

Votes in the UN General Assembly

Background

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is "the main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the UN" [1]. It meets in annual session in New York and is the only UN body in which all member countries enjoy equal representation. The UNGA considers resolutions on a variety of pressing global issues, and its votes of the UNGA are a unique record of how the international community has viewed the most important issues of the postwar era. In particular, this project focuses on how frequently different countries vote in the majority because it reflects how often their preferred viewpoint or policy aligns with the international consensus. ***What factors influence how majorities are formed and whom they include?*** This project will examine how a country's economic growth or decline might affect how often it votes with a majority in a particular UNGA session.

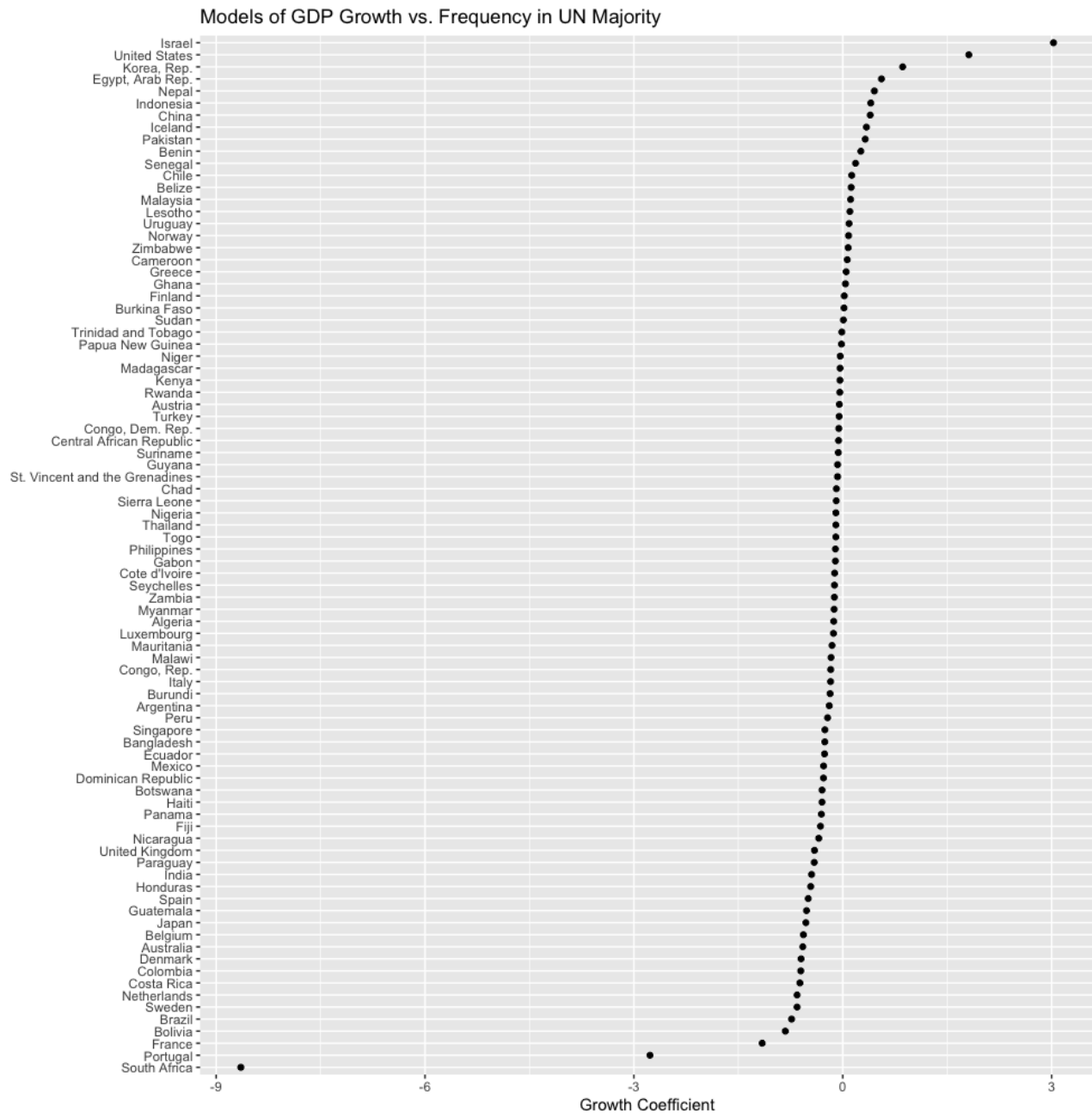
Methods

This project uses a dataset compiled by Erik Voeten of Georgetown University containing all roll-call votes in the UNGA from 1946 to 2018 [2]. I calculated the proportion of all votes in each session in which each country voted with the majority. For example, if the US voted with the majority in 9 out of 12 total votes in a given year, it would receive a value of 0.75. In making this calculation, I considered the fact that 'yes' and 'no' are not the only possible votes. A country can also vote either 'abstain' or 'absent'. I decided to exclude a country's abstentions and absences from their "total votes"—i.e. only include votes that were 'yes' or 'no'—for several reasons. First, the project aims to examine why a country agrees or disagrees with the majority, not why it is noncommittal. Second, in early UNGA sessions, some countries like Albania exclusively voted 'abstain' or 'absent'. Including those votes would result in an anomalously low rate of majority votes that would reflect only the method of calculation, rather than real facts in the world. Lastly, abstentions and absences are rare enough that their exclusion does not substantively alter the analysis.

For GDP data, I used a dataset from the World Bank containing annual percentage change in GDP since 1961 for every country. I then ran a linear regression with GDP change as the explanatory variable and the previously calculated frequency in the majority as the response variable. I limited the analysis to the approximately one hundred countries that have continuous GDP data available dating back to 1961. All data processing and analysis was performed using R.

Analysis

Figure 1. Coefficients of GDP by Country



A bootstrap replication of these results revealed very little uncertainty surrounding the GDP coefficient. As the plot shows, for the vast majority of countries, the coefficient associated with GDP change ranges from slightly negative to slightly positive, with most countries displaying essentially no relationship. The extreme outlier of South Africa is attributable to unique historical circumstances. South

Africa was suspended from the UNGA in 1974 over apartheid and reinstated in 1994 following its transition to democracy. Owing to this two-decade gap in the data, no conclusions should be drawn from the regression with regard to South Africa.

Discussion

The results of my analysis are not surprising. While economic prosperity or decline does plausibly affect a country's global prominence and power, very generally defined, the specific relationship between GDP change and frequency in UNGA majorities is more tenuous. GDP itself is a highly constructed metric, and minute differences in GDP change—a 3.1 percent increase this year versus 3.2 percent the previous year—are hardly likely to significantly affect the fundamentals of a country's international standing. Along the same lines, the UNGA and “one country, one vote” do not reflect the realities of international engagement. Many small countries with negligible influence vote 100 percent of the time with the UNGA majority. For such countries, any relationship my analysis may indicate is almost certainly random chance.

Some of the analysis can be seen as indicative of real-world trends. For instance, Israel shows the highest coefficient of GDP change. This likely reflects the historical fact that its economic strength has risen in tandem with other factors like military strength and diplomatic standing, which then indirectly translate into greater power in the UN. The same reasoning could be applied to China, which also shows a fairly positive relationship. For other countries like the former European colonial powers, a negative relationship could suggest economic decline accompanied by a broader loss in international status, but further case-by-case investigation is needed to determine the exact historical circumstances.

Future research on UNGA voting patterns may focus on the influence exerted by countries like the United States. For instance, there may be a relationship between US foreign aid to a country, or military presence near a country, and the frequency at which that country votes with the US in the UNGA.

References

- [1] <https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/index.shtml>
- [2] Erik Voeten 'Data and Analyses of Voting in the UN General Assembly' Routledge Handbook of International Organization, edited by Bob Reinalda (published May 27, 2013). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2111149>.
- [3] <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>