

Nov 04, 2016 by [Caitlin Byrne](#)

UNSC countdown: The public diplomacy challenge to come ^[1]

As the countdown to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) election intensifies, diplomacy takes a silly turn. Australia, Finland and Luxembourg – competitors in the race - continue to outdo each other in pursuit of the diplomatic prize: a temporary seat on the UNSC.

The final round of diplomatic receptions is in full swing this week in New York, with dignitaries and diplomats pressing the campaign messages. Finland is said to be preparing gift bags of dried blueberries for all the UN General Assembly members, while Australia has taken to handing out special honors to popular Indian cricketers; all this in an effort to woo diplomatic votes right up to the close of the contest.

At this stage in the race, much of the intense lobbying activity falls naturally to the professional diplomats. While pledges of support may have been secured through official channels, the voting outcome remains unpredictable and votes can move depending upon the dynamic in the room on the day. Anecdotally, the opportunity for further movement builds when voting moves into second and subsequent rounds. It is in these rounds that the public diplomacy efforts of the respective campaigns might hold some sway.

A distinction should be made between the intense public diplomacy and media activity of the final few weeks of the campaign and the longer term efforts of media and cultural exchanges, development assistance programs, disaster relief, conferences and events – combined with good policy-making. The experience of nations like Italy and Ireland suggest that the former is more noise than impact, whereas longer-term, consistent engagement strategies can lend credibility to a nation's campaign; creating the necessary popular support that can influence the decision-maker.

Experience also suggests the profile of a nation's campaign leadership plays a valuable role. Finland's Prime Minister Tarja Halonen has been a longstanding, visible campaign leader having contributed much to Finland's reputation as a credible and serious candidate. By contrast, Australia's Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was slow off the mark but has gathered significant momentum in recent months. Gillard's recent fiery show against sexism and misogyny from the floor of the Australian Parliament proved effective in boosting her global leadership profile and credibility.

Yet the greatest public diplomacy challenge for the current UNSC competitors is still to come. Official and public audiences will be watching the reactions of both the successful and unsuccessful candidates. As with the Oscars, gracious acceptance of success or defeat is noted.

When viewed through the narrow prism of the contest itself, defeat can be devastating for national ego; while success overwhelming. Both outcomes can result in states disengaging

from public dialogue on international policy issues. However, when viewed as one element in a broader strategy of international engagement, an effective campaign should yield further opportunities for the campaigning states, regardless of the voting outcome.

All silliness aside, for middle power states like Australia, public diplomacy should move into full swing after the UNSC vote. Significant international challenges persist and diplomacy does not end with the UNSC contest. Publics both abroad and at home are increasingly invested in international policy decisions and effective in contributing to outcomes. A public diplomacy strategy that picks up and builds on the momentum of the UNSC campaign poses a real and tangible opportunity for states seeking to make the most of the outcome, win or lose.
