

Regional Group Democracy and Election to the United Nations Security Council

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Abstract

Why are some states elected to the United Nations Security Council? Previous analysis has focused on the individual characteristics of states and has found few systematic patterns explaining this process. I posit that these inconsistent results are due to focusing on individual characteristics of states rather than their position relative to others in their regions regarding their ability to pursue peaceful settlements of international disputes—the primary job of the Security Council. Focusing on the “lock-in” effect of democratic institutions, I find that a state with more democratic institutions than its regional group peers is more likely to be elected to the United Nations Security Council since 1948.

Keywords

United Nations, Security Council, democracy, election

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Introduction

Why are some states elected to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) while others are not? While the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has the formal power to elect these non-permanent members to the Security Council, in practice, the UNGA defers to each of the regional groups to elect their own representatives. The UNGA merely ratifies these regional decisions unless the region fails to nominate their representatives. Most commonly, the regions know what they want.¹ Previous research highlights that democracy plays little role in increasing a state’s electoral chances (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2010). Instead, state wealth and size tend to matter more (e.g. Dreher et al., 2014). Yet, states often trumpet their democratic features when campaigning for a seat on the Council to represent their regional group. For example, when elected to the Security Council in 2024, Slovenia promised that its membership would be based on

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“*democratic attitudes, clear positions, dialogue and cooperation.*”² Similarly, Australia emphasized its “political values as a democratic nation” in its 2013 campaign for a UNSC seat (see Cross, 2024). Election to the UNSC is important to states because not only will they have a say on crucial matters of international peace and security, but they will also experience an increase in aid, loans, and major power attention from the permanent five (P5) members of the Security Council for the 2 years of their term (e.g. Dreher et al., 2009; Kuziemko and Werker, 2006; Reynolds and Winters, 2016). Given the importance of these seats, why would states campaign on their democratic institutions if such a strategy did little to help in this situation?

I suggest rethinking the logic behind how states evaluate each other’s candidacy for the role of non-permanent Security Council member. Specifically, I posit that within a regional group, states are not solely evaluating a candidate on its own merits. Instead, a candidate state is considered in terms of other options the region could provide for UNSC membership specifically regarding the tasks of the UNSC related to international peace and security. Within this broader context, the strength of a state’s democratic institutions matters for two reasons. First, democracies are prone to seek peaceful solutions to conflict situations more fervently than are non-democracies, even when they are not party to the crisis (e.g. Crescenzi et al., 2011; Greig, 2015; Lebovic, 2004). Second, due to both audience costs (e.g. Potter and Baum, 2014; Quek, 2021) and veto players (e.g. Lupu, 2015; Tsebelis, 2002) democracies are more likely to lock-in their commitments to agreed upon policy pathways at the international level (e.g. Leeds, 1999; Leeds et al., 2009; Putnam, 1988; Von Stein, 2016; Voeten, 2019), making for more stable Security Council relations.

This logic suggests that states who are more democratic than their regional group peers are more attractive UNSC members for promoting a more stable Security Council and more peaceful approach to managing international conflict. For this reason, I expect states that are more democratic than the others in their region to have a higher probability of being elected to the UN Security Council. I test this proposition from 1948 to the present and find strong support for my expectation. This article contributes to our understanding of international organization (IO) broadly and the United Nations (UN), specifically. In terms of IOs, my argument helps explain why it appears that some organizations commit to more liberal norms or approaches (e.g. Tallberg et al., 2020). Here, it is because these more democratic leaders within regional groups are more likely to pursue policies that reduce conflict and thus provide a benefit for the region as a whole. Furthermore, as narrow state interests are one of the key causes of organizational underperformance (e.g. Lall, 2017), electing states that are more likely to lock-in their positions and are thus harder for the P5 to influence helps smaller states pull some of the power back toward themselves. In terms of the UN, this reorients our understanding of Security Council election toward thinking about group dynamics rather than individual state characteristics.

Since the UNSC is the primary decision-making body on matters related to international peace and security, understanding which states are elected to serve on it enhances our ability to understand better a wide range of international issues, from how the Security Council encourages state contributions to UN operations (e.g. Uzonyi, 2020) and whether these missions are successful (e.g. Di Salvatore, 2020; Fjelde and Smidt, 2022; Walter et al., 2021) or pale to other conflict dynamics (Uzonyi and Reeder, 2024) to how the Council responds to new security issues such as climate change (e.g. De Biasio, 2024) and technology risks (e.g. Biechi et al., 2024). Scholars can also consider if these elections function similarly to other forms of elections, whether domestic (e.g. Sudulich and Trumm, 2019) or regional (e.g. Beaudonnet and Gomez, 2024). Since most of the

electoral decision-making in this process is made within regional groups, this article likely has implications for regional organizations, as well (e.g. Maru, 2012).

The Advantages of Democracies Within Regional Groups

The purpose of the United Nations Security Council is to maintain international peace and security. Throughout the Moscow, Yalta, and San Francisco conferences that designed what became the United Nations, a primary concern of the original UN architects was how to build an organization that would provide the major powers the tools to bargain with one another and avoid another world war when it was clear that the East and West were allies by necessity rather than by choice. The resulting organizational design was one that favored the major powers. It gave them permanent seats on the Security Council of a global organization. Within this Security Council it also gave them veto power over decisions to be made regarding issues of international peace and security. This institutional design provided mechanisms for the P5 to slow down international decision making and provide each other crucial information on what they intended to do globally (e.g. Thompson, 2015) and convey what truly were red lines that the other side should not cross (e.g. Voeten, 2005).

The major powers could not be the only ones represented on the Security Council of a global body, however. Initially, there were six rotating non-permanent members (NPMs). In 1963, the Security Council expanded from 6 NPMs to include 10 elected members (E10). The NPMs have an important role on the Security Council. Their affirmative votes on resolutions count equal to those of the P5 members.³ Their votes are public record and often these states come to the Security Council with foreign policy goals and strategies they plan to pursue while in office on the UNSC. The E10 are elected on a rotating basis for 2-year terms, in which an elected member is not eligible to serve back-to-back terms. The E10 are elected from regional groups, which are given quotas of representation as follows: three members from African States, two from Asian States, one from Eastern European States, two from Latin American and Caribbean States, and two from the Western European and Other States group.

Previous research has found that few factors systematically influence election to the UNSC (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2010; Dreher et al., 2014; Lim and Vreeland, 2013). I posit that one reason for these inconsistent results is that they have overlooked that UN member states look to the Security Council for outcomes that the elected members have a chance to influence. Since the E10 face institutional disadvantages and physical power imbalances, literatures have developed to understand to what extent P5 interests dominate Security Council decision making (e.g. Allen and Yuen, 2020; Beardsley and Schmidt, 2012; Binder and Golub, 2020; Lundgren and Klamberg, 2023). Critics of the P5 often call for reforming the Security Council, arguing that the exclusionary nature of the UNSC allows it to act too slowly, ignore conflicts of little importance to the P5, and allow their own realpolitik interests to come before global concerns (e.g. Blum, 2005; Deudney and Maull, 2011; Wilson, 2019). Recent literature, though, suggests that the E10's ability to influence Security Council decision making may be underemphasized. Working together, the E10 can pressure the P5 members to stay the course, rewrite resolutions, or abstain rather than veto, depending on the particulars of a situation (e.g. Farrell et al., 2020; Nick Pay and Postolski, 2022). Understanding how this collective pressure influences the likelihood of an NPM being elected requires understanding which foreign policy issues would be most attractive to both an E10-candidate and group members across regions.

Here, I focus on the spread of war and its destabilizing effects. Inter- and intra-state conflicts have the potential to spread, cause economic harm to neighboring states, and undermine regional and international peace and security (e.g. Bara, 2018; Linebarger and Braithwaite, 2020; Minhas and Radford, 2017; Uzonyi, 2018). For this reason, states tend to want conflicts resolved as peacefully and quickly as possible. Given this importance of international peace and security to UN members' own well-being, the power of the Security Council to influence these dynamics through diplomatic isolation, economic blockades, and authorizing armed force, among other actions, and the need to resist the P5 from dominating the direction of the Council or allowing its policies to swing along with the intensity of their interests, I argue that regional groups endeavor to elect those members they believe will best pursue peaceful settlement to disputes and lock those policy pursuits into place regardless of P5 interests. Specifically, the need to elect states that are more likely to (1) seek peaceful settlement to disputes and (2) lock-in those policy goals once agreed upon should increase a regional group's willingness to nominate its more democratic members. This is because more democratic institutions are associated with each of these needs.

First, democracies have been shown to pursue peaceful solutions to conflicts beyond their borders more readily than their non-democratic counterparts. In part, democracies seek to promote peaceful conflict resolution to realize liberal norms abroad (e.g. Lebovic, 2004). They take these actions to fulfill their own normative reasons for seeking a more peaceful world (e.g. Koliev, 2020). Strategically, though, democratic leaders are also more likely to be forced into this position through their more open decision-making process than leaders in less democratic countries. Since democratic leaders can be better scrutinized for pursuing policies that exacerbate conflicts abroad, rather than successfully mediating and ending them, these leaders are more likely to seek policy solutions that will benefit each side in the conflict and end it quickly rather than further undermine peace (e.g. Crescenzi et al., 2011). With more democratic states available to work together, the chances that a conflict receives attention before it escalates to undermine regional or global peace and security increases (e.g. Greig, 2015).

Second, once more democratic states have agitated for these policies and voted for them openly in the Security Council, it will be difficult for them to change course for two reasons. The first reason is that leaders in these countries will have to pay an "audience cost" for promising to take an action and then failing to follow through (see Potter and Baum, 2014; Quek, 2021; Uzonyi et al., 2012). Wishing to avoid these costs, especially if such costs could lead to electoral losses, democratic leaders are more likely to stay the course than their less democratic counterparts. The second reason is that, even if the constituents within a democracy change, or their preferences change over time, reversing policy remains more difficult for leaders in these states because of the overlapping institutions within these states. These institutions are often controlled by competing interests, parties, or veto players that makes changing policy quickly untenable (e.g. Henisz, 2000; Tsebelis, 2002). For these reasons, more democratic states often find it difficult to initially agree upon which policy to implement internationally, but become more locked-in to seeing that policy through despite changing domestic and international circumstances (e.g. Leeds, 1999; Leeds et al., 2009; Lupu, 2015; Putnam, 1988; Von Stein, 2016; Voeten, 2019).

Two important notes. Previous scholars have found that democracies are no more likely to get elected to the Security Council than other states (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2010). However, my argument is not about democracies, *per se*. It is about states that are more democratic in their region, which means that how democratic a

state must be for these effects to matter varies by region. This is *not* a monadic effect. It is *relative* to a state's regional group. Second, my argument does not require that states in the region prefer or desire democracy for their region. Rather, it only argues that states, on average, want the Security Council to commit to policies of peaceful dispute resolution that benefit the global community over P5 interest and believe a collection of democratic non-permanent members can better hold the P5 beholden to that vision. And, even if holding the P5 accountable to the UN charter is hard, a group of these states is best positioned to do it together.

Overall, the testable implication of my argument is that,

Hypothesis: A state with more democratic institutions than its regional group peers is more likely to be elected to the United Nations Security Council than other states.

Importantly, states campaign for a seat on the Security Council. Abstracting away from this process to consider only the institutional advantages/disadvantages a state possesses vis-à-vis other candidates will make it harder to find support for my hypothesis because it does not allow me to parse out other regional regime-type or leader-specific preferences that the campaign may illuminate.

Research Design

The unit of analysis in this study is the state-year for all states from 1948 to the present. It excludes the Permanent Five members of the Security Council because they do not need elected to the UNSC. The dependent variable is *Elected*, coded 1 in the year in which the state was elected to the UNSC; 0 otherwise (UN, 2024). The state is then dropped from the sample for the 2 years that it serves on the Security Council and the 3 years following its term because a state is not eligible for immediate re-election. Given this dichotomous dependent variable, the estimator is a probit model.

The key independent variable is a state's regional *Democracy Ratio*. This variable is constructed as the state's *Democracy Score*/Mean Regional Group *Democracy Score* where *Democracy Score* is V-Dem's 0-1 Electoral Democracy index in which higher numbers indicate more democratic states (Coppedge et al., 2024).

I begin with a parsimonious model that only includes the key independent variable and a time polynomial of years since election to the Security Council to account for temporal dependence. I then included additional independent variables to help capture alternative explanations and potential confounders. However, previous research has found that little systematically correlates with election to the Security Council. Two exceptions hold. First, as a states' *Wealth* increases, so does its probability of being elected to the UNSC as it can better campaign for the position (e.g. Dreher et al., 2014). I include a state's gross domestic product per capita to capture *Wealth* (Bolt and Luiten Van Zanden, 2025). Second, as a state's *Population* increases, so does its probability of being elected to the UNSC (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2010). Thus, I include a state's population size (Bolt and Luiten Van Zanden, 2025).

All three of these independent variables possess high rightward skew. I therefore use the logged form of each in the models that follow. I also lag each by 1 year to help capture the sequence of events in the data. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for all variables in the main analysis and the Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs). As all VIFs are below 1.05, multicollinearity is not a significant concern in this analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Variance Inflation Factors.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	VIF
Elected	0.030	0.171	0.000	1.000	#
Democracy ratio	-0.228	0.754	-3.452	1.570	1.020
Wealth	8.440	1.170	0.000	11.960	1.000
Population	8.612	1.627	3.223	14.076	1.040
Years since elected	20.495	17.785	0.000	74.000	1.040

#Dependent variable.

Results

Before turning to the large-N econometric results of my main analysis, I begin by considering patterns in the raw data. I use lowess estimation to take a non-parametric look at the underlying relationship between a state's *Democracy Ratio* in its region and its probability of being *Elected* to the United Nations Security Council. As Figure 1 illustrates, states that are more democratic than their regional peers are more likely to be elected to the Council. Thus, there is support for my hypothesis in the raw data.

Table 2 presents the results of my main analysis. Model 1 is the base parsimonious model that includes only *Democracy Ratio* and the time polynomial. Here, more democratic states increase the likelihood of being *Elected*. Moving *Democracy Ratio* from its minimum value to its maximum value, while keeping all other variables at their mean, reveals *Democracy Ratio* to have a first difference effect of 0.055. Model 2 includes the additional variables previous scholars have shown to be robust correlates of UNSC elections—*Wealth* and *Population*. Again, I find that an increased *Democracy Ratio* increases the probability of a country being *Elected*. Here, though, the first difference effect drops slightly with the inclusion of these confounders to 0.047. Model 3 employs a jackknife technique that systematically drops every observation to determine if any one is driving the results. Model 4 is a linear probability model that includes state and year fixed effects. Model 5 includes group fixed effects. Finally, since *Elected* years only account for ~3% of observation years, Model 6 is a rare events logistic regression. In each of these models, the results hold: states that are more democratic than their group average are more likely to be elected to the United Nations Security Council.

To assess the predictive power of this argument, I compare Model 2 to a baseline model that includes all covariates other than *Democracy Ratio* and report the receiver-operating characteristics (ROC) and precision-recall (PR) curves. The area under the baseline ROC curve is 0.718, whereas the area under the curve increases for Model 2 upon including the *Democracy Ratio* to 0.729. This difference is statistically significant at the 5 percent level, indicating that our ability to predict UNSC election results increases once we consider the level of a state's democracy relative to the UN group to which it belongs (Figure 2(a)). Similarly, the area under the PR curve for the baseline model is 0.082 but increases to 0.091 for Model 2 (Figure 2(b)).

There is strong support for my claim that states that are more democratic than their group average are more likely to be elected to the United Nations Security Council. But this claim is not deterministic. The models reveal that when there are close cases, other factors like a state's wealth, size, or time since last election also have influence, as previous analysis has found.

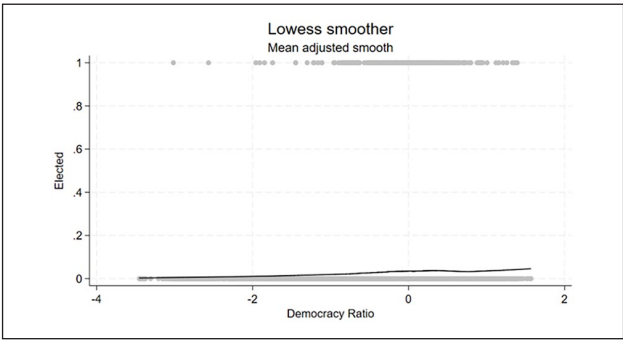


Figure 1. Democracy Ratio and Elected States in the Raw Data.

Table 2. Probit Analysis of UNSC Election.

	Model 1: Base	Model 2: Controls	Model 3: Jackknife	Model 4: LPM + FE	Model 5: Group	Model 6: RE Logit
	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)
Democracy Ratio _{t-1}	0.210* (0.037)	0.191* (0.039)	0.191* (0.045)	0.012* (0.004)	0.187* (0.041)	0.453* (0.089)
Wealth _{t-1}		0.147* (0.024)	0.147* (0.024)	0.003 (0.004)	0.140* (0.036)	0.336* (0.052)
Population _{t-1}		0.180* (0.020)	0.180* (0.018)	-0.013* (0.005)	0.199* (0.020)	0.400* (0.043)
Years Since Elected	0.078* (0.014)	0.088* (0.015)	0.088* (0.013)	0.007* (0.001)	0.089* (0.015)	0.206* (0.035)
Years Since Elected ²	-0.002* (0.000)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.006* (0.001)
Years Since Elected ³	0.000* (4.46e-06)	0.000* (5.09e-06)	0.000* (4.90e-06)	1.23e-06* (3.11e-07)	0.000* (5.06e-06)	0.000* (0.000)
Constant	-2.370* (0.111)	-5.368* (0.362)	-5.368* (0.321)	0.054 (0.043)	-5.462* (0.419)	-11.373* (0.814)
N	9877	8518	8518	8518	8518	8518
Log pseudolikelihood	-1292.411	-1155.125	-1155.125		-1147.743	

#Errors clustered by state.

*p < 0.05.

Additional Analysis

To gauge the robustness of these results and the bounds of this theory, I estimate a series of additional models. See Table 3. First, using the V-Dem data, I control for the state's level of democracy alongside its *Democracy Ratio* (Model 7). *Democracy Ratio* remains robust, and, like previous scholars, I find that a state's level of democracy, on its own, has no statistically significant influence on its probability of being *Elected* to the Security Council. Second, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United Nations saw a greater emphasis on democracy and human rights in the post-Cold War era. This shift in global priorities may have heightened the effect of the dynamics I propose here. However, when I

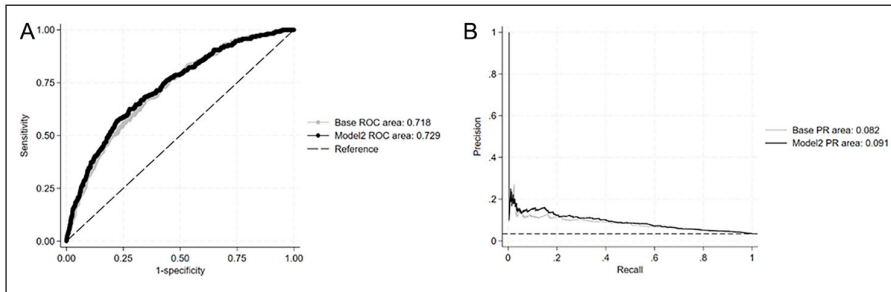


Figure 2. ROC and PR Curves.

interact *Democracy Ratio* with *Post-Cold War*, I find that more democratic states increase the likelihood of being *Elected* in both periods (Model 8; Figure 3(a)). Third, I find that the effects of the *Democracy Ratio* are enhanced by a state's *Wealth*. States that are more democratic than average in their regional group are more likely to be *Elected*, especially when they are wealthier (Model 9; Figure 3(b)). Fitting with previous studies, this may be because such states are better able to advertise their stances on issues and their desire to be on the Council. Similarly, the effect of the *Democracy Ratio* is enhanced by a state's *Population* size, with the effect size increasing alongside the size of a state's population size (Model 10; Figure 3(c)). It is important to note that wealth and population size are correlated with the probability of civil war (e.g. Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Hegre and Sambanis, 2006), and recent scholarship has noted that domestic stability can influence a state's success in UNSC elections (Caro-Burnett and Weese, 2023). Therefore, I also control for whether a state is experiencing civil war (Davies et al., 2024). As expected, experiencing civil war decreases the likelihood of election. However, *Democracy Ratio* remains robust (Model 11).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article returned to the question of which states get elected to the United Nations Security Council. For reasons of global security, prestige, and individual financial benefit, states covet these positions. Yet, scholars have found few systematic patterns explaining which states are elected to these important positions. I posit that this struggle was due to our previous focus on the individual characteristics of states rather than their position relative to others in their regions on aspects related to bargaining issues pertaining to issues addressing international peace and security—the primary job of the Security Council. When we consider both this job, and which states are most likely to tie themselves to policy positions geared to the peaceful settlement of disputes, even when P5 interests begin to conflict or wane, the value of democratic institutions and their “lock-in” effect becomes clear.

While it may be the case that states are interested in the easy money that comes with Security Council membership, they are also aware that there are negative consequences from relying on these monies (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2010). They are also aware that the Security Council has an important job to do. Neglecting this job, while possibly beneficial in the short run, can have serious regional and international consequences. For this reason, it may be helpful to elect a neighbor who is better equipped to withstand the pressures of deviating course when you cannot, and threats are on the

Table 3. Robustness Checks.

	Model 7: Monadic Democracy	Model 8: Post-Cold War	Model 9: Wealth Interaction	Model 10: Population Interaction	Model 11: Civil War
	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)	β (s.e.)
Democracy Ratio _{t-1}	0.183* (0.059)	0.213* (0.047)	-0.047 (0.259)	-0.215 (0.161)	0.185* (0.040)
Democracy _{t-1}	0.032 (0.172)				
Post-Cold War		-0.241* (0.065)			
Democracy Ratio _{t-1} × Post-Cold War		-0.051 (0.094)			
Wealth _{t-1}	0.143* (0.031)	0.180* (0.027)	0.150* (0.024)	0.147* (0.024)	0.133* (0.024)
Democracy Ratio _{t-1} × Wealth _{t-1}			0.027 (0.031)		
Population _{t-1}	0.180* (0.020)	0.199* (0.021)	0.180* (0.020)	0.179* (0.020)	0.207* (0.021)
Democracy Ratio _{t-1} × Population _{t-1}				0.046* (0.019)	
Civil War _{t-1}					-0.303* (0.107)
Years Since Elected	0.088* (0.015)	0.090* (0.015)	0.089* (0.015)	0.091* (0.016)	0.089* (0.015)
Years Since Elected ²	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)
Years Since Elected ³	0.000* (5.09e-06)	0.000* (5.01e-06)	0.000* (5.13e-06)	0.000* (5.12e-06)	0.000* (5.15e-06)
Constant	-5.344* (0.380)	-5.748* (0.387)	-5.405* (0.365)	-5.384* (0.362)	-5.471* (0.355)
N	8518	8518	8518	8518	8518
Log pseudolikelihood	-1155.107	-1147.661	-1154.878	-1153.289	-1148.954

#errors clustered by state.

*p < 0.05.

horizon. Giving up those benefits today may help avoid larger consequences tomorrow (e.g. Bas et al., 2024). In a sense, this is one way that smaller states may also try to keep the P5 from further dominating the course of the United Nations. As Lall (2017) highlights, narrow state interests are one of the key causes of organizational underperformance. While the P5 states possess veto power and can kill action they find too egregious, they must work with the elected members to move action forward. Being forced to work with states that are harder to move off peaceful paths forward may be a way for regional groups to pull some of the power back toward themselves.

This logic raises the question, though, of how well these more democratic states can lock-in to their policy pathways. At least three conditions may arise that are worthy of further exploration. First, the results here highlight that states need to be *more* democratic than

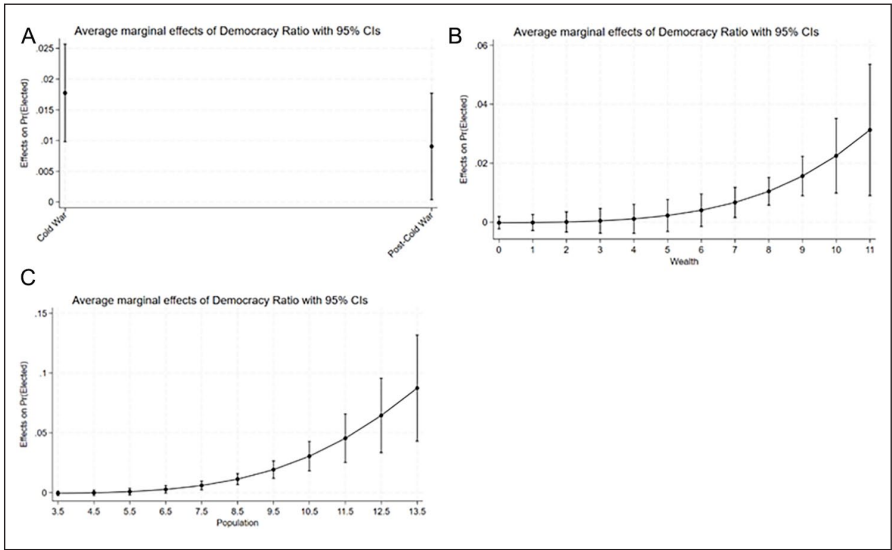


Figure 3. Interactive Effects From Table 3.

the average member of their region to increase their probability of being elected. However, some regions are *less* democratic than others. This means that a state's chances of being elected improve in less democratic regions before it becomes fully democratized. How committed do these states stay to the peaceful policy solutions? Second, groups of states with similar preferences tend to work together in crafting policy (e.g. Edgerton, 2024). As the success of their policy wanes, or stronger members of their coalition suggest deviations, how long will these members remain committed to the initial policy and at what point will commitment itself lead to friction on the Security Council? Finally, democratic leaders are beholden to domestic constituents whose opinions may change (e.g. De Vries et al., 2021; Morse and Pratt, 2022). When these constituents prefer a different course of action, how will that affect Security Council bargaining and deviations from agreed upon action? How long can veto players and cross-cutting institutions lock-in stable policies against new preferences? What if the peaceful policy pathways are not working?

Overall, this project sought to reorient our perspective on what shapes voting for United Nations Security Council membership. It highlights that the *group* rather than the *individual* is important to consider. Nonetheless, relative democracy is only one consideration states have when making this important choice. Much research is left for scholars to do as we more fully work to understand how this important international body is constructed to shape global politics.

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Notes

1. Dreher et al. (2014) note that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) must make this decision in roughly 20% of cases, and sometimes there are ties in voting such that states share the seat.
2. Italics added. See <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2024-01-01-slovenia-takes-up-non-permanent-seat-on-the-un-security-council/>.
3. A total of 9 out of the 15 Security Council Members voting “yes” and no P5 veto against the resolution are required for it to pass.

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