

Just Patronage? Familiarity and the Diplomatic Value of Non-Career Ambassadors

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Abstract

Career diplomats have expertise. Why, then, do U.S. presidents appoint relative novices to key diplomatic posts? Conventional wisdom points to patronage. Yet this explanation overlooks the benefits of a diplomat's *familiarity* with political superiors. Inherent in delegated diplomacy is uncertainty over diplomats' ability to "deliver" on understandings reached at the negotiating table. Non-career diplomats often speak more credibly for political superiors, creating an incentive for foreign counterparts to engage in diplomacy. I theorize a tradeoff between familiarity and expertise to generate empirically testable prediction. Counterintuitively, I expect that presidents often sacrifice professional expertise to delegate important diplomatic assignments to relative amateurs, even accounting for the patronage value of the post. I find empirical support for the argument using a novel dataset on U.S. ambassadorial appointments from the Reagan through Trump administrations.

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I don't speak Italian. I speak Bush.

- Melvin Sembler, former U.S. Ambassador to Italy

In November 2019, the *LA Times* declared career diplomats—U.S. Foreign Service officers—the “stars” of the Trump impeachment hearings (Fleishman August 17, 2020). Testimony by U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch and others gave the public a rare glimpse at the expertise and poise of America’s professional diplomats, who typically ply their trade behind closed doors and far from U.S. shores. Yet, while the U.S. maintains a skilled diplomatic service, presidents of both parties frequently look outside the State Department’s career ranks when appointing their personal representatives abroad. Though the U.S. is notable in its use of political appointments, it is not alone in deploying non-career officials to key diplomatic missions.¹

This practice is puzzling. Diplomatic services exist to develop within their ranks diplomats with the expertise needed to succeed in negotiation and other diplomatic functions (Greenstock 2013). Moreover, recent research finds that career diplomats may be better conduits for threats than non-career alternatives (Lindsey 2017). Why, then, do presidents appoint anyone else to high-ranking diplomatic positions? The conventional wisdom holds that non-career appointments are sinecures meant to reward political allies (e.g., Hollibaugh Jr 2015; Scoville 2019; Fedderke and Jett 2017). And, indeed, with every new U.S. president, some number of campaign donors with few discernible qualifications are sent as ambassadors to attractive capital cities in Europe and elsewhere.

The patronage theory has merit, but struggles to explain important cases. Leaders

¹Many of Britain’s successful ambassadors to France, Germany, and the U.S. have been non-career (Nicholson 1963, 102), and Prime Minister James Callaghan even appointed his son-in-law, a journalist, as ambassador in Washington. South Korea also uses non-career diplomats in key posts, such as Tokyo, Beijing, and Washington. Only about half of recent Australian ambassadors to the U.S. have been professionals from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, according to the Lowy Institute (see, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-makes-ideal-australian-ambassador-washington>).

often select non-career officials for high-stakes diplomatic assignments that carry no conceivable patronage value, which strongly suggests that patronage is only part of the story. For example, Franklin Roosevelt appointed a diplomatic neophyte and personal confidant, Harry Hopkins, to serve as envoy on the key diplomatic task of his presidency: building an alliance with Churchill and Stalin to defeat Hitler. The appointment earned FDR no political favors, and offered the chronically-ill Hopkins no formal title even as he endured enormous physical pain to carry out his mission (Roll 2012). Yet, from 1940 to 1945, Hopkins was FDR’s ‘man in Europe.’ The Hopkins appointment and others like it indicate that presidents expect diplomatic benefits from non-career envoys. What are these benefits?

Diplomacy often resembles a two-level game, with diplomats negotiating at one level on behalf of political leaders at another. Selecting a diplomat who is familiar with the president solves an important problem inherent in two-level diplomacy: uncertainty over a diplomat’s ability to “deliver” the assent of political superiors to agreements reached at the negotiating table. This uncertainty can undermine confidence in the diplomatic process and reduce incentives to negotiate in a two-level context (Putnam 1988). *Familiarity* between a diplomat and the president helps the former better learn or anticipate the preferences of the latter. In turn, this allows the diplomat to more credibly commit the government to agreements, reducing concern at home and abroad that agreements will fall through.

In turn, the appointment of a high-familiarity diplomat incentivizes foreign counterparts to prioritize the conclusion of agreements, amplifying the diplomat’s effectiveness. By contrast, a diplomat who lacks strong connections to the White House and therefore may struggle to deliver the president’s agreement is not worth engaging. This dynamic explains why Hopkins was so effective as FDR’s envoy. Roosevelt “depended on Hopkins because Hopkins understood better than anyone what the president had in mind” (Roll 2012, 7). It was this familiarity that earned Hopkins unprecedented engagement from Churchill and Stalin, gave him “influence over the wartime coalition,” and ultimately “proved so fateful to

the nation and the world” (Roll 2012, 7).

In an ideal world, presidents would prefer that their ambassadors were both high-familiarity and high-expertise. However, there are many diplomatic posts to fill and few ambassadorial candidates high on both dimensions. In selecting ambassadors, presidents thus face an *familiarity-expertise tradeoff*: in most cases, presidents must decide whether to prioritize familiarity or expertise. While it is costly to forego the expertise of professional diplomats, there are countervailing diplomatic benefits to non-career appointments. I use intuitive argumentation and a formal model (presented in the appendix) to generate empirically testable predictions. While recovering the conventional wisdom about patronage and expertise, the theory suggests a counterintuitive prediction: presidents increasingly value high-familiarity diplomats—i.e., non-career appointees with ties to the president—as the importance of a diplomatic assignment increases.

I test these predictions by examining U.S. ambassadorial appointments across six presidential administrations, from Reagan to Trump. Consistent with the theory, high-familiarity appointees are more prevalent in important bilateral relationships, such as those receiving presidential attention, even after accounting for indicators of a post’s patronage value. In addition, it emerges that the small number of ambassadors high in familiarity *and* expertise are especially likely to be allocated to ambassadorial posts that are both important and difficult, such as Russia, China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, among others. Overall, the evidence suggests that presidents are engaged in a process of optimally matching the attributes of ambassadorial candidates to those of diplomatic posts.

This paper makes a number of contributions. First, it theorizes representation in diplomacy, introducing familiarity as a key concept in the nascent literature on delegated bargaining in international affairs (e.g., Lindsey 2017; Malis 2021; MacDonald 2021). For diplomatic channels to function, there has to be confidence that diplomatic representatives actually *represent* their principals. Prior work investigates the role of ambassadorial vacan-

cies in influencing international outcomes (Malis 2021). This study suggests that *who* fills ambassadorial posts critically influences patterns of conflict and cooperation.² In particular, it indicates that high-familiarity, politically appointed diplomats facilitate cooperative outcomes, such as the forging of alliances. By the same token, this study indicates that diplomatic disasters can result when diplomats and their principals are out of sync.³ For example, a disconnect between George HW Bush and his career Foreign Service ambassador in Iraq may have contributed to the onset of the Gulf War when the latter incorrectly implied to Saddam Hussein that Washington took no position on Iraq’s dispute with Kuwait (The New York Times July 13, 1991).

Second, this paper takes up Saunders’ call in a recent review article for scholars to study the “politics of elite selection” as well as the “politics of elite interaction” in foreign policy (Saunders 2022, 3-4). This paper advances the literature on both dimensions, showing how the principal-agent interaction between presidents and ambassadors explains variation in the selection of different categories of envoys, from high-ranking Foreign Service officers to donors to friends and confidants. The impact of familiarity is potentially wide-ranging in foreign policy, with implications beyond the context of ambassadorial appointments. The use of non-career ambassadors is just one way that presidents bureaucratically marginalize, duplicate, or circumvent the career Foreign Service. Presidents have also centralized foreign policy control in the White House by creating and maintaining a National Security Council Staff that one senior State Department official likened to a “foreign office in microcosm” (Preston 2010, pp. 43) and by using special representatives and non-governmental cutouts to conduct sensitive diplomacy. The logic of familiarity may shed light on the selection and performance of this broader set of actors.

²This study of the background characteristics of ambassadors also contributes to literature on elite biographies in IR (Krcmaric et al. 2020; Horowitz and Fuhrmann 2018), as well as more recent work that seeks to understand how those biographies are likely to be perceived abroad (Goldfien and Joseph 2023; Byun and Carson 2023; Goldfien et al. forthcoming).

³This logic comports with findings by MacDonald (2021) that political appointees with ties to the president are less likely to be involved in militarized interstate disputes.

Last, this study has timely policy implications. Following Trump-era turmoil at Foggy Bottom, many policymakers now aim to ‘rebuild’ the State Department by, in part, limiting the prevalence of political appointees. These calls are understandable, but this study suggests that political appointments need not have a deleterious effect. In implementing any reforms to the appointment process for ambassadors, policymakers should bear in mind that political appointees can offer real diplomatic value even if they lack the expertise of their Foreign Service colleagues.

The Logic of Familiarity in Diplomatic Appointments

Much recent scholarship on diplomacy focuses on the costliness and credibility of diplomatic communication. The powerful logic of cheap talk (see, e.g., [Fearon 1994](#)) spurred an torrent of important work aimed at explaining the apparent credibility of private or ‘costless’ diplomacy (e.g., [Trager 2017](#); [Ramsay 2011](#); [Sartori 2002](#); [Yarhi-Milo 2013](#); [Holmes 2018](#)). With increased confidence in the potential for diplomacy to influence international outcomes, scholars—particularly those working in a rationalist or political psychology tradition—have begun to explore diplomatic practice, including research on high-level diplomatic travel ([Lebovic and Saunders 2016](#); [Malis and Smith 2021](#); [McManus 2018](#); [Goldsmith et al. 2021](#)), the link between diplomacy and status and reputation ([Duque 2018](#); [Pouliot 2016](#); [Goldfien et al. 2023](#)), and the appointment and performance of envoys and ambassadors ([Lindsey 2017](#); [MacDonald 2021](#); [Towns and Niklasson 2017](#); [Haglund 2015](#); [Hollibaugh Jr 2015](#); [Arias and Smith 2018](#); [Fedderke and Jett 2017](#); [Malis 2021](#)).⁴

⁴To their credit, constructivists and English School theorists have long recognized the importance of diplomacy in international affairs.

Delegating Diplomacy

An important contribution of recent scholarship is Lindsey’s application of a principal-agent lens to diplomacy, opening the door to understanding what makes foreign policy unique amidst the broader scholarship on bureaucracy and delegation (Lindsey 2017).⁵ Career diplomats who have some bias toward the interests of the country to which they are accredited—who have some amount of the dreaded ‘localitis’ often alleged of career diplomats—actually serve as better conduits for threats than would unbiased ambassadors precisely because they are sensitive to host country interests.

Intuitively, we would expect career diplomats to offer benefits in expertise. After all, the logic of diplomatic services is to develop in their ranks the skills and experience required to succeed in diplomatic assignments (Moskin 2013; Greenstock 2013). If these career diplomats offer additional advantages in making threats, then why would leaders ever look elsewhere for diplomatic representation?

Scholars and other observers point to a patronage-expertise tradeoff: presidents sometimes forego the expertise of career diplomats in order to reward donors and political allies. Ambassadorships confer title and status, entrée to the high society of the host country and, often, the use of grand residences abroad.⁶ Scholars have demonstrated a strong relationship between campaign contributions and ambassadorial appointments (Fedderke and Jett 2017; Scoville 2019). Politically appointed ambassadors are more prevalent in attractive destinations, and less prevalent in difficult posts (Hollibaugh Jr 2015). Meanwhile, evidence from internal State Department reviews indicate that embassies headed by non-career political appointees perform worse (Haglund 2015).

⁵Scholars have also used a principal-agent lens to study international organizations and monetary policy. There is also a rich tradition of scholarship on bureaucratic politics and foreign policy (e.g., Zelikow and Allison 1999), but this focuses more on the policy formulation process than on diplomatic communication. See also Lindsey (2023) for additional discussion.

⁶For example, Winfield House, the official residence of the U.S. ambassador to the Court of St. James, includes the second largest private grounds and garden in London, following Buckingham Palace.

Though patronage clearly matters, it is unlikely that patronage alone drives political appointments. First, at moments of crisis and flux in global politics, presidents have often used personal confidants rather than professional diplomats as intermediaries to foreign counterparts, even in the absence of a compelling patronage rationale. The Harry Hopkins case noted above is one such example. Another is Robert Strauss. Amid the tumult of 1991, George HW Bush selected his longtime friend to be ambassador to a crumbling Soviet Union, even though Strauss conceded that his Foreign Service predecessor “knew more about the Soviet Union in his little finger than I knew in my whole body” (Kennedy 2002, 112). Such appointments cannot be explained with reference to patronage or expertise.

Second, it is not abundantly clear that politically appointed U.S. ambassadors perform worse than Foreign Service officers. While some research provides evidence of non-career incompetence (Haglund 2015), considering similar data, other examinations conclude that non-career ambassadors simply have higher variance, with both more embarrassing and more outstanding performances than career Foreign Service counterparts (Jett 2014).⁷ Kim and Fu (N.d.) find that ambassadors with backgrounds as politicians increase trade with the U.S. states they represented as governor or in Congress. Further, MacDonald (2021) finds that politically appointed ambassadors are less likely to experience a militarized interstate dispute (MID) with the country to which they are accredited than Foreign Service officers. While avoiding MIDs is not the only way to measure success, this data provides a powerful counterpoint to the assumption that political appointees are uniformly feckless. Overall, that presidents frequently rely on politically appointed diplomats for high-importance but low-patronage value assignments strongly suggests that presidents expect them to be effective. I explore why in the next section.

⁷Despite potential professional incentives to lampoon political appointees, Foreign Service officers often have praise for them. For example, former U.S. ambassador to Italy Melvin Sembler was mocked by some (Moskin 2013, 767) as undiplomatic for the quote that serves as epigraph to this paper, “I don’t speak Italian. I speak Bush.” Nonetheless, Sembler’s deputy chief of mission, a career Foreign Service officer, later said in an oral history interview that Sembler was “terrific” and “highly regarded by the Italians” (Kennedy 2010, 100-1).

Familiarity and the Ability to “Deliver” in Diplomacy

Negotiation is central to an ambassador’s work and most diplomatic negotiation resembles a two-level game, with diplomats at one level bargaining on behalf of leaders at another. In this stylized rendering, diplomatic agents strike agreements on behalf of political principals who then must approve of them (at least tacitly) if they are to be implemented. The risk of using non-career diplomats is that a lack of foreign affairs or negotiating expertise may result in unforced errors in at the bargaining table. What are the potentially compensating benefits of political appointments?

The primary value of non-career, politically appointed diplomats is their *familiarity* with political superiors. Familiarity—or closeness—helps the diplomatic agent to accurately learn or anticipate the policy preferences of their political principal.⁸ Because non-career ambassadors and envoys are often friends and confidants to the president, they may find it easier to understand the president’s preferences. Or, since ambassadors who are familiar with and close to the president may have better access at the White House, high-familiarity ambassadors may find it easier to learn the president’s thinking on a given issue than the average Foreign Service officer. Hopkins, despite his inexperience in foreign policy, lived in the White House with the Roosevelts and thus intimately understood FDR’s thinking about the World War II. Similarly, the official charged with vetting ambassadors for President Kennedy felt that political appointees often served the White House better than career diplomats because the former “have the President’s ear” (Moskin 2013, 764).⁹

Familiarity matters not just because it creates confidence at home that the ambassador

⁸Note that familiarity is a distinct concept from bias. Bias implies a divergence of preferences, and agents can be biased away from their principal even if the principal’s preferences are known with certainty. The concept of familiarity, on the other hand, focuses on an agent’s uncertainty over the principal’s preferences.

⁹The main interpretation in this paper is that familiarity helps convey information from the president to the foreign government. A closely related idea is that, because familiarity may give ambassadors greater access at the White House, it may also help the foreign government convey information to the president, or even get the president’s attention at all. I argue below that the formalization of the argument in the appendix can at least partially capture this secondary interpretation (see footnote 24).

will accurately represent the president’s policies abroad. Crucially, familiarity also increases foreign counterparts’ incentive to invest time and effort in diplomacy with the ambassador in the first place. Diplomatic agents who are and are seen as close to their political principals help to solve a bargaining problem highlighted by Putnam (1988) and inherent in delegated diplomacy: uncertainty over whether agents can secure the assent of their principal to agreements reached. If a leader must ‘ratify’ agreements made by their negotiator, then whether a negotiator can deliver the leader’s endorsement becomes a factor in negotiating success. If a foreign actor doubts the negotiator’s ability to deliver—doubts their understanding of the president’s preferences—they may not put much priority on bargaining in the first place. By contrast, if the foreign actor is confident that the negotiator speaks for the president, they may be willing to devote costly time and effort (Malis and Smith 2021; McManus 2018) to engaging with the negotiator, expend political capital, or even undertake concrete policy actions to improve diplomatic outcomes.¹⁰

Thus, an advantage of high-familiarity political appointments is that they make bargaining attractive to foreign counterparts by erasing concerns that agreements will be vetoed *ex post* by the president. This, in turn, enhances the negotiator’s effectiveness. Indeed, the appointment of high-familiarity, non-career ambassadors often appears to be a preferred outcome by foreign governments.

To return to an example cited earlier, George HW Bush insisted on his friend and lawyer Robert Strauss as ambassador to Moscow not for patronage or expertise. According to one State Department official, the administration felt it was important to “give Gorbachev access to someone who is a close friend of the president... to have someone in Moscow who can pick up the phone and talk directly to [Secretary of State James] Baker or the White House rather than a State Department desk officer” (Yang June 5, 1991). Though Bush

¹⁰For example, as the illustrative case below shows, Saudi Arabia’s confidence that the U.S. ambassador in Riyadh spoke for the White House in expressing the goal of getting the Kingdom into the World Trade Organization led the Saudis to undertake domestic reforms that would increase the likelihood of accession.

recognized the expertise of the “splendid” career Foreign Service ambassador who preceded Strauss, the president told Strauss that he was appointed so that if Gorbachev “speaks to you, he is speaking to me, that is what I need desperately” (Kennedy 2002, 112). Later, the Strauss appointment also helped to solidify a diplomatic channel with Boris Yeltsin, which the *Washington Post* called the “Yeltsin-Strauss connection.” What “mattered most to Yeltsin was [Strauss’] proximity to power,” his ability to facilitate communication with President Bush (Anderson and Binstein December 13, 1992). Overall, the appointment paid off: Strauss saw Gorbachev and Yeltsin frequently and, according to his Foreign Service deputy, leveraged his connections in Washington to obtain a crucial foreign aid package for the collapsing Soviet Union and its successor states (Kennedy 2010, 203-4).

More recently, Joe Biden surprised observers by nominating Obama administration chief of staff Rahm Emmanuel to be U.S. ambassador to Japan. Emmanuel’s limited foreign policy experience, non-existent Japan expertise, and famously undiplomatic personality would seem to make him an unwelcome choice. Yet Emmanuel matched Tokyo’s preference for an ambassador who is familiar with the president, since such individuals can “work closely with the president in case of an emergency” (Imao December 2, 2020). As one Japanese observer put it, an “ambassador who is well-known and close to the president, even if they don’t have policy knowledge or deep involvement in Japan-U.S. relations, would be valuable for Japan” (Imao December 2, 2020). And, indeed, the Japanese appear to have taken a “shine” to Emmanuel as his “close ties to the Biden administration were welcomed” (He Yee Lee May 14, 2023).

A Non-Standard Rendering of the Principal-Agent Problem

In the standard rendering, principal-agent problems result because agents may have divergent preferences from the principal they represent. Here, the diplomatic agent may instead be uncertain over the political principal’s policy preferences. This can have a dele-

terious effect at the bargaining table because it undermines confidence that agreements will be implemented and in turn undermines the incentive for foreign counterparts to invest in diplomacy in the first place. The above anecdotes make clear that presidents value ambassadors who can clearly speak for them abroad. However, this non-standard rendering of principal-agent problems raises some questions: how fundamentally different is this from the typical principal-agent framework? Why does it arise in a diplomatic context? And why do presidents struggle to clearly communicate their preferences to ambassadors?

Though a non-standard rendering of the principal-agent problem, my focus on familiarity shares an important insight with foundational work on delegation. In particular, the idea that presidents value high-familiarity ambassadors is substantively similar to the “ally principal” (Bendor et al. 2001). Presidents delegate diplomacy to agents but it is costly to monitor them. As a result, all else equal, presidents would like to have agents who understand how they think and would act as they themselves would, i.e., an ally.

While the problem of agent uncertainty over a principal’s preferences in negotiation could arise in many contexts, the diplomatic setting amplifies its salience. For example, if a president delegates negotiation with Congress to an agent, the costs to the president of monitoring the agent and to the agent of communicating with the president are low. The bargaining process occurs on Pennsylvania Avenue and the agent likely works at the White House or elsewhere in Washington, D.C. By contrast, presidents have hundreds of diplomatic agents spread out in embassies across different time zones around the world. Combined with the fact that presidents are only able to spend limited time on foreign policy relative to other issues (Lindsey and Hobbs 2015), it is likely more costly for presidents to monitor diplomatic agents and for diplomatic agents to get in touch with the president. Moreover, the president’s interlocutors in Congress or elsewhere domestically likely know the president and their policy preferences better than do many foreign governments.

More generally, the barriers to communication between presidents and their diplomatic

agents are higher than they might initially appear. First, presidents may not anticipate all the issues that could arise in a negotiation. A high-familiarity ambassador may be better able to predict how the president would react as new considerations emerge in the negotiating process. Alternately, high-familiarity envoys may find it easier to obtain relevant information about the president's preferences. For example, one former Obama political appointee noted that "seventy percent of the career Foreign Service officers can't really pick up the phone to call the White House about an issue" (Pomeranz January, 2015). Even skeptics of non-career appointments concede that political appointees often have better access to the thinking of political superiors than career diplomats, and that this is valued by foreign counterparts (Moskin 2013, 767).

Second, there may be transaction costs associated with communication between leaders and diplomats. Presidents have competing demands on their attention (Suri 2017; Dickerson 2020; Lindsey and Hobbs 2015) and the international and domestic political environment is constantly shifting. From the president's perspective, limited time and attention may prevent them from providing the clear instructions that would resolve uncertainty over their preferences.

Third, even if career diplomats have a clear picture of the president's preferences, this may not be obvious to foreign counterparts. Even if there is simply the perception that a diplomat does not speak for the president, it can undermine confidence in the diplomatic process. For this reason, an envoy may bring diplomatic value when they are easily *seen* as close to the president. For example, the Obama White House selected Ben Rhodes, an Obama confidant who by his own admission had no experience as a negotiator, to lead normalization talks with Cuba. One motivation for this surprising choice, according to an administration official, was that "[a]ll it takes is one Google search for these guys [the Cuban delegation] to know that Ben speaks to the president" (LeoGrande and Kornbluh 2015, 425).

Fourth, career and bureaucratic incentives may also help to explain what is ultimately

something of an institutional failure by the U.S. government. Career diplomats do not owe their position to a particular president, something that is generally seen as an indicator of merit-based public administration and may be, on balance, a positive. However, this could also mean that career diplomats are less attentive to the specific preferences and foreign policy views of a given White House than are non-career appointees whose career prospects and position are directly tied to the incumbent president.

The Familiarity-Expertise Tradeoff

In considering ambassadorial appointments, presidents must consider both familiarity and expertise. As noted above, familiarity refers to an ambassador's closeness to the president, which impacts their ability to understand or learn the president's preferences. By expertise, I mean general skill in political analysis and negotiation, and perhaps also some country- or region-specific knowledge.¹¹ Presidents would prefer that all of their envoys had both familiarity and expertise. This is not possible, however, because there are many posts to be filled and most ambassadorial candidates are high on one dimension or the other, but not both. As a result, presidents must match potential ambassadors and envoys to specific diplomatic assignments. This creates an *familiarity-expertise tradeoff* in ambassadorial appointments. In some limited cases, presidents are able to get the best of both worlds by appointing an envoy high in familiarity and expertise. But for most positions they must prioritize one dimension or another. How do presidents resolve this tradeoff?

First, presidents should use high-expertise ambassadors—often but not always career diplomats—in more difficult posts. A difficult post is one in which it is challenging to produce high-quality diplomacy, such that expertise is especially valuable. A post could be more

¹¹Though U.S. Foreign Service officers tend to be generalists without a true country specialization, many do develop some regional expertise over the course of their careers (e.g., the State Department's Arabists (Kaplan 1995)). Moreover, high-expertise political appointees often have country- or region-specific expertise (e.g., former U.S. ambassador to Russia Mike McFaul or former U.S. ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk).

or less difficult and require expertise for a number of reasons. For example, posts in countries that have complex and unstable political environments may require superior political analysis—potentially aided by some amount of country or regional expertise—on the part of the ambassador to understand the interests of and constraints facing their counterparts and find common ground at the negotiating table. Further, the fast-moving nature of crises likely to arise in such contexts may mean that ambassadors have to act quickly in dealing with counterparts. Consequently, they have less time to consult with colleagues in the country or back in Washington, requiring them instead to rely more on their own judgment. Other factors like preference alignment and the institutionalization of the diplomatic relationship could influence the difficulty of the post.¹²

Table 1: Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Career diplomat	A career member of a diplomatic service; a member of the U.S. Foreign Service in the State Department; a bureaucrat
Non-career diplomat	Any diplomat appointed from outside the diplomatic service; not a Foreign Service officer
Importance	An important post is one in a host country that figures centrally in the U.S. national interest.
Difficulty	A difficult post is one in which expertise is required to produce high-quality diplomacy.
Patronage value	A high patronage value post is one that offers U.S. diplomats a high quality of life.
Familiarity	Closeness to the president, which influences a diplomat’s ability to learn or anticipate the president’s policy preferences.
Expertise	A diplomat’s subject-matter knowledge and understanding of diplomatic practice and tradecraft.

Second, and counterintuitively, I expect that presidents should be more likely to appoint non-career, high-familiarity diplomats when the importance of the diplomatic post is high. I take a broad view of the concept of importance. An important post is one in a host country central to the U.S. national interest. The reason for this encompassing approach is that diplomatic relationships can be important for different reasons. For example, Canada

¹²Empirically, I focus below primarily on host country political instability, but also examine preference alignment and institutionalization in the appendix. Other factors, such as the technical complexity of the issues being negotiated, could also contribute to difficulty but are challenging to measure.

is a neighbor and key trade partner, even though it is relatively small by population and just a middling military power. By contrast, Russia has a relatively large population and is a major military and nuclear power, but is not a key U.S. trade partner or neighbor. However, both are important to the U.S. national interest.

At first glance, it may seem that a president would want to send the ‘A-team’ to manage these key relationships, using the most expert diplomats the Foreign Service has to offer. Yet, the more the president cares about a diplomatic relationship, the more weight they place on ensuring that their preferred policy is pursued and communicated to foreign counterparts. Thus, all else equal, the more important a foreign policy issue or relationship is to the president, the more they are likely to value familiarity relative to expertise. This dynamic is reinforced because diplomats who can ‘speak for’ the president induce greater effort by foreign counterparts on important issues. In the U.S. system, the president is the linchpin of foreign policymaking. It is therefore crucial that the president’s diplomatic representatives are able to accurately represent the president’s preferences.¹³

One counter-argument might be that the hypothesized tradeoff does not truly exist because lower-expertise, non-career ambassadors are supported by high-expertise career diplomats. Perhaps the latter can help to compensate for the shortcomings of the former. That non-career ambassadors are supported by professional likely does make the use of non-career appointees more tenable. However, a tradeoff remains. For one, lower ranking officials may not have the same level of access to foreign interlocutors as an ambassador, and may not

¹³An important assumption in this paper is that the president dominates the US foreign policy process. I focus on the president because the U.S. constitutional system confers a great deal of authority over foreign affairs on the presidency. Further, since at least World War II, successive presidents have centralized foreign policy control in the White House at the expense of the Executive Branch agencies, so much so that complaints of presidential micromanagement, a broken interagency process, the marginalization of the Secretary of State and State Department have become commonplace (e.g., Gans 2019; Rothkopf 2014). Other Executive Branch actors can matter but observers note that, in practice, the authority and influence of these actors ultimately flow—largely informally—from the president (e.g., Rothkopf 2014; Destler 1980). Likewise, there are some areas where Congress has an important say (e.g., ratifying treaties). However, even here, presidents retain a strong first-mover advantage; Congress affects foreign policy, but does not set the course and can often be marginalized (e.g., by using executive agreements rather than treaties).

be in the room for all discussions. Ambassadors are often expected to lead diplomatic talks or have sensitive one-on-one meetings with foreign leaders or other high-ranking officials. As such, issues may arise where the ambassador cannot rely on guidance from subordinates, or where they are privy to confidential information that the subordinate is not. Indeed, this may be more likely on the most important foreign policy issues. Moreover, in practice, non-career ambassadors may not care to ask subordinates for advice or may not know what to ask (i.e., may not know what they do not know). Lower-ranking career diplomats may, for their part, be hesitant to challenge superiors or highlight their shortcomings.

Finally, consistent with existing work and conventional wisdom, I expect that the patronage value will matter. All else equal, higher-patronage value posts are more likely to see non-career political appointees. A high-patronage value post is one where diplomats enjoy a high quality of life. This definition comports with prior work and the portrayal of political appointees in the op-ed pages as rich neophytes swanning about attractive foreign capitals on extended holiday (Hollibaugh Jr 2015; Fedderke and Jett 2017).¹⁴ Nonetheless, I expect to observe a familiarity-expertise tradeoff even accounting for the patronage value of the post.

As an alternative theoretical look, the appendix analyzes a formal model of diplomatic appointments to examine how presidents resolve the tradeoff between familiarity and expertise. Consistent with the logic described informally above, presidents gravitate toward high-expertise ambassadors in difficult posts, but high-familiarity ambassadors in important posts. The familiarity-expertise tradeoff exists even accounting for patronage in the model.

¹⁴It is worth noting that both career and non-career ambassadors value ambassadorships. Indeed, even career diplomats may, post government service, leverage their ambassadorship secure attractive jobs in the private sector or academia. However, what matters for selection is the political favors that ambassadorial candidates can offer the president. In this regard, it is clear that non-career ambassadors have the most to trade in exchange for desirable assignments.

Empirical Predictions

The theory suggests a number of testable predictions. Consistent with existing research, it indicates that as the patronage value of a diplomatic post increases, so should the likelihood that politically appointed, non-career ambassadors—i.e., those with a greater ability to offer the president political favors—are selected.

In addition, the theory considers how presidents trade off expertise and familiarity as they allocate these scarce resources from the pool of ambassadorial candidates. The theory indicates that as difficulty increases, presidents gravitate to ambassadorial expertise at the expense of familiarity. Therefore, as the difficulty of a diplomatic post increases, I expect that presidents will be more likely to select high-expertise ambassadors.

By contrast, the theory indicates that as importance increases, president value ambassadorial familiarity at the expense of expertise. As such, as the importance of a diplomatic post increases, I expect that presidents will be more likely to select high familiarity ambassadors. Table 2 summarizes the above predictions.

Table 2: Summary of Predictions

No.	Prediction
1	Higher patronage value → increased likelihood of politically appointed ambassadors
2	Higher difficulty → increased likelihood of high-expertise ambassadors
3	Higher importance → increased likelihood of high-familiarity ambassadors

Evidence from U.S. Ambassadorial Appointments

To test these predictions, I turn to data on bilateral U.S. ambassadorial appointments covering the Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, Obama, and Trump administrations. Data on each appointment—the posting, the ambassador, and whether the ambassador is politically appointed or a career Foreign Service officer—comes from the American

Foreign Service Association (AFSA).

Dependent Variables

The outcome of interest is an ambassador's attributes, or their ability to provide political benefits, their expertise, and their familiarity with the president. To examine the theoretical prediction about patronage, I code whether an ambassador is a non-career political appointee or a career Foreign Service officer. This distinction follows prior research on patronage in diplomatic appointments (Hollibaugh Jr 2015; Haglund 2015; Fedderke and Jett 2017). Consistent with existing work, I propose that non-career political appointees are able to offer greater political benefits to the president in exchange for ambassadorships, from campaign donations to endorsements to political advice. In the sample, roughly 28.7 percent of ambassadors are non-career political appointments.¹⁵

To examine the predictions regarding important and difficult posts, I code whether ambassadors are (1) high-familiarity and whether they are (2) high-expertise. Ambassadors can thus be one of four ideal types: high-familiarity, high-expertise; high-familiarity, low-expertise; low-familiarity, high-expertise; or low-familiarity, low-expertise. An ambassador is coded as high-familiarity if they are a political appointee with a documented and meaningful connection to the president prior to selection. This includes being a friend, a business associate or employee, campaign advisor, or a high-ranking member of the administration.¹⁶ Ambassadors are coded as low-familiarity if they are a career member of the Foreign Service or if they are a political appointee but do not appear to have a strong connection to the president (e.g., a campaign donor with no other evidence of a personal relationship).¹⁷ In

¹⁵This figure is slightly lower than common estimates of the percentage of ambassadorships going to non-career appointees because it excludes multilateral and at-large posts, which overwhelmingly go to non-career appointees.

¹⁶Specifically, I searched news articles and press releases related to ambassadorial appointments for evidence of these associations.

¹⁷Though some small number of Foreign Service officers may have pre-existing personal relationships with the president, this is unlikely for the vast majority of career ambassadorial candidates. Since career

the sample, just about 10 percent of ambassadors and roughly 1/3 of non-career ambassadors are coded as high-familiarity. An ambassador is coded as high-expertise if they are a career Foreign Service officer or if they are a political appointee with substantial policy experience related to foreign affairs.¹⁸ Ambassadors without these experiences are coded as low-expertise. Just over 76 percent of ambassadors are coded as high-expertise. Reflecting the assumption that few ambassadorial candidates are high in familiarity and expertise, just 2.9 percent of ambassadors are coded as high-expertise and high-familiarity. See the appendix for greater discussion of the coding procedure and for a more complete breakdown of the distribution of ambassador types.

Independent Variables

The theory suggests that appointments are determined by three factors: the patronage value, difficulty, and importance of the post. Below I describe how I measure each of these concepts.¹⁹

Patronage Value. In the paper, I consider three measures of patronage value: (1) GDP per capita and (2) U.S. State Department hardship pay differentials, and (3) tourism. Each of these has been identified in prior work as a potential indicator of a post's patronage value (e.g., [Fedderke and Jett 2017](#); [Hollibaugh Jr 2015](#)).

diplomats are expected to limit their political activities ([Anderson September 4, 2020](#)) and because most ambassadorial candidates from the Foreign Service have been in government for many years, they are unlikely to be campaign advisors, business associates, etc.

¹⁸Specifically, this includes former U.S. senators and representatives, governors, assistant secretaries or higher in a relevant federal agency or body (e.g., the Departments of Defense, Treasury, or Commerce), Senior Intelligence Service, NSC senior directors, and flag or general officers.

¹⁹Some predictors are not available for the entire period, which leads to fewer observations in some models (e.g., State hardship pay is available beginning in 1997). Missingness could induce bias if data availability depended on the values of the data themselves. However, since this type of missing data affects all posts over the same period, this is unlikely to be the case. As such, missingness may reduce statistical power and lead observers to draw more conservative inferences about the strength of the relationship or its generalizability to other time periods, but should not produce biased estimates.

Prior work and conventional wisdom portrays patronage value as primarily about quality of life. GDP per capita captures this in a general sense by measuring the level of economic development in a country. State Department hardship pay differentials may be more specific to the concerns of diplomats. It refers to the additional pay that State offers at diplomatic posts to “compensate employees for service... where conditions of environment differ substantially” from the U.S.²⁰ These pay differentials are explicitly intended as a “recruitment and retention incentive,” aimed at fully staffing posts seen as undesirable by employees, and are different from simple cost-of-living adjustments offered to U.S. government employees at home and abroad. Hardship differentials range from 0 to 35 percent, in 5 percent increments, with a mean of 14.5 and a median of 15. Posts with low hardship pay in recent years include, for example, Canada (0%), Costa Rica (0%), Morocco (0%) and Lithuania (5%). Posts with high hardship pay in recent years include, for example, Bangladesh (35%), Venezuela (30%), Algeria (25%) and Saudi Arabia (25%). Finally, tourism as a share of GDP captures the idea that patronage appointments often amount to an extended holiday for rich donors.

Difficulty. I primarily use politico-military instability to proxy for the difficulty of a diplomatic post. As defined above, a difficult post is one in which it is challenging to produce high-quality diplomacy, such that expertise is especially valuable. Political instability and crises make diplomacy difficult and call on ambassadorial expertise. First, crises and instability both reflect and contribute to complex political environments. Complex political environments (e.g., fractious coalitions, civil unrest, conflict) may require of ambassadors a higher level of political analysis to understand foreign actors’ constraints and interests as they seek to find common ground through negotiation. For example, in his book on “front line” U.S. diplomacy, Richter (2019) highlights the value of seasoned ambassadors’ expertise in negotiating with unruly governing coalitions in Iraq or in securing a commitment from

²⁰Hardship differentials can be accessed at <https://aoprals.state.gov/Web920/hardship.asp>. I use the first table published by the State Department in each calendar year for which data is available, and use the differential listed for a country’s capital city.

the Egyptian military to hold elections amidst Arab Spring protests.²¹ Second, political and military crises tend to be fast-moving events. This may require diplomats to act quickly, leaving less time to consult with colleagues in the embassy or back in Washington about the best way to achieve policy objectives, instead forcing them to rely to a greater extent on their own judgment and skill. Third, instability and crises tend to affect third countries, meaning that diplomatic agreements are more likely to have externalities. Ambassadors with general diplomatic skill and foreign affairs background—and perhaps also some regional expertise—may be better able to anticipate these externalities and account for them in negotiation.

In the main manuscript, I measure difficulty using Political Risk Services (PRS) Political Risk Index. PRS indices were developed by academics in conjunction with the CIA and State Department and aim to quantify countries' political risk. The variable *Political Risk* ranges from 1 to 100. Higher scores reflect conditions such as interstate conflict, government instability, coups, civil conflict, terrorism, social unrest, and poor governance. This index sheds light on the perceived potential for host country political complexity and instability at the time of appointment.

In the appendix, I present models with alternative measures of difficulty. One is a PRS conflict risk index, which is a narrower measure of politico-military instability than the political risk index. It focuses just on interstate conflict and internal political violence rather than political instability more broadly. A second alternate measure is whether the U.S. has an alliance with the host country. This latter measure focuses not on country instability but on other features of the diplomatic relationship, such as preference alignment and institutionalization. Washington and its treaty allies share broad international political goals, which may make it easier to find common ground. Further, they feature robust lines of communication, limiting the opportunity for individual ambassadors to make critical errors. For example, U.S. ties with its Western European allies are so well-developed that one former

²¹Indeed, in the latter case, the U.S. ambassador, Anne Patterson, initially believed the post would be relatively easy precisely because Egypt appeared stable when she was selected for the post.

U.S. diplomat noted that it is “easy enough to work around a political appointee, either in the foreign capital or Washington, if the ambassador turns out to be lazy or a disaster” (Jett 2014).

Importance. A surprising prediction of the theory is that high-familiarity political appointees should be increasingly prevalent in as the importance of a post rises. I define an important post as one in which the host country is integral to the U.S. national interest. The theory suggests that it is in these important posts that high-familiarity political appointees are most valuable.

I proxy for importance using presidential visits to the host country in the eight years prior to an appointment. Presidential travel is an ideal proxy for the importance the White House places on a relationship for two reasons. First, visits are time consuming and physically taxing, and U.S. presidents would not make them unless they valued the diplomatic relationship. It is a costly statement of the president’s priorities. Second, as noted above, bilateral relationships could be important to the U.S. for any number of reasons: a country could be a military power, an important trade partner, geographically proximate, populous, etc. Visits are an agnostic proxy. In recent years, presidents have made many visits to Germany, China, Russia, South Korea, and Mexico, among others. Each of these countries is typically a priority for U.S. administrations, but for different reasons. Presidential visits capture the importance of a relationship without prejudice to the underlying source of that importance.

I use data on presidential travel from the Office of the Historian at the U.S. State Department to code which countries presidents have visited and when. The variable *POTUS visits last 8 years* provides a summary: for each country-year, the number of presidential visit to that country in the eight years prior, or the length of two presidential terms. For example, if the president visited Tanzania in 2013 and 2017, the *POTUS visit last 8 years*

variable would be 2 for a U.S. ambassador to Tanzania appointed in 2018. To be clear, this measure can include visits by the appointing president's predecessor. However, shifts in the importance of a given country to U.S. foreign policy are gradual. As Lebovic and Saunders find in their study of high-level U.S. diplomacy, "the travels of the President... converge to serve a set of priorities that derive from a fairly stable set of national interests" (Lebovic and Saunders 2016, 107). As a result, the measure remains a good proxy for the importance a president and other senior officials likely place on a diplomatic relationship.

One concern might be that presidents are unlikely to visit key adversaries since it confers legitimacy or status. Among countries to which the U.S. has sent an ambassador in the period studied, this does not seem to be the case. U.S. rivals such as China and Russia are among the most visited countries. Further, since these posts often receive high-familiarity political appointments, any hesitance by presidents to visit adversaries would undermine support for the key prediction of my theory, making for a conservative test. The appendix lists the 15 most visited countries by U.S. presidents during the years captured by this proxy. The ranking reveals the measure to have face validity; countries typically considered central to U.S. foreign policy top the list, including China, Russia, Germany, France, Saudi Arabia, Israel, South Korea, Japan, Canada, and Mexico. These countries each received more than 10 visits over the period. The median number of visits for all countries over the entire period examined was just 1 (mean of 2.9), underscoring both the variation in the measure and the fact that presidents concentrate their personal diplomacy with key countries. To establish the construct validity of the measure, I show in the appendix that presidential visits are positively and statistically significantly correlated with other, narrower, measures of importance: (1) population, (2) military capabilities (CINC), and (3) trade with the U.S.

Table 3: Selection of Non-Career Ambassadors

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Log GDP per Capita	0.15*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.02)				
DoS Hardship (0-35)			-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)		
Tourism (%GDP)					0.03*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
POTUS Visits Last 8 Years		0.07*** (0.01)		0.08*** (0.02)		0.09*** (0.01)
PRS Political Risk (0-100)		-0.01*** (0.00)		-0.01*** (0.00)		-0.02*** (0.00)
POTUS Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Num. obs.	1783	1301	1034	833	1062	908

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; OLS estimates with robust SEs clustered at the country level.

Results

I first examine Prediction 1, that higher patronage value posts should be associated with an increased likelihood of political appointees. OLS estimates with robust standard errors clustered at the country level are presented in Tables 3. All models feature president fixed effects, with some specifications controlling for the primary measures of post importance and difficulty discussed above.

The results presented in Table 3 provide strong support for Prediction 1. Models 1 and 2 suggest that for each unit increase in logged GDP per capita, the president is between 7 and 15 percentage points more likely to appoint a non-career, political ambassador. Models 3 and 4 indicate that a one increment increase in State Department hardship pay (5%) is associated with a 5 to 10 percentage point decrease in the probability that a non-career, politically appointed ambassador will be selected. Finally, Models 5 and 6 suggests that for each percentage point increase in tourism as a share of a host country's GDP, there is between a 1 and 3 percentage point increase in the likelihood that a president will opt for a political appointee, though the estimate in Model 6 does not attain conventional levels of

significance. Overall, both more general and more targeted measures of the patronage value of ambassadorial posts suggest that as the quality of life of a diplomat increases, the more likely the president will select a political appointee. This supports the conventional wisdom that presidents use plum diplomatic posts to reward political allies.²²

Most ambassadorial candidates are high on expertise or familiarity, but not both. The primary goal of the theory is to understand how presidents resolve the tradeoff between expertise and familiarity. To examine this tradeoff, I use multinomial logistic regression to predict the selection of ambassadors along the dimensions of expertise and familiarity. As noted above, ambassadors can be high or low on each dimension, yielding four ideal types (high, high; high, low; etc.). Low-familiarity, low-expertise envoys are the omitted reference category. The results for an initial set of model specifications is presented in Table 4. The coefficients represent relative risk ratios. Estimates above (below) one represent an increase (decrease) relative to the omitted base category. As before, models are presented with robust standard errors clustered at the country level and president fixed effects.

Prediction 2 is that as the difficulty of diplomatic posts increase, presidents should be increasingly likely to select high-expertise ambassadors. The results presented in Table 4 offer strong support for this prediction. Across the model specifications, increases in the political risk of a host country is positively associated with an increased likelihood that a high-expertise ambassador will be appointed relative to the reference category. For each unit increase in a host country's political risk score, the odds that a president selects a high-expertise, low-familiarity ambassador are between 1.08 and 1.18 times higher relative to the low-expertise, low-familiarity base category. For each unit increase in a host country's political risk score, the odds that a president selects a high-expertise, high-familiarity ambassador are between 1.04 and 1.12 times higher.

²²Though I separately code familiarity and expertise, the results in Table 3 could also be interpreted to support the predictions on familiarity and expertise. Non-career appointees, on average, may be more familiar with the president and less expert than career appointees. If so, the negative coefficients for Political Risk and positive coefficients for POTUS Visits would constitute support from Predictions 2 and 3, respectively.

Table 4: Selection of Ambassador Expertise and Familiarity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Low Expertise, High Familiarity				
POTUS Visits Last 8 Years	1.69*** [1.41,2.03]	1.66*** [1.40,1.96]	1.68*** [1.34,2.10]	1.69*** [1.39,2.05]
Political Risk	1.00 [0.97,1.04]	1.01 [0.97,1.07]	1.01 [0.95,1.07]	1.01 [0.97,1.06]
Log GDP per Capita		1.10 [0.70,1.71]		
DoS Hardship (0-35)			1.00 [0.92,1.09]	
Tourism Share				0.87 [0.73,1.04]
High Expertise, Low Familiarity				
POTUS Visits Last 8 Years	0.92 [0.74,1.14]	0.97 [0.77,1.20]	0.89 [0.66,1.20]	0.88 [0.67,1.16]
Political Risk	1.12*** [1.10,1.15]	1.08*** [1.06,1.11]	1.11*** [1.07,1.15]	1.18*** [1.14,1.22]
Log GDP per Capita		0.65** [0.48,0.89]		
DoS Hardship (0-35)			1.10** [1.03,1.17]	
Tourism Share				0.89+ [0.78,1.02]
High Expertise, High Familiarity				
POTUS Visits Last 8 Years	1.85*** [1.49,2.31]	1.86*** [1.47,2.35]	1.77*** [1.29,2.41]	1.61*** [1.23,2.11]
Political Risk	1.07*** [1.03,1.10]	1.04+ [0.99,1.10]	1.09** [1.03,1.16]	1.12*** [1.07,1.17]
Log GDP per Capita		0.77 [0.45,1.32]		
DoS Hardship (0-35)			1.06 [0.99,1.13]	
Tourism Share				0.85 [0.70,1.04]
POTUS Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1356	1301	833	908

Exponentiated coefficients; 95% confidence intervals in brackets

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The most counterintuitive prediction of the theory—Prediction 3—is that as the importance of a diplomatic post increases, presidents should be increasingly likely to appoint to high-familiarity ambassadors, i.e., non-career ambassadors with whom they have a personal connection. On this count, the relationship shown in Table 4 is stark. In each model, an increase in the number of visits presidents have made to a host country in recent years is strongly associated with the probability that a high-familiarity ambassador will be chosen. For each additional visit by the president to a host country in the prior eight years, the odds that a president selects a high-familiarity, low-expertise ambassador are roughly 1.6 times higher relative to the low-familiarity, low-expertise base category. For each additional visit by the president to a host country in the prior eight years, the odds that a president selects a high-familiarity, high-expertise ambassador are between 1.6 and 1.8 times higher.

Overall, these results suggest that while the roles for expertise and patronage highlighted in existing work are salient, familiarity is also an important consideration in ambassadorial appointments. Further, they suggest that presidents are indeed strategic in how they allocate these diplomatic resources. That is, they appear to match ambassador’s attributes to posts in a manner consistent with the theory presented above. In addition, it is worth considering the allocation of ambassadors with high expertise and high familiarity (i.e., foreign policy experts who are close to the president). This is the least common ideal type, but one where the president does can have the best of both worlds. The results presented in Table 4 suggests that they are increasingly likely to be appointed as posts become more difficult and as they become more important. That is, presidents reserve these particularly valuable ambassadorial candidates for tough, important assignments. Indeed, over 40 percent of these high expertise, high familiarity types are sent to posts that have at least moderate political risk and have received at least one presidential visit in the past eight years, compared with 20 percent or less for the other types of ambassadors. Other ambassadors ideal types are likewise allocated in a manner consistent with their attributes. See the appendix for further discussion.

The appendix presents a brief case on U.S. ambassadorial appointments in Saudi Arabia to illustrate the additional explanatory power gained by thinking about political appointees' familiarity with the president, not just their ability to offer political benefits. I summarize this case here to further illustrate the empirical purchase of the theory. Saudi Arabia produces divergent predictions for the logics of familiarity and patronage. Saudi Arabia has long been an important security and energy partner for the U.S., but has dubious patronage value (e.g., 25% hardship pay). Indeed, one former U.S. ambassador noted his wife's reticence to join him in Riyadh given local gender norms (Jordan and Fiffer 2015, 10). Given this, a pure patronage story would predict virtually no non-career political appointments. Meanwhile, the logic of familiarity suggests that there could be many political appointees, and that a good number of them should have ties to the president. Evidence from the Saudi case strongly supports a logic of familiarity and cuts against a simple patronage perspective. Nine of 14 U.S. ambassadors to Riyadh have been non-career appointees, and five of those were coded as high-familiarity.²³ Further, the Saudis appear happy with this appointment pattern; as one career diplomat who served in Riyadh reflected, to "have an ambassador who was a personal friend of the president, that counted far more than having some. . . bureaucrat like myself" (Kennedy 2005, 94). And indeed, high-familiarity ambassadors' proximity to the president has delivered tangible diplomatic victories, such as obtaining Saudi Arabia's accession to the WTO.

Discussion

This paper introduces familiarity as a new concept in the growing literature on bureaucracy, delegation, and diplomacy. Diplomats with close ties to political leaders can more credibly speak for their governments at the bargaining table, incentivizing joint effort with

²³Few of these political appointees come from the oil industry or private sector more broadly, which rules out an alternative way of thinking about patronage in the Saudi case, i.e., that it is about business opportunities and self-enrichment rather than lifestyle.

foreign counterparts to construct strong diplomatic channels. This insight offers a new take on the oft-lamented habit of U.S. presidents selecting amateurs rather than career professionals for high-ranking diplomatic roles. Ambassadors serve at the pleasure of the president, and thus familiarity with the president becomes a key characteristic of effective diplomats. Though patronage does matter, the theorized tradeoff between familiarity and expertise explains additional variation in appointment patterns, including the surprising outcome that presidents may optimally select non-career political appointees for important diplomatic missions.

These findings have important theoretical and policy implications. Within IR, the logic of familiarity may travel more broadly in the bureaucratic politics of diplomacy and suggests fruitful avenues for future research. Whether through special representatives or the NSC Staff, presidents often find ways to delegate priority diplomatic assignments to individuals who understand their policy preferences and whom they trust. Familiarity may shed light on the conditions under which these actors are most useful and effective. Beyond IR, the familiarity-expertise tradeoff represents a more general contribution to the literature on delegation and bargaining. Existing studies suggest that there can be advantages to delegating bargaining to biased agents (e.g., [Lindsey 2017](#); [Gailmard and Hammond 2011](#)). These studies are convincing. However, the logic of familiarity suggests a potentially countervailing effect. If familiarity and bias are negatively correlated—if agents with bias are less likely to be well-informed of a principal’s preferences or enjoy the principal’s trust—the gains from delegating to a biased agent may be undermined by an absence of familiarity or vice versa. Future research on delegation and bargaining could investigate this tradeoff.

The findings of this paper also have important implications for a salient policy question: how to rebuild the State Department following Trump-era turmoil at Foggy Bottom. The glaring incompetence of some Trump-era political appointees—such as Gordon Sondland, the hotelier-turned-ambassador to the EU who was at the center of the first Trump impeachment

saga—has led observers to take a fresh look at the incomplete professionalization of U.S. diplomacy. For example, Senator Elizabeth Warren and others have proposed harder limits on the use of political appointees as diplomats. These calls are understandable and the most blatant patronage appointments could be curtailed. At the same time, this paper suggests that it is crucial that presidents be able to delegate key diplomatic missions to high-familiarity agents. Inevitably, non-career diplomats—even those who are political allies and donors—may sometimes fit the bill.

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