

Use U.S. Aid to Increase Support in the United Nations

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

At the United Nations, major recipients of U.S. foreign assistance are among the countries that support America the least.

Because many member states are hostile to key U.S. policies and objectives, Congress should ensure that U.N. voting is considered when allocating aid.

The President should instruct Administration officials to consult with the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. before allocating or committing assistance.

For decades, the U.S. has been in the minority in the United Nations most of the time on contested votes. U.S. lawmakers have been frustrated particularly by the fact that countries that receive generous amounts of foreign assistance from the United States vote consistently against the U.S. at the United Nations. Moreover, with rare exceptions, the largest recipients of U.S. aid vote in opposition to America most of the time. Tolerance of this practice undermines U.S. influence and hinders the advancement of U.S. policy priorities in the organization. Countries such as China see the U.N. as a vehicle they can use to enhance their influence and counter-balance the United States, and they have leveraged economic engagement abroad to advance that goal. To counter this pattern, the U.S. must likewise use foreign assistance to encourage support.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/ib5368>

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Forty Years in the U.N. Minority

The United Nations is an important international venue in which to discuss and resolve international disputes and crises. Since the founding of the organization, the United States has been the largest financial supporter of the U.N. and its affiliated organizations. However, U.S. influence in the General Assembly is not commensurate with this level of support.¹ In fact, the last time other countries voted with the U.S. a majority of the time on contested General Assembly resolutions (those not adopted by consensus) was during the Carter Administration.² Although not necessarily aware of the data, the American public likewise senses the disconnect between the U.N. and U.S. interests. As a February 2024 Gallup poll noted, Americans' views of the United Nations "remain largely negative as a steady 58% say it is doing a 'poor job' trying to solve the problems it faces."³

Being outvoted in the U.N. is not a new problem: It is both deep and persistent. Since Congress first mandated that the Department of State track and report on U.N. voting in 1983, voting coincidence of other countries with the U.S. in the General Assembly, on average, has been about 35 percent.⁴ Data indicate that variation in voting coincidence over the past four decades is due more to shifts in U.S. policy than to shifts in voting by other member states. When a Democrat is in the White House, average annual voting coincidence is about 10 percentage points higher on average than it is when a Republican is in the White House. This trend continued during the Biden Administration, which saw voting coincidence rise well above the historical average of the past 40 years.⁵

As Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in 1975, "This is our circumstance. We are a minority. We are outvoted.... The question is what do we make of it."⁶ Several years later, Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick observed that most member states saw U.N. voting as largely divorced from the real world outside Turtle Bay because the U.S. was not paying attention to their votes. She recommended that the U.S. "communicate to nations that their votes, their attitudes and their actions inside the U.N. system inevitably must have consequences for their relations with the United States outside the U.N. system" by linking allocation of U.S. assistance and support for the U.S. in the U.N.⁷

In response, Congress adopted legislation that barred assistance to a country the President found, based on the contents of the voting practices report, to be "engaged in a consistent pattern of opposition to the foreign policy of the United States."⁸ However, application was erratic. This provision was repealed in 1990, and consideration of U.N. voting in aid allocation decisions since then has bordered on nonexistent.

Since the 1960s, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the U.S. has been the world's largest provider of foreign assistance, accounting for roughly a fifth of the total, including over \$40 billion annually in recent years.⁹ According to U.S. data, America doled out over \$110 billion in foreign assistance from 2020 to 2023.¹⁰ By failing to consider support for the U.S. in the U.N. when allocating aid, the U.S.—unlike adversaries like China—is failing to use a powerful tool to leverage support.¹¹

The Need to Follow Through

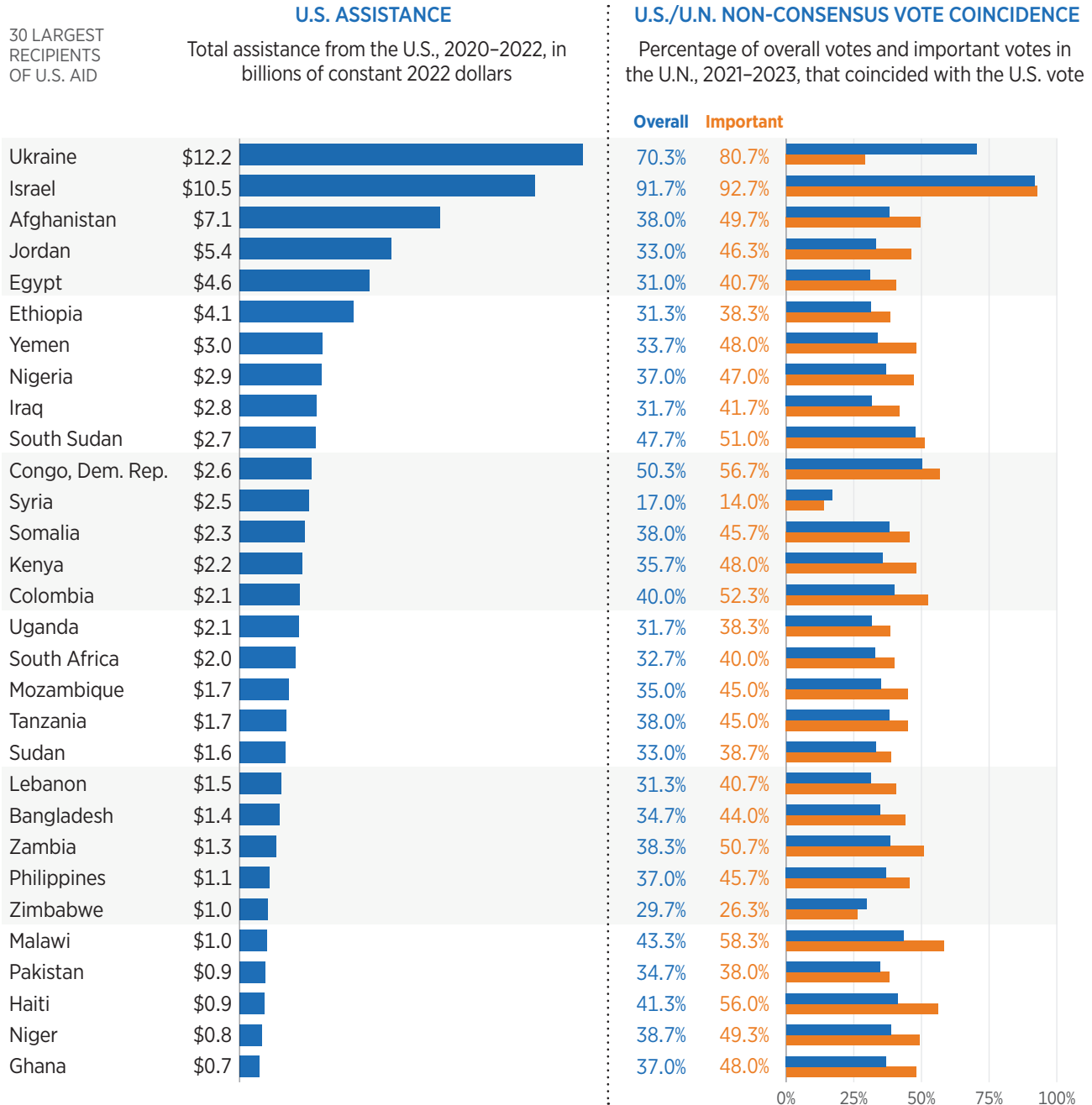
Voting in the U.N. General Assembly is a useful and practical metric for gauging a foreign government's support for U.S. priorities. However, more than diplomatic cajoling is sometimes necessary to convince other governments to shift their votes toward U.S. preferred outcomes. In 2016, Congress adopted legislation stating, "It is the policy of the United States to strongly consider a Member State's voting practices at the United Nations before entering into any agreements with the Member State."¹² While not a mandatory or sole condition, it gives a potentially useful lever for diplomats to pull during negotiations. To be effective, however, an Administration must be willing to deploy it.

Unfortunately, the Biden Administration does not appear to have considered U.N. voting in allocating U.S. assistance. Overall, there is no meaningful relationship between U.N. members' voting practices and the amount of assistance they receive from the U.S. General Assembly voting patterns from the past three sessions indicate that the U.S. neither effectively rewards countries that support U.S. priorities nor withholds assistance from countries that consistently oppose U.S. priorities. Specifically, as illustrated in Chart 1:

- Voting records for the 2021, 2022, and 2023 sessions of the General Assembly as reported by the State Department show that of the 178 countries receiving U.S. assistance from 2020 to 2022, nearly three-quarters (74.7 percent) voted against the U.S. in a majority of the overall non-consensus votes.
- For the subset of non-consensus votes considered "important" by the State Department, a majority (51.1 percent) of countries receiving assistance voted against the U.S. most of the time.
- Most major recipients voted against the U.S. more often than they voted with the U.S. Of the 30 largest recipients of U.S. assistance from 2020 to 2022, 27 voted against the U.S. in a majority of overall non-consensus votes, and 22 voted against the U.S. in a majority of the important non-consensus votes.

CHART 1

U.S. Aid Does Not Translate into Votes in the U.N. General Assembly



NOTE: 2023 and 2024 data were not incorporated as because aid data are only available only through 2022.

SOURCES: U.N. votes: U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Voting Practices in the United Nations for 2021*, March 31, 2022; *Report to Congress on Voting Practices of UN Members for 2022*, March 31, 2023; and *Report to Congress on Voting Practices in the United Nations for 2023*, March 31, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/voting-practices-in-the-united-nations/> (accessed December 9, 2024). Assistance: U.S. Agency for International Development, “Foreign Assistance Dashboard,” <https://foreignassistance.gov/> (accessed December 9, 2024).

Obviously, expecting countries to follow America's lead on every vote is unrealistic. Even America's strongest allies do not agree with the U.S. on every vote. Sometimes, important foreign policy interests outside the UN will lead the U.S. to aid governments that habitually oppose the U.S. in the UN. However, that does not mean that the U.S. should not pursue ways to champion its positions more effectively in the United Nations by using the levers available to it, including allocation of U.S. assistance.

Policy Recommendations

Congress and the incoming Administration should, in the words of Ambassador Kirkpatrick, "communicate to nations that their votes, their attitudes, and their actions inside the U.N. system inevitably must have consequences for their relations with the United States outside the U.N. system."¹³ To facilitate this communication, the U.S. should:

- **Require that U.N. voting be a mandatory consideration in aid allocation.** The U.S. uses its foreign assistance to advance many goals, but advancing U.S. interests in the U.N. must be a higher priority than it currently is. To ensure that positive and negative voting changes are considered and reflected in allocations, Administration officials should be instructed to consult with the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. before allocating or committing assistance, and Congress should require that the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. sign off on aid allocation decisions.
- **Amend the statute mandating the report on voting practices at the United Nations.** Congress should require inclusion of foreign assistance data in the report and a summary of specific U.N. voting actions that were considered in the allocation of assistance.
- **Communicate U.N. voting priorities beyond Turtle Bay.** The U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., the State Department, and U.S. embassies must work jointly to highlight important U.N. votes in New York, Geneva, and Vienna and explain clearly that opposing the U.S. will affect the bilateral relationship, including future assistance and cooperation.

Conclusion

If it is to increase support for its priorities at the U.N., the U.S. must hold nations more accountable for their actions at the U.N. in the overall diplomatic relationship and use available tools, including foreign assistance, to reward support and sanction opposition when votes are cast on issues that are critical to U.S. interests.

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Endnotes

1. Brett D. Schaefer and Anthony B. Kim, "The U.S. Should Employ Foreign Aid in Support of U.S. Policy at the U.N.," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3356, October 5, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-us-should-employ-foreign-aid-support-us-policy-the-un>.
2. Many U.N. General Assembly resolutions are unimportant or do not elicit debate or controversy. For instance, earlier in 2024, the General Assembly adopted by consensus Resolution A/RES/78/287 proclaiming 2025 to be the "International Year of Quantum Science and Technology." Resolutions adopted by a recorded vote more often address issues of substance and, thus, reveal more about whether other governments support U.S. positions.
3. Gallup, "Americans Remain Committed to NATO, Critical of U.N.," February 29, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/611261/americans-remain-committed-nato-critical.aspx> (accessed December 9, 2024).
4. Brett D. Schaefer and Anthony B. Kim, "Thirty Years of Voting in the U.N. General Assembly: The U.S. Is Nearly Always in the Minority," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4047, September 17, 2013, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/thirty-years-voting-the-un-general-assembly-the-us-nearly-always-the>.
5. Voting coincidence was 41 percent in 2021, 48 percent in 2022, and 46 percent in 2023. U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Voting Practices in the United Nations for 2021*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Report-Voting-Practices-in-the-United-Nations-2021.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2024); *Report to Congress on Voting Practices of UN Members for 2022*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Report-Voting-Practices-of-UN-Members-2022.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2024); and *Report to Congress on Voting Practices in the United Nations for 2023*, March 31, 2024, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Voting-Practices-of-UN-Members_2023-Report.pdf (accessed December 9, 2024).
6. Daniel P. Moynihan, "The United States in Opposition," *Commentary*, March 1, 1975, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/daniel-moynihan/the-united-states-in-opposition/> (accessed December 9, 2024). Punctuation as in original.
7. Senate Report 98-146, *International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1983*, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 98th Congress, 1st Session, May 23, 1983, pp. 107-111.
8. This provision was expressed in Public Law 98-151, which specified that "none of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available pursuant to this [Act] shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to a country which the President finds, based on the contents of the report [on voting practices in the United Nations] required to be transmitted under this paragraph, is engaged in a consistent pattern of opposition to the foreign policy of the United States." H.J. Res. 413, Joint Resolution Making Further Continuing Appropriations for the Fiscal Year 1984, Public Law 98-151, 98th Congress, November 14, 1983, § 101(b)(1), <https://www.congress.gov/98/statute/STATUTE-97/STATUTE-97-Pg964.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2024). The foreign assistance instruction was repealed by H.R. 3792, Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1990 and 1991, Public Law 101-246, 101st Congress, February 16, 1990, § 406(e)(1), <https://www.congress.gov/101/statute/STATUTE-104/STATUTE-104-Pg15.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2024), but the report on voting practices was maintained.
9. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "OECD Data Explorer," <https://data-explorer.oecd.org/?lc=en> (accessed December 9, 2024).
10. Constant 2022 dollars. U.S. Agency for International Development, "Foreign Assistance Dashboard," <https://foreignassistance.gov/> (accessed December 9, 2024).
11. A 2022 study found that "for each 0.1 increment in the similarity of its [General Assembly] votes with China, a state can expect from 0.32% (model 3) to 0.48% (model 2) more aid from China." Min Ye, "The Dragon's Gift: An Empirical Analysis of China's Foreign Aid in the New Century," *International Trade, Politics and Development*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2022), pp. 73-86, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/itpd-06-2022-0010/full/pdf?title=the-dragons-gift-an-empirical-analysis-of-chinas-foreign-aid-in-the-new-century> (accessed December 9, 2024). This corroborates the finding in a 2018 paper that "a statistically significant relationship between the receipt of highly concessional flows—measured in terms of the aggregate financial value of grants—and voting in line with China in the UN General Assembly. An increase in voting similarity by 0.1 increases grant funding by 51 percent." Axel Dreher, Andreas Fuchs, Brad Parks, Austin M. Strange, and Michael J. Tierney, "Apples and Dragon Fruits: The Determinants of Aid and Other Forms of State Financing from China to Africa," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (March 2018), pp. 182-194, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322980506_Apples_and_Dragon_Fruits_The_Determinants_of_Aid_and_Other_Forms_of_State_Financing_from_China_to_Africa (accessed December 9, 2024).
12. S. 1635, Department of State Authorities Act, Fiscal Year 2017, Public Law 114-323, 114th Congress, December 16, 2016, Title III, § 309, <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ323/PLAW-114publ323.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2024).
13. Senate Report 98-146, pp. 107-111.