



Guest Blog

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Inside Scoop on the UN Race

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Previous Secretaries General were often compromise candidates chosen through protracted, politicized and largely secretive bargaining among Security Council members. The General Assembly then debated the nomination, with little prior knowledge of the nominee's background, vision or agenda, before appointing him (it's always been a 'him') to the post. This year's UN Secretary General selection, however, has been unprecedented in its openness and transparency.

Candidates drafted campaign platforms, created campaign websites and spoke at public events around the world. India, Canada and other middle-power states demanded a stronger role for the General Assembly in proposing and vetting candidates under consideration. The Security Council – often criticized for its unrelenting, secretive grip on the nomination process – responded by limiting its consideration to only formally (read, publicly) nominated candidates from member governments.

The overall impact has been that governments outside the Security Council, as well as the public, know more about the individual who will guide the UN through the next five-to-ten years than they have any previous nominee.

The eventual nominee must receive at least nine positive votes in the Council, barring a veto from any of the permanent members. The Council's membership include permanent members China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States and, this year, elected members Argentina, Congo, Denmark, Ghana, Greece, Japan, Peru, Qatar, Slovakia and Tanzania.

Before a formal vote is taken by the Security Council, a series of "straw polls" are used to weigh each candidate's level of support, and if possible, to narrow the field by encouraging weaker candidates to withdraw early on. In the past, these straw polls differentiated between permanent members and elected members through color-coded ballots. Disapproval of a candidate by a permanent member was likely to equal a veto in the formal vote.

This year, however, the Security Council has held three straw polls in which all members either "encouraged," "discouraged," or offered "no opinion" without regard to their permanent or elected status. Of the candidates, South Korea's candidate Ban Ki Moon has led each time, but always with one "discouragement." With no way to tell if that one vote was from a permanent member (and therefore a possible veto), Ban is considered the front runner. India's Shashi Tharoor has come in second place during each straw poll.

Thursday's third straw poll included five other candidates, including Thailand's Surakiart Sathirathai, Jordan's Prince Zeid, Sri Lanka's Jayantha Dhanapala, Afghanistan's Ashraf Ghani and – the only non-Asian in the race – Latvia's Vaira Vike-Freiberga. The results of this latest straw poll can be found at www.UNSG.org. But a more definitive straw poll, using color-coded ballots which will for the first time reveal the preferences of permanent members, will be held Monday.