



Who Supports the UN? A Qualitative Analysis

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Synopsis

As the world's largest international organization with 193 member states, the United Nations plays an important role in international affairs. Since the US contributes over 22 percent of the UN's regular budget and nearly 27 percent of the UN's peacekeeping budget, and since the organization's headquarters is located in New York City, understanding how the American public views the United Nations is critical.

Building on data gathered from a survey conducted by the Better World Campaign in October 2014, we have created a study to better understand the determinants of US public attitudes of the United Nations. In this component of the project, we analyzed qualitative data from the survey to better understand why survey respondents viewed the United Nations favorably or unfavorably.

In October 2014, the Better World Campaign reported the findings of a survey of 800 randomly-selected registered voters. The margin of error in this survey was plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. Survey participants were asked a number of questions about current international events and their attitudes toward the United Nations. Respondents were asked the following question:

Please tell me whether your opinion of the United Nations is very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable.

A follow-up question was asked of a quarter of the sample (N=181). This question was aimed at clarifying why respondents offered the opinions on UN favorability that they did.

Please tell me the one or two reasons you have (A Favorable/Neither Favorable or Unfavorable/ An Unfavorable) opinion of the United Nations. What specifically makes you feel this way about the United Nations?

Below, we analyze these qualitative results to better understand why survey respondents felt the way that they did about the UN. To answer this question, we coded the verbatim responses of each category. Since the original question had five categories, we present the findings by category and conclude with some common themes.

Methodology

Of the 181 verbatim responses, 31 respondents had a very favorable view of the UN, 74 respondents had a somewhat favorable view, 19 respondents were neutral, 24 respondents had a somewhat unfavorable view, and 33 respondents had a very unfavorable view. The distribution of verbatim responses by level of favorability appears in Figure 1 below:

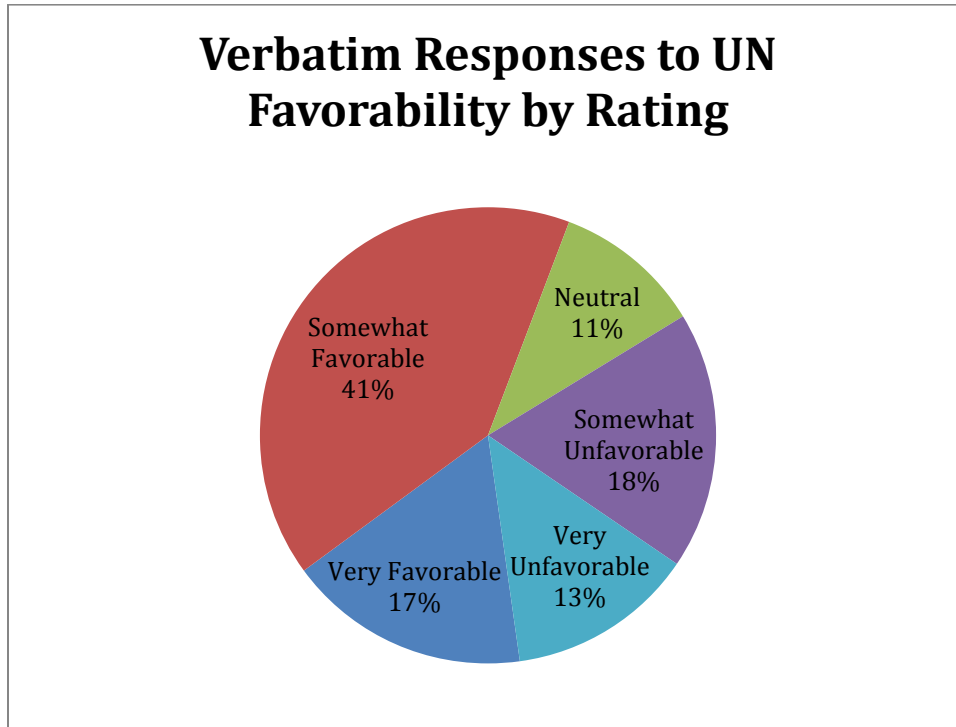


Figure 1

These favorability groups, in turn, were allocated to project members who worked together to come up with appropriate codings for each of the entries. Some verbatim responses fit more than one code. What appears below, then, is a summary of the key themes common to respondents for each level of favorability.

Findings

There were 31 respondents who stated their opinion of the UN as **Very Favorable**. The most frequent theme highlighted was that the UN is a tool for advancing global issues. The UN has value because it is where countries come together to solve international problems. In some of these cases, respondents were very explicit about the range of global problems that the UN solves. In other instances, respondents merely indicated that the UN aids in solving global problems. The second most prevalent theme was that the UN served an informational function; distinct from developing policy solutions, the UN serves as the place where the world comes together to talk. Other respondents noted specific issues in which the UN was engaged, from security to Ebola to humanitarian aid. Other respondents noted that the UN served as the embodiment of international teamwork. In these instances, respondents offered no specific examples and didn't credit the UN with solving global problems. Only 2 of the 31 respondents connected the US and the UN directly. In both cases, these respondents suggested that US engagement in the UN was

vital. A summary table of these findings appears in Figure 2 below, where the Y-axis represents the frequency of each expressed reason.

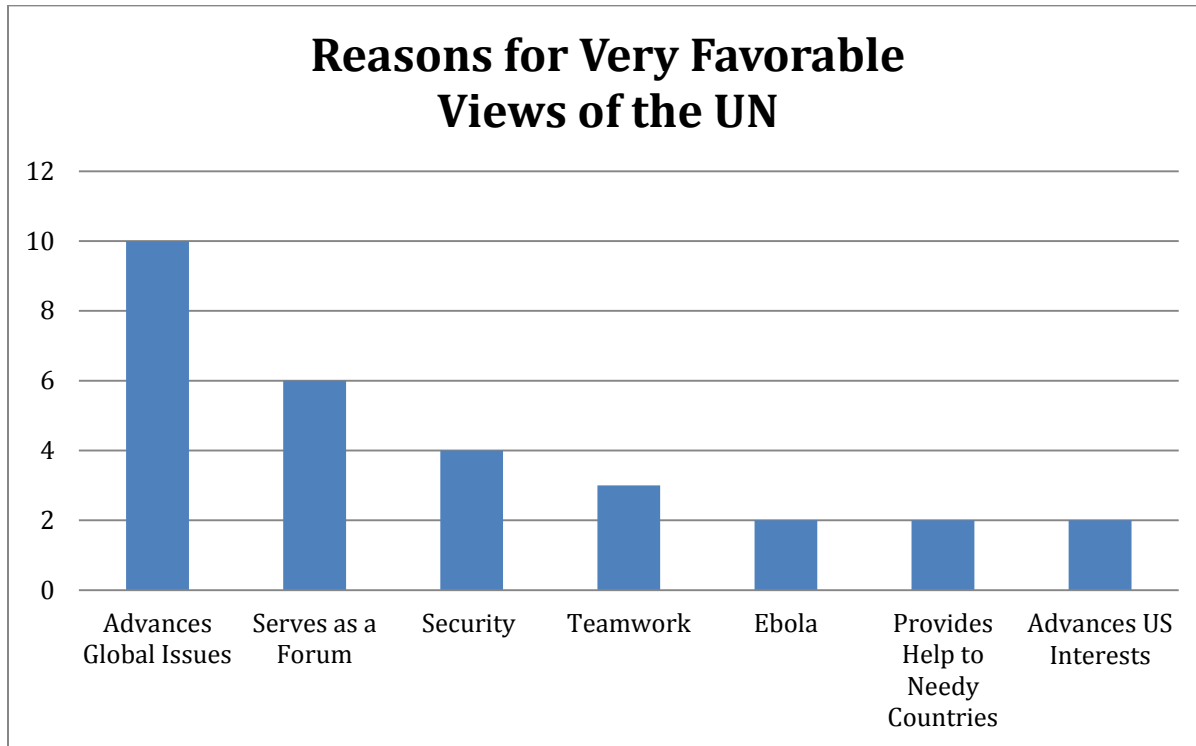


Figure 2

There were 74 **Somewhat Favorable** responses, making this the most numerous category. This category was narrowed down to nine themes classified into three broad groups: UN functioning, values projected, and prevention. “Cooperation” and “good intentions” were the most prevalent rationales that respondents offered. This first category refers to the idea that the UN serves as a mechanism for global cooperation. In the second category, respondents felt the UN did a lot of good work, but they were often unable to name specific examples. These were followed by “Security,” “United States,” “terrorism and violence,” and “benefits the weak.”

The survey responses that mentioned the US by name merit additional discussion. As above, there was little sense that the UN served to advance US interests. The focus of these responses referenced either our lack of influence (either globally or at the UN) or concerns about the US share of the UN budget.

The most mentioned crises were terrorism/ISIS and Ebola. Many agreed that further development of communication and transparency mechanisms needs to happen to improve functions of the UN. “Peace,” “Development,” and “Ineffectiveness” each had 10 or fewer occurrences, the latter indicating that skepticism about the UN was rather low. A summary table of these findings appears in Figure 3 below, where the Y-axis represents the frequency of each expressed reason.

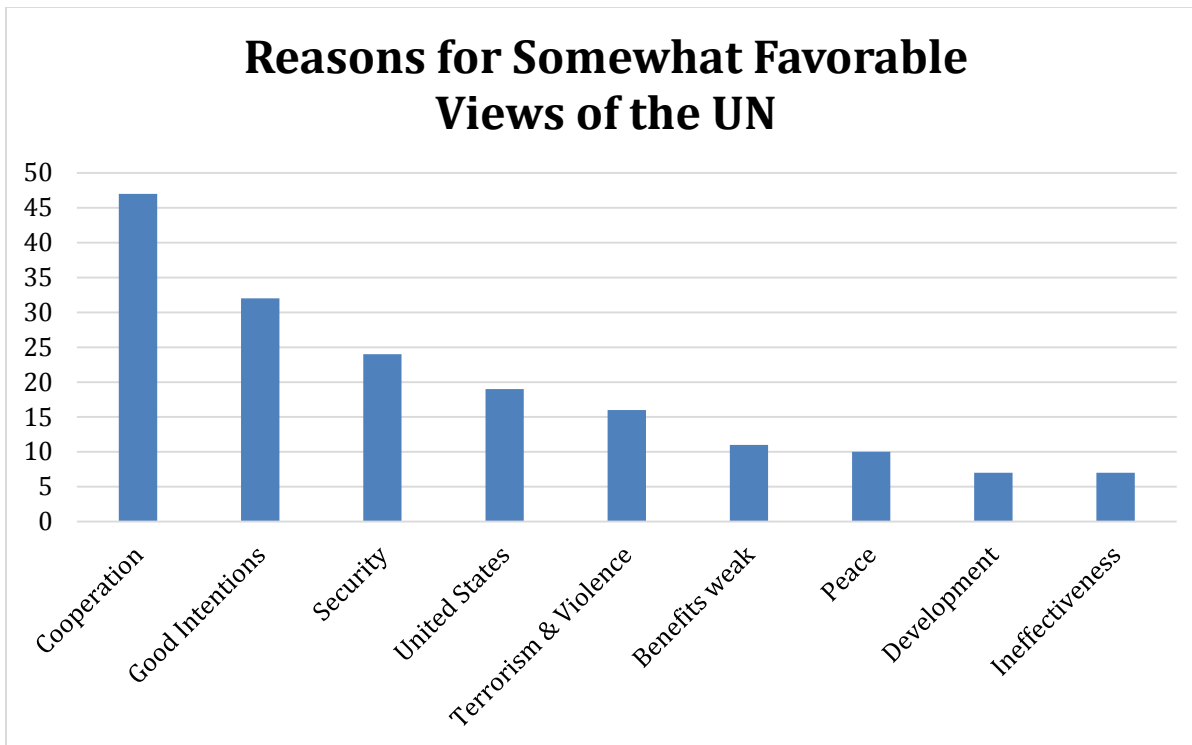


Figure 3

Nineteen individuals responded that they had **Neutral** opinions of the UN. However, most of these neutral statements had either negative or positive undertones. Of the 21 codes that originated from the 19 individual responses, 16 had a negative bias, 3 had a neutral bias, 1 had a positive bias, and 1 was categorized as “unrelated.”

Though they answered the previous question as **Neutral**, the majority of the respondents in this category had negative opinions of the UN. Sixteen of the final 21 codes that were used to categorize the data fell under the “negative” category. Of these 16 negative codes, 9 of them were that the UN was ineffective. In other responses, there were negative undertones because of the effect that the UN has on the United States – 2 of the codes were “Dependent on US” while 2 were “Detrimental to US interests.” Additionally, there was 1 of each of the following in the negative response category: “Corrupt,” “Enables Violence,” and “Unfavorable.” A summary table of these findings appears in Figure 4 below, where the Y-axis represents the frequency of each expressed reason.

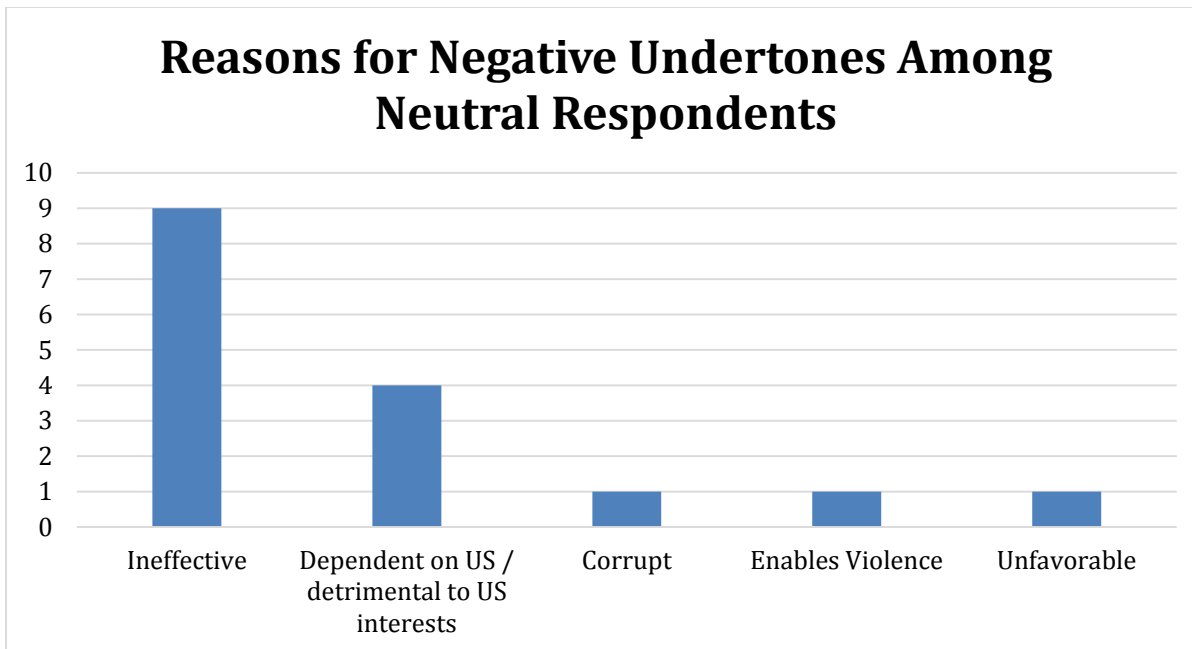


Figure 4

Even when we consider that many of the neutral respondents offered criticisms of the UN, negative opinion about the UN overall remains in the minority. Twenty-four respondents rated the UN as **Somewhat Unfavorable**. Importantly, though, criticisms of the UN fall along several common themes. While “Ineffectiveness” was the most common theme, many respondents were more nuanced in their critique, suggesting that the UN was unable to produce collaboration between countries, unable to take specific actions, or unable to generate results. These respondents also mentioned the “cost ineffectiveness” and even the “negative effects” of the UN involvement. A summary table of these findings appears in Figure 5 below, where the Y-axis represents the frequency of each expressed reason.

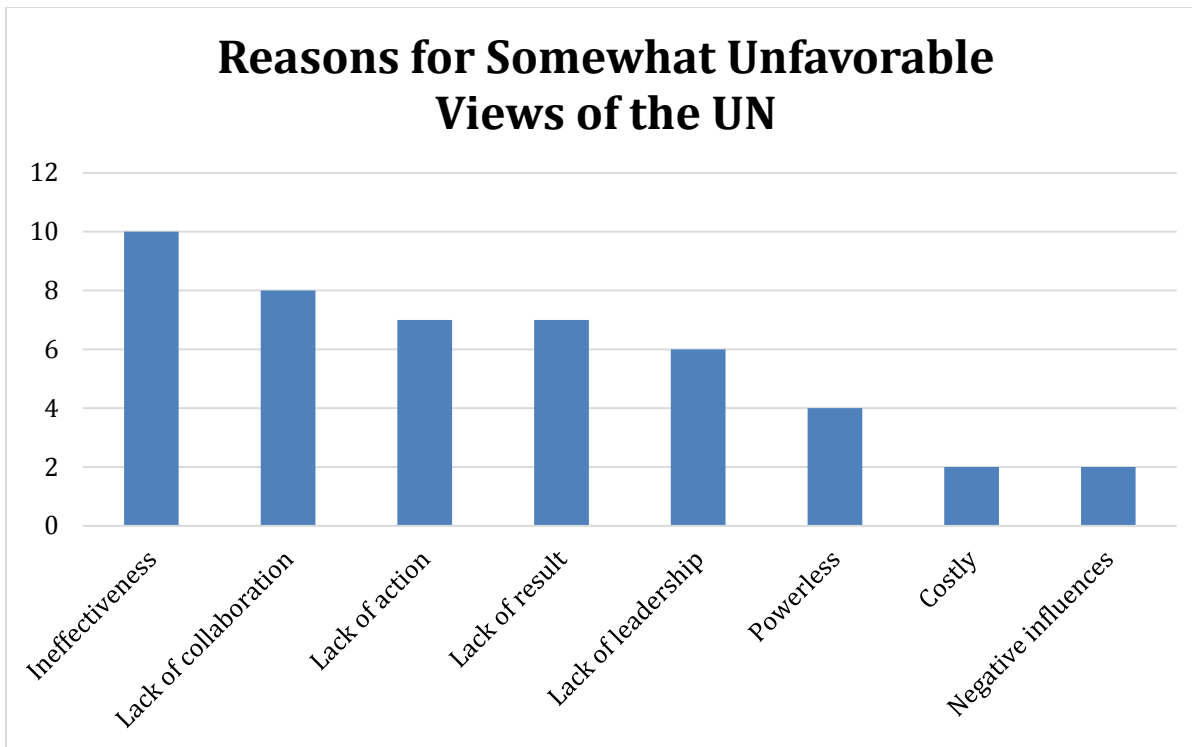


Figure 5

Thirty-three respondents fell into the **Very Unfavorable** category, classified under 8 codes. “Biased” was the top recurring code, with 17 respondents in some way referring to the preferential treatment of some states over others. Some respondents focused on how the US is not able to get its way at the UN, while others mentioned excessive criticism of Israel. “Cost” came in as the second highest recurring theme with 14 occurrences, with many respondents who felt that the US carried more than its share of the financial burden of operating the UN. This was followed by “Ineffectiveness,” which was an issue for 12 of the 34 respondents. Of the 8 themes in the very unfavorable category, only one centered on a specific responsibility articulated in the UN Charter. Five respondents felt that the UN was not active enough in solving security issues, specifically global terrorism. This was the only recurrent instance in this category where respondents felt the UN should have more sovereignty to act. In this category, “bias” and “cost” comprised a clear majority of the issues put forth by respondents with 50% of respondents mentioning “bias” and 41% mentioning “cost.” Most respondents did not mention any specific projects, goals, or tasks of the UN, which may indicate a general lack of knowledge of the UN’s work, but may also indicate an opposition to the UN in principle. A summary table of these findings appears in Figure 6 below, where the Y-axis represents the frequency of each expressed reason.

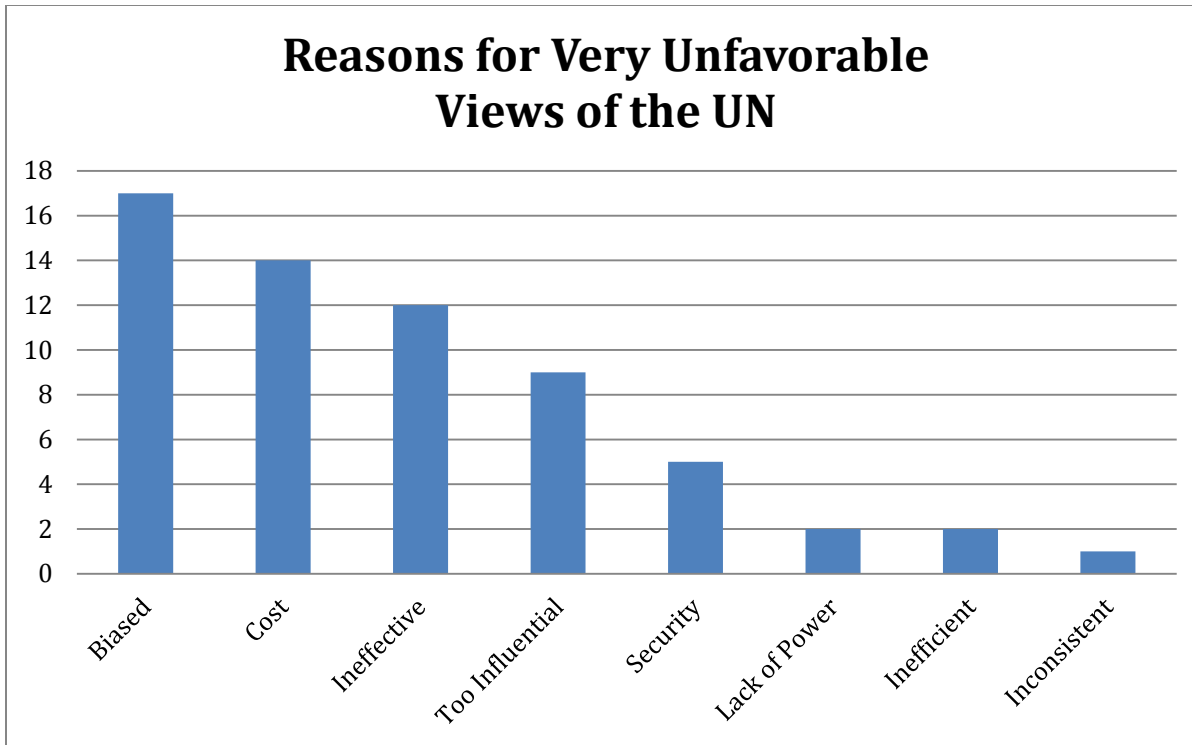


Figure 6

Broader Implications

These findings bring with them a number of important implications. We discuss each in turn below.

Support for the UN is diffuse; Objections to the UN are concentrated.

Respondents in the survey with favorable views of the UN focused on its ability to solve global problems, to serve as a forum for diplomats to discuss international matters, or to create cooperation more generally. Respondents with unfavorable views of the UN tended to argue that cooperating with the UN is a liability for the US. “Bias” and “cost” were recurring themes in the Neutral, Somewhat Unfavorable, and Very Unfavorable categories. Critics of the UN made the case that the US was not getting good results from the UN. Proponents, however, were less likely to make these arguments. Fewer respondents on the positive side of the ledger argued that the UN was a force multiplier for US interests. In some cases, even the supporters shared concerns about costs.

This suggests some possible strategies to shore up support. Making the case that US interests and UN interests are identical helps combat concerns about bias. Stressing that multilateral engagement advances US interests efficiently underscores the UN’s value as a tool of American diplomacy. Finally, since many of the supporters did not reference specific issues, better knowledge of a recent success for the UN (such as Ebola) might ensure that supporters have stronger points of reference moving forward.

Many details about the US-UN relationship are not understood.

Since the majority of responses were rather short and lacked detail, there seemed to be a general lack of knowledge about the UN and its functions. The discontent about conflicting US/ UN interests is incongruent with the fact that UN values are very much American. It is a common misconception that

the General Assembly is “the US versus the world” and countries in the UN instinctively vote against US positions. They have a strong incentive to vote *with* the US, as those that do tend to receive more aid and financial assistance. Although the US does contribute more than any other country, strengthening the US-UN relationship ensures our continued influence over the organization, which also ensures that the US gets value for its money. The United Nations also projects values that are congruent with American and western social standards, including human rights, good governance, and the rights of women and children. International agreements and laws propel these values beyond US borders and in so doing advance our own national security. Finally, while some respondents argued that the US carries a heavier burden in financing the UN than other countries, other findings in the Better World Campaign survey point to how debates about costs can be turned around. Respondents from all political parties supported the US paying its peacekeeping dues on time. This suggests that better informing the public about the US-UN relationship, as the Better World Campaign has done, can pay dividends in higher support.

Respondents offered little discussion of the alternatives.

Survey respondents who had unfavorable views of the UN were more clear about what they did not like than they were about what they did like. Respondents who were critical of the UN did not express a clear support for greater unilateralism. It is also not clear if respondents would be happy with a shared financial burden at the UN if it also represented a diminution of US influence over other countries. So, while it is important to think about strategies to confront those respondents with unfavorable views, it is worth stressing that these views might be easier to change than perhaps originally thought.

Need to learn more about the determinants of individual attitudes.

In order to learn more about individual attitudes, a number of potential innovations in subsequent surveys merit consideration. Randomized experimental designs are increasingly used in surveys to assess the effects of information on attitudes. This would require more of a panel setup in which the original respondents are re-contacted. Upon being informed of UN projects and successes, favorability would be reassessed. Alternatively, a few questions designed to measure respondent background knowledge would be added to an existing survey. This would allow researchers to measure whether differences in favorability are driven by differences in respondents between those that are poorly informed and those that are well informed. This approach was recently used in an IPSOS survey conducted for the American Bar Association’s International Criminal Court Project.

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