you there." In a related vein, another diplomat (Interview #3) pointed out that China strategically cultivates support from developing nations by positioning itself as a champion of their interests and causes. When these countries come under scrutiny, China stands shoulder-to-shoulder with them in the Council, thereby reinforcing a sense of solidarity. Third, membership in the UNHRC grants special status, increasing a country's negotiation power and making their preferences more influential. This enhanced negotiation power was emphasized in multiple interviews (Interviews #3, #5, and #8). As one diplomat noted (Interview #6), the "absence of China diminishes its influence," emphasizing the essential role that China's presence plays in shaping the dynamics and outcomes of the Council. Another diplomat (Interview #7) pointed out that when China is present in the Council, it has no problem approaching a representative and saying, "We don't want you to be vocal against Russia," for example. By leveraging their membership, countries can exploit the potential to sway votes. However, not all countries possess the broad agenda and diplomatic resources to effectively exercise influence. Thus, the ability to advocate for positions, mobilize support, and shape decision-making processes hinges on active participation (Interviews #1, #3, #4, and #6). China, as we found in our interviews and data analysis, stands out in this regard.

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Data Availability Statement

All data generated and analyzed during the current study, including replication files, are available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/researchandpolitics

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See Table A1 in the Online Appendix.
2. See Table A4 in the Online Appendix.
3. See Table A5 in the Online Appendix.
4. Available at: https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/217/97/PDF/G1921797. pdf
5. Available at: https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/265/07/PDF/G2026507.pdf
6. See Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix for a list of all the themes in each category, where we have maintained the theme classification created by HURIDOCS.
7. Following accepted practice, we have decided not to consider the votes on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the topic is an entirely separate predicament; it reflects a long-standing bilateral conflict; and it exhibits its own internal dynamic.
8. See Table A7 in the Online Appendix for imbalance measures of CEM.
9. See Table A1 in the Appendix for more information about the interviews.

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