

Foreign Lobbying as an Electoral Strategy: Electoral Cycles and Major-Power Engagement *

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Abstract

Major powers frequently influence elections abroad, yet existing research focuses primarily on the supply side of intervention. This paper shifts attention to the demand side by examining how weaker states seek foreign electoral support during electoral competition. I argue that foreign support-seeking follows electoral cycles: As elections approach, incumbents intensify efforts to secure foreign support that can strengthen their electoral prospects. More specifically, electoral cycles should be more pronounced in efforts to secure public-facing support than resource-based support. While both can be electorally valuable, public-facing support—such as high-level visits and political endorsements—can be delivered much more quickly than resource-based support—such as aid, trade, and investment, which typically requires prolonged bargaining and implementation. Using original data on foreign government lobbying in the United States from FARA disclosures, classified with large language models, I find that incumbents intensify their efforts to seek foreign electoral support as elections approach, and that this pattern is driven primarily by efforts to secure public-facing support from the United States rather than resource-based support. These findings recast foreign electoral intervention as a process actively solicited by incumbents facing electoral pressures, rather than one driven solely by major powers.

Keywords: foreign electoral intervention; diplomacy; foreign policy; election; major powers;

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1 Introduction

In the run-up to the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s (DRC) 2023 national election, the Congolese government expanded its lobbying presence in Washington, D.C. On March 11, 2022, the Ministry of Communication and Media signed a \$900,000 contract with Ballard Partners to “improve bilateral relations between the U.S. and the DRC; strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law; and advance the DRC’s economic growth.” Just three days later, on March 14, the ministry retained Scribe Strategies and Advisors with the aim of “improving the DRC’s image in the U.S.” and “increasing U.S. investment.”¹ These pre-election lobbying efforts attracted substantial media attention, prompting *The Africa Report* to ask: “Is the upcoming DRC presidential election being played out in Washington?”² Nor was the DRC an isolated case. Similar patterns of pre-election foreign lobbying have appeared across many other countries, such as Liberia, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Haiti.³ Why would governments facing upcoming elections intensify their lobbying efforts abroad?

Major powers frequently influence elections abroad and possess the capacity to shape the political survival of leaders in other countries. This raises an important possibility that politicians may seek foreign support to strengthen their electoral position (Tomz and Weeks 2025). I argue that electoral incentives shape how incumbent leaders engage major powers. As elections approach, incumbents intensify efforts to seek electoral help from foreign powers whose actions can affect domestic electoral competition. A growing literature on foreign electoral intervention helps explain why such behavior may be politically attractive

¹Romain Gras, “DRC: US lobbyists enlisted to rescue Tshisekedi,” *The Africa Report*, 1st April 2022. Available at <https://www.theafricareport.com/188916/drc-us-lobbyists-enlisted-to-rescue-tshisekedi/>. Accessed 5 April 2026.

²Romain Gras, “Is the upcoming DRC presidential election being played out in Washington?,” *The Africa Report*, 22 March 2023, Available at <https://www.theafricareport.com/293646/is-the-upcoming-drc-presidential-election-being-played-out-in-washington/>. Accessed 7 November 2023.

³For example, see Julian Pecquet, “African electoral lobbying dominates \$3 million in new contracts for September”, *Foreign Lobby Report*, 11 November 2021. Available at <https://www.foreignlobby.com/2021/11/01/african-electoral-lobbying-dominates-3-million-in-new-contracts/>. Accessed 7 November 2023. Julian Pecquet, “Haiti ramps up US lobbying ahead of elections”, *Foreign Lobby Report*, 18 December 2020. Available at <https://www.foreignlobby.com/2020/12/18/haiti-ramps-up-us-lobbying-ahead-of-elections/>. Accessed 7 November 2023.

(e.g., [Bubeck and Marinov 2017, 2019](#); [Bubeck et al. 2022](#); [Levin 2016, 2019, 2020](#)). Previous studies show that foreign powers can shape candidates' electoral prospects by altering resources and political rhetoric in ways that advantage or disadvantage particular parties or candidates (e.g., [Levin 2016](#); [Bush and Prather 2020](#); [Tomz and Weeks 2025](#)). They also demonstrate that such involvement affects how voters evaluate both candidates and foreign actors: citizens may tolerate or punish candidates based on perceived foreign backing ([Tomz and Weeks 2025](#)), and foreign side-taking can shift public support for international partners and foreign policies ([Tomz and Weeks 2020](#); [Bush and Prather 2020, 2022](#); [Corstange and Marinov 2012](#)).

Yet, despite growing recognition that foreign electoral intervention often depends on the consent and cooperation of domestic political actors ([Levin 2016, 2020](#); [Bubeck et al. 2022](#); [Tomz and Weeks 2025](#)), the demand side of foreign electoral intervention has received limited theoretical and empirical attention. Drawing from the literature on political business cycles and electoral manipulation, I develop a theory that shifts the focus from the supply of foreign electoral intervention to the demand for foreign electoral support by incumbents who face electoral incentives. I argue that electoral incentives generate cycles in major power engagement: because elections are anticipated, incumbents strategically plan and adjust their foreign engagement over time. In particular, incumbents intensify their engagement with major powers to solicit foreign support as elections approach.

Because different forms of foreign support vary in how quickly they can generate political benefits, governments' efforts to obtain them should follow different temporal patterns over the electoral cycle. I distinguish between two broad forms of foreign electoral support: *resource-based* support and *public-facing* support. Resource-based support involves material benefits, such as aid, trade, investment, or sanctions relief, that can strengthen incumbents through distributive channels. Public-facing support involves visible forms of international engagement, such as diplomatic meetings, high-level visits, and public endorsements, that shape domestic perceptions of the incumbent's legitimacy, competence, and

external backing. Because obtaining resource-based support typically requires the time for sustained negotiation and implementation, the efforts to seek it are less driven by short-term electoral timing. By contrast, public-facing support can be generated quickly and produce immediate informational and symbolic returns. Therefore, I further argue that as elections approach, governments increase efforts to secure public-facing forms of foreign support more than resource-based forms of foreign support.

Empirically examining how smaller states engage with major powers to seek their electoral support poses a fundamental measurement challenge. Most such efforts occur through routine, informal, or opaque diplomatic channels that are difficult to systematically observe in real time. Private meetings, informal negotiations, and backchannel communications are often not publicly recorded (Connelly et al. 2021; Gray and Potter 2020), making it difficult to trace how and when governments seek external support. Even when engagement is observable, it is often unclear whether it is driven by the major power’s strategic initiatives or by domestic actors seeking foreign support.

However, foreign lobbying provides a rare observable window into governments’ otherwise difficult-to-observe efforts to solicit foreign support.⁴ As domestic policymaking processes and international negotiations grow more complex, the boundary between diplomacy and lobbying has become increasingly blurred (OECD 2021). Governments do not rely solely on traditional diplomatic channels; instead, they often hire private lobbying firms to advance their foreign policy objectives abroad (OECD 2021).⁵ Unlike reports of international engagement, such as diplomatic visits, summit meetings, and bilateral agreements, which usually reflect the joint decisions of both governments involved, lobbying activities are directly initiated and financed by foreign governments themselves. Foreign lobbying therefore

⁴Lobbying refers to organized efforts to influence public officials or policy processes to secure favorable policies and regulations.

⁵OECD (2021) documents that foreign government lobbying is practiced in more than 40 countries worldwide. Examining who lobbies whom and for what purposes reveals substantial overlap between diplomacy and foreign policy lobbying. The foreign government entities that engage in lobbying are typically those formally authorized to conduct diplomacy; the targets are often officials who regularly interact with foreign diplomats; and the substantive issues closely mirror those addressed through traditional diplomatic channels.

provides an observable indicator of governments’ efforts to influence major-power decision making. Moreover, because lobbying activities are systematically disclosed, they generate detailed records of when and how governments seek external engagement in pursuit of political objectives.⁶

To test my theoretical expectations about an electoral cycle in solicitation of major power support, I collect original data on foreign governments’ lobbying activities in the United States from 2002 to 2018. The empirical analysis shows that foreign governments are more likely to lobby and spend more on lobbying in the U.S. during their own election years. Moreover, lobbying activity rises as elections approach and declines sharply in the post-election period. This temporal pattern is consistent with the theory’s expectation that incumbents strategically adjust their engagement with major powers in response to electoral incentives. To address concerns that electoral incentives may be endogenous to political conditions, I leverage variation in electoral incentives arising from constitutionally fixed electoral calendars. The results remain consistent under this design.

Further, to evaluate how governments seek different forms of foreign support over the electoral cycle, I rely on Large Language Model (LLM)-assisted classification of lobbying issues drawn from 5,368 disclosure reports between 2002 and 2018. I distinguish between lobbying aimed at securing resource-based benefits such as trade, investment, aid, development, tourism, and sanctions relief and lobbying oriented toward public-facing benefits, including diplomatic engagement, meetings, visits, and image-building. The results reveal a clear temporal differentiation across these forms of support-seeking. Foreign governments spend significantly more on lobbying for public-facing support and allocate a larger share of efforts to soliciting public-facing support than resource-based support in election years. This pattern is consistent with the expectation that public-facing benefits can generate immedi-

⁶Importantly, the policy domains targeted through foreign lobbying closely overlap with the very forms of external support that the foreign electoral intervention and political survival literatures identify as consequential for incumbents’ electoral prospects and leader survival. Therefore, lobbying could be seen as a revealed preference indicator of governments’ demand for politically valuable foreign engagement.

ate political returns, whereas resource-based benefits typically require longer negotiation and implementation horizons, making efforts to solicit public-facing support more responsive to short-term electoral pressures than efforts to solicit resource-based support.

Overall, this work contributes to multiple literatures in political science. First, this study directly contributes both to the broader literature on international influence on elections (e.g., [Kelley 2009, 2012](#); [Hyde and Marinov 2014](#); [Bush and Prather 2017, 2018](#)) and to the emerging literature on foreign electoral intervention by shifting attention from the supply of major power influence to the domestic demand for it. Existing research has primarily examined how and when foreign powers attempt to shape electoral outcomes and how such interventions affect voters and electoral competition (e.g., [Bubeck and Marinov 2017, 2019](#); [Bubeck et al. 2022](#); [Levin 2016, 2019, 2020](#); [Tomz and Weeks 2020, 2025](#); [Bush and Prather 2020, 2022](#)). While recent work acknowledges that domestic actors may have incentives to recruit foreign support ([Levin 2020](#); [Tomz and Weeks 2025](#)), this insight remains theoretically under-specified and empirically underexplored. Without accounting for the demand side, scholars risk mischaracterizing foreign electoral intervention as driven primarily by external initiative, while overlooking how domestic electoral incentives shape when intervention occurs, what forms it takes, and how domestic actors strategically mobilize foreign support for electoral purposes. In doing so, the study also extends second-image reversed arguments ([Gourevitch 1978](#)) by showing that international sources of domestic politics are not only externally imposed, but can be generated by domestic political considerations.

Second, this study speaks to the broad literature on political business cycles. Existing research has primarily examined how electoral incentives shape the use of economic and security policy tools (e.g., [Nordhaus 1975](#); [Schultz 1995](#); [Hyde and O'Mahony 2010](#); [Pierskalla and Sacks 2018](#); [Smith 1996](#); [Marinov, Nomikos and Robbins 2015](#)). This study extends the range of strategies that incumbents employ to secure electoral advantage to the domain of diplomacy, by examining foreign policy lobbying as a previously overlooked instrument of electoral strategy. This is particularly important because, unlike many domestic and

security policies, diplomacy is often believed to be an arena where executive leaders wield more discretionary authority (Kaarbo and Lantis 2024). Since such efforts can be embedded in routine diplomatic engagement with foreign partners, they provide incumbents with a relatively unconstrained and less visible channel for pursuing electorally motivated strategies.

Last but not least, this study has implications for the lobbying literature, particularly research on foreign lobbying in international political economy. While a large body of work examines how firms, business interests, and domestic interest groups use lobbying to influence policymakers, relatively little attention has been paid to lobbying conducted by foreign governments. Existing studies of foreign government lobbying have primarily focused on its effects on policy outcomes (Gawande, Krishna and Robbins 2006; Kee, Olarreaga and Silva 2007; Montes-Rojas 2013; Pevehouse and Vabulas 2019; You 2023; Scharpf, Gläsel and Dukalskis 2025). In contrast, this paper shifts attention to when lobbying occurs. More broadly, it advances our understanding of how political actors design lobbying strategies to achieve their objectives.

2 The Demand Side of Foreign Electoral Intervention

Foreign electoral intervention has emerged as an important form of international influence in domestic politics. Existing research provides important insights into the causes, consequences, and implementation of foreign intervention in elections (e.g., Corstange and Marinov 2012; Levin 2016, 2019, 2020; Levin and Musgrave 2023; Bubeck and Marinov 2017, 2019; Bubeck et al. 2022; Bush and Prather 2020; Tomz and Weeks 2020, 2025). Building on these insights, this manuscript develops a demand-side perspective that shifts attention to when domestic politicians seek foreign electoral support and what types of support they seek.

2.1 Existing Literature on Foreign Electoral Intervention

Foreign electoral intervention refers to efforts by external actors to shape electoral competition in another state in favor of or against preferred candidates, parties, or political outcomes (Levin 2016, 2020; Tomz and Weeks 2020). Such intervention can take many forms, including campaign assistance, financial support, public threats or promises, economic punishments or concessions, information campaigns, and the provision of electoral expertise (Levin 2016, 2020; Bubeck et al. 2022). Existing research generally views these activities as strategic efforts by foreign actors to influence electoral outcomes in ways that advance their political, security, or economic interests. Foreign powers are most likely to intervene when competing domestic political forces differ substantially in their foreign policy orientations toward the intervener, making electoral outcomes consequential for the intervener’s interests (Levin 2016, 2020; Bubeck et al. 2022).

This literature demonstrates that foreign electoral intervention can have important political consequences. Cross-national evidence shows that partisan interventions increase the electoral prospects of the favored side (Levin 2016), while subsequent work demonstrates broader political consequences, including effects on regime trajectories and post-election stability (Levin 2019). At the same time, experimental research shows that foreign involvement shapes public opinion in systematic ways: citizens update their evaluations of candidates and foreign economic preferences in light of foreign backing, and such involvement can generate polarization or backlash depending on its source and visibility (Tomz and Weeks 2020, 2025; Bush and Prather 2022; Shulman and Bloom 2012).

Crucially, existing research recognizes that foreign electoral intervention is rarely imposed unilaterally from the outside. Successful interventions depend on the cooperation of domestic political actors, who provide local knowledge, facilitate implementation, and help determine whether and how foreign involvement occurs (Levin 2016, 2020). Although recent studies acknowledge that politicians may recruit foreign electoral support (e.g., Levin 2020;

Tomz and Weeks 2025), we know relatively little about how domestic political incentives shape politicians' efforts to seek foreign electoral support. This paper addresses that gap by developing a demand-side theory of foreign electoral intervention. I argue that domestic political incentives shape the timing and content of incumbents' engagement with foreign powers, and that understanding foreign electoral intervention therefore requires explaining not only why foreign actors intervene, but also when and in what forms domestic actors seek their involvement.

2.2 Electoral Cycles and the Strategic Solicitation of Foreign Electoral Support

I theorize that incumbents strategically adjust their foreign policy behavior to maximize their chance of winning reelection, causing their efforts to seek foreign support to follow electoral cycles. Politicians aim for reelection and rely on constituents' support. Thus, opportunistic politicians have incentives to use available tools to construct a positive public image, gain votes, and win reelection. Their electoral incentives tend to sharpen near election time, as voters are more likely to focus on the recent past and make decisions based on the state of affairs at that moment (Healy and Malhotra 2013).

Incumbents strategically employ a variety of tools to boost support in electoral cycles. Domestic tools include fiscal and monetary policies (e.g., Nordhaus 1975; Rogoff 1990; Franzese 2002; Drazen and Eslava 2010; Aidt et al. 2020), emergency declarations (Cooperman 2022), and election-timing adjustments (Kayser 2005; Schleiter and Tavits 2016; McClean 2021). In the international sphere, leaders can start wars to divert public attention away from domestic problems and to gain more domestic political support (e.g., Smith 1996; Tarar 2006; Tir 2010). They can also strategically exploit troop contributions to peacekeeping operations (Marinov, Nomikos and Robbins 2015), counterterrorism actions (Nanes 2017), the timing of trade disputes (Chaudoin 2014; Pervez 2015), and arms sales (Alley 2026) for

electoral purposes.

I argue that the same electoral logic applies to governments' foreign policy behavior and their interactions in international politics. Foreign policy and diplomacy are arenas in which executive leaders often wield greater discretionary authority (Kaarbo and Lantis 2024). Engagement with major powers constitutes an additional instrument that incumbents can strategically deploy to shape domestic political outcomes. By cultivating ties with influential foreign partners and seeking external support, incumbents can attempt to secure both material benefits and favorable rhetorics that are valuable in electoral competition. Since such activities are often embedded in the routine conduct of foreign affairs, it makes leaders' opportunistic attempts less visible than many alternative policy interventions.

Foreign electoral intervention can meaningfully shape candidates' electoral prospects by altering both resources and voter perceptions (Levin 2016, 2020; Bush and Prather 2020; Corstange and Marinov 2012). If foreign support can tilt the electoral playing field, incumbents have incentives not only to respond to foreign involvement but to actively recruit it (Tomz and Weeks 2025). This implies that engagement with major powers can be strategically intensified in response to electoral incentives. Given that elections create predictable political timelines, I thus expect that proximity to domestic elections creates incentives for incumbent governments to intensify their engagement with major powers and their efforts to solicit external support, generating electoral cycles in the demand for foreign support. My first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1 : *Incumbent governments will increase their efforts to solicit foreign support as domestic elections approach.*

If incumbents strategically intensify engagement with major powers as elections approach, the next questions are what forms of foreign support they seek through such engagement and how such support can be translated into electoral gains. I distinguish between two broad forms of foreign support: *resource-based* support and *public-facing* support.

Resource-based support involves material or policy-related benefits such as aid, trade access, investment, loans, or sanctions relief. As [Bush and Prather \(2020, p. 586\)](#) note, foreign meddling frequently operates through economic “carrots and sticks,” including “aid, loans, investment, preferential trade benefits, and sanctions.” Resource-based support has the potential to influence elections through a distributive mechanism. The logic builds on selectorate theory, which argues that leaders survive politically by maintaining the loyalty of a winning coalition through the distribution of private goods, public goods, and targeted benefits ([Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005](#)). Because coalition maintenance depends on the resources available for distribution, resource-based support can strengthen an incumbent’s political position by expanding access to economically valuable resources.

Specifically, foreign aid can provide governments with additional fiscal resources that can be directed toward patronage networks, public goods provision, or other politically valuable expenditures (e.g., [Ahmed 2012](#); [Kono and Montinola 2009](#); [Licht 2010](#)). Expanded trade access can increase export opportunities, employment, and income in sectors that are important to the incumbent’s political coalition ([Margalit 2011](#); [Hollyer and Rosendorff 2012](#); [Jensen, Quinn and Weymouth 2017](#)). Foreign investment can generate visible economic activity and employment opportunities that incumbents may claim credit for delivering ([Owen 2019](#); [Bak and Moon 2016](#); [Arias, Hollyer and Rosendorff 2018](#)). Sanctions relief can ease fiscal and economic pressures, restore access to international markets, and reduce strains on both governing coalitions and the broader economy (e.g., [Marinov 2005](#); [Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010](#); [Licht 2017](#); [Grossman, Manekin and Margalit 2018](#)). In this sense, resource-based foreign support matters electorally because it changes the material resources available for coalition maintenance and political mobilization.

The second form of foreign support is public-facing support, which operates through an informational mechanism. Rather than directly altering the distribution of material resources, public-facing support shapes how domestic audiences perceive the incumbent’s political strength, legitimacy, competence, and prospects for survival. Such support includes

visible forms of international engagement, such as high-level meetings, diplomatic visits, public endorsements, and other symbolic displays of external recognition and backing.

State visits from and to major powers constitute highly visible diplomatic signals that convey information about international relationships and political standing (McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017; McManus 2018; Malis and Smith 2019, 2021; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2021). Because major powers have incentives to devote diplomatic attention to incumbents expected to remain politically viable, decisions to engage through state visits or official meetings are selective and endogenous to assessments of regime strength and durability. Given the high visibility and extensive media coverage that typically accompany such engagements, domestic audiences may update their beliefs about an incumbent’s political viability, international standing, and external backing. For example, Malis and Smith (2021) empirically show that diplomatic visits to and from the United States increase leader survival even after accounting for foreign aid and other economic flows, suggesting that symbolic recognition carries independent political value.

In addition to the selection process, diplomatic visits, joint press conferences, and official appearances allow leaders to project favorable images (Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2021). Because these interactions are highly visible, carefully orchestrated, and publicly endorsed by participating leaders, they tend to convey positive signals about the relationship between the two governments and about leaders themselves. Such engagements allow incumbents to publicly demonstrate access to influential international partners and showcase their ability to manage important foreign relationships.⁷

More directly, foreign actors may shape electoral dynamics through public endorsements, strategic messaging, and the dissemination of favorable or unfavorable narratives, including selective information, exaggeration, condemnation, or misinformation, external actors can affect how voters interpret candidates and faith in democracy (Tomz and Weeks 2020, 2025).

⁷This argument is about the domestic benefits of engaging with major powers for the leaders of weaker states. Major power leaders don’t necessarily get the same domestic benefits from foreign interactions (Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2026).

Unlike diplomatic visits and meetings, which primarily signal status and relationships, these interventions operate by directly shaping the information environment in which electoral competition takes place.⁸

Finally, public-facing support may operate through international recognition and validation of electoral processes and outcomes. Statements by major powers and affiliated international election observers endorsing elections as credible, legitimate, or reflective of democratic procedures can help incumbents bolster claims to domestic and international legitimacy. Conversely, criticism or refusal to recognize electoral outcomes may undermine incumbents' political standing and embolden opposition actors ([Kelley 2009, 2012](#); [Bush and Prather 2017, 2018](#)). In this way, external actors can influence not only who wins elections but also whether electoral outcomes are viewed as politically legitimate.

Although both forms of foreign support can affect incumbents' electoral prospects, they have distinct implications for how governments allocate effort to secure them over the electoral cycle. Resource-based support often depends on lengthy policymaking, bargaining, and implementation processes within major powers, making it less flexible to respond to electoral needs. Foreign economic policies are shaped through interactions among executives, legislatures, bureaucracies, and domestic interest groups, whose preferences may diverge over allocation, timing, and conditionality ([Milner and Tingley 2015](#)). Consequently, aid flows, trade agreements, investment arrangements, and sanctions relief are rarely generated through one-time diplomatic engagement; instead, they usually require continuous lobbying and negotiation across multiple stages of policymaking ([You 2023](#)). In democratic major powers, such as the United States, these distributive policies are frequently subject to congressional authority and budgetary procedures ([Milner and Tingley 2015](#)), limiting the executive branch's ability to rapidly deliver material benefits in response to foreign electoral needs. Even in autocratic powers, foreign economic policymaking often impacts the material

⁸For example, Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election involved the dissemination of misleading and polarizing information through social media to shape voter perceptions. Similar patterns of foreign-backed messaging campaigns have been documented in other electoral contexts ([Ringhand 2021](#)).

interests of elites and involves bargaining and power-sharing among leaders, ruling elites, and bureaucrats (Jost 2024).

By contrast, public-facing support can be generated and transmitted much more quickly through visible diplomatic engagement and public communication. High-level meetings, state visits, public endorsements, and symbolic displays of international recognition do not generally require the same prolonged approval and implementation processes associated with distributive policies. If the mechanism underlying Hypothesis 1 operates through variation in incumbents' electoral incentives, then engagement aimed at securing public-facing support should exhibit stronger electoral cycles in governments' efforts to engage major powers, because the political returns from public-facing support are more immediate.⁹ I therefore derive a second hypothesis concerning the types of foreign support governments are most likely to be sought as elections approach.

Hypothesis 2: *As domestic elections approach, incumbent governments are more likely to increase efforts to solicit public-facing forms of foreign support than resource-based forms of foreign support.*

3 Foreign Lobbying as an Empirical Window into Major Power Engagement

Seeking electoral support from major powers is a consequential but difficult-to-observe aspect of international politics. Most such efforts occur through routine and often informal interactions that leave limited records, making it difficult to trace when governments strategically

⁹Announcements of foreign aid, investment, or trade agreements may also generate positive domestic signals before the underlying resources are delivered. However, unlike public-facing support, obtaining such announcements themselves typically requires lengthy bargaining and negotiation before they can be made public. Moreover, even if announcements of resource-based support produce electoral signaling benefits, they are classified as resource-based support in the analysis, reducing the observed difference between the two types of support. Any resulting bias therefore would be downward rather than upward.

intensify foreign engagement in response to domestic political incentives. Even when engagement is observable, it is often unclear whether interactions are driven by the initiatives of foreign powers or by domestic actors seeking external support. Foreign government lobbying provides a uniquely valuable window into these otherwise opaque processes. Because these lobbying activities are directly initiated and financed by foreign governments, they provide an observable measure of governments' efforts to influence major-power decision makers. Moreover, disclosure requirements generate detailed records of when and how governments pursue such engagement.

By hiring lobbyists, foreign governments can navigate complex policymaking environments and gain access to decision-makers, which in turn enables them to influence the content and process of policymaking and shape public narratives in major powers. As one Washington-based lobbyist notes, lobbying constitutes a form of "private diplomacy," helping foreign governments secure access in a system that is otherwise difficult to navigate. Similarly, former U.S. Undersecretary of State for African Affairs, Tibor Nagy, observes that "80% of the time, lobbyists are doing the job that an embassy should be doing," highlighting the functional overlap between lobbying and traditional diplomatic representation.¹⁰ In this sense, lobbying represents a strategic form of engagement with foreign powers, which complements and, in some cases, substitutes for traditional diplomatic interaction.

The perceived political influence of foreign lobbying has attracted attention from media, policymakers, and scholars. As former U.S. Representative Lee Zeldin observed, "In the corridors of power in our nation's capitol, it's an open secret that the more money foreign governments spend on lobbying and influence peddling, the more they will be able to influence policy decisions that affect their interests."¹¹ Foreign lobbying can meaningfully influence

¹⁰Romain Gras, "African leaders in the secret world of American lobbyists", *The Africa Report*, 21 March 2023. Available at <https://www.theafricareport.com/290521/african-leaders-in-the-secret-world-of-american-lobbyists/>. Accessed 24 March 2024.

¹¹Lee Zeldin articulated this perspective in his opinion piece for *Newsweek*, published on February 1, 2023. Accessible at: <https://www.newsweek.com/lets-bring-greater-transparency-foreign-influence-policy-making-opinion-1777547>

policy outcomes in the target state across economic, legislative, and diplomatic domains. For example, foreign governments use lobbying to shape trade policy (e.g., [Gawande and Hoekman 2006](#); [Gawande, Krishna and Robbins 2006](#)), expand tourism ([Gawande, Maloney and Montes-Rojas 2009](#)), attract investment ([Montes-Rojas 2018](#)), secure foreign aid ([Montes-Rojas 2013](#)), influence human rights assessments ([Pevehouse and Vabulas 2019](#)), negotiate about sanctions ([Peksen and Peterson 2023](#)), and intervene in key stages of foreign policymaking processes ([You 2023](#)).

The lobbying benefit is also evident in the informational dimension of foreign engagement. Foreign Lobby Report, a watchdog on foreign influence operations in Washington, documents how lobbying for public-facing support occurs in practice. In 2021, the DRC government lobbied for a state visit to Washington to bolster President Tshisekedi’s standing ahead of upcoming elections.¹² Similarly, Somali leaders engaged lobbyists to push for diplomatic meetings that could enhance their domestic credibility.¹³ In addition, Liberia’s government engaged multiple lobbying firms to enhance President George Weah’s international profile before the 2023 elections.¹⁴ Likewise, the Mongolian ruling party signed a contract with a U.S. lobbying firm two months before the 2021 elections to promote its democratic credentials in international media.¹⁵ Foreign governments use lobbying to manage their international image and shape perceptions among foreign audiences, and that hiring lobbying firms increases the likelihood of high-level diplomatic visits from the U.S. ([Scharpf, Gläsel and Dukalskis](#)

¹²Julian Pecquet, “Iranian Party With Monarchical Pedigree Lobbies Against U.S. Deal With Tehran DR Congo Lobbies For Tshisekedi Visit to Washington Thursday Daily Digest,” *Foreign Lobby Report*, 11 March 2021. Available at <https://www.foreignlobby.com/2021/03/11/iranian-party-with-monarchical-pedigree-lobbies-against-us-deal-with-tehran-dr-congo-lobbies-for-tshisekedi-visit-to-washington-thursdays-daily-digest/>.

¹³Julian Pecquet, “Embattled Somali President Hires Lobby Shop For US Visit,” *Foreign Lobby Report*, 23 April 2021. Available at <https://www.foreignlobby.com/2021/04/23/embattled-somali-president-hires-lobby-shop-for-us-visit/>. Accessed 27 January 2024.

¹⁴Julian Pecquet, “African electoral lobbying dominates \$3 million in new contracts for September,” *Foreign Lobby Report*, 11 November 2021. Available at <https://www.foreignlobby.com/2021/11/01/african-electoral-lobbying-dominates-3-million-in-new-contracts/>. Accessed 7 November 2023.

¹⁵Julian Pecquet, “Mongolian Party’s Hiring of U.S. PR firm ahead of Elections Sparks Political Uproar,” *Foreign Lobby Report*, 22 April 2021. Available at <https://www.foreignlobby.com/2021/04/22/mongolian-partys-hiring-of-us-pr-firm-ahead-of-elections-sparks-political-uproar/>. Accessed 8 November 2023.

2025).

The United States provides an important setting for studying weaker states’ efforts to secure foreign electoral support. As a major power with a long history of involvement in foreign elections (Levin 2016; Levin and Musgrave 2023), the U.S. represents a popular supplier of foreign electoral support. At the same time, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), a U.S. transparency law that mandates the disclosure of lobbying and political activities conducted on behalf of foreign principals, generates detailed and publicly accessible records. Taken together, these features make the U.S. the best testing ground for studying weaker states’ demand for electoral support from major powers.

4 Data and Estimation Strategy

To measure foreign governments’ demand for foreign support from the United States, I collect and scrape original data from FARA disclosure reports. The FARA is a U.S. federal law that requires individuals and organizations acting as agents of foreign principals to register with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and to disclose information about their activities. FARA was enacted in 1938, in response to concerns about foreign propaganda and political influence in the United States. Registrants are required to disclose the nature of their relationship with the foreign principal, including any contracts or agreements governing their activities, in semiannual reports covering activities conducted during the reporting period.¹⁶

The DOJ’s semi-annual reports to Congress document the identity of the foreign principal, payment amount, and the specific activities registrants engage in on behalf of the foreign principal, including the purpose of the activities and the intended audience (see Figure A3 in Appendix B for an excerpt of a FARA lobbying report). To create a dataset of foreign lobbying from 2002 to 2018 from the FARA reports, I used string manipulation to

¹⁶FARA imposes legal disclosure requirements on foreign agents, and willful failure to register or report as a foreign agent under the FARA constitutes a federal felony punishable by up to five years and significant fines. These enforcement provisions strengthen compliance and mitigate concerns about systematic underreporting relative to most other contexts.

distinguish foreign governments from other types of foreign principals. I did this by identifying keywords in the foreign principal’s name that suggested a government entity, such as Government, Republic, Embassy, Consulate, Kingdom, President, Ministry, or Minister.¹⁷

To determine the timing of elections around the world, I rely on the Regime Characteristics and Transitions (REIGN) (Bell and Frank 2021) and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) datasets (Coppedge et al. 2025). These two datasets provide me with the valuable information on political regimes and their characteristics and timing of elections. I only consider elections that are relevant to a potential change in government leaders because lobbying disclosure reports identify state leaders and their representatives as the foreign governmental actors directly engaging in lobbying activities. Specifically, I use the national elections identified in the REIGN election list. Depending on the political system, these elections may include presidential elections or legislative elections through which state leaders are selected. All referendums are excluded.

In addition, I gather demographic, economic, and political variables to investigate the factors that might confound a foreign government’s decision to engage in lobbying activities and the timing of general elections. I obtain demographic and economic data from the World Bank Open Data platform and utilize bilateral trade data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Additionally, I use several sources for political data, including Polity5: Regime Authority Characteristics and Transitions Datasets (Marshall and Gurr 2020). The dataset covers 192 countries and 663 elections between 2002 and 2018.

The main hypothesis is that electoral cycles affect governments’ demand for foreign support through changes in incumbents’ electoral incentives. Electoral incentives themselves are latent and therefore not directly observable. Following a large literature on electoral cycles, I use electoral timing as an observable indicator for underlying variation in the intensity of incumbents’ electoral incentives.¹⁸ Figure 1 illustrates the research design using a Directed

¹⁷The cases for Russia and Qatar are special because they use *Russia Federation* and *the State of Qatar*.

¹⁸The core assumption is that incumbents become increasingly concerned with political survival and electoral performance as elections approach, inducing greater incentives to engage in politically beneficial behavior

Acyclic Graph (DAG).

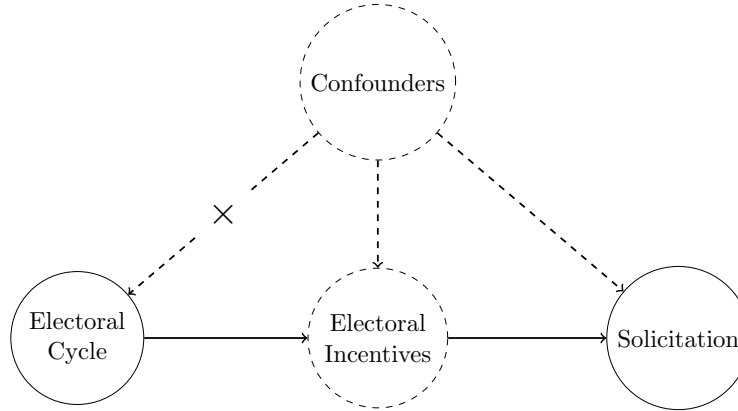


Figure 1. Causal Directed Acyclic Graph

Note: Solid circles denote observed variables, while dashed circles denote unobserved or latent variables. Solid arrows indicate direct causal effects. Dashed arrows indicate potential confounding paths or controlled causal relationships. The $\times$ symbol denotes a back-door path that threatens causal identification. This identification assumes that, conditional on observed controls, fixed effects, and country-specific time trend, electoral timing affects support-seeking efforts only through changes in incumbents' electoral incentives.

The identification challenge is that electoral timing may be correlated with pre-treatment confounders that also affect foreign lobbying behavior, such as domestic political instability, economic crises, or geopolitical changes. To address these concerns, I rely on a two-way fixed effects (TWFE) research design that exploits within-country variation in electoral timing.¹⁹ The empirical strategy compares lobbying behavior within the same country between election and non-election periods, while controlling for country fixed effects and year fixed effects. The identification strategy relies on two key assumptions. The first is a conditional no-confounding assumption: conditional on country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and observed covariates, electoral timing is assumed to be independent of other unobserved factors affecting lobbying behavior. The second is an exclusion restriction assumption: electoral

during electoral periods.

¹⁹Recent methodological work has highlighted important limitations of TWFE estimators in settings with staggered treatment adoption and heterogeneous treatment effects (Imai and Kim 2021; Roth et al. 2023; Chiu et al. 2026). However, this empirical setting differs from the canonical staggered adoption framework. Elections are not one-time treatments that permanently switch on, but instead occur repeatedly and intermittently over time. As a result, countries alternate between treated (election years) and untreated (non-election years) states. Therefore, the recent methods for staggered treatment adoption are not applicable. To further assess robustness, I employ the FEct imputation estimator (Liu, Wang and Xu 2024; Xu et al. 2026), which accommodates settings with treatment switching on and off over time. See later robustness checks.

cycles affect governments' demand for foreign support only through changes in incumbents' electoral incentives, rather than through other post-treatment channels. Under these assumptions, variation in electoral timing identifies how governments adjust foreign support-seeking behavior as electoral incentives intensify.²⁰

As the baseline specification, I estimate the following ordinary least squares (OLS) model:

$$Lobbying_{it} = \beta Election_{it} + \Gamma X_{i(t-1)} + \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where i denotes country, and t denotes year. $Election_{it}$, a binary treatment variable, indicates whether a certain year t is an election year for a given country i . It takes on the value of 1 if the country has an election that could change the government leader in a given year, otherwise 0. $Lobbying_{it}$ is the outcome variable, referring to lobbying efforts by a certain foreign country i in year t . I adopt two measures: (1) whether a foreign government engaged in lobbying activities in a certain year (participation), coded as Yes = 1 and No = 0 and (2) the total amount spent by the foreign government on lobbyist representation in a year (spending). To account for yearly inflation, the lobbying expenditure is adjusted to 2018 dollars. To address the issue of skewness, the log-transformed variable of lobbying spending is used in the analysis.

$X_{i(t-1)}$ is a vector that includes demographic, political, and economic characteristics that could affect one foreign government's decision to lobby and the timing of domestic elections. This includes unemployment rate, the level of democracy, exports to the U.S. as a share of total exports, and GDP per capita. I choose these control variables based on the literature concerning the opportunistic timing of elections and foreign lobbying. α_t indicates year fixed effects to capture any time-specific trends, such as economic recessions all countries were confronted with, and α_i indicates country fixed effects to incorporate any country-specific time-invariant confounders. All covariates are lagged by one year to reduce collider

²⁰I assess the plausibility of these assumptions through a series of diagnostic tests. See later robustness checks and validity checks.

bias and reverse causality. All standard errors are robust-clustered at the country level to cope with a concern of serial autocorrelation within unit.

5 Results: Electoral Cycles in Foreign Support-Seeking

I begin by examining the first hypothesis: whether governments intensify efforts to seek support from the United States during election periods. Establishing the existence of this overall electoral cycle is important because it provides the empirical foundation for the second hypothesis, which I examine in the following section. To test the first hypothesis, I estimate the baseline specification outlined in Equation 1. Table 1 reports the baseline results using both measures of lobbying activity: spending and participation. All specifications include a set of controls, as well as country and year fixed effects. Columns (2) and (4) further incorporate country-specific linear time trends to account for unobserved, gradually evolving country-level factors that may affect lobbying behavior over time.

Table 1. Election Years and Demand for Foreign Support

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending	Spending	Participation	Participation
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Election Year (t)	0.560*** (0.165)	0.460*** (0.168)	0.038*** (0.014)	0.031** (0.014)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.583	0.679	0.525	0.622
Adjusted R ²	0.552	0.631	0.489	0.565

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

Across all specifications, election years are associated with a statistically significant increase in lobbying activity. For lobbying expenditures, Columns (1) and (2) show that election years are associated with an increase of approximately 0.46 to 0.56 log points in

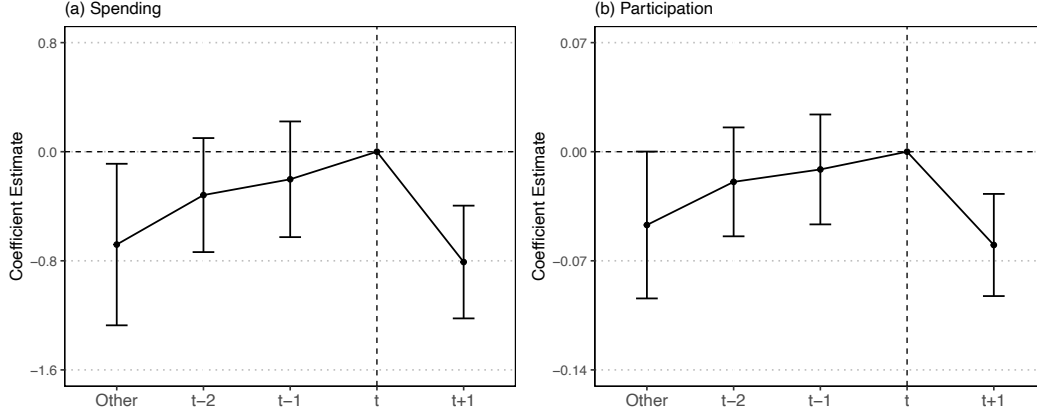
spending, indicating a substantial rise in lobbying intensity. Substantively, this corresponds to an approximately 58 to 75 percent increase in lobbying expenditures during election years, compared to non-election years, holding other factors constant. Importantly, this effect remains robust after including country-specific time trends, suggesting that the results are not driven by slow-moving country-specific trends. Similar patterns emerge when examining lobbying participation. Columns (3) and (4) indicate that election years significantly increase the likelihood that a country engages in lobbying in the U.S. Consistent with the theoretical argument, the baseline findings suggest that electoral incentives are associated with increased demand for foreign support, as reflected in both higher lobbying expenditures and a greater likelihood of participation.

To investigate how lobbying activity evolves with electoral incentives, I complement the baseline TWFE specification with an event-study design. Specifically, I decompose non-election years into periods relative to elections, distinguishing between $t - 2$, $t - 1$, $t + 1$, and all other non-election years, while using election years t as the reference category.²¹ This approach allows me to trace how incumbents adjust their behavior around elections. Figure 2 presents the corresponding estimates. Consistent with the theoretical argument, lobbying activities increase as elections approach and decline following elections.

While the baseline results document a robust association between electoral timing and lobbying activity, a reasonable concern is that election timing itself may be endogenous. In particular, incumbents may strategically call early or delay elections when political or economic conditions are favorable or unfavorable, and these same time-varying country-specific factors could also affect lobbying activity. To address this concern, following the practice in studies of electoral cycles (e.g., [Pierskalla and Sacks 2018, 2020](#); [Cooperman 2022](#); [Lucardi and Micozzi 2022](#)), I exploit variation in constitutionally scheduled elections. When election timing is fixed by constitutional rules, contemporaneous country-specific conditions

²¹This specification accommodates variation in electoral cycles across countries (e.g., four- versus five-year terms) while avoiding overlapping treatment windows. “Other” years refer to all non-election years that are not captured by the $t - 2$, $t - 1$, t , or $t + 1$ indicators.

Figure 2. Electoral Cycles in Demand for Foreign Support: Event Study



Note: The figure plots dynamic estimates of foreign governments' demand for external support from the United States around election years. Coefficients are shown relative to the election year t (baseline) and correspond to periods before and after elections. Each panel reports point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. All specifications include a full set of political and economic controls, as well as country and year fixed effects.

cannot determine whether an election occurs in a given year. As a result, even if such conditions affect lobbying activity, they do not open a back-door path from electoral timing to lobbying, shown in Figure 1, because they are not causes of constitutionally fixed election timing.

The scheduled-election design therefore helps address the main remaining source of confounding that is not fully absorbed by country and year fixed effects and country-specific time trends. Using the REIGN dataset, I classify elections into two categories: constitutionally scheduled (plausibly exogenous) and snap (potentially endogenous), with non-election years as the reference category. Table 2 presents the results. The estimates show that lobbying activity increases significantly during scheduled election years, providing evidence consistent with a causal interpretation of electoral cycles in foreign governments' demand for external support.²²

²²The estimates attenuate in Columns 2 and 4 because these specifications are particularly demanding: they simultaneously include country and year fixed effects, distinguish between scheduled and snap elections, and incorporate country-specific linear time trends. Together, these controls absorb a substantial share of the within-country temporal variation in lobbying behavior, leaving more limited variation from which to identify electoral-cycle effects.

Table 2. Electoral Timing and Demand for Foreign Support: Scheduled vs. Snap Elections

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending (1)	Spending (2)	Participation (3)	Participation (4)
Scheduled Election	0.547** (0.223)	0.425* (0.223)	0.037** (0.018)	0.027 (0.018)
Snap Election	0.581* (0.304)	0.521* (0.278)	0.041 (0.025)	0.038* (0.022)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.583	0.679	0.525	0.622
Adjusted R ²	0.552	0.631	0.489	0.565

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

5.1 Robustness Tests

To assess the robustness of the main findings, I conduct several additional analyses that vary the inclusion of covariates, the measurement of electoral timing, the level of fixed effects, the unit of observation, and the causal estimator. First, Table B1 in the Supplementary Material shows that the estimated effects remain substantively unchanged regardless of whether additional covariates are included. Second, I employ an alternative measure of electoral timing by capturing proximity to the next election, where larger values indicate greater proximity. The results, reported in Table B2 in the Supplementary Material, show that lobbying activity increases as elections approach, consistent with the baseline findings. Third, I replace country fixed effect with leader fixed effects to account for leader-specific heterogeneity in political incentives. As shown in Table B3 in the Supplementary Material, the main patterns remain unchanged, particularly for lobbying expenditures, suggesting that the results are not driven by differences across leaders. Fourth, I exploit the semi-annual structure of the FARA data by conducting the analysis at the country–half-year level. The results, presented in Table B4 and Figure B1 in the Supplementary Material, are consistent with the main results. Lastly, I re-estimate the treatment effects using the FEct imputation estimator implemented

in the `fect` package (Liu, Wang and Xu 2024; Xu et al. 2026), which imputes counterfactual outcomes for treated observations using untreated country-years. The estimated average treatment effects are substantively similar to the baseline TWFE results as shown in Table B5 in the Supplementary Material. In addition, the p-value (0.364) for the F-test shows little evidence of pre-trends prior to elections, further supporting the identification strategy.

5.2 Validity Checks

Even if concerns about pre-treatment confounding are minimized, election timing may still coincide with post-treatment processes, such as economic expansion or political violence, that affect lobbying independently of incumbents’ electoral incentives, thereby violating the exclusion restriction assumption. Although this assumption cannot be tested directly, its plausibility can be assessed indirectly through placebo treatment and outcome tests. The intuition is straightforward: if the observed relationship were driven by alternative channels rather than electoral incentives, we should observe similar electoral cycles in these placebo settings.

I first implement five placebo treatment tests using settings in which incumbent governments’ electoral incentives should be lower or absent. Using the pre-election year ($t - 1$) as a placebo treatment, I find no significant effects (Table C1 in the Supplementary Material), indicating no systematic increase in lobbying prior to elections.²³ Using the post-election year ($t + 1$) as a placebo treatment, I find a significant decline in lobbying activity (Table C2 in the Supplementary Material), consistent with diminishing electoral incentives after elections. Replacing national elections with subnational elections also yields no significant effects (Table C3 in the Supplementary Material), as expected given that the analysis focuses on lobbying activities conducted by national governments. Using U.S. electoral cycles as a

²³Although Figure 2 suggests that lobbying activity begins to increase before elections, this does not contradict the placebo test. The event-study estimates indicate a gradual buildup of lobbying activity, while the placebo specification tests whether the peak effect occurs one year before the election. The theory predicts that lobbying intensifies as elections approach but reaches its highest level in the election year; thus, evidence of a gradual pre-election increase is fully consistent with an insignificant placebo estimate for $t-1$.

placebo treatment shows no statistically significant effects on foreign governments’ lobbying behavior, as shown in Table C4 in the Supplementary Material. Lastly, I use cancelled elections—elections not held because deadlines were not met or because of regime failure—as the placebo treatment. Table C5 in the Supplementary Material shows no significant effect.

I next conduct a placebo outcome test using lobbying by non-governmental actors from the same countries. If the results were driven by broader country-level shocks or omitted factors unrelated to incumbents’ electoral incentives, similar patterns should also appear in non-governmental lobbying activity. However, I find no significant relationship between election timing and lobbying by non-governmental actors (Table C6 in the Supplementary Material), reinforcing the interpretation that the observed patterns reflect incumbents’ strategic responses to electoral incentives rather than alternative channels.

5.3 Heterogeneity

The placebo tests above provide indirect evidence consistent with the exclusion restriction assumption. Now, I assess this interpretation further by examining whether the estimated electoral-cycle effects are concentrated in observations where the theory predicts incumbents should face the strongest incentives to seek external support.

One alternative explanation for the broader results is that the observed electoral cycle reflects bureaucratic rather than incumbent behavior. As elections approach, governments often face heavier administrative workloads associated with election management, public communication, and interactions with domestic and international actors. Increased lobbying activity may therefore arise because bureaucratic agencies become unusually busier during election periods, independent of incumbents’ electoral incentives.

To assess this possibility, I first examine heterogeneity across regime types, where elections vary in their importance for political survival and in incumbents’ ability to manipulate electoral outcomes. Table D1 in the Supplementary Material shows that electoral cycles in foreign support-seeking are most prevalent in non-OECD democracies and electoral auto-

cracies, where both lobbying expenditures and participation increase in election years. By contrast, the effects are small and statistically insignificant in established OECD democracies, broadly consistent with prior work showing weaker political cycles in such countries (e.g., Alesina, Cohen and Roubini 1993; Brender and Drazen 2005; Alt and Lassen 2006; Pervez 2015; Aidt et al. 2020), which argues that incumbents in consolidated democracies face greater institutional constraints and possess less discretion to manipulate electoral outcomes. The effects are also not prevalent in closed autocracies, where limited electoral competition reduces incentives to seek foreign support for electoral purposes.²⁴

I next examine whether the effects vary with leaders' eligibility for reelection. Table D2 in the Supplementary Material interacts election years with a measure of reelection eligibility. In established OECD democracies, the average election-year effect is negative, but becomes positive and significant for reelection-eligible leaders, indicating that individual career incentives condition foreign support-seeking. In contrast, in unconsolidated democracies, election-year effects remain positive regardless of reelection eligibility, and the interaction term is insignificant. This suggests that non-eligible leaders might care more about electing a preferred successor to protect their political legacy or avoid political persecution in less consolidated democracies.

These patterns are difficult to reconcile with a bureaucrat-driven explanation. Election-related administrative workloads should not systematically vary across regime types in the manner predicted by electoral incentives, nor should they depend on incumbents' reelection eligibility.²⁵

²⁴Regime types follow the V-Dem typology *v2x_regime*. Closed autocracies are defined as systems without multiparty elections for the chief executive or the legislature, including single-party regimes and monarchies. Electoral autocracies are regimes that formally allow multiparty elections for both executive and legislative offices, but where elections are not free and fair or fail to meet a minimum level of Dahl's institutional requirements of polyarchy as captured by V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index.

²⁵For example, the annual sessions of China's National People's Congress generate substantial coordination demands across government agencies, including foreign affairs institutions.

6 Results: Electoral Cycles in Types of Foreign Support-Seeking

Having established that governments intensify support-seeking behavior during election periods, I now turn to Hypothesis 2, which examines whether electoral incentives shape the types of foreign electoral support incumbents seek. If the observed electoral cycles operate through incumbents’ electoral incentives, incumbent governments should therefore increase efforts to seek public-facing support as elections approach. To assess this implication, I decompose lobbying activity by type of support-seeking.

6.1 Measuring the Types of Foreign Support-Seeking

I implement this decomposition using activity descriptions from semiannual FARA filings. Each filing links a foreign government entity (e.g., ministries or embassies) to a lobbying firm and reports the activities undertaken on its behalf. I employ a large language model (LLM), ChatGPT-5.4-mini, to classify these descriptions into predefined issue and target categories.²⁶ The classification scheme includes 21 issue categories, developed based on existing literature, news coverage, and manual review of FARA filings.²⁷ It also identifies ten target categories, which I use for additional tests.

Issue categories capture the substantive focus of lobbying (e.g., trade, investment, aid, visit, image management), while target categories identify the intended audience (e.g., member of Congress, Congressional staffers, executive branch, media, public). The model assigns multiple labels when appropriate, restricts outputs to the predefined categories, and provides short text-based justifications for each assignment, enabling validation. Conservative coding rules are imposed, including defaulting to “other” or “unspecified” when no clear category

²⁶I do not employ unsupervised topic models (e.g., structural topic models) because the classification of interest is theoretically pre-specified rather than empirically discovered. LLM-assisted classification allows the texts to be mapped directly into theoretically defined categories and has become increasingly common in political science research (Heseltine and Clemm von Hohenberg 2024; Lee et al. 2025).

²⁷The full prompt used for the LLM-assisted classification is provided in Appendix E.2.

applies. Table 3 provides illustrative examples.

Table 3. Examples of FARA Activity Description and LLM-Assisted Classification

Activity Description	Issue Labels	Target Labels
The registrant contacted members of Congress, congressional staffers, and U.S. Government officials to discuss all facets of the bilateral relationship including, but not limited to, defense, trade, foreign assistance, and international visits of governmental officials.	trade; aid; defense_procurement; diplomacy; visits	congress; congressional_staff; executive_branch
The registrant contacted members of Congress and congressional staffers to discuss the status of U.S.-Azerbaijan relations, media freedom in Azerbaijan, and accompanied the Ambassador and Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan to appointments with members of Congress.	diplomacy; human_rights; visits	congress; congressional_staff

Note: This table illustrates how raw FARA activity descriptions are translated into structured issue and target categories.

Each filing reports total payments without disaggregating expenditures across issues or targets. I therefore assume that lobbying effort is distributed evenly across labeled categories within a report, allowing me to approximate issue- and target-specific spending.²⁸ All monetary values are converted to constant 2018 U.S. dollars and aggregated to the country-year level. Guided by the theoretical distinction between forms of foreign support, I group lobbying issues according to whether they primarily seek resource-based or public-facing benefits. Resource-based issues capture efforts to secure material or policy-related benefits, including trade, investment, aid, tourism, sanctions, development, energy, and technology. Public-facing issues instead capture efforts aimed at shaping perceptions and signaling external engagement, including diplomacy, meetings, visits, and image or reputation management.²⁹

²⁸Binary indicators or mention counts do not better capture lobbying intensity. Even with the same issue mentions, lobbying efforts may differ substantially in duration. Expenditure better captures this variation.

²⁹I aggregate lobbying activities by issue category into broader types of foreign support and then use log-

6.2 Electoral Cycles and the Types of Foreign Support-Seeking

To evaluate Hypothesis 2, I test whether efforts to secure different types of foreign support follow different electoral cycles. Columns (1) and (2) use a long-format dataset in which each country-year contributes two observations: one for spending on resource-based support-seeking and one for spending on public-facing support-seeking. Column (1) estimates the baseline model with no interaction, while Column (2) adds an interaction between Election Year and an indicator for public-facing support-seeking. This second specification directly tests whether election years have a stronger association with seeking public-facing support than with seeking resource-based support. The positive and statistically significant interaction term indicates that electoral cycles are significantly stronger for efforts to secure public-facing support, consistent with Hypothesis 2.

Table 4. Election Years and Different Types of Foreign Support

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Spending (1)	Spending (2)	Resource-Based (3)	Public-Facing (4)	Pub/(Pub+Res) (5)
Election Year (t)	0.279** (0.131)	0.055 (0.170)	0.005 (0.156)	0.554*** (0.164)	0.047*** (0.013)
Public-Facing	1.223*** (0.233)	1.130*** (0.224)			
Election Year (t) × Public-Facing		0.450** (0.216)			
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	5,008	5,008	2,504	2,504	2,410
R ²	0.488	0.488	0.544	0.546	0.460
Adjusted R ²	0.471	0.471	0.513	0.515	0.421

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

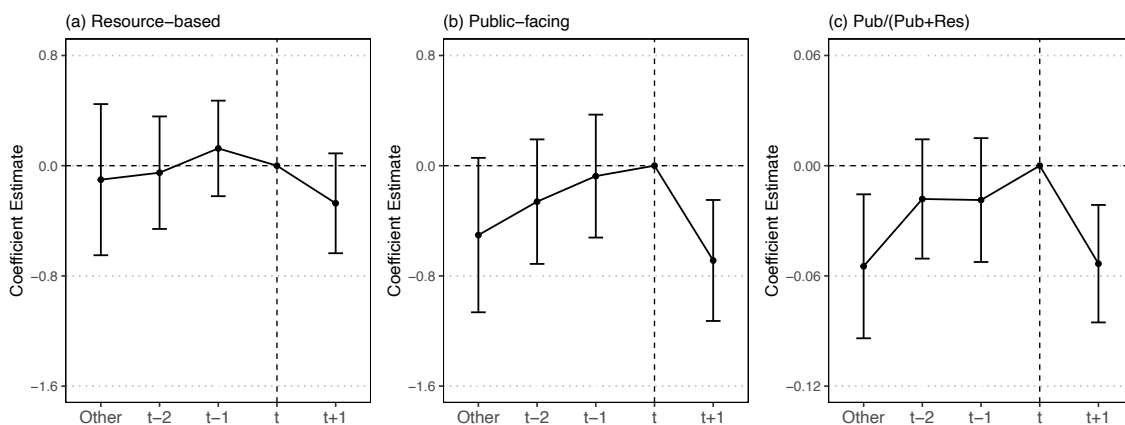
Columns (3)–(5) provide additional evidence using the original country-year structure rather than the reshaped long-format data. In these models, I treat each outcome as a separate dependent variable. Columns (3) and (4) separately estimate the effect of election years on expenditure on resource-based and public-facing support-seeking. The results show that election years are not associated with a significant increase in lobbying spending

transformed lobbying expenditures for each type.

on seeking resource-based support, but are associated with significantly higher spending on seeking public-facing support. Column (5) then examines the share of total lobbying spending devoted to pursuing public-facing activities. The positive and statistically significant result shows that governments allocate a larger proportion of their lobbying efforts to promote public-facing activities during election years. Taken together, these findings suggest that as elections approach, governments increase lobbying efforts toward forms of foreign engagement that can generate more immediate informational and symbolic political returns.

Figure 3 presents an event study of foreign governments' support-seeking behavior by support type. The figure broadly reinforces the results in Table 4. Panel (a) shows relatively small and statistically insignificant changes in lobbying for resource-based support over the electoral cycle. By contrast, Panel (b) exhibits larger shifts in lobbying for public-facing support: spending increases as elections approach and declines afterward. Panel (c) confirms that governments allocate relatively greater attention to conducting public-facing activities during election periods. Overall, the dynamic patterns are consistent with the argument that electoral cycles in foreign support-seeking are driven primarily by efforts to secure public-facing rather than resource-based support.

Figure 3. Electoral Cycles in Demand for Different Types of Foreign Support: Event Study



Note: The figure plots event-study estimates of foreign governments' demand for external support from the United States around election years by support type. Coefficients are shown relative to the election year t (baseline) and correspond to periods before and after elections. Each panel reports point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. All specifications include a full set of political and economic controls, as well as country and year fixed effects.

My findings above show that efforts to secure resource-based support are not strongly responsive to electoral cycles, consistent with the view that such activities require time to negotiate and implement. If this logic is correct, a similar pattern should emerge for all lobbying directed at Congress, where distributive policies are subject to legislative approval and thus less amenable to short-term influence (Milner and Tingley 2015). The results in Table E1 provide further support for this interpretation. Consistent with this expectation, Column (3) shows no statistically significant effect for Congress. By contrast, lobbying directed at the executive branch and federal agencies exhibits positive and statistically significant effects. These actors have greater discretion over diplomatic engagement and policy implementation, making them more responsive to short-term electoral incentives. Together, these results suggest that incumbents shift their lobbying efforts toward political targets that can generate more immediate, public-facing returns during election periods. The results are also robust to alternative LLM classifiers. Using GPT-4.1 instead of ChatGPT-5.4-mini to classify lobbying descriptions yields substantively similar results as shown in Table E2 and Figure E1 in the Supplementary Material.

I also validate the LLM-assisted classifications against human coding. From the 5,368 disclosures filed on behalf of foreign government entities, I randomly selected 540 disclosures (approximately 10%) and manually coded both lobbying issues and lobbying targets according to the coding protocol described above. I then compared the manual classifications with those generated by GPT-5.4-mini. As reported in Table E3, the AI classifier achieves high levels of agreement with the human-coded benchmark across both issue and target categories, with consistently high Cohen’s kappa scores and relatively few false positives and false negatives. Manual review of the remaining disagreements indicates that they primarily arise from broadly worded disclosures and differences in coding judgment regarding whether a particular issue is sufficiently explicit to warrant classification, rather than systematic errors by the AI model. Representative examples are presented in Table E4 in the Supplementary Material.

7 Case Study: Tshisekedi’s Washington Lobbying before the 2023 Election

The quantitative analysis above shows that foreign governments tend to intensify lobbying activities in the United States as elections approach. But aggregate patterns alone cannot clearly show how electoral incentives shape these lobbying campaigns in Washington during electoral periods. The case of the DRC under President Félix Tshisekedi helps illustrate these dynamics more directly. As the DRC’s December 2023 presidential election approached, Tshisekedi’s government expanded its lobbying activities in Washington through a sequence of contracts and political contacts that increasingly tracked the electoral calendar. These efforts unfolded against a difficult domestic political backdrop, which increased the importance of maintaining strong relations with Washington before the election.

Tshisekedi entered office in 2019 under fragile political circumstances following a disputed election and an uneasy power-sharing arrangement with former president Joseph Kabila’s coalition. By the beginning of the 2023 electoral cycle, questions surrounding the legitimacy of Tshisekedi’s presidency, persistent violence in eastern Congo, and frustrations over economic conditions had become central political pressures on his government.³⁰ Under these conditions, maintaining international legitimacy and strong relations with Washington became increasingly important for Tshisekedi as the election approached. The government’s lobbying efforts therefore went beyond routine diplomacy. They sought to encourage U.S. policymakers to view Tshisekedi’s government as a democratic, economically valuable, and strategically important partner whose continued cooperation served broader American interests ahead of a potentially contentious reelection campaign.

The first important stage began in 2021, before the major lobbying contracts were formally registered under FARA. According to *The Africa Report*, Tshisekedi met Joseph Szlavik

³⁰Reuben Loffman, “DRC elections: three factors that have shaped Tshisekedi’s bumpy first term as president,” *The Conversation*, 6 December 2023, Available at <https://theconversation.com/drc-elections-three-factors-that-have-shaped-tshisekedis-bumpy-first-term-as-president-217018>.

of Scribe Strategies in New York in September 2021 while attending the United Nations General Assembly.³¹ The article reports that their introduction came through Gilbert Mundela, a distant cousin of Tshisekedi and one of his principal U.S. contacts. Mundela had previously worked with Pamoja USA, the lobbying firm Tshisekedi hired during the 2018 presidential campaign.³² This arrangement suggested that the emerging lobbying campaign was not simply being organized through ordinary state bureaucracies. It was also passing through political networks connected to Tshisekedi's earlier electoral efforts.

The lobbying campaign expanded significantly in March 2022. On March 11, the DRC Ministry of Communication and Media signed a one-year agreement with Ballard Partners.³³ The contract stated that Ballard would work to “enhance U.S.-DRC bilateral relations, strengthen democratic institutions and rule of law, and advance economic growth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.”³⁴ The agreement also included efforts to position the DRC as “an international leader of climate change,” especially on carbon credits and forest protection.³⁵

The language of the contract mapped closely onto the political vulnerabilities facing Tshisekedi before the 2023 election. “Democratic institutions and rule of law” directly addressed concerns that Washington might eventually criticize the conduct of the upcoming vote. Investment, economic growth, and climate cooperation served a different function: they framed the DRC not primarily as a governance problem, but as a useful economic and strategic partner. The objective was not only to improve Congo's image in the abstract. It was to encourage U.S. policymakers to see continued cooperation with Tshisekedi as desirable across multiple policy areas before the election approached.

Three days later, on March 14, the same ministry retained Scribe Strategies and Advisors.³⁶ Scribe's filing described the work as advocacy services related to U.S.-DRC bilateral

³¹Gras, “DRC: US lobbyists enlisted to rescue Tshisekedi.”

³²Ibid.

³³Ballard Partners, FARA Exhibit AB, Registration No. 7070, filed March 18, 2022.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Scribe Strategies and Advisors, FARA Exhibit AB, Registration No. 6305, filed March 25, 2022, contract

relations and included communications and media advising alongside efforts to improve bilateral relations and increase U.S. trade and investment.³⁷ *The Africa Report* further described the agreement as an effort to improve the DRC's image in the United States.³⁸ Whereas the Ballard contract focused heavily on policy advocacy, the Scribe agreement added a more explicit communications component aimed at shaping how Tshisekedi's government was presented to American political and media audiences before the election.

By late 2022, the lobbying campaign became more directly connected to Tshisekedi himself. According to *The Africa Report*, Tshisekedi wrote personally to President Biden in 2022 and 2023 seeking the removal of U.S. sanctions imposed under the Global Magnitsky framework on Israeli businessman Dan Gertler, a longtime actor in the Congolese mining sector.³⁹ Gertler had maintained extensive commercial ties in the DRC for years, and Kinshasa reportedly viewed the sanctions issue as an obstacle to certain investment and mining arrangements. The immediate economic effects of sanctions relief would likely have arrived too slowly to matter before the December 2023 election. Politically, however, removing the sanctions could help Tshisekedi demonstrate domestically that his government's engagement with the United States was producing tangible diplomatic results.

Another important moment came during the December 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington. In a FARA filing submitted the following month, Isaiah King reported that the DRC Embassy had asked him to help compile a list of U.S. government officials and others in order "to send invitations for a reception with the President of the DRC who was in Washington on December 12th."⁴⁰ King described the assignment as an administrative exercise and "strictly a favor," adding that there was "no strategic advice" involved.⁴¹ Yet the political significance was straightforward. The summit took place around one year

dated March 14, 2022.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Gras, "DRC: US lobbyists enlisted to rescue Tshisekedi."

³⁹Gras, "Is the upcoming DRC presidential election being played out in Washington?"

⁴⁰Isaiah King, FARA Exhibit AB, Registration No. 7224, filed January 30, 2023.

⁴¹Ibid.

before the Congolese election and gathered African leaders alongside senior U.S. officials. Tshisekedi used the summit to publicly reaffirm his commitment to holding elections on schedule and welcoming international observers. The resulting meetings, photographs, and public statements could then circulate domestically as evidence that Tshisekedi remained internationally recognized and accepted in Washington. Examples of Congolese media coverage of these events are presented in Appendix F.

By 2023, eastern Congo and the M23 rebellion had become increasingly central to Tshisekedi's Washington lobbying. According to *The Africa Report*, Tshisekedi's advisers in Washington were simultaneously trying to reassure U.S. officials that elections would be held on schedule and encourage Washington to take a harder line toward Rwanda over its alleged support for M23 rebels operating in eastern Congo.⁴² The article further reports that, in June 2022, one of Ballard Partners' lobbyists informally approached the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to ask whether it might request a State Department investigation into Rwanda's involvement.⁴³ As insecurity in eastern Congo worsened before the election, the government increasingly sought to frame the conflict as an issue requiring greater international attention and support. The security crisis therefore became intertwined with the government's broader effort to maintain diplomatic backing from Washington during the electoral period.

Tshisekedi was reelected in December 2023 with more than 73 percent of the vote according to official electoral results. Opposition figures and observer groups cited irregularities and logistical failures, but the United States ultimately congratulated Tshisekedi on his reelection while also acknowledging shortcomings in the electoral process. The response was important because it reflected the broader objective of the lobbying campaign: criticism without diplomatic rupture, and continued engagement rather than outright rejection of the electoral outcome.

⁴²Gras, "Is the upcoming DRC presidential election being played out in Washington?"

⁴³Ibid.

This case study illustrates that the DRC lobbying effort was closely tied to Tshisekedi’s political backdrop surrounding the 2023 election. Although the lobbying contracts were formally signed by government agencies, the timing, content, and key personnel involved in the lobbying effort all reflected Tshisekedi’s personal political objectives and his networks in the United States.

8 Conclusion

Despite the growing importance of foreign electoral intervention in contemporary politics, and increasing recognition that such interventions often depend on domestic actors and electoral competition, we know relatively little about its demand side: when and how domestic actors seek foreign electoral support. This paper shifts attention to this missing dimension by showing that incumbents strategically instrumentalize foreign actors during domestic electoral competition.

I argue that the demand for foreign electoral support follows electoral cycles. As elections approach, incumbents intensify engagement with major powers to secure external support that can strengthen their domestic political position. In particular, electoral cycle in the solicitation of foreign electoral support is concentrated in efforts to secure public-facing support, such as diplomatic visits, meetings, and endorsements, rather than resource-based support, such as trade, investment, and aid. To test this argument, I examine foreign government lobbying in the United States using original data from FARA disclosures and text-classification methods to distinguish between different forms of support sought. I find that foreign lobbying increases significantly during election years, and that this pattern is driven primarily by efforts to secure public-facing support, whereas lobbying for resource-based support exhibits substantially weaker electoral dynamics.

While the empirical analysis is U.S.-centric, the underlying logic is not. The argument applies more broadly to other major powers, including China, Russia, the United Kingdom,

and France, which possess the capacity to shape electoral outcomes abroad and whose recognition, support, or criticism carries political weight for minor power incumbents. The theory therefore implies similar electoral cycles in efforts to secure support from these states.⁴⁴ Future work can extend this framework to examine how variation across major powers, such as in institutional structure, geopolitical interests, and tools of influence, shapes the demand for foreign support.

This paper also opens several avenues for future research. First, foreign electoral intervention often involves multiple major powers with competing interests. Understanding how such competition shapes incumbents' demand-side strategies under conditions of major power competition remains an important question. Second, this paper uses lobbying as an empirical window into foreign support-seeking. While lobbying overlaps with routine diplomatic engagement, the relationship between the two remains under-explored. Future research should examine whether lobbying complements or substitutes for formal diplomacy, and under what conditions governments rely more heavily on one channel over the other. Finally, the prevalence of costly lobbying raises a broader puzzle in international politics and interest group politics: why do governments invest substantial resources in private advocacy even when official diplomatic channels exist? Answering this question would deepen our understanding of how states navigate the interface between formal diplomacy and informal influence in international politics.

⁴⁴For example, shortly before Côte d'Ivoire's 2020 presidential election, President Alassane Ouattara met with French President Emmanuel Macron amid controversy surrounding his bid for an unconstitutional third term. The meeting was publicly invoked by Ouattara's government as evidence of continued French engagement despite criticism of his candidacy. Although Macron had initially expressed reservations about Ouattara's decision to seek another term, he ultimately recognized Ouattara's re-election and later sent a letter of congratulations, illustrating the political value of visible major-power acceptance during contested elections. See Reuters, "Macron to Meet Ivory Coast President Ouattara after Election U-Turn," September 3, 2020. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/macron-meet-ivory-coast-president-ouattara-after-election-u-turn-2020-09-03/>. Accessed June 15, 2026. Genocide Watch. "Côte d'Ivoire: What Ouattara Has in Store for His Third Term." November 19, 2020, Available at <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/c%C3%B4te-d-ivoire-what-ouattara-has-in-store-for-his-third-term>. Accessed June 15, 2026.

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Supplementary Material

A Appendix: Data Source and Summary Statistics

A.1 Data Source

Table A1. Data Sources and Definitions

Variable	Source	Description
Election Year	Bell and Frank (2021)	Binary, indicating years in which a general election that potentially leads a change in leadership happens. (coded as 1, otherwise 0)
Lobbying Participation	FARA Semi-Annual Reports	Binary, indicating observations in which government entities of a foreign country hire any registrants and spend on lobbying. (coded as 1, otherwise 0)
Lobbying Expenditure (constant 2018 US\$, In)	FARA Semi-Annual Reports	Total amount of lobbying spending by government entities of a foreign country.
Autocracy Type	Coppedge et al. (2025)	Closed autocracy: v2x_regime==0; Electoral autocracy: v2x_regime==1
Election Type	Bell and Frank (2021)	To distinguish between scheduled and snap elections, I use the event variable from the REIGN dataset (election_list_8_21.csv). Elections coded as “Vote, As Scheduled” are classified as scheduled elections, while those coded as “Vote, Early” are classified as snap elections.
Exports to the US Share (%)	World Bank Open Data; US Census Data	Exports to the US as a share of the country’s total exports.
GDP per capita	World Bank Open Data	GDP per capita in the constant 2018 USD value.
Polity2	Marshall and Gurr (2020)	A measure of democracy, spanning from -10 (dictatorship) to 10 (democracy).
Unemployment Rate (%)	World Bank Open Data	Unemployment, total (% of total labor force).
Political Violence	Marshall (2019)	Total summed magnitudes of all societal and interstate warfare (ACTOTAL, with a scale from 0-10).
US total aid obligation (constant 2018 US\$, In)	USAID Greenbook	US bilateral net obligation of foreign assistance.
International Tourism Receipts (% of Exports)	World Bank Open Data	International tourism receipts as a share of the country’s total exports.
Population	World Bank Open Data	Natural logarithm of the country’s total population.

A.2 Summary Statistics

Table A2. Summary Statistics

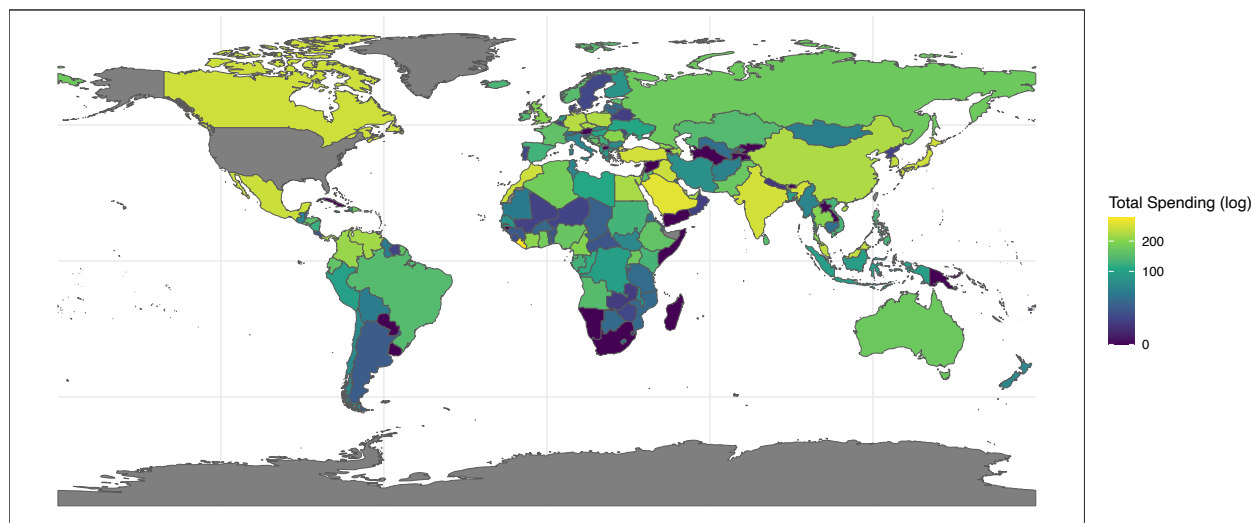
Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Pctl. 25	Pctl. 75	Max
lob_log	3264	5.5	6.6	0	0	13	18
lob_participate	3264	0.42	0.49	0	0	1	1
election	3264	0.2	0.4	0	0	0	1
unempl_rate_lag	3009	7.9	6.1	0.14	3.7	10	37
polity2_lag	2669	3.8	6.3	-10	-2	9	10
exp_us_share_lag	2912	0.099	0.15	0	0.013	0.11	1.3
ln_gdp_pc_lag	3171	8.5	1.4	5.5	7.3	9.5	12
tourism_lag	2796	16.4	18.8	0.0	4.0	20.4	170.5
ln_population_lag	3258	15.5	2.2	9.2	14.3	17.0	21.0
acttotal_lag	2713	0.5	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.0
aid_ob_lag	3179	117.9	647.6	0.0	0.7	34.4	12842.7

Table A3. Top 20 Lobbying Spenders Among Foreign Governments between 2002 and 2018

No.	Country	Spending (Millions)	Participation (Years)
1	Liberia	879.476	17
2	Bahamas, The	425.668	17
3	Saudi Arabia	213.435	17
4	Marshall Islands	185.414	17
5	Mexico	113.801	17
6	United Arab Emirates	110.549	14
7	India	75.824	17
8	Turkey	69.903	17
9	Canada	63.331	17
10	Ireland	61.447	9
11	Japan	59.178	17
12	Morocco	56.625	17
13	Qatar	55.662	17
14	Singapore	53.476	17
15	Israel	41.958	17
16	Ethiopia	40.555	11
17	Iraq	40.094	15
18	Cyprus	39.535	17
19	Russian Federation	38.265	12
20	Korea, Rep.	34.444	17

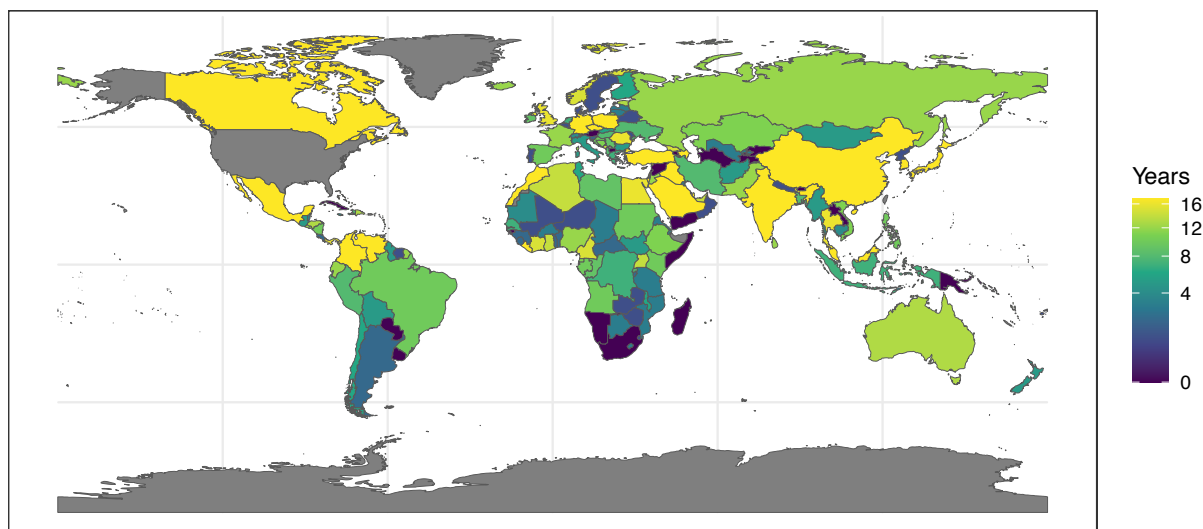
A.3 World Maps of Foreign Governments' Lobbying Efforts

Figure A1. World Map of Lobbying Spending by Incumbent Foreign Governments between 2002 and 2018



Note: Log-transformed total amount of lobbying spending by foreign governments (U.S. dollars at 2018 value).

Figure A2. World Map of Lobbying Frequency by Incumbent Foreign Governments between 2002 and 2018



A.4 An Excerpt of a FARA Semi-Annual Report

Figure A3. Lobbying Reports Submitted by Registrants on Behalf of Morocco Principals for Activities during the Second Half of 2018.

MOROCCO

Glover Park Group, LLC #5666

13215 Deer Highlands Way
Silver Spring, MD 20906

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Morocco (on behalf of JPC Strategies, LLC)

Nature of Services: Lobbying

The registrant provided consulting services in the development and implementation of a public relations strategy to promote business with the Kingdom of Morocco on behalf of the foreign principal.

\$100,000.00 for the six month period ending July 31, 2018

Husch Blackwell, LLP #6362 (T)

750 17th Street, NW
Suite 900
Washington, DC 20006

Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco (t)

Nature of Services: Lobbying

The registrant provided government relations counsel to raise awareness among Members of Congress and the Administration regarding the foreign principal's concerns and positions on various issues.

Finances: None Reported

Iron Bridge Strategies LLC #6497

5573 Seminary Road
Unit 106
Falls Church, VA 22041

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Morocco (through JPC Strategies LLC)

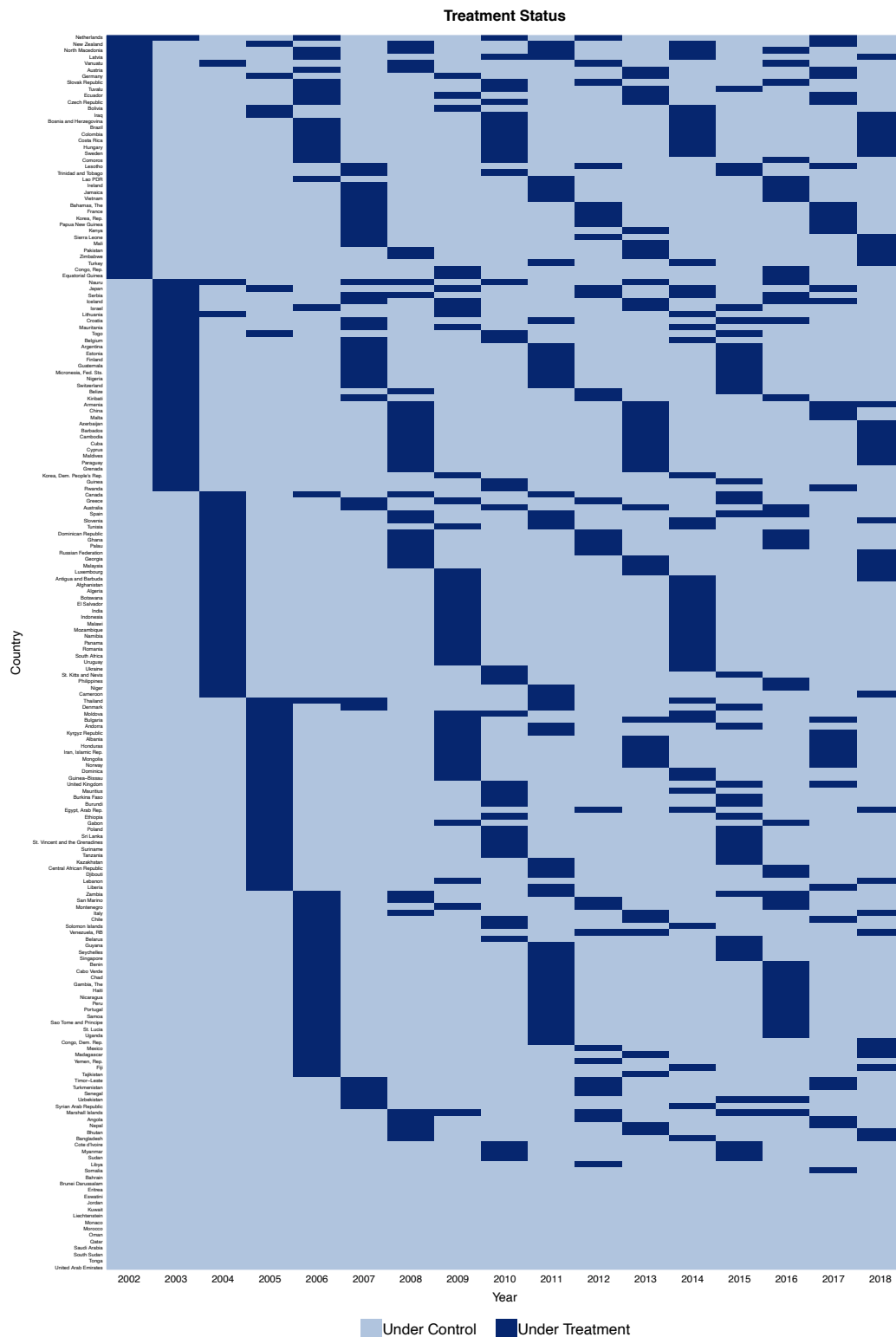
Nature of Services: Lobbying

The registrant performed government relations activities on behalf of the foreign principal with the United States Government and implemented a public relations strategy for the promotion of business with the Kingdom of Morocco by advising the foreign principal in promoting a strategic partnership with the United States.

\$120,000.00 for the six month period ending December 31, 2018

A.5 Treatment Status

Figure A4. Election Treatment Status Across Countries and Years



B Appendix: Robustness Tests

B.1 Covariate Adjustment

Table B1 compares the baseline specification reported in Table 1 with models that exclude any covariates and include additional covariates. Across all specifications, the estimated effect of election years remains positive and statistically significant, indicating that the main findings are robust to alternative choices of control variables.

The fully adjusted specifications, however, come at a substantial cost in sample size. Because several covariates contain missing values, including the full set of controls reduces the estimation sample to 2,224 observations, a loss of nearly one-third of the available country-year observations. To avoid this substantial reduction in sample coverage, the main specifications reported in the paper include only four baseline covariates—unemployment rate, democracy score, exports to the United States as a share of total exports, and log GDP per capita—which capture the principal economic and political characteristics that are most likely to confound the relationship between election timing and foreign government lobbying.

Table B1. Regression Results With and Without Additional Covariates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending (1)	Participation (2)	Spending (3)	Participation (4)
Election Year (t)	0.459*** (0.143)	0.034*** (0.012)	0.536*** (0.172)	0.036** (0.014)
Unemployment Rate (Lagged)			−0.005 (0.095)	−0.001 (0.007)
Polity2 Score (Lagged)			−0.197** (0.089)	−0.014** (0.007)
Exports to the U.S. (% of Total Exports, Lagged)			5.606 (3.539)	0.348 (0.254)
Log GDP per Capita (Lagged)			2.522 (1.622)	0.163 (0.125)
International Tourism Receipts (% of Exports, Lagged)			0.030 (0.044)	0.002 (0.003)
Log Population (Lagged)			4.794 (3.150)	0.359 (0.237)
Active Armed Conflict (Lagged)			0.115 (0.229)	0.006 (0.015)
U.S. Foreign Aid (Lagged)			0.0003 (0.001)	0.00002 (0.00004)
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,264	3,264	2,224	2,224
R ²	0.578	0.520	0.593	0.541
Adjusted R ²	0.550	0.488	0.560	0.503

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

B.2 Continuous Measure of Electoral Timing

I construct an alternative measure that records the number of years until the next election, coded as $0, -1, -2, -3, \dots$, where values closer to zero indicate greater proximity to the upcoming election.

Table B2. Electoral Proximity and Foreign Governments' Demand for External Support

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending (1)	Spending (2)	Participation (3)	Participation (4)
Years to the Next Election (-n)	0.213*** (0.065)	0.186*** (0.064)	0.016*** (0.005)	0.013** (0.005)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	2,279	2,279	2,279	2,279
R ²	0.578	0.677	0.526	0.626
Adjusted R ²	0.545	0.627	0.489	0.568

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

B.3 Leader-Level Analysis

When replacing country fixed effects with leader fixed effects, the estimated effects attenuate because identification relies only on within-leader variation, reducing the available observations for estimation.

Table B3. Leader-Level TWFE Estimates of Electoral Cycles in Foreign Support-Seeking

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending (1)	Participation (2)	Spending (3)	Participation (4)
Years to the Next Election	0.126* (0.073)	0.009 (0.006)		
Election Year (t)			0.352* (0.187)	0.022 (0.015)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Leader FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,279	2,279	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.719	0.682	0.724	0.681
Adjusted R ²	0.636	0.587	0.646	0.590

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

B.4 Half-Year–Level Analysis

I exploit the semi-annual structure of the FARA disclosure data by re-estimating the analysis at the country–half-year level. Because all covariates are only available annually, however, I treat these models as robustness checks rather than the main specification.

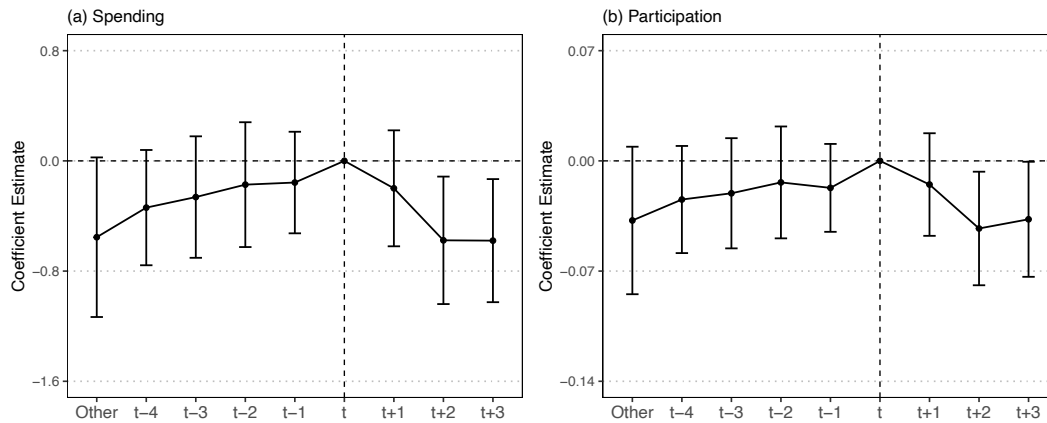
Table B4. Electoral Timing and Foreign Support-Seeking: Country–Half-Year Estimates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending (1)	Spending (2)	Participation (3)	Participation (4)
Election Year (t)	0.521*** (0.154)	0.436*** (0.154)	0.032*** (0.011)	0.025** (0.011)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Half-Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	5,008	5,008	5,008	5,008
R ²	0.561	0.648	0.524	0.622
Adjusted R ²	0.543	0.622	0.505	0.593

Note:

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

Figure B1. Half-Year–Level Analysis and Event-Study Estimates



Note: The figure plots event-study estimates of foreign governments' demand for external support from the United States around election periods. The unit of observation is the country–half-year. Coefficients are reported relative to the election period (t), which serves as the omitted baseline, and correspond to half-year intervals before and after elections. Each panel displays point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. All specifications include a full set of political and economic controls, as well as country and half-year fixed effects.

B.5 Imputation Estimator

As an additional robustness check, I estimate treatment effects using the counterfactual imputation framework implemented in the `fect` R package (Liu, Wang and Xu 2024; Xu et al. 2026). The framework treats untreated potential outcomes for treated observations as missing data and imputes these counterfactual outcomes using information from untreated observations. Specifically, I employ the fixed effects counterfactual (FEct) estimator, which first estimates a two-way fixed effects model using untreated country-years and then predicts the lobbying outcomes that treated country-years would have experienced in the absence of elections. Treatment effects are subsequently calculated as the difference between observed outcomes during election years and these model-imputed counterfactual outcomes. Averaging these differences yields the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT).

Table B5 reports the estimated ATT from the FEct imputation estimator. The results indicate that election years are associated with significant increases in both lobbying spending and participation. Averaged across treated country-years, election periods increase lobbying spending by approximately 0.52 log points and lobbying participation by about 3.6 percentage points. Averaging treatment effects at the country level yields substantively similar estimates. Importantly, these estimates closely mirror the magnitude and statistical significance of the baseline two-way fixed effects results reported in Table 1. The similarity across estimation approaches suggests that the main findings are not driven by modeling assumptions specific to the baseline specification.

Table B5. Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT): Estimates from the Imputation Estimator

	(1) Spending	(2) Participation
ATT (averaged over treated country-years)	0.523*** (0.162)	0.036*** (0.013)
ATT (averaged over treated countries)	0.609*** (0.200)	0.042** (0.017)
Country FE	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓
Controls	✓	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504

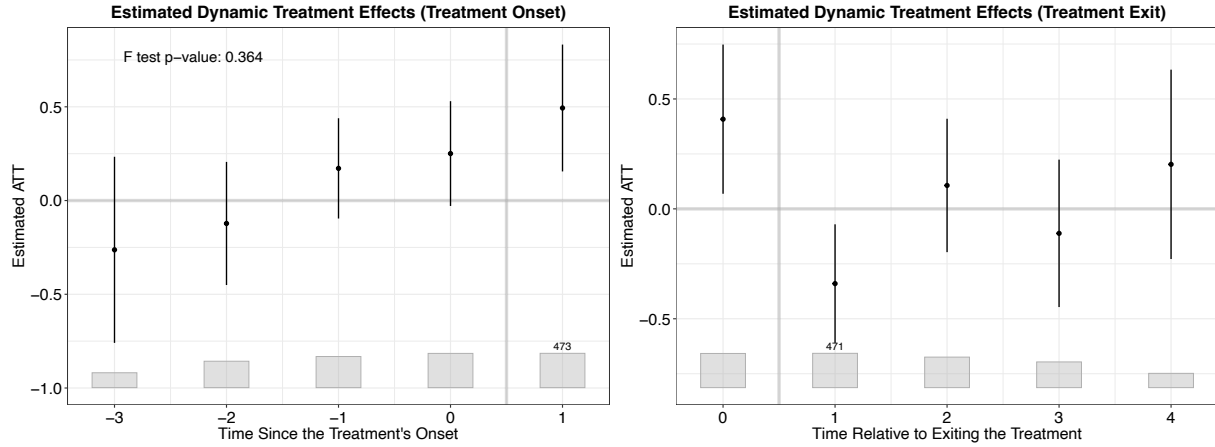
Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at country level.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Figure B2 presents two complementary sets of dynamic treatment-effect estimates around election periods. The onset plot examines how lobbying activity evolves relative to the estimated counterfactual level that would have been expected in the absence of an election.⁴⁵ Each coefficient therefore captures whether lobbying activity is higher or lower than the model-imputed non-election baseline at a given relative time period. The reported F-test evaluates whether the pre-election coefficients are jointly equal to zero. The insignificant p-value suggests little evidence of systematic pre-election trends prior to elections. Substantively, the estimates indicate that lobbying activity rises around elections and remains above non-election counterfactual levels immediately afterward.⁴⁶

The exit plot instead examines whether these effects persist after governments leave the election period.⁴⁷ The negative post-election estimates therefore indicate that lobbying activity declines after elections compared to election-year levels, consistent with diminishing electoral incentives following elections. Taken together, the two plots suggest that elections generate temporary increases in lobbying activity that intensify around election periods and attenuate afterward.

Figure B2. Dynamic Treatment Effects: Estimates from the Imputation Estimator



⁴⁵ Formally, the onset estimates correspond to period-specific average treatment effects on the treated, $ATT_k = E[Y_{it}(1) - Y_{it}(0) | k]$, where k indexes time relative to treatment onset, $Y_{it}(1)$ denotes observed lobbying outcomes under elections, and $Y_{it}(0)$ denotes the model-imputed counterfactual outcome in the absence of elections.

⁴⁶ The contrast with Figure 2 reflects different baselines: Figure B2 benchmarks post-election lobbying against the imputed non-election counterfactual, whereas Figure 2 benchmarks it against election-year lobbying. Lobbying can fall relative to election years while remaining above the non-election counterfactual baseline.

⁴⁷ The exit estimates realign relative time around treatment exit rather than treatment onset. Consequently, the post-election coefficients capture changes in treatment effects after elections relative to treatment effects during election years. Formally, the estimates can be interpreted as $ATT_{post,k} - ATT_{during} = (Y_{t+k}^{obs} - Y_{t+k}^{cf}) - (Y_t^{obs} - Y_t^{cf})$, where positive or negative values indicate whether treatment effects strengthen or attenuate following treatment exit.

C Appendix: Validity Checks

C.1 Placebo Treatment Test: Pre-Election Timing

Table C1. Placebo Treatment Test: Pre-Election Year (t1)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending	Spending	Participation	Participation
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election Year (t-1)	0.207 (0.179)	0.164 (0.173)	0.017 (0.015)	0.012 (0.015)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.582	0.679	0.524	0.621
Adjusted R ²	0.551	0.630	0.488	0.564

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

C.2 Placebo Treatment Test: Post-Election Timing

Table C2. Placebo Treatment Test: Post-Election Year (t+1)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending	Spending	Participation	Participation
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Post-Election Year (t+1)	-0.571*** (0.196)	-0.557*** (0.199)	-0.045*** (0.015)	-0.045*** (0.016)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.583	0.680	0.525	0.623
Adjusted R ²	0.552	0.631	0.490	0.565

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

C.3 Placebo Treatment Test: Subnational Elections

As a placebo test, I examine whether the same pattern appears during subnational elections. If unobserved factors associated with election proximity drive lobbying behavior, similar cycles should emerge around subnational elections. However, because the analysis includes only lobbying by national governments, I expect no such relationship. Table C3 confirms that no electoral cycle is observed at the subnational level.

Table C3. Placebo Treatment Test: Subnational Elections

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending	Spending	Participation	Participation
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Subnational Election Year (t)	0.186 (0.234)	0.299 (0.225)	0.009 (0.020)	0.017 (0.019)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.582	0.679	0.524	0.621
Adjusted R ²	0.551	0.630	0.488	0.564

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

C.4 Placebo Treatment Test: U.S. Election

Table C4. Placebo Treatment Test: U.S. Election

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending	Participation	Spending	Participation
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
US Election (t)	-0.153 (0.144)	-0.015 (0.012)	-0.108 (0.142)	-0.010 (0.012)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	×	×
Leader FE	×	×	✓	✓
Observations	2,518	2,518	2,518	2,518
R ²	0.579	0.520	0.723	0.679
Adjusted R ²	0.551	0.488	0.647	0.592

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

C.5 Placebo Treatment Test: Cancelled Election

Table C5. Placebo Treatment Test: Cancelled Election

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Spending (1)	Participation (2)
Cancelled Election	0.212 (0.898)	0.013 (0.080)
Election	0.550*** (0.164)	0.038*** (0.014)
Controls	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓
Observations	2,518	2,518
R ²	0.586	0.528
Adjusted R ²	0.555	0.493

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

C.6 Placebo Outcome Test: Non-Governmental Lobbying

Table C6. Placebo Outcome Test: Non-Governmental Lobbying

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Non-Governmental Spending		Non-Governmental Participation	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Election Year (t)	0.169 (0.156)	0.109 (0.166)	0.011 (0.013)	0.007 (0.014)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-Specific Time Trend	×	✓	×	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.659	0.740	0.579	0.667
Adjusted R ²	0.634	0.700	0.547	0.616

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

D Appendix: Heterogeneity

D.1 Heterogeneity by Regime Type

To assess the heterogeneous effects of elections across different political regimes, I employ a fully interacted specification that allows the treatment effect to vary flexibly by country type. Following [Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu \(2019\)](#), this approach avoids the restrictive Linear Interaction Effect (LIE) assumption, which would assume that the effect of elections changes at a constant rate across regime categories, and instead provides a discrete, semi-parametric estimate for each group. This specification is the categorical equivalent of the binning estimator proposed by [Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu \(2019\)](#). By interacting the election-year indicator with a complete set of regime-type dummies, I recover the Conditional Average Treatment Effect (CATE) for each specific regime type directly. The model is specified as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \sum_{g=1}^4 \beta_g (\text{Election}_{it} \times \mathbf{1}\{G_i = g\}) + \varepsilon_{it}. \quad (\text{D1})$$

where Y_{it} is the outcome for country i in year t , α_i and λ_t denote country and year fixed effects, respectively, Election_{it} is an indicator for election years, and $\mathbf{1}\{G_i = g\}$ is an indicator equal to one if country i belongs to group $g \in \{1, 2, 3, 4\}$. The four groups correspond to: (1) established OECD democracies, (2) closed autocracies, (3) electoral autocracies, and (4) other democracies. The coefficients β_g capture the election-year effect for each group of countries. Group indicators themselves are not included separately, as they are time-invariant and therefore absorbed by country fixed effects. A standalone election indicator is not included because it is fully captured by the set of interaction terms, i.e., $\text{Election}_{it} = \sum_g \text{Election}_{it} \times \mathbf{1}\{G_i = g\}$, so including it separately would be redundant and lead to perfect collinearity.

Table [D1](#) presents heterogeneous effects by regime type. The results show that electoral cycles in foreign governments' demand for external support are concentrated in democracies outside the OECD and electoral autocracies, where election years are associated with significant increases in both lobbying expenditures and participation. By contrast, no statistically significant effects are observed in established OECD democracies or in closed autocratic regimes. This pattern is consistent with the expectation that electoral incentives must be both present and politically consequential for governments to strategically intensify engagement with major powers.

Table D1. Electoral Incentives and Demand for Foreign Support:
Heterogeneity by Regime Type

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Spending (1)	Participation (2)
Closed Autocracy $\times$ Election	0.851 (0.691)	0.062 (0.052)
Electoral Autocracy $\times$ Election	0.646** (0.292)	0.043* (0.023)
Other Democracy $\times$ Election	0.590** (0.238)	0.038* (0.020)
Established OECD $\times$ Election	0.147 (0.373)	0.020 (0.033)
Controls	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.583	0.525
Adjusted R ²	0.552	0.489

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

D.2 Heterogeneity by Eligibility for Reelection

Table D2. Reelection Incentives and Electoral Cycles in Foreign Support-Seeking

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Spending Established OECD	Participation Established OECD	Spending Other Democracies	Participation Other Democracies
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Election Year (t)	-2.394*** (0.714)	-0.199*** (0.058)	0.567** (0.229)	0.040** (0.019)
Reelectable	-1.639* (0.878)	-0.129* (0.069)	0.001 (0.001)	0.0001 (0.0001)
Election Year $\times$ Reelectable	2.538** (0.924)	0.220*** (0.075)	0.00004 (0.001)	-0.00002 (0.0001)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	289	289	1,201	1,201
R ²	0.674	0.632	0.561	0.501
Adjusted R ²	0.623	0.574	0.517	0.451

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

E Appendix: Measuring Support Type from Disclosure Text

E.1 LLM-Assisted Classification Description

To classify lobbying activities, I use a large language model (LLM) to code the activity descriptions reported in semiannual FARA filings. These descriptions are short textual summaries of lobbying services conducted by registered agents on behalf of foreign governmental principals. For each description, the model assigns labels along two dimensions: issue (the substantive topic of lobbying) and target (the U.S. audience being influenced). The classification is multi-label, allowing each observation to be assigned multiple issue and target categories when appropriate. The issue classification scheme includes 21 predefined categories: trade, investment, aid, development, tourism, sanctions, culture, image and reputation, diplomacy, security, immigration, technology, energy, health, environment and climate, human rights, education, meeting, visits, defense procurement, and other. The target classification scheme includes 11 categories: executive branch, Congress, congressional staff, federal agencies, state and local actors, courts, media, public, think tanks, business, and unspecified. These categories are developed based on existing literature, news coverage, and manual review of FARA filings.

The model is prompted with a structured coding instruction that restricts outputs to these predefined categories, allows multiple labels, and requires a short text-based justification for each assignment. It is instructed to apply conservative coding, assigning a label only when supported by clear textual cues, and to default to “other” (for issues) or “unspecified” (for targets) when no category clearly applies. Additional guidance is provided for ambiguous categories such as diplomacy, meetings, visits, security, and public-facing activities to ensure consistent coding. The model is run with deterministic settings and required to return outputs in a fixed JSON format. After classification, labels are cleaned to ensure consistency with the predefined sets, and duplicate or invalid labels are removed. This procedure converts unstructured lobbying descriptions into structured data on issue areas and targets, enabling systematic analysis of the composition of foreign support-seeking across the electoral cycle.

E.2 LLM Prompt for Issue and Target Classification

The following prompt was used to classify FARA activity descriptions into predefined issue and target categories.

You are coding a lobbying service description into TWO label sets:

A) ISSUES (substantive topics)

B) TARGETS (who/what audience the registrant tried to influence)

ISSUES: choose ALL relevant labels from allowed list ONLY:

["trade","investment","aid","development","tourism","sanctions","culture",
"image_reputation","diplomacy","security","immigration","technology","energy",
"health","environment_climate","human_rights","education","meeting","visits",
"defense_procurement","other"]

TARGETS: choose ALL relevant labels from allowed list ONLY:

["executive_branch","congress","congressional_staff","federal_agencies",
"state_local","courts","media","public","think_tanks","business","unspecified"]

Return ONLY valid JSON with exactly this schema:

```
{"issues":[{"label":"<issue>","reason":"<short reason>"}],  
  "targets":[{"label":"<target>","reason":"<short reason>"}]}
```

GENERAL RULES:

- Multi-label allowed for both issues and targets.
- Reasons must be short (≤ 20 words) and reference the text.
- Use ONLY allowed labels. Do not invent new labels.
- If no issue fits: label as "other".
- If no target is specified: label as "unspecified".
- Be conservative: assign labels only with clear textual evidence.

ISSUE CODING GUIDANCE:

- "diplomacy": bilateral relations, foreign policy, embassy interaction, peace process
- "culture": cultural programs, exchanges, arts, film
- "aid": foreign aid, development assistance, humanitarian or financial assistance
- "image_reputation": public relations, messaging, reputation building
- "security": conflict, terrorism, proliferation, security cooperation
- "meeting": arranging or facilitating meetings with U.S. officials
- "visits": organizing visits or delegations
- If Compact of Free Association is mentioned:
code BOTH "aid" and "security" when applicable
- "other": if no category clearly applies
- Do NOT code procedural terms (e.g., "government relations") as issues

TARGET CODING GUIDANCE:

- "public": public relations, outreach, informational materials
- "media": press, journalists, broadcasting
- "executive_branch": White House, Administration, executive officials

- "congress": Members of Congress
- "congressional_staff": staffers or aides
- "federal_agencies": specific agencies or departments
- Embassy involvement alone does NOT define a target

E.3 Additional Results

Table E1 shows that election-year increases in foreign support-seeking are concentrated in engagement with executive branch officials and federal agencies, with weaker and less consistent effects for Congress and public-facing audiences.

Table E1. Electoral Cycles in Targeted Foreign Support-Seeking

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Executive Branch	Federal Agencies	Congress	Publics	Unspecified
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Election Year (t)	0.381** (0.170)	0.245** (0.102)	0.111 (0.154)	0.159 (0.152)	0.310* (0.160)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504	2,504
R ²	0.493	0.368	0.505	0.549	0.464
Adjusted R ²	0.459	0.325	0.472	0.519	0.428

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

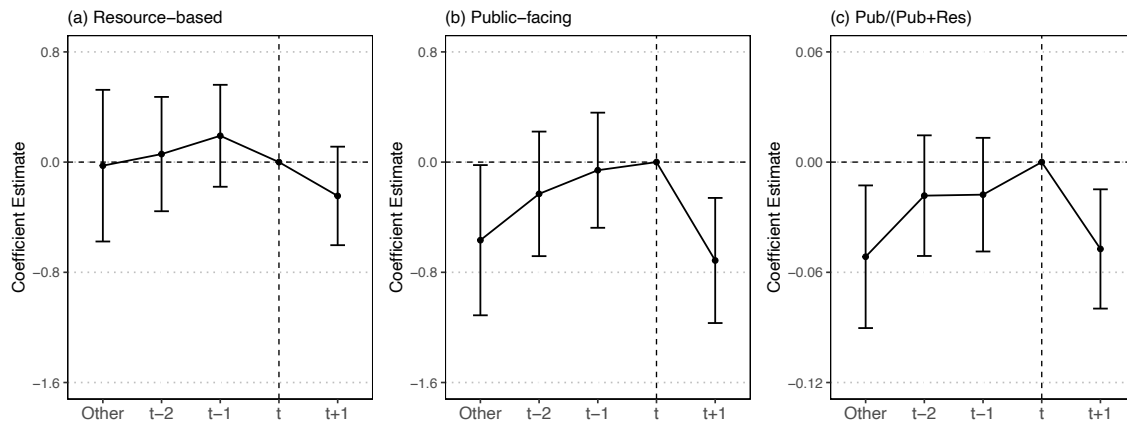
Table E2. Robustness Checks for Table 4 with Alternative LLM Model (ChatGPT-4.1)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Spending	Spending	Resource-Based	Public-Facing	Pub/(Pub+Res)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Election Year (t)	0.253* (0.131)	-0.015 (0.180)	-0.077 (0.167)	0.583*** (0.165)	0.047*** (0.013)
Public-Facing	1.086*** (0.266)	0.976*** (0.266)			
Election Year:Public-Facing		0.536** (0.228)			
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	5,008	5,008	2,504	2,504	2,407
R ²	0.451	0.451	0.534	0.523	0.457
Adjusted R ²	0.433	0.433	0.502	0.491	0.419

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Standard error clustered at the country level in parentheses.

Figure E1. Robustness Checks for Figure 3 with Alternative LLM Model (ChatGPT-4.1)



E.4 Validation of LLM-Assisted Coding

To assess the reliability of the LLM-assisted classifications, I conducted a validation exercise using a random sample of 540 disclosures (approximately 10% of the 5,368 disclosures filed on behalf of foreign government entities in the dataset). Each sampled disclosure was independently hand coded according to the coding protocol described above and compared with the classifications generated by GPT-5.4-mini. Table E3 reports the validation results for both issue and target classifications, including percent agreement, Cohen’s kappa, and the numbers of false positives and false negatives relative to the human-coded benchmark.

Overall, the AI classifier demonstrates a high level of agreement with human coding. Across the 21 issue categories, percent agreement exceeds 94% for every category and is above 99% for most categories. Cohen’s kappa values are likewise high, exceeding 0.85 for nearly all substantive issue categories. The only exception is *technology*, which has a lower kappa despite a 99.4% agreement rate because the category is extremely rare in the validation sample, making the statistic sensitive to class imbalance. Target classifications exhibit even stronger performance, with agreement rates above 99% for all target categories and perfect agreement for several categories, including the executive branch, congressional staff, state and local governments, courts, and the media.

To better understand the remaining discrepancies between human and AI coding, I manually reviewed disclosures on which the two coders disagreed. Because the issue categories are not mutually exclusive, these disagreements do not reflect tradeoffs between categories. Rather, they arise primarily when disclosure descriptions are broad or generic, making it difficult to determine whether a specific issue category is sufficiently explicit to code as present. For example, some disclosures describe arranging meetings, accompanying foreign officials to meetings, or advising embassy officials. The AI sometimes coded these descrip-

tions as *diplomacy*, whereas the human coder did not when the disclosure did not identify a more specific diplomatic objective. Similarly, public-relations activities such as newsletters, press releases, background papers, and speeches can plausibly be read as image-management activities, but the human coding applied a more conservative threshold for *image_reputation* when reputational objectives were not stated explicitly. Table E4 presents representative examples illustrating the types of disagreements between the human and AI coders.

Table E3. Human–AI Inter-Coder Reliability for Issue and Target Classification

	Agreement	Kappa	False Positive	False Negative
Issue				
trade	0.9796	0.9370	7	4
investment	0.9944	0.9494	1	2
aid	0.9981	0.9808	0	1
development	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
tourism	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
sanctions	0.9981	0.8562	0	1
culture	0.9926	0.9092	4	0
image_reputation	0.9463	0.8550	10	19
diplomacy	0.9500	0.8933	24	3
security	0.9907	0.9506	2	3
immigration	0.9963	0.9481	1	1
technology	0.9944	0.3982	3	0
energy	0.9981	0.9402	0	1
health	0.9981	0.8880	1	0
environment_climate	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
human_rights	0.9944	0.9063	3	0
education	0.9944	0.8861	3	0
meeting	0.9722	0.8624	4	11
visits	0.9944	0.9444	0	3
defense_procurement	0.9963	0.8731	1	1
other	0.9481	0.8790	16	12
Target				
executive_branch	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
congress	0.9963	0.9918	2	0
congressional_staff	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
federal_agencies	0.9981	0.9878	1	0
state_local	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
courts	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
media	1.0000	1.0000	0	0
public	0.9963	0.9916	1	1
think_tanks	0.9963	0.9314	1	1
business	0.9981	0.9901	0	1
unspecified	0.9944	0.9825	1	2

Table E4. Illustrative Human–AI Coding Disagreements

Issue Category	Error Type	Disclosure	Disclosure Content
Diplomacy	False Positive (human = 0; GPT = 1)	Pakistan-2007-DEC-2	The registrant monitored, advised and evaluated legislative issues, as well as arranged meetings and accompanied Pakistani Government officials to meetings with Members of Congress and congressional staffers to discuss general U.S.–Pakistan issues. Representatives of the registrant also traveled to Pakistan to meet with Pakistani Government officials.
Diplomacy	False Negative (human = 1; GPT = 0)	Korea, South-2015-DEC-5	The registrant provided public relations and consulting services and contacted members of Congress on behalf of the foreign principal regarding the renegotiation and extension of the U.S.–Korea Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, a proposal to allow more visas for highly skilled Koreans to work in the United States, and the Korea–Japan comfort women dispute.
Image_Reputation	False Positive (human = 0; GPT = 1)	Bahamas-2013-JUN-2	The registrant developed and executed tourism promotions to the Bahamas through the development of travel brochures and press releases.
Image_Reputation	False Negative (human = 1; GPT = 0)	Turkey-2010-JUN-3	The registrant provided counsel for the foreign principal in connection with the extension and strengthening of the Turkish–American relationship and educating U.S. Government officials on issues of importance to the foreign principal.

F Appendix: Domestic Media Coverage of Tshisekedi's 2022 State Visit to the United States

To illustrate how information about President Tshisekedi's engagement with U.S. officials reached domestic audiences, this appendix presents examples of coverage from *7sur7.cd* during his December 2022 visit to Washington. *7sur7.cd* is widely regarded as one of the most consulted news outlets in the DRC and is frequently cited by other Congolese media organizations. The selected examples below demonstrate that meetings with senior U.S. officials, accompanying photographs, and related public statements received substantial domestic media coverage. All articles were originally published in French. English translations of headlines and standfirsts are based on Google Translate.

Rencontre bilatérale RDC - USA : Félix Tshisekedi et Anthony Blinken échangent sur la situation sécuritaire dans l'Est



mer 14/12/2022 - 15:08

Le président Félix Tshisekedi et le secrétaire d'Etat américain Anthony Blinken ont échangé ce mercredi 14 décembre 2022 dans le cadre de la rencontre bilatérale entre la RDC et les États-Unis. D'après une dépêche de la cellule de communication de la présidence parvenue à la rédaction de 7SUR7.CD, les échanges ont porté sur la situation sécuritaire dans l'Est de la RDC suite à l'agression du Rwanda sous couvert du M23.

English translation: *Title:* Bilateral meeting between DRC and USA: Félix Tshisekedi and Anthony Blinken discuss the security situation in the East. *Standfirst:* President Félix Tshisekedi and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken met on Wednesday, December 14, 2022, as part of the bilateral meeting between the DRC and the United States. According to a press release from the presidential communications unit received by 7SUR7.CD, the discussions focused on the security situation in eastern DRC following the Rwandan aggression carried out under the auspices of the M23. **Source:** <https://7sur7.cd/2022/12/14/rencontre-bilaterale-rdc-usa-felix-tshisekedi-et-anthony-blinken-echantent-sur-la>

Joe Biden salue le « leadership » et « l'engagement » de Félix Tshisekedi pour la paix et la prospérité en RDC



jeu 15/12/2022 - 07:38

Félix Tshisekedi a été reçu par le président des États-Unis d'Amérique, Joe Biden, à la Maison Blanche, le mercredi 14 décembre 2022. Le chef de l'État Congolais a eu un bref entretien bilatéral avec son homologue américain dans le bureau ovale de la Maison Blanche, suivi d'une rencontre multilatérale aux côtés de 5 autres présidents africains et le président Joe Biden. D'après la cellule de communication de la Présidence congolaise, les sujets abordés lors de ces rencontres étaient : la politique, la diplomatie, la sécurité, le commerce et l'investissement.

English translation: *Title:* Joe Biden praises Félix Tshisekedi's "leadership" and "commitment" to peace and prosperity in the DRC. *Standfirst:* Félix Tshisekedi was received by the President of the United States of America, Joe Biden, at the White House on Wednesday, December 14, 2022. The Congolese Head of State held a brief bilateral meeting with his American counterpart in the Oval Office, followed by a multilateral meeting alongside five other African presidents and President Joe Biden. According to the Congolese Presidency's communications unit, the topics discussed during these meetings included politics, diplomacy, security, trade, and investment. **Source:** <https://7sur7.cd/2022/12/15/joe-biden-salue-le-leadership-et-lengagement-de-felix-tshisekedi-pour-la-paix-et-la>

Washington : Reçu par Joe Biden, Félix Tshisekedi appelle les USA à faire pression sur le Rwanda pour qu'il cesse de soutenir le M23



jeu 15/12/2022 - 07:57

Dans le cadre du Sommet USA - Afrique qui se tient à Washington, le président de la République démocratique du Congo, Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, a été reçu le mercredi 14 juin 2022, par son homologue américain, Joe Biden. La rencontre entre les deux personnalités a eu lieu à la Maison Blanche, précisément au Bureau Oval. Plusieurs sujets ont été évoqués par les deux chefs d'État, notamment la situation sécuritaire dans l'Est de la RDC, avec l'agression rwandaise sous couvert du M23.

English translation: *Title:* Washington: Received by Joe Biden, Félix Tshisekedi calls on the US to pressure Rwanda to stop supporting the M23. *Standfirst:* During the US-Africa Summit in Washington, D.C., President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo of the Democratic Republic of Congo met with his American counterpart, Joe Biden, on Wednesday, December 14, 2022. The meeting took place at the White House, specifically in the Oval Office. The two leaders discussed several topics, including the security situation in eastern DRC, particularly the Rwandan aggression perpetrated by the M23. **Source:** <https://7sur7.cd/2022/12/15/washington-recu-par-joe-biden-felix-tshisekedi-appelle-les-usa-faire-pression-sur-le>