

ISSUE BRIEF

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Thirty Years of Voting in the U.N. General Assembly: The U.S. Is Nearly Always in the Minority

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Congress has been concerned for decades that countries receiving American foreign aid often oppose U.S. initiatives and priorities in the United Nations. A State Department annual report on the voting practices in the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA), mandated by Congress since 1983, shows that in the past 30 years voting coincidence with the U.S. surpassed 50 percent only twice.

Moreover, the vast majority of recipients of U.S. foreign assistance routinely oppose U.S. diplomatic initiatives and vote against the U.S. The most recent report confirms yet again that most recipients of foreign aid voted against the U.S. in the UNGA in 2012.

To address this issue, Congress should instruct State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to take into account countries' U.N. voting practices when allocating America's development assistance.

Low Support for the U.S. in the U.N. In 1983, Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick testified on how the U.N. could be “made a more effective instrument for problem-solving and peace-making among nations, an institution which helps resolve difference rather and exacerbate them.” Among her recommendations was to make “voting behavior, in multilateral

organizations like the United Nations...one of the criteria we employ in deciding whether we will provide assistance, and what type of assistance and in what amount.”¹

To help implement this recommendation, Congress required the State Department to track how individual countries vote in the U.N. and report the results to Congress in its *Voting Practices in the United Nations* report submitted annually since 1984.² Each report includes tables listing the percentages with which countries voted with the U.S. on U.N. Security Council and UNGA resolutions, including consensus and non-consensus votes and votes deemed “important” by the State Department. These reports serve as a unique and valuable source of information for gauging support for U.S. priorities and policies and show that, to the detriment of American interests, the U.S. is often in the minority at the U.N.

Most UNGA resolutions are adopted by consensus—i.e., without a recorded vote or dissent. For instance, 180 of 269 resolutions (66.9 percent) were adopted by consensus during the 67th UNGA session in 2012,³ which is typical of recent U.N. sessions. Although some consensus decisions are the result of prolonged negotiation, it is difficult to separate the significant consensus votes from those of little substance.⁴ Therefore, analysis is better focused on non-consensus votes—when actual votes are taken on resolutions and, by definition, involve substantive matters where member states disagree—where there is a transparent metric for measuring support for U.S. positions.

Voting coincidence with the U.S. in the UNGA on overall non-consensus votes has averaged 32.7

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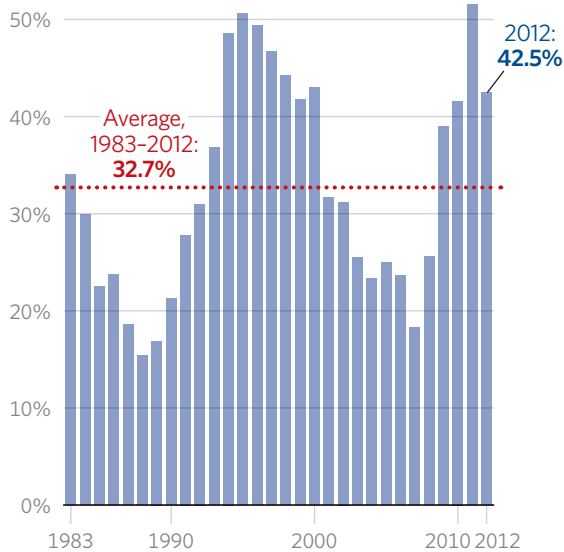
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CHART 1

Non-Consensus Overall Votes in the U.N. General Assembly Coinciding with the U.S. Vote



Note: Data include only resolutions adopted by the U.N. General Assembly.

Source: Authors' correspondence with the U.S. Department of State. For data since 2000: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Organization Affairs, *Voting Practices in the United Nations*, 2003–2012, <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rls/rpt/> (accessed September 17, 2013).

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percent since the State Department's first report. The all-time low was 15.4 percent in 1988. Since 1983, voting coincidence with the U.S. was higher than 50 percent only twice—in 1995 and 2011.

Since 2000, voting coincidence in the UNGA on overall non-consensus votes has averaged 32.4 percent, although it has improved in recent years. In 2012, voting coincidence with the U.S. dropped by nine percentage points to 42.5 percent from 51.5 percent in 2011.⁵ The negative change marks the largest year-to-year decline in voting coincidence over the past decade and the second largest since the State Department began compiling the reports. (Voting coincidence dropped by 11 percentage points from 2000 to 2001.)

As part of the report, Congress instructed the State Department to annually identify important issues and report on support for them.⁶ These resolutions also offer insight into support for U.S. positions, because they are generally subjects of intense U.S. lobbying. On important non-consensus votes, voting coincidence with the U.S. fell by 17.5 percentage points to 35.4 percent from 52.9 percent in 2011—the largest year-to-year drop since 1998.⁷

Foreign Aid and U.N. Voting. Every U.N. voting report between 1999 and 2009 listed U.S. foreign assistance disbursements to each nation alongside its voting coincidence with the U.S. However, the Obama Administration ended this practice and, since 2010, has failed to include foreign assistance disbursements in its reports.

1. Jeane Kirkpatrick, "International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1983," testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 1983, pp. 51 and 55, <http://www.disam.dsca.mil/pubs/Vol%205-4/Kirkpatrick.pdf> (accessed September 17, 2013).
2. U.S. Department of State, "Voting Practices in the United Nations: A Yearly Analysis by the U.S. Department of State," February 24, 1984, <http://www.princeton.edu/~sbwhite/un/VPr1983.html> (accessed September 17, 2013).
3. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Organization Affairs, *Voting Practices in the United Nations*, 2012, April 2013, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208072.pdf> (accessed September 17, 2013).
4. The State Department highlights a selection of "Important Consensus Actions" in its annual report. Some of these consensus actions are indeed important and potentially controversial. However, others are relatively non-controversial or unlikely to elicit opposition. Ultimately, however, deciding whether a consensus resolution is important is subjective. Regardless, the report does not provide a comprehensive breakdown of important versus unimportant consensus resolutions.
5. U.S. Department of State, *Voting Practices in the United Nations*, 2012.
6. In accordance with Section 406 of Public Law 101-246, the State Department is required to analyze and discuss "important votes," which are defined as votes on "issues which directly affected United States interests and on which the United States lobbied extensively." See U.S. Department of State, *Voting Practices in the United Nations*, 2012, pp. 23-34, and previous reports.
7. Data on "important" votes for the entire 28-year period of the report were not available online.

CHART 2

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

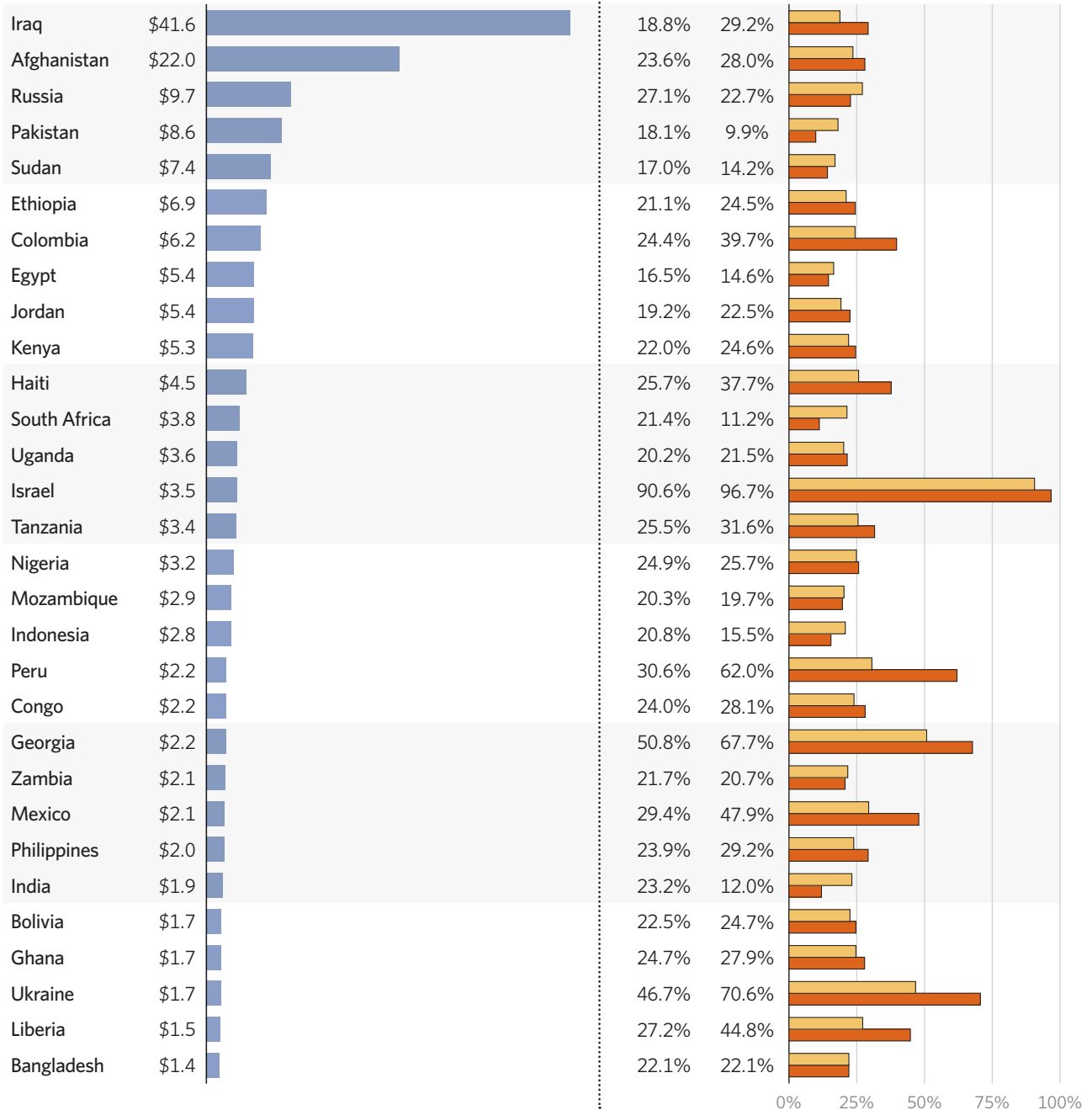
30 LARGEST RECIPIENTS OF U.S. AID

U.S. DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Total development assistance from the U.S., 2002-2011, in billions of constant 2011 dollars

U.S./U.N. NON-CONSENSUS VOTE COINCIDENCE

Percentage of overall votes and important votes in the U.N., 2003-2012, that coincided with the U.S. vote



Sources: U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants, <http://gbk.eads.usaidallnet.gov> (accessed September 17, 2013), and authors' correspondence with USAID Economic Analysis and Data Services; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Organization Affairs, *Voting Practices in the United Nations, 2003-2012*, <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rls/rpt/> (accessed September 17, 2013).

UNGA voting patterns indicate (and analysis confirms) that the U.S. neither effectively rewards countries that support U.S. priorities in the U.N. nor withholds assistance from countries that consistently oppose U.S. priorities.⁸ Most major recipients voted against the U.S. more often than they voted with the U.S.

Indeed, over the past 10 UNGA sessions, on average, 81.9 percent of all development assistance recipients (177 countries in all) voted against the U.S. in a majority of the overall non-consensus votes, and 68.9 percent voted against the U.S. in a majority of the important non-consensus votes. In 2012, average voting coincidence with the U.S. among U.S. development aid recipients was 40.4 percent on overall non-consensus resolutions and 35.4 percent on important non-consensus votes.

Chart 2 summarizes voting coincidence with the U.S. for the 30 largest recipients of U.S. development assistance (cumulatively between 2002 and 2011). Of these 30 countries, 28 voted against the U.S. in a majority of the overall non-consensus votes, and 26 voted against the U.S. in a majority of the important non-consensus votes.

What the U.S. Should Do. 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. Yet the U.S. could champion its positions more effectively in the UNGA by:

- **Linking U.N. voting to eligibility for U.S. development assistance.** Other priorities often

override support for U.S. positions in the U.N. As a result, many countries believe that they can oppose American priorities and initiatives without consequences. Congress should instruct the State Department and USAID to take into account U.N. voting when dispersing development assistance.

- **Requiring information on foreign assistance to be stated in the annual U.N. voting report to Congress.** The Obama Administration stopped including data on foreign assistance in its most recent reports. Congress should require State to include this information in future reports.

Time to Advance America's Interests . America's engagement with the U.N. is multifaceted and serves as an important vehicle for discussing many of today's complex global challenges. To protect and advance its interests, the U.S. should explicitly link U.S. foreign aid to support for U.S. priorities in the U.N.

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8. See Brett D. Schaefer and Anthony B. Kim, "The U.S. Should Link Foreign Aid and U.N. General Assembly Voting," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 2591, August 8, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/the-us-should-link-foreign-aid-and-un-general-assembly-voting>.