

# Presidential Ambassadorial Appointments: Competence or Patronage?

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## Abstract

In 2020 President Biden appointed Michelle Kwan, an Olympic medalist, as ambassador to Belize, and he also appointed R. Nicholas Burns, an American diplomat and foreign policy scholar, to China. This variation in qualifications raises the question: what explains presidential choice of ambassadors to various countries? I theorize that presidents make decisions on who to nominate based on several factors, namely their electoral and policy goals. However, presidents may have to balance these goals in the face of tradeoffs. As such, I argue that presidents will appoint campaign donors to countries the United States shares values and a history of cooperation with. In contrast, I expect the president to appoint experts to countries with which the U.S. has a fraught relationship. I test my theory with 166 nominations made during the Biden presidency and find partial support for my claims. The findings show potential for a correlation between my independent variables and nominations around the world. However, further research on a wider sample over a larger time period should be conducted in order to gain more insight into the connections that lead to ambassadorial nominations.

## Introduction

President Joe Biden came into the presidency with a significant background in foreign relations. He served as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for twelve years and played an important role in shaping foreign policy as the vice president during the Obama presidency. However, when he began nominating ambassadors to various countries, he made some unexpected choices. For example, he nominated Scott Miller, who is a philanthropist, LGBTQ activist, and one of Biden's top donors, to be ambassador to Switzerland. In addition, David Cohen, a Comcast executive, was nominated as ambassador to Canada, and Michelle Kwan, an Olympic medalist in ice skating, was named ambassador to Belize. None of these nominees had political, let alone foreign policy, experience before serving. This is all the more interesting given Biden's close relationship with the foreign policy establishment.

These examples raise the more general question: What explains presidential choice of ambassadors to various countries? I argue that there are many factors that influence these decisions. Ideally, the president would choose the best candidate for a given country based on their qualifications and the political climate of said country. The importance of having ambassadors fit for the job is immeasurable; foreign relations can make or break peace between countries. Having capable people at the helm can ensure the stability of policy and encourage cooperation. However, it is clear that expertise and experience are not the only qualities presidents consider.

In making these decisions, I assume that the president has both electoral and policy goals. The president will strategically weigh these goals in making these choices. In doing so, I argue that they will be more likely to nominate inexperienced donors to countries similar to the U.S. and career diplomats to those with fraught relations with the United States. To evaluate my claims, I measure similarities to the U.S. based on the type of government, economy, and alliances of countries. I find partial support for my hypothesis that the president is more likely to appoint donors to countries that share similar values and a history of cooperation with the United States. I also find partial support for my second hypothesis that the president is more likely to appoint career diplomats to countries whose values are at odds with the United States, measured using regime type and human rights violations. These results have important implications for representation of the U.S. abroad and the role of money in United States politics.

In what follows, I survey the existing literature on ambassadorial appointments, provide my theory on how a president makes ambassadorial nominations, and conduct an

empirical analysis of the connections between my independent variables and President Biden's nominations. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research, and I suggest avenues for further research.

## Literature Review

In the United States, the sitting president has control over filling many official positions in our government. The president gets to choose who will run departments, advise on special topics, and liaise with other countries on foreign relations. While the president requires Senate approval for many nominations, this is still a critical part of executive power. These appointees make many decisions within our government. Though they don't always have the final say, their expertise informs how policies are made and how global relations are maintained. Ambassadors are a particularly important appointed position. A skilled ambassador can improve relations, enhance cooperation, and support national interests abroad. These ambassadors can be an incredibly important tool for the president to have influence over global issues in different regions while also delegating to a trusted colleague. Beyond the technical aspects, ambassadors are also symbolic and can send messages about an administration's goals and priorities. These ambassadors play a critical role in foreign affairs and the public appearance of the United States. Thus, presidents carefully consider their choices for these positions.

In the literature on presidential appointments, many scholars identify a trade-off between nominees who are loyal to the president and those that are competent and have relevant expertise. Krause and O'Connell (2019) find that the president values loyalty most in high level bureaucratic positions and competence more in lower levels. They also find that in executive agencies that are at odds with the current president's ideology, the trade-offs tend to be stronger, and the president prioritizes loyalty. Presidents also tend to favor loyalty in departments they deem important. In executive branch agencies, there is a strong lean towards loyalty, whereas independent agencies gain more competent candidates. Similar tradeoffs can be found in ambassadorial appointments. Hollibaugh (2015) brought to light the patronage-expertise trade-off. This is similar concept to the loyalty-competence trade-off but instead suggests that donations to a given campaign or party could result in a nomination for an ambassadorial position.

Presidents use appointments as bargaining chips in order to strengthen their administration throughout their time in office. In modern politics, the president tends to be held accountable for the functioning of the entire government. This is a big job for just one

person to uphold (Lewis 2011). By appointing candidates into different positions that the president cannot do alone, they can provide a united front not only nationally but internationally as well. When choosing who to appoint, presidents don't just face national scrutiny; they also face the long-term consequences of embracing either loyalty or experience. Appointing more experienced candidates may help the president during their time in office, whereas appointing a donor may assist them in gaining a second term. Lewis (2011) also suggests that presidents tend to put their own interests into consideration when appointing ambassadors. While there are still biases in this appointment system, appointees become more diverse with every presidential cycle. This increase in diversity between Eisenhower and now seems to mean that the president's interests will have a larger impact on who is appointed than cultural biases.

McCarty and Razaghian (1999) discuss the implications of the Senate confirmation process on who presidents choose to appoint. They find support for their hypotheses that the more opposition that a president faces in the Senate, the safer their appointments need to be in order to be confirmed. This means that when a president is opposed in the other branches, they are more likely to pick qualified candidates for nominated positions. These authors show a clear correlation between divided government and who a president appoints to various positions. This confirms that there are clear differences between Republican and Democrat administrations in their styles of appointments.

Literature on other types of appointments can also give us clues about what factors into appointing candidates to different positions. Piper (2022) analyzes how presidents decide to change leadership in positions that would be filled with nominees from the previous administration. He suggests that presidents focus on the most influential positions when choosing which of thousands of different seats to fill. Piper's analysis shows that political ideology is an important part of who is appointed to different positions. This leads me to the conclusion that ideology, importance of the position, and presidential goals are the main factors in nominations to positions in government. I directly build from this my argument.

## Theoretical Foundations

I assume the president has multiple goals when deciding who to appoint to ambassadorial positions. First, the president has policy goals and thus wants to send ambassadors who will advance those goals and United States' national security interests. The president also has electoral goals. That is, the president has an incentive to use ambassadorial positions to reward donors for their financial contributions to the president's campaign. Further, rewarding donors may also grease the wheels for future contributions to the president and their party. These goals can, at times, be at odds. In

those situations, the president will have to make a choice between nominating a donor to the position, who I assume will be loyal to the president but will typically be less qualified, and a career diplomat, who is more likely to be competent and have relevant experience but is less likely to be loyal to the president, as they have their own informed stances on policy toward the relevant country. I assume the president weighs these tradeoffs on a position-by-position basis.

Building from this, I argue that the president will prioritize their electoral goals in making ambassadorial nominations to countries with whom the U.S. shares values. In particular, they will nominate donors to positions in other democratic, capitalist countries with whom the U.S. has a history of cooperation. These countries are often part of large treaties and organizations that encourage countries to cooperate with one another, exhibit democratic values, and maintain clean reputations on the front of human rights. Given the strength of these pre-existing relationships, it is unlikely an unqualified donor with little experience will negatively impact our relationship with these like-minded countries. Countries with a long-standing history of alliance and trade or with similar values and political systems to the United States will require less maintenance in terms of their relationship to the U.S. Thus, there is less risk in sending a donor. These donors will feel rewarded with such a prestigious nomination and therefore will be more likely to continue to support the president in future elections. Therefore, I hypothesize:

*H1: The president is more likely to appoint donors as ambassadors to countries with whom the U.S. shares values and a history of cooperation.*

In contrast, when the president is making nominations to countries with whom the U.S. has strained relationships or incompatible values, they will prioritize competence over donor loyalty and electoral concerns. Countries with autocratic governments, for example, require more precise dealings. Having expertise in that country's politics and culture or knowledge of negotiation is vastly more valuable in a tense situation. In dealing with autocratic countries, the United States has to balance national security concerns and its role as a protector of human rights and civil rights. The U.S. must also think about how negotiations may affect potential for war and violence, not only with the U.S. but regionally as well. When there are such high stakes, it is invaluable to have an expert in the lead. By nominating these competent and experienced candidates to politically tense countries, the president can advance their policies while also presenting a qualified ambassador who can help to solidify foreign relations. Without considering political experience or competence, there is a far higher risk of increased tensions between the United States and these autocratic countries. As such, I hypothesize:

*H2: The president is more likely to appoint competent and qualified candidates (career diplomats) as ambassadors to countries whose values and interests are at odds with the United States.*

## Empirical Analysis

I take a quantitative approach to testing my hypotheses. In order to do so, I use ambassadorial appointments in the United States under President Biden and his administration from 2020 to 2024. While this limited timeframe may introduce potential biases, particularly given the importance of variation between different presidential administrations, it was not feasible to collect a broader range of data within the time constraints of this study. Further, Biden is an interesting case to study for these dynamics as he had an immense amount of foreign policy experience and connections to the foreign policy establishment, but he also has a track record of patronage. The unit of analysis is the country-vacancy. There are 166 observations in the sample. Some countries have multiple entries either because the first nomination failed or because an appointee left their position before the term was over. The sample includes only countries with whom the United States has diplomatic relations and to which Biden made ambassadorial nominations, as well as countries for which the necessary data was available. I excluded any appointments made to organizations such as NATO or the United Nations.

For my first hypothesis, the dependent variable is whether the presidential nominee to an ambassador position was a donor to President Biden's 2020 campaign. It is coded 1 if yes and 0 if no. This information was sourced from OpenSecrets, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that tracks money in U.S. politics and its influence on elections and public policy. OpenSecrets provides detailed data on campaign contributions, lobbying expenditures, and other political financial activities. Out of the 166 ambassadors, I determined that only about 15% (25) of nominees donated to Biden's campaign.

The main independent variable for my first hypothesis is whether a country shares values and a history of cooperation with the United States. This is measured in multiple ways. First, I consider whether a country is a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD is an international organization, founded in 1961, which encourages economic development and trade deals. All members are committed to democracy and market economies, meaning they share important goals and values with the United States. This variable is coded as 1 for OECD members and 0 for otherwise. Out of the observations in my sample, 21% (36) of them are OECD members; the other 78% (130) are not. The second measure captures a history of cooperation with the United States, so I consider whether each country is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This alliance was started in 1949, and all of its members

promote democratic values and cooperate on issues of national security and defense. While there is a military pact between NATO countries, the organization is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes whenever possible, indicating these countries not only cooperate but share values. Yet again this variable is coded 1 for NATO members and 0 for non-members; 18% (31) of the observations represented are members of NATO and the other 81% (135) are not.

For my second hypothesis, the dependent variable is whether the presidential nominee to an ambassador position was a career diplomat or not. It is coded as 1 if so, and 0 otherwise. I utilized information from the American Foreign Service Association to code this variable. This is a professional organization for those in U.S. Foreign Service. They consider nominees career diplomats if they came from a position in the United States Foreign Service. For this variable, I found that 116 of 166 nominees were considered to be career diplomats. This is about 70% of Biden's recorded nominations.

The independent variable for this hypothesis is whether a given country has values and interests at odds with those of the United States. I measure this in two ways. The first is a measure of the level of democracy in each country, which captures the strength of democratic values or lack thereof. I assume that U.S. values are more at odds with autocratic regimes than with other democracies. To capture this variable, I use The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democratic Index for 2020, which rates countries based on features of their electoral process, functioning of the government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. The index is on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is the least democratic and 10 is the most. The strongest democracy within my sample is that of Norway with a score of 9.81, making it the most similar to the United States. The weakest democracy in the sample is the Democratic Republic of Congo, with a score of 1.13, which I interpret to mean it is at odds with the United States. On average, countries have a score of 5.41 on this scale. The second way I measure whether a country is at odds with the United States is the amount of human rights violations in a country. I hold that the more abuses of human rights in a country, the less it shares values and interests with the U.S. I measure this factor using the Political Terror Scale (PTS). This measure captures the level of state perpetrated and sanctioned violence in a country based on U.S. State Department reports. Capturing the level of violence perpetuated by the state against people within their borders allows us to determine the level of similarity or difference to the United States in terms of values. I assume that countries with a value of 1, those with the least state violence, are most similar to the U.S. and that states with a value of 5, those with the most state violence, are least similar. On average countries in my dataset have a score of about 2.5. Norway is an example of a country with a score of 1, while China and Democratic Republic of Congo have scores of 5.

Finally, I include several important control variables. The first of these is whether the country is in the Middle East or North Africa, coded as 1 if so and 0 otherwise. This is important to consider because this region received a lot of attention from the Biden administration. This region was a major foreign policy priority due to several major events, such as the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and the Gaza war. This leads me to believe that Biden would have prioritized career diplomats to this region during the nomination process. To code which countries count as part of this region of importance, I use an indicator of the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. I recorded 11% (19) of my observations within this MENA (Middle East North Africa) region, and 88% (147) not in this region. My second control variable is absolute value of the latitude of a country's capital, a measure distance from the equator. I believe this is relevant, as a president may decide to send donors to more temperate and tropical regions as this may equate to a bigger or better reward. The closest to the equator in my data was Quito, Ecuador with a distance of 0.25, and the furthest from the equator was Reykjavík, Iceland with a distance of 64.15. On average, the capitals of countries Biden made nominations to had a latitude about 26 degrees from the equator.

## Results

To evaluate Hypothesis 1, which holds that the president will be more likely to appoint donors to countries with whom the U.S. shares values and a history of cooperation, I estimate a linear probability model. The dependent variable is the dichotomous indicator for whether a nominee donated to the president's campaign. The results can be found in Table 1.

My two independent variables of interest are whether a country to which a nomination was made is a member of the OECD and NATO. I expected both to have a positive effect on the probability of the president nominating a donor. The coefficient for OECD is 0.31, which indicates that OECD membership increases the probability that the president appoints a donor by 31%. This is a considerably large effect, and it is the variable that seems to have the largest effect on the president's decision to nominate a donor. This variable also has a statistically significant effect. The coefficient on NATO is -0.11, which indicates that NATO membership has the opposite effect on presidential nominations than I had anticipated. The analysis shows that NATO member countries are 11% less likely to receive the nomination of a donor. Though, the effect not statistically significant. Together the results indicate mixed support for Hypothesis 1.



Table 1: Donor Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value
Intercept	-0.24	0.14	0.09
OECD	0.31	0.09	0.001
NATO	-0.11	0.09	0.26
Democracy Score	0.05	0.02	0.001
PTS	0.02	0.03	0.56
MENA	0.05	0.08	0.55
Latitude	0.0004	0.002	0.84

*Here my two independent variables of interest were OECD and NATO. While the results for OECD show high support for my theory, the NATO results do not. With the exception of the democracy measure, none of the controls were statistically significant predictors of a donor appointment.*

I also took interest in several control variables; the first of these is the democracy score of a country. I expected this to have a positive influence on donor nominations. This variable is measured on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 represents the most democratic country. The coefficient for the democracy score variable is 0.05. This means that donors are 5% more likely to be nominated to a country for every point a country goes up on the democracy score. To understand the influence of this, if a country were to go from a 1 to a 10 on the democracy scale, they would be 50% more likely to be appointed an ambassador who donated to the president's campaign. This is a fairly large effect and is statistically significant. The second control variable of interest was a country's ranking on the Political Terror Scale (PTS). Where 1 indicates countries with the least human rights infringements and 5 those with the most. I expected this variable to have a negative outcome on the dependent variable. PTS has a coefficient of 0.02. This indicates that for every point of increase on the PTS, a country is 2% more likely to have a donor named ambassador. This is an unexpected result, but it is not statistically significant. Therefore, it may not make a substantial difference in the president's decision at all and may not have a real-world effect.

For the final two control variables, my expectations were that a country with a capital closer to the equator would be more likely to receive a donor as ambassador and that countries in the Middle East or North Africa would be less likely to receive a donor. MENA has a coefficient of 0.05, which indicates that countries in the Middle East or North

Africa are 5% more likely to receive a donor candidate. This is a relatively small and not statistically significant effect, though it is in the opposite direction than expected. Latitude has a coefficient of 0.0004, which indicates that for every degree away from the equator a country's capital is, they have a 0.04% higher chance of receiving a donor nomination. This effect is not in the expected direction but is very small and not statistically significant, indicating that this likely doesn't factor into the president's nomination calculus.

To evaluate Hypothesis 2, which holds that the president is more likely to appoint competent and qualified candidates as ambassadors to countries whose values and interests are at odds with the United States, I estimate another linear probability model. The dependent variable is the dichotomous indicator for whether a nominee was a career diplomat. The results can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Career Diplomat Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-Value
Intercept	1.19	0.17	0.00
Democracy Score	-0.07	0.02	<0.05
PTS	-0.02	0.03	0.51
OECD	-0.52	0.11	<0.05
NATO	0.07	0.11	0.51
MENA	-0.06	0.10	0.56
Latitude	0.001	0.002	0.59

*Here my two independent variables of interest are Democracy Score and PTS. The Democracy Score shows strong support for my theory, while the PTS scores show mild support at best. OECD is the only other variable that shows significant effects on ambassadorial appointments.*

My two independent variables of interest for this second regression are the democracy score and Political Terror Scale ranking of a country to which an ambassadorial nomination was made. I expected that countries with a higher democracy score would have a decreased chance of being appointed a career diplomat ambassador. Similarly, I expected that a country with a higher ranking on the Political Terror Scale would have an increased chance of being appointed a career diplomat ambassador. The coefficient for democracy score is -0.07 which indicates that for every point a country increases its

democracy ranking, the probability of being appointed a career diplomat decreases by 7%. This is a fairly substantial effect, as a change from 1 to 10 on the democracy scale would show a potential decrease of 70%. This effect is also statistically significant, supporting my expectations. My second independent variable, PTS, has a coefficient of -0.02. This indicates that for every point a country increases on the PTS, there is a 2% decrease in probability that a career diplomat may be appointed ambassador. This is a relatively small effect, and, while it is in the opposite direction from my expectation, it is not statistically significant. As such, I have mixed support for Hypothesis 2.

I also considered several control variables; the first of these is whether a country is a member of the OECD. I expected that countries with similar economies to us, represented by OECD membership, would be less likely to get career diplomats appointed as ambassadors. OECD has a coefficient of -0.52, indicating that countries who are members of the OECD are 52% less likely to be appointed a career diplomat as ambassador. The second of my control variables was NATO membership. I expected that countries who belong to NATO would be less likely to receive the nomination of a career diplomat. However, with a coefficient of 0.07, analysis indicates that countries with active NATO membership are 7% more likely to receive a career diplomat as an appointed ambassador. I speculate that there are several factors that may influence this unexpected result, including NATO's position as a military alliance. One could assume it is best to have an experienced diplomat working with other countries on national defense issues. There is also the possibility that NATO membership is not factored into the president's decision when it comes time to nominate an ambassador, seeing as this effect is not statistically significant.

For the final two control variables my expectation was that a country with a capital closer to the equator would be less likely to receive a career diplomat as ambassador and a country in the Middle East or North Africa would be more likely to receive a career diplomat. MENA has a coefficient of -0.06, indicating that countries in the Middle East or North Africa are 6% less likely to receive a career diplomat ambassador. While this relatively small effect is not in the expected direction, it is also not statistically significant. Latitude has a coefficient of 0.001, which indicates that for every degree away from the equator a country's capital is, they have a 0.01% increased chance to be appointed a career diplomat. This effect is in the expected direction but is very small and not statistically significant, indicating that it likely does not factor into the president's decision making.

## Conclusion

I have argued that presidents make ambassadorial decisions based on their two types of goals, policy and electoral. Particularly, I hold that they will nominate top donors to countries that share similar values and a history of cooperation with the United States, and they will nominate competent and qualified career diplomats to countries with higher tensions. My analysis showed some support for both of these statements, with the exception of several independent variables. The results showed that career diplomats were more likely to be nominated to NATO countries rather than donors. I suspect this is because negotiating skills may be valued during military operations and NATO is primarily a military alliance. The results on human rights violations were also unexpected and warrant further investigation.

As for the implications of my results, understanding how presidents choose ambassadors can influence voting behavior as well as donations to different presidential campaigns. Putting understanding in the hands of voters can allow them to make more educated decisions when they make choices on a ballot. Money has a lot of different implications in American politics, incredible sums are spent every election cycle on campaigns, lobbying influences policy outcomes, and even media appearance of candidates. Now it appears that money also influences international relations as well. President Biden was absolutely influenced by donations and favors, which makes it important to question how other presidents are influenced by money. Looking at Biden's nominations does not paint the larger picture well enough to determine the broader results of ambassadorial nomination of donors. Therefore, I want to advocate for further research using more presidencies over a large period of time and different political climates. This could show a correlation between donor prioritization and whether a president will be running for reelection in the subsequent term. Using a broader collection of data could result in a better system for predicting ambassadorial nominations based on a variety of global factors. It is also important to determine the effectiveness of different appointed politicians like ambassadors. Research on correlations between political effectiveness and the background of a given politician could produce interesting results. Being a career diplomat versus only a donor can mean a variety of things for effectiveness and skill. Understanding the dynamics surrounding ambassadorial appointments is essential in determining whether appointments are made considering qualifications and strategy rather than favoritism and financial influence.

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