

Signalling opposition or struggling to compromise

Analyzing abstention votes in the United Nations General Assembly

David Weyrauch - University of Mannheim - dweyrauc@mail.uni-mannheim.de

EPSA - Panel: International Organization and International Order

25.06.2021

Introduction

Why do coalition governments abstain from voting in the United Nations General Assembly?

Follow up: why should we care about abstention votes in the UNGA?

Vote analyses to derive the similarity of preferences of states in international relations (see for example Bailey et al., 2015; Bueno de Mesquita, 1975; Gartzke, 1998; Signorino and Ritter, 1999).

- Variation in votes between countries is utilized to extrapolate variation in the preferences of states.
- Measures of preference divergence are applied to different questions of international cooperation.
 - Withdrawal from intergovernmental organizations (Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019)
 - UN Security Council activity (Allen & Yuen, 2020)
 - International trade (Gowa, 1994)

Motivation and set-up

- 'Abstentions' are perceived to be important informative signals
 - *"Virtually all studies treat a nay vote as a stronger signal of disapproval than an abstention"* (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 432).
 - Abstentions are regularly treated as halfway between a yes and a no vote.
- This becomes problematic if the abstention is not determined by the preference of the government vis-a-vis the proposal.
 - An abstention that is not due to the rejection of a proposal will bias our measure of states' observable preferences.

The mechanisms which underlie these vote choices, especially the decision to abstain, have received limited attention.

Theory

How can we explain abstentions?

Scholarship on abstentions in other institutions

Studies on abstention-votes in other institutions may provide some initial insights

- Likelihood of abstention increases with intra-party preference heterogeneity (Ceron 2015)
- MEPs abstain because they may be “*torn between different positions of their national party, their transnational party group, and their country’s minister*” (Mühlböck and Yordanova 2017, 323).

The diverging preferences of the key actors may create an **impasse** in which it is impossible to commit to a single action

- The result is an abstention

Heterogeneity of preferences among key actors may lead to abstentions in roll call votes

- By implication: abstentions might be better understood as **indecision** rather than **rejection**.

This translates to a key argument of **coalition foreign policy decision-making**.

How do coalitions decide over foreign policies?

Scholarship on coalition foreign policy has developed conflicting mechanisms: **extremism** and **moderation**.

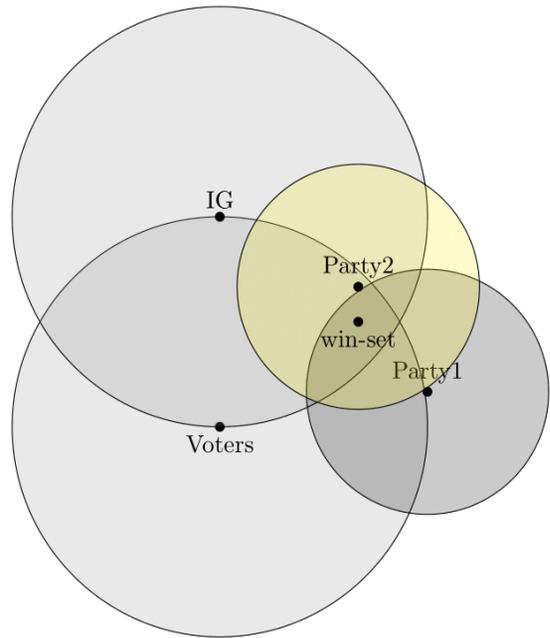
Moderation: deliberation and **gridlock**

An increase in the number of key actors decreases the size of the win-set and limits the number of **ratifiable** foreign policies (Clare 2010, Hagan et al. 2001, Oktay 2014)

- More coaling parties will lead to a smaller win-set of domestically ratifiable outcomes (Clare 2010; Oktay 2014)
 - Any party may block the actions of the rest of the cabinet by threatening to defect from the coalition (Gehlbach, 2013, Hagan et al. 2001)
 - Foreign policy choices may no longer be determined by the repeated interaction of coalition partners in their attempt to find common ground (Martin & Vanberg, 2014)
 - Instead will be determined by the lack of policy choices that are acceptable to all coalition partners.

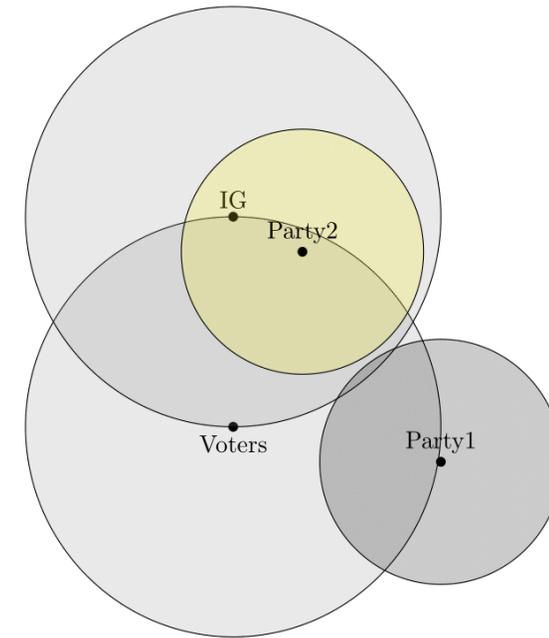
As a result, governments will face gridlock and specific issues will remain undecided.

Linking coalitions, ideology and UNGA-voting



a) Congruent coalition parties

- Coalition parties are somewhat ideologically congruent
 - Win-set of acceptable foreign policies is not empty



b) Incongruent coalition parties

- Coalition parties are not ideologically congruent
 - Win-set of acceptable foreign policies is empty

I assume that greater **ideological distance** increases the likelihood that no satisfying policy can be found.

Issue-specific ideological incongruence (I)

- However, merely increasing the number of **potential** veto players is not a sufficient condition of increasing the likelihood of gridlock.
- They need to have diverging preferences over policies.

Voting in the UNGA regularly revolves around **questions of international cooperation**

- Ideological incongruence on issues related to international cooperation will impact the size of the win-set for UNGA-votes

H_1 : As ideological incongruence regarding international cooperation increases the likelihood and number of abstention(s) increases.

Issue-specific ideological incongruence (II)

I do not expect divergence on issues generally covered by the left-right distinction of political parties to matter.

- The left-right systematization can be useful to account for questions of e.g. market freedom versus market regulation.
 - The left-right scale is insufficient in the explanation of European integration (Hooghe et al. 2002; König et al. 2017)
 - Whether ideological incongruence on economic issues equally affects decision-making on international cooperation is questionable.

*H*₂: Left-right ideological incongruence does not affect the likelihood and the number of abstention(s).

Accounting for the historical background of UNGA voting

The end of the Cold War has been a critical juncture for the cooperation of states in IGOs (Tallberg et al. 2014).

- During the Cold War, the United States and the USSR influenced the preferences of their allies (Snyder, 1984).
- This is observable in the voting patterns (Kim & Russett, 1996).
 - Following the Cold War the coercive power of hegemons decreased.

*H*₃: Following the Cold War the effect of ideological incongruence on abstentions is more pronounced.

Research Design

Data and operationalization

Combination of different sources of data

1. Vote choice in the UNGA (from Bailey et al., 2015)
 2. Parties in Cabinet (from ParlGov)
 3. Partisan position on different issues (from Manifesto Project)
- Dataset contains coalition governments from predominantly European democracies (approx. 80.000 vote decisions)

Measuring ideological incongruence

I calculate the euclidean distance between the coaling parties on two dimensions:

1. Internationalism (Manifesto project: per107 & per109)
 2. European integration (Manifesto project: per108 & per110)
- European integration is frequently more controversially discussed and can be a decent indicator of the willingness for international cooperation.
 - The results remain consistent but less pronounced for disaggregated indicators.

Basic set-up of modeling abstentions

I model binary decision of abstaining or voting yes/no (**logit regression**) and the annual number of abstentions of a given country (**negative binomial regression**).

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 \text{Ideological incongruence}_{it} + \beta_n X_{it} + \gamma_i CFE_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

Controls (X_{it}):

- Year (continuous)
- **Topic of the vote (Bailey et al. 2015)**
- Weighted average position of government: Internationalism
- Weighted average position of government: European integration
- Weighted average position of government: Left-right

Unit specific intercepts ($\gamma_i CFE_i$)

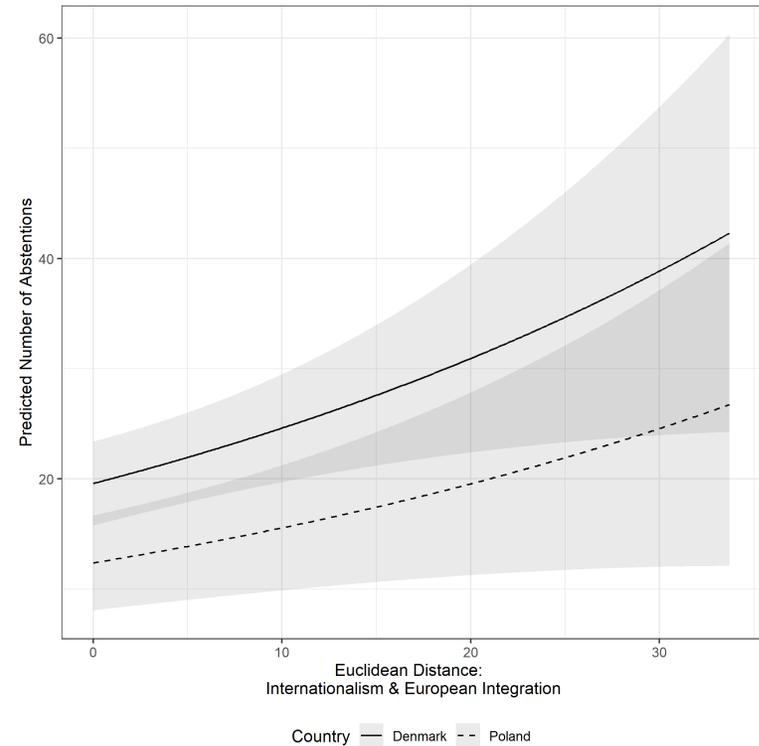
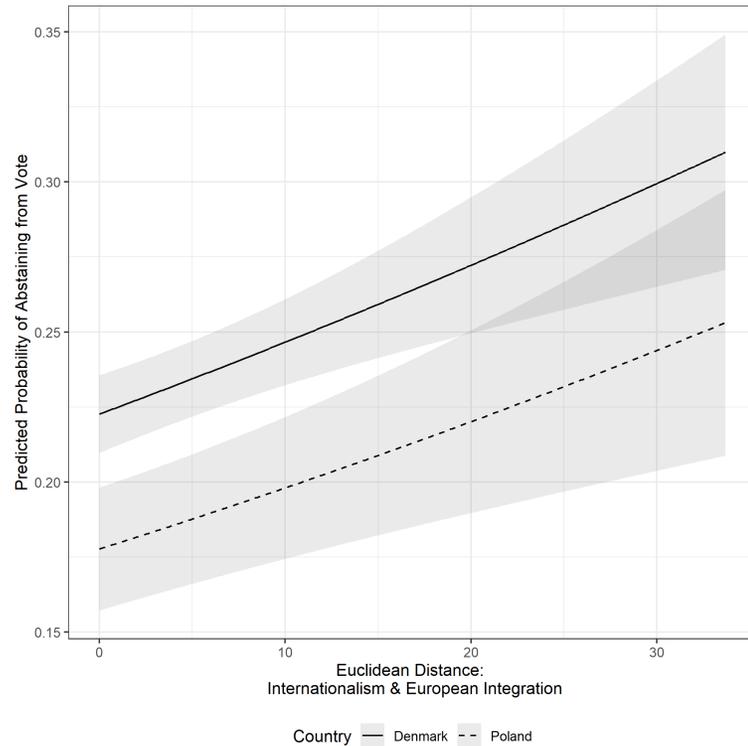
- Country fixed-effects
 - To account for unobserved, yet constant, confounders that vary across units

Across these models I vary the measure of ideological incongruence (β_1 **Ideological incongruence**)

- Euclidean distance: international cooperation
- Range: left-right scale

Analysis

Preliminary Results (I)



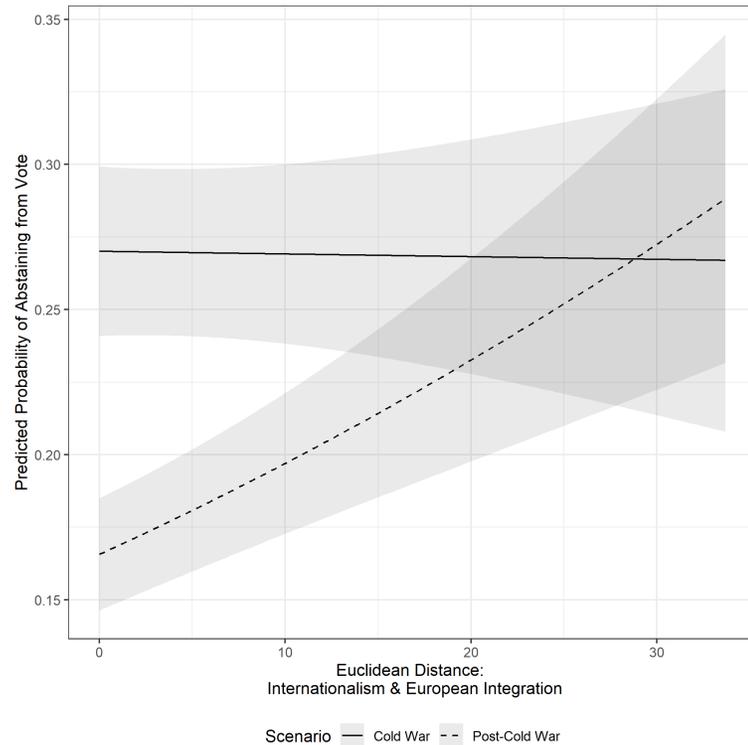
a) Predicted probability of abstaining from vote (Denmark and Poland)

- Approximate increase of 8-10 percentage points
 - 40 percent greater likelihood of abstaining

b) Predicted number of annual abstentions (Denmark and Poland)

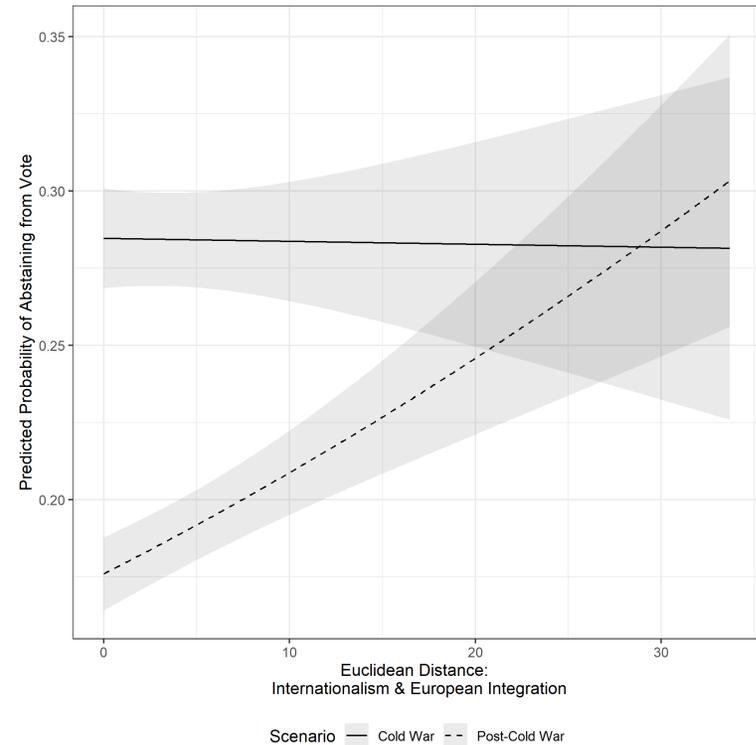
- Significant change in the number of abstentions for Denmark
- Effect is less pronounced for Poland

Preliminary Results (II)



a) Predicted probability of abstaining from vote (Poland)

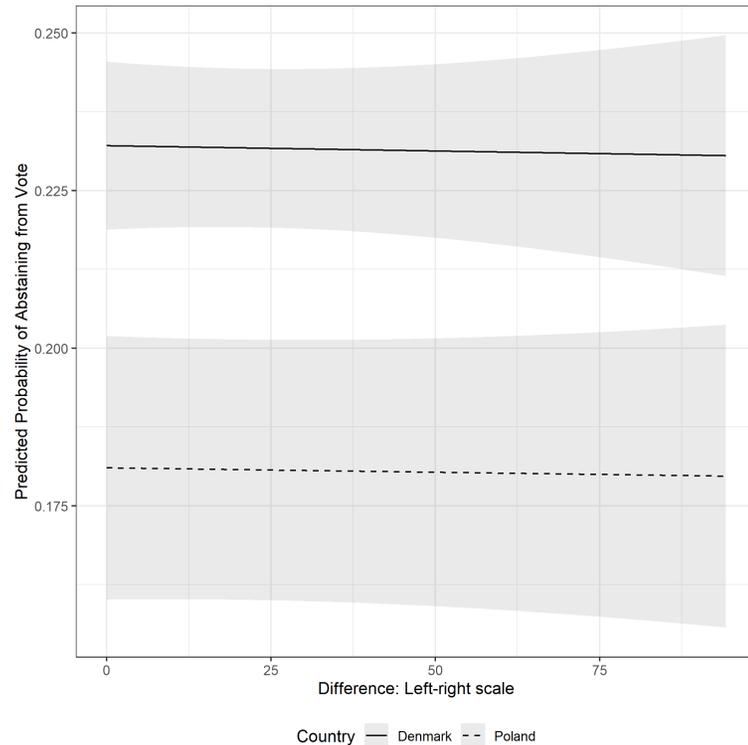
- Post Cold War: approx. 11 percentage point increase
 - Corresponds to approx. 64 percent greater probability of abstention.



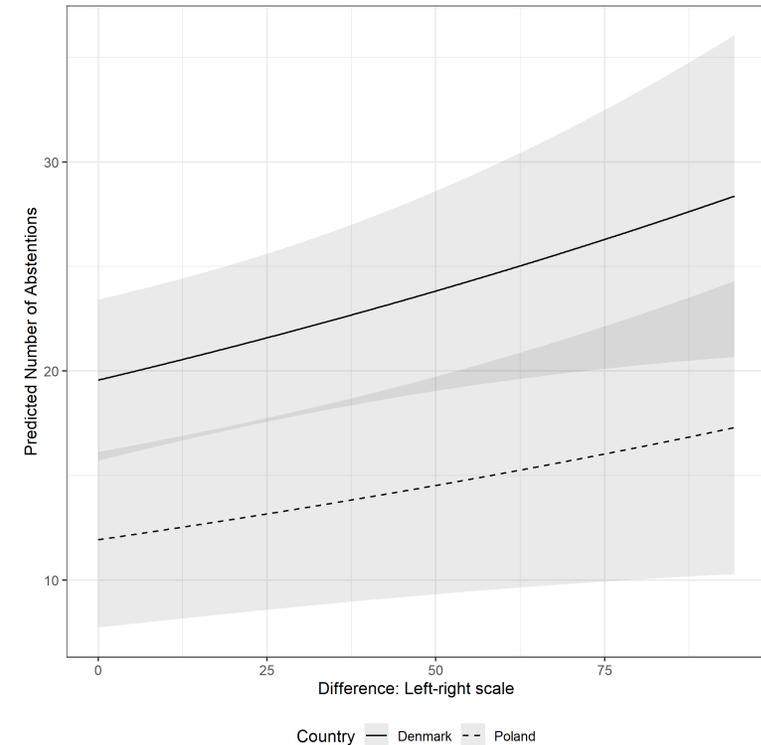
b) Predicted probability of abstaining from vote (Denmark)

- Post Cold War: approx. 12.5 percentage point increase
 - Corresponds to approx. 70 percent greater probability of abstention.

Preliminary Results (III)



a) Predicted probability of abstaining from vote (Denmark and Poland)



b) Predicted probability of abstaining from vote (Denmark and Poland)

As hypothesized there is no effect of ideological incongruence on a left-right scale.

- Assessing the influence of ideological incongruence on foreign policy decision-making requires context-specific assessments of conflict given the issue under consideration.

Conclusion

Ideological incongruence may impede foreign policy making of coalition governments

- I observe an inability to coordinate on a yes/no preference.
- Incongruence is case-specific and we need to account for this issue-specific conflict.
- The effect is more pronounced after the end of the Cold War.

Contributed to the field of scholarship which extrapolates state preference similarities from UNGA votes

- Highlighting that abstention is not exclusively to be evaluated as a signal of disagreement.
- Implications for using vote-similarity as a proxy for preference similarity?
 - Compare how a measure that excludes abstentions compares to the original measure.

Next steps need to better operationalize the mechanism

- Further embedding the theory in an agency-framework
- Potentially via the appointment of the UN-representative
- Extrapolate the mechanism to other, regularly occurring events of foreign policy decision-making

Thank you very much for your attention!

References (I)

Allen, S. H., & Yuen, A. T. (2020). Action or inaction: United Nations Security Council activity, 1994–2013. *Journal of Peace Research*, 57(5), 658–665.

Bailey, M. A., Strezhnev, A., & Voeten, E. (2015). Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data: *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

Borzyskowski, I. von, & Vabulas, F. (2019). Hello, goodbye: When do states withdraw from international organizations? *The Review of International Organizations*, 14(2).

Bueno de Mesquita, B. (1975). Measuring Systemic Polarity. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 19(2), 187–216.

Ceron, A. (2015). Brave rebels stay home: Assessing the effect of intra-party ideological heterogeneity and party whip on roll-call votes. *Party Politics*, 21(2), 246–258.

Clare, J. (2010). Ideological Fractionalization and the International Conflict Behavior of Parliamentary Democracies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 54(4), 965–987.

References (II)

Gartzke, E. (1998). Kant We All Just get Along? Opportunity, Willingness, and the Origins of the Democratic Peace. *American Journal of Political Science*, 42(1), 1–27.

Gehlbach, S. (2013). *Formal Models of Domestic Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Gowa, Joanne. 1994. *Allies, Adversaries, and International Trade*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hagan, J. D., Everts, P. P., Fukui, H., & Stempel, J. D. (2001). Foreign Policy by Coalition: Deadlock, Compromise, and Anarchy. *International Studies Review*, 3(2), 169–216.

Hooghe, L., Marks, G., & Wilson, C. J. (2002). Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration? *Comparative Political Studies*, 35(8), 965–989.

Kim, S. Y., & Russett, B. (1996). The New Politics of Voting Alignments in the United Nations General Assembly. *International Organization*, 50(4), 629–652.

References (III)

König, T., Marbach, M., & Osnabrügge, M. (2017). Left/Right or U? Estimating the Dimensionality of National Party Competition in Europe. *The Journal of Politics*, 79(3), 1101–1105.

Martin, L. W., & Vanberg, G. (2014). Parties and Policymaking in Multiparty Governments: The Legislative Median, Ministerial Autonomy, and the Coalition Compromise. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(4), 979–996.

Mühlböck, M., & Yordanova, N. (2017). When legislators choose not to decide: Abstentions in the European Parliament. *European Union Politics*, 18(2), 323–336.

Oktay, S. (2014). Constraining or enabling? The effects of government composition on international commitments. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(6), 860–884.

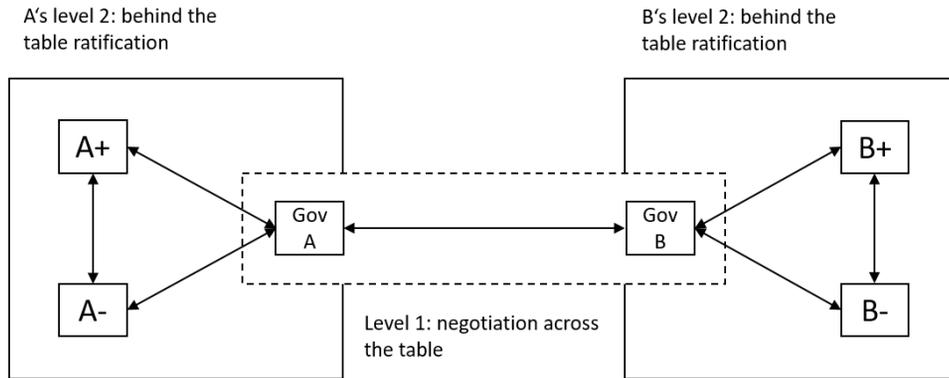
Signorino, C. S., & Ritter, J. M. (1999). Tau-b or Not Tau-b: Measuring the Similarity of Foreign Policy Positions. *International Studies Quarterly*, 43(1), 115–144.

Snyder, G. H. (1984). The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics. *World Politics*, 36(4), 461–495.

Tallberg, J., Sommerer, T., Squatrito, T., & Jönsson, C. (2014). Explaining the Transnational Design of International Organizations. *International Organization*, 68(4), 741–774.

Embedding withdrawal in a two-level framework

A first step to answer the puzzle above is to answer what may constrain governments foreign-policy decision-making



- Vote choice needs to be acceptable to national veto-players
- Unless all relevant actors agree with the vote choice, governments may suffer costs from withdrawing regardless

Who are the relevant actors?

- Scholarship on foreign-policy decision-making has increasingly moved beyond the voters vs. interest groups conceptualization and has begun to include other relevant actors.
- In the following I will focus on **coaling parties** in governments

TLG

To further explain why ideologically heterogeneous coalitions may face gridlock in foreign policy decision-making it can be useful to think of the UNGA vote decision in a two-level game framework.

- Putnam (1988) proposes that chief negotiators play two games simultaneously.

If we perceive governments in international relations to be agents of multiple principals (Nielson and Tierney 2003)

- then it is possible to understand the actions of the government as a function of the preferences of the principals.

I argue in this paper that the decisive factor influencing the foreign policy choices of a coalition government is the ideological incongruence of coalition parties regarding a specific issue under consideration (Putnam, 1988; Tsebelis, 1995, 1999).

If one coalition party strongly favors a “yea” vote in the UNGA and another favors a “nay” vote, then the government finds itself in a situation in which either vote may be unsatisfactory to at least one of its principals.

Linking coalitions, ideology and UNGA-voting

This raises the question given which circumstances the government will face resistance from the parties that constitute the coalition.

- Figure 1 visually displays this argument. Figure 1 (a) displays the coalition government that inhibits similar positions, whereas Figure 1 (b) displays a two-party coalition in which the coaling parties have diverging positions.

Extremism

Extremism: diffusion of responsibility or hijacking

- The ability to avoid blame allows parties to pursue more extreme policies in coalition governments (Hobolt and Karp 2010, Fisher and Hobolt 2010, Powell and Whitten 1993, Vowles 2010)
- Fringe parties in coalitions can force extreme behavior by threatening to upend the coalition (Kaarbo 1996, Kaarbo and Beasley 2008).

Veto players

- Veto players do not need to be institutionally defined.
 - They may "*arise endogenously through the political process. Parties that join a governing coalition, for example, typically acquire a veto over a policy change*" (Gehlbach, 2013, p. 74).