

Who Governs Matters: Member States' Regime Types and Public Support for International Organizations

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Abstract

How does growing influence of authoritarian states affect public support for international organizations (IOs)? We argue that influential member states' regime type provides citizens with a cue for evaluating IO legitimacy in democracies. As democratic publics generally associate nondemocracies with opaque governance practices and illiberal interests, information that nondemocracies are gaining greater institutional influence in an IO may reduce public support for the affected IO. Across four survey experiments in two democracies—the United States and South Korea—focusing on two major IOs—the UN Security Council and the IMF—we find that democratic publics are generally less willing to comply with or remain in IOs when governance reforms are described as empowering authoritarian rather than democratic states. These findings have important implications for the future of institutionalized multilateralism amid the rise of authoritarian states.

1 Introduction

Major international organizations (IOs) are undergoing a profound transformation. Authoritarian regimes have gained growing leverage in institutions long dominated by liberal democracies. At the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), for example, they have gained greater formal voting power via recent governance reforms, which placed China and Russia among the top ten most influential members. At the United Nations Human Rights

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Council (UNHRC), China exercised diplomatic pressure to weaken Western-backed initiatives, including efforts to investigate repression in Xinjiang. These are not isolated incidents: a recent study finds that between 2011 and 2020, 62 out of 73 major IOs experienced growing autocratic density (Debre and Sommerer, 2026), and although most still retain a democratic majority, 14 global IOs were on the brink of losing one in 2020.

These developments raise an important tension in international cooperation through IOs. On the one hand, IOs may benefit from granting more institutional representation to rising powers, either because a broader membership helps to diffuse liberal norms, or because incorporating historically underrepresented states strengthens public support for the organization (McDowell et al., 2024). The IMF's 2016 reform of its voting quotas, for instance, was undertaken in large part to bolster the institution's legitimacy. On the other hand, the inclusion of illiberal member states increases the possibility that the liberal norms in IOs will be contested. Scholars have recently shown a trend in which nondemocratic regimes attempt to undermine liberal IOs *from within* (Lake, Martin and Risse, 2021; Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2025). Seeing themselves as disadvantaged by the existing liberal international order, authoritarian regimes have increasingly sought to challenge it by controlling important committees and assuming leadership positions, gaining the power to set agendas that advance their interests (Cottiero et al., 2024). In sum, rising authoritarian influence presents a dilemma in IO governance: accommodating nondemocratic regimes may bolster representation while simultaneously empowering them to undermine liberal norms.

This study examines one important consequence of authoritarian empowerment within IOs: its effect on public support for institutionalized multilateralism. The idea that an IO's membership composition affects how the public evaluates the IO has been well established in the literature (Chapman, 2009; Gutner and Thompson, 2010; Chu, 2025; Johnson, 2011). Yet despite the growing understanding of the assertive role illiberal regimes play within IOs, little scholarly attention has been paid to how their rise affects public evaluations of the IO. This question matters because major IOs require strong public backing to remain relevant (Morse

and Keohane, 2014), attract financial and political support (Sommerer and Agné, 2018), and secure member states' compliance (Zürn and Joerges, 2005; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023). The question is likely to grow in importance, as the trend toward greater illiberal presence in IOs is likely to continue, driven in part by the continued rise of China.

We argue that the regime type of influential member states serves as a salient heuristic for evaluating IOs. When citizens learn that a member state has become more influential within an IO, they use regime type to infer how that state is likely to exercise its authority and cooperate with other members. Because democratic publics generally associate authoritarian regimes with opaque and exclusionary governance and with weaker commitments to liberal cooperation, greater authoritarian influence within an IO should generate expectations of poorer decision-making procedures and institutional performance. We expect these inferences to be reflected in citizens' assessments of the IO's legitimacy.

We conduct four survey experiments in two democratic states—the United States and South Korea—to show that the regime type of influential member states shapes public support for IOs.¹ We situate our experiments in two major IOs, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the IMF, which differ in policy domain and decision-making process. We leverage both hypothetical and actual governance reform scenarios that vary whether democratic or authoritarian states gain decision-making power within the organization. We find that both American and South Korean publics are less willing to comply with and more willing to withdraw from the UNSC when authoritarian states become more powerful within the Council. In the case of the IMF, however, we find that Americans withdraw their support upon authoritarian empowerment while South Koreans do not. This suggests that the regime type effect may be conditioned by a country's past interactions with the organization and by country-specific perceptions of authoritarianism around the IO's issue areas. We find that democratic publics view authoritarian states negatively and perceive IOs with powerful authoritarian members as less legitimate along several dimensions, which we take as evidence consistent with the proposed

¹An anonymized pre-analysis plan (PAP) is available at OSF.

mechanism. Finally, our exploratory analyses suggest that learning about rising authoritarian influence may have far-reaching consequences by dampening enthusiasm for multilateral cooperation in general and increases approval for an anti-IO incumbent.

Our study makes three contributions. First, we propose member regime type as an important yet underappreciated source of public support for IOs. Our findings suggest that IO legitimacy depends not only on its formal operation and procedures but also on the political character of the responsible actors. This implies that the increasing assertiveness of non-democratic regimes in major IOs could erode public support for institutionalized multilateralism in democracies.

Second, our findings suggest that legitimacy effects of representation depend on who is represented. It is widely believed that IOs derive public support from their ability and willingness to provide public goods in a technocratic, non-politicized manner. According to this perspective, embracing rising powers bolsters public support through improved representation (Parizek and Stephen, 2021; Steinberg and McDowell, 2024; Weaver et al., 2022). Our findings instead illustrate the politicized nature of representation in IOs. Expanding the representation of rising powers does not uniformly increase IO legitimacy among democratic publics. Rather, *whose* power is enhanced matters.

Finally, beyond the literature on public opinion about IOs, our study contributes to the growing body of work examining how illiberal regimes reshape global governance through IOs' policy outputs (Tallberg and Vikberg, 2025; Cottiero and Haggard, 2023; Leeds et al., 2025; Debre, 2022). Two decades of scholarship has shown that the regime type of member states shapes IO behavior (Pevehouse, 2002, 2005; Mansfield and Pevehouse, 2008; Cottiero and Haggard, 2023; Debre, 2022). We demonstrate that another important channel through which illiberal regimes shape multilateral cooperation through IOs is by influencing how other member states' publics perceive the organization.

2 Public Support for International Organizations and Authoritarian Power Shifts

Major IOs require strong popular support to remain relevant as forums for cooperation (Morse and Keohane, 2014). Because IOs have limited enforcement power, they rely on favorable public legitimacy to secure state compliance, especially when the costs of policy adjustment are high (Zürn and Joerges, 2005; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023). Public opinion is particularly important in the era of growing politicization and contestation of global governance, when publics have mobilized in protest against international institutions (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2026). When public support for IOs erodes, leaders face greater difficulty delegating authority to them. Brexit, for example, was decided through a national referendum. Popular backlash against the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Burundi and the Philippines led both to withdraw, limiting the ICC's jurisdiction over them. Experimental evidence from European countries that underwent financial crisis shows that public skepticism toward the IMF lowers support for IMF-mandated economic reforms (Hübscher, Sattler and Wagner, 2024).

IOs appear to be cognizant of the importance of public support, as illustrated by their investments in public relations. The IMF and the World Bank maintain dedicated communications units and regularly review outreach based on the rationale that “reaching a wider audience of policy influencers and the general public will be essential to achieving the Fund’s institutional objectives” (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

In keeping with this perspective, scholars have also examined how the public evaluates IOs, finding that the IO’s procedure (input) and performance (output) are important sources of public evaluation. The public views IOs to be more legitimate when the way IO works is inclusive and fair—for instance, when they involve civil society (Bernauer and Gampfer, 2013), underrepresented racial and gender groups (Steinberg and McDowell, 2024; Chow and Han, 2023), or developing countries (McDowell et al., 2024) in their decision-making, and when they remain free from great-power capture (Arias and Hulvey, 2025). Similarly, the public supports

IOs that generate beneficial outcomes. Citizens increase support for the EU, the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the UNSC all when they believe the IO's policies benefit their personal well-being and their countries (Gabel, 1998; Edwards, 2009; Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi and Cabrera, 2022).

While these insights are invaluable, little has been written on whether and how the *regime* composition of an IO's membership, especially that of powerful member states, shapes beliefs about procedure and performance. This omission is consequential given the growing influence of illiberal regimes in IOs (Cottiero et al., 2024; Debre and Sommerer, 2026) and the findings that the public takes into account democratic, technocratic, and fairness-related qualities (Dellmuth, Scholte and Tallberg, 2019), as well as great power influence within IOs (Arias and Hulvey, 2025; Johnson, 2011), when assessing legitimacy.

Recent scholarship further suggests that changes in member states' regime type has substantive consequences for how IOs operate. IOs with a strong authoritarian presence tend to promote authoritarian regime survival (Debre, 2022; Cottiero and Schneider, 2026) and adopt nominal good governance mandates without substantive changes (Hafner-Burton, Pevehouse and Schneider, 2024). Growing Chinese and Russian authority within the UN has reshaped the priorities of UN peacekeeping missions toward respecting sovereignty and away from human rights monitoring (Reeder, 2025). These findings imply that influential member states' regime type can alter public perceptions of both the procedures through which IOs govern and the policies they produce.

3 Regime Type and Public Support for International Organizations

Democratic publics become aware of rising authoritarian influence in IOs through multiple channels. Most prominently, political elites running on anti-IO platforms frequently frame their rhetoric around the struggle between democracies and nondemocracies. For instance, Trump

claimed that the “the United Nations is not a friend of democracy” (Merica, 2017), while Brazil’s President Lula Da Silva warned in his UN address that “throughout the world, anti-democratic forces are trying to subjugate institutions and stifle freedoms” (Brazilian Government, 2025). Media outlets also cover politicization of IOs, as illustrated by the scrutiny of China’s influence within the WHO and WTO. IOs themselves also engage the public directly: former IMF executive director Paulo Nogueira published articles and gave public talks on IMF governance reforms, and high-profile IO programs such as World Bank projects and UN peacekeeping missions routinely acknowledge major contributors—including nondemocratic regimes—to increase their public visibility.²

We argue that democratic citizens withdraw support for IOs when they learn that authoritarian members wield substantial influence within them. Authoritarian empowerment in IOs activates negative evaluative schema associated with authoritarianism among democratic publics, which decreases the public’s confidence for both input and output legitimacy of IOs. Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical framework.



Figure 1: Proposed theoretical process linking authoritarian empowerment and public support for IOs

3.1 Regime type as a heuristic

The premise of our argument is that when citizens evaluate an IO, they do so primarily through heuristic thinking. Since IOs are bureaucratic organizations that specialize in issues that ap-

²For example, see UN Peacekeeper’s public acknowledgment of China’s services in Sudan. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/china>

pear removed from the daily lives of ordinary citizens, the public is likely to “know little about IOs, their procedures, and their performance” (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015). Nevertheless, citizens are often exposed to IO affairs—through the news media, political elites, or the IO’s own publicity campaigns—and these exposures provide opportunities, however brief, to form opinions about IOs. In such instances, rather than seeking out all the information about how IOs work, citizens are likely to rely on heuristics, a “fast and frugal” mental shortcut that yields efficient and reasonably good judgments by focusing on a few key parts of the relevant information (Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier, 2011). In particular, people form or revise their attitudes toward an object on the basis of their existing attitudes toward some other object associated with it (Hofmann et al., 2010). Known as the guilt-by-association heuristic, this mechanism implies that people can form opinions about objects of which they have little understanding or experience, because attitudes spread from one object to another through mere association (Walther, 2002).

Applied to IOs, guilt-by-association reasoning reduces the complex task of evaluating an IO to the simpler operation of assessing its member states. This insight accords with the existing literature that examines how member states affect public attitudes toward IOs. Citizens assess an IO’s legitimacy based on their attitudes toward the states that wield significant influence within it (Johnson, 2011), and respond more positively to an IO’s policy endorsements when they come from a democratic organization (Chu, 2025). Even international investors, who have greater means and motivation to study IOs closely, frequently turn to evaluating an IO by “the company it keeps” (Gray, 2013; Gray and Hicks, 2014).

Regime type provides a particularly salient heuristic because it allows citizens to infer how a state is likely to exercise its influence. Among democratic publics, democracy is generally associated with positively valued principles such as accountability, transparency, fairness, inclusiveness, and freedom. Citizens acquire these associations over the course of their lives through education, political discourse, and direct experience of democratic governance (Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, 1998; Mishler and Rose, 2007; Bratton and Mattes, 2001; Glaeser,

Ponzetto and Shleifer, 2007; Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007; Chapman et al., 2024; Inglehart, 2003). Democracy also carries strong descriptive norms: democracy theorists suggest that in the post-Cold War global order, democracy has become a benchmark separating the legitimate “civilized” world from the rest (Mozaffari, 2001; Hobson, 2008).

Nondemocratic governments, by extension, are associated among democratic publics with the opposite qualities—unaccountable decision-making, corruption, exclusion, and disregard for human rights. Research showing systematic differences between democratic and authoritarian policies may help to create and sustain these beliefs. Authoritarian regimes tend to have weaker domestic institutional constraints, lack media freedom and information sharing, and record higher levels of perceived and real corruption than democracies (Treisman, 2007; Mansfield, Milner and Rosendorff, 2002; Cox, 2016). They have also been associated with low levels of cooperation in international trade and human rights protection (Bliss and Russett, 1998; Mansfield, Milner and Rosendorff, 2002; Milner and Kubota, 2005; Vreeland, 2008), and are often viewed as more belligerent (Tomz and Weeks, 2013; Dixon, 1994; Maoz and Russett, 1993; Russett, 1994; Schultz, 2001; De Mesquita et al., 1999).

Ordinary citizens need not know this literature or possess detailed knowledge of the domestic politics of the countries in question. Knowing a state’s regime type will evoke such a positively or negatively charged schema and leads democratic citizens to draw inferences about its likely conduct as a member of an IO with little cognitive effort.³

3.2 How regime type cues translate into IO evaluation

This section explains how democratic public uses the negative perceptions attached to authoritarian states to make inferences about IO legitimacy (See Figure 1). Following the sociological approach to legitimacy (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2021), we conceptualize legitimacy as a subjective belief held by an audience about an organization’s right to rule, which depends largely

³We are agnostic about the normative or evaluative accuracy of the regime type heuristic—our interest here is in the public’s *use* of them in assessing IOs.

on IO's procedures (input) and effectiveness (output) (Dellmuth, Scholte and Tallberg, 2019; Hurd, 2008).

First, concerning input legitimacy, nondemocratic states may be thought to undermine fair and transparent decision-making procedures within IOs. These concerns could be particularly damaging given that IOs often invoke technocratic procedures to legitimize their authority, and that audiences, including political elites, respond positively to such attributes (Steffek, 2015; Hurd, 2018; Zürn, 2018; Dingwerth, Schmidtke and Weise, 2020; Tallberg and Verhaegen, 2020). U.S. criticism of the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) provides an example of regime-based apprehension. Even before the AIIB was launched, U.S. officials repeatedly raised concerns about transparency and accountability, reflecting the belief that an IO led by an authoritarian state might not adhere to liberal governance norms. In particular, the U.S. cited doubts about commitments to anti-corruption enforcement, genuine multilateral decision-making, and workers' rights (Asia Society, 2015). This example illustrates how regime type can become a basis for anticipating an IO's procedures before there is evidence about its actual operation.

Second, concerning output legitimacy, when authoritarian members come to exercise greater influence, democratic publics may expect those IOs to become less capable of, or less interested in, fulfilling liberal mandates. Traditional IOs have portrayed themselves as engines of international cooperation and globalization that generate mutual benefits (Dingwerth, Schmidtke and Weise, 2020). Nondemocratic states, by contrast, have been associated with preferences that privilege sovereignty and policy autonomy over institutionalized cooperation. When such states gain institutional influence, citizens may expect the IO's commitments to the liberal agenda to be diluted, expecting it to become less likely to, for example, supervise free elections and support private property rights.

This perception is likely to counteract any legitimacy benefits from better reflecting the changing global power distribution and the interests of developing countries. Moreover, growing authoritarian power in IOs likely has greater implications for collective performance than

simply having a few “bad apples” would suggest, because authoritarian members can socialize others into illiberal norms and gradually turn the IOs into “clubs of autocrats” (Hafner-Burton and Schneider, 2019; Debre, 2021; Cottiero and Haggard, 2023).

In sum, we expect that when IOs allow greater influence from authoritarian member states, democratic citizens would withdraw their support for the IOs. This prediction should hold for IOs with at least one nondemocratic member; our theory does not speak to fully democratic IOs such as contemporary NATO. It should apply, however, across a broad range of major IOs, including the UN with its universal membership, and newer China-led IOs such as the AIIB. The argument will apply particularly well when an IO is salient enough that the democratic public is aware of and cares about its operation. Authoritarian empowerment may not impair the legitimacy of an IO of which the public does not hold any impression to begin with (and which may not depend on public opinion).

Note that our argument neither predicts the actual behavior of member states nor suggests that authoritarian states are the only members capable of undermining IOs’ legitimacy. All powerful states face incentives to control IO decision-making, and powerful democracies do engage in nondemocratic practices such as vote buying (Stone, 2011; Kuziemko and Werker, 2006; Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland, 2009). Similarly, democracies are not shy about shunning from the liberal cooperation agenda when their domestic interests are at stake. For example, the U.S. has not ratified core human rights treaties, including the ICC statute, and has paralyzed the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanism for years. Our argument rather hinges on democratic publics’ *perceptions* of regime type and their effect on *expectations* about IO legitimacy, regardless of the actual behavior of the member states. The following hypotheses summarize our expectations:

Hypothesis 1: *The public will be less supportive of IOs that increase the decision-making power of nondemocracies compared to those that increase the decision-making power of democracies.*

Hypothesis 2a: *The public will view an IO as less legitimate when the IO increases the decision-making power of nondemocracies compared to when the IO increases the decision-making power of democracies.*

Hypothesis 2b: *The public will have more negative perceptions of nondemocratic IO members than democratic IO members.*

4 Evidence from Four Survey Experiments

To test our hypotheses, we conducted four pre-registered survey experiments—two in the context of the UNSC and two in the context of the IMF—in two democracies, the U.S. and South Korea. Both institutions are highly relevant: the UNSC has faced mounting pressure for governance reforms in recent years, and the IMF underwent a governance reform in 2016. In both institutions, public support is crucial for sustaining their authority. For the UNSC, legitimacy underpins its ability to identify threats to international peace, authorize sanctions and military force, and deploy peacekeeping operations. States seek UNSC authorization precisely because it enhances the perceived legitimacy and domestic popularity of their actions (Grieco et al., 2011; Matsumura and Tago, 2019; Chapman and Reiter, 2004). Moreover, although authoritarian veto power has been foundational to the UNSC, the Council leaves room for granting further decision-making power to authoritarian states than democratic states, satisfying our theoretical scope condition.⁴ Similarly, the IMF’s effectiveness depends in part on public support. When the public is supportive and trusts the institution, governments are more willing to implement IMF-mandated austerity measures, and more likely to elicit favorable market reactions (Shim, 2022; Hübscher, Sattler and Wagner, 2024).

At the same time, the UNSC and the IMF differ along three dimensions that allow us to test our arguments across distinct contexts. First, the UNSC’s primary mission involves main-

⁴The UNSC is not an international organization itself. We nonetheless focus on it because it is where a potential increase in nondemocratic influence is likely to have a significant implication for world politics. The alternative, UN General Assembly, has one-country, one-vote system with universal membership, presenting little room for further enlargement of nondemocratic member states.

taining international security, while the IMF's mandate is to ensure international financial stability. By examining these two IOs, we can assess whether our theory about influential states' regime type has explanatory power across different policy domains. Second, they differ in decision-making structures: the UNSC operates on a one-member, one-vote system with veto powers for the five permanent members, whereas the IMF allocates its voting power based on a country's economic size and financial contribution. Third, the UNSC and the IMF have different public images and therefore enjoy potentially different baseline support. Democratic publics tend to view the UN as a "left-wing, GAL (green, alternative, liberal)" organization, while they view the IMF as a "a right-wing, TAN (traditional–authoritarian–nationalist)" organization (Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2024).⁵

The parallel structure of our experiments in the U.S. and South Korea helps to address the reliance on U.S.-centric data in experimental work in IR (Bassan-Nygate et al., 2025). The choice of the U.S. and South Korea is useful because they differ in three key dimensions. The first is power. The U.S. is a permanent member of the Security Council, whereas South Korea is a rotating member. Therefore, the U.S. public might have different levels of sensitivity to rising authoritarian influence and the resulting power shifts within the UNSC than their South Korean counterpart. The second is each country's history of interaction with the IOs. The U.S. has sought UNSC approval multiple times for its use of force in abroad, while South Korea never has. The U.S. is the IMF's largest financial contributor, while South Korea transitioned from a borrower under one of the IMF's most demanding programs (1997 IMF program) to a creditor country. A recent study shows that the 1997 IMF program still remains salient among Koreans: 57.5% of Korean adults rank the crisis as the most severe in the past 50 years, and 60% report it had a negative impact on their lives (Lim and Jeong, 2017). The third is race and ethnicity. In light of recent finding that the treatment effect of democracy in important IR experiments may have been motivated by ethnocentrism and racialization in U.S. public

⁵Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth and Tallberg (2024) estimates public perceptions around the UN in a general sense without separating them into different sub-organizations. Public's baseline perceptions around the UNSC might be different from that of the overall UN.

samples (Rathbun, Parker and Pomeroy, 2025), testing our theory of regime type in a non-white, non-Western democracy helps guard against such concerns.

5 Study 1: UNSC Governance Reform

5.1 Research Design

In our UNSC studies, we utilize a scenario describing a hypothetical governance reform. We empirically focus on the UNSC for several reasons. First, although the prospect for an actual governance reform at the UNSC may be low, the UNSC is an IO in which a reform would likely be most consequential if such a reform takes place, both in terms of the rearrangement of political power and the normative consequences for international security. Second, public is relatively well informed of the UNSC, making it more likely that information about a reform will be politically salient. Third, there are a number of reform proposals involving diverse countries from different regions. This context provides an excellent setting that allows us to plausibly manipulate country features in a hypothetical scenario.

Our experiments were conducted in the summer of 2025 on nationally representative samples of the U.S. and South Korean publics, using online survey firms Prolific and Embrain, respectively. All respondents completed a pre-treatment questionnaire eliciting pre-existing attitudes toward IOs and domestic political institutions, perceived benefits of economic globalization, partisanship, and a variety of foreign policy dispositions. We also included simple attention checks and retained only those who passed them. The final effective samples were 898 for the U.S. and 695 for South Korea.⁶

After the pre-treatment questionnaire, all respondents read the same background information about the UNSC and its governance structure. Respondents were told:

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is an organization within the United Nations whose mission is to maintain international peace and security. The UNSC

⁶Initially, 900 respondents in the U.S. and 800 respondents in South Korea selected into our survey.

issues resolutions against acts of aggression, imposes sanctions, and deploys military forces for peacekeeping.

The UNSC has five permanent members with the power to block any Security Council resolution: the United States, France, China, Russia, and the United Kingdom. The UNSC also includes ten rotating members that serve two-year terms without such veto power.

Then, we presented respondents with a hypothetical governance reform scenario introducing new permanent members with veto powers. Our treatment manipulated the regime type of the new permanent members, representing a shift in the power balance between democracies and authoritarian states within the Security Council. Half of the respondents were randomly assigned to a condition where the beneficiaries are mostly authoritarian states, while the other half were told that democratic states are the beneficiaries. To mitigate concerns that our regime type treatment unintentionally primes respondents to assume certain country attributes, our scenario held constant beneficiaries' economic and security ties to respondents' home countries, and specified that the beneficiaries come from different regions of the world. The exact treatment wording is as follows:

In response to growing global pressure to better represent rising powers, the UNSC carries out a historic reform in 2030. The reform brings in multiple new permanent members from different regions, giving them the same veto power as the original five. This has shifted the balance of power within the Security Council substantially.

Most of the new members are [democratic/authoritarian] countries with large economies and strong militaries. They trade with the US but are not US allies.

Our main outcome is public support for the UNSC, operationalized as compliance and

withdrawal. Because the U.S. and South Korea interact with the UNSC in different ways, we tailored the measurement to each context. For American respondents, compliance referred to willingness to seek UNSC endorsement for U.S. foreign policy. For South Korean respondents, it referred to willingness to comply with UNSC decisions. Withdrawal, for both countries, captured preferences for exiting the UNSC, arguably a stronger indicator of non-support (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2024). For the U.S., withdrawal would mean relinquishing its permanent member status, while in the South Korean context, it would mean stepping down from its temporary seat or choosing not to seek election in future cycles.⁷ Both compliance and withdrawal were measured on a 7-point Likert scale for assessing agreement with the statements shown in Table 1.

To understand mechanisms, we measured respondents' perceptions of the UNSC's legitimacy: perceived efficacy (benefit), input legitimacy (fairness), and output legitimacy (competence) of the UNSC given the governance reform. We also measured beliefs about the new permanent members on a variety of country-level attributes.

In addition, we included two outcomes to explore broader implications of our argument. First, we measured general support for multilateral cooperation in order to investigate whether the treatment effect extends beyond the context of the UNSC (Engagement). Second, we asked respondent to report how much they would approve or disapprove of a president's proposal to withdraw from the UNSC (Approval).⁸ After answering these questions, respondents filled out a demographic questionnaire.

Finally, we note that while we report here the vignette used in the U.S. study, the experimental design slightly differs in three ways between the U.S. and South Korea. First, the U.S. experiment use a shorter background description of the UNSC to reduce information fatigue. Second, while U.S. respondents read about a reform that brought in multiple new permanent

⁷The vignette specifies that South Korea is a rotating member in 2030. South Korea was an actual rotating member in 2025.

⁸Because partisanship in the U.S. can prime the president's policy stance toward IOs, we randomize the president's party and analyze the aggregated average across partisanship conditions. This randomization only appears in the U.S. experiment. In South Korea, participation in IOs is much less politicized, and the president's party is not a reliable predictor of support for multilateralism (Kwon, 2011).

Concept	Variable	Question
Main outcomes	Compliance	(U.S.): The U.S. must seek UN Security Council support in pursuing its international interests. (S. Korea): In general, South Korea must comply with UN Security Council decisions.
	Withdrawal	It is worth considering pulling [the U.S./South Korea] out of the UN Security Council.
Mechanism	Legitimacy	Being a member of the UN Security Council will benefit my country. The UN Security Council's decisions will be fair and transparent. The UN Security Council will make important contributions to international security.
	State attributes	Corrupt; respectful of human rights; cooperative with other UNSC members; aggressive toward other countries; likely to honor international agreements; promoting free elections abroad; efficient at making policy decisions; friendly to [the U.S./South Korea]; trustworthy.
Exploratory analysis	Multilateralism	Generally speaking, [the U.S./South Korea] should get involved in international organizations to cooperate with other countries.
	Approval	Imagine that in 2030, events happened just as described, and the new [U.S./Korean] President, who is a [Republican/Democrat], promises to withdraw [the U.S./South Korea] from the UN Security Council. How much would you approve or disapprove of this policy?

Table 1: Outcome variables for Study 1. All responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale indicating agreement or approval. They were then binarized for analysis, coded as 1 if the respondent at least somewhat agreed or somewhat approved, and 0 otherwise.

members, Korean respondents are told that the reform added one new permanent member. Third, the South Korean experiment randomly varies whether the new member is culturally similar to South Korea and averages over it in the analysis, while the U.S. experiment holds it constant by specifying that new members are from diverse regions. These choices are intended to strengthen the regime type treatment. We introduced them after a prior study using the same design as the South Korea study generated null results in the U.S., which informed us of the theoretically interesting possibility that the citizens of a superpower like the U.S. may not find the addition of a single nondemocratic state sufficiently consequential.⁹ Because of these differences, we do not compare effect sizes directly across the two countries, focusing instead on within-country effects.

5.2 Results

First, manipulation checks validate our treatments. In the U.S., we measured perceptions of the power balance between democracies and nondemocracies in the UNSC, and our treatment significantly increased beliefs about nondemocracies' influence ($b = 0.579, p < 0.01$). In South Korea, we used a factual manipulation check, and the treatment successfully increased beliefs about the new member's regime type ($b = 0.426, p < 0.01$).

We find strong support for our hypotheses in both the U.S. and South Korea. Figure 2 illustrates the effects of pro-authoritarian versus pro-democracy reforms on compliance and withdrawal (H1). What stands out from the results is the high level of support under a pro-democratic governance reform. About 72% of American respondents and 53% of South Korean respondents believed that their countries must either seek the Council's endorsement for foreign policy or follow the Council's decisions. However, willingness to comply drops by 15 percentage points (pp) in the U.S. ($p < 0.01$) when authoritarian decision-making power increases within the UNSC. This is a substantively large negative effect; its magnitude is com-

⁹All the design changes have been pre-registered. For a detailed discussion of the difference, see Appendix D, where we also report additional previous studies that examined how regime type and anti-IO elite cues might interact.

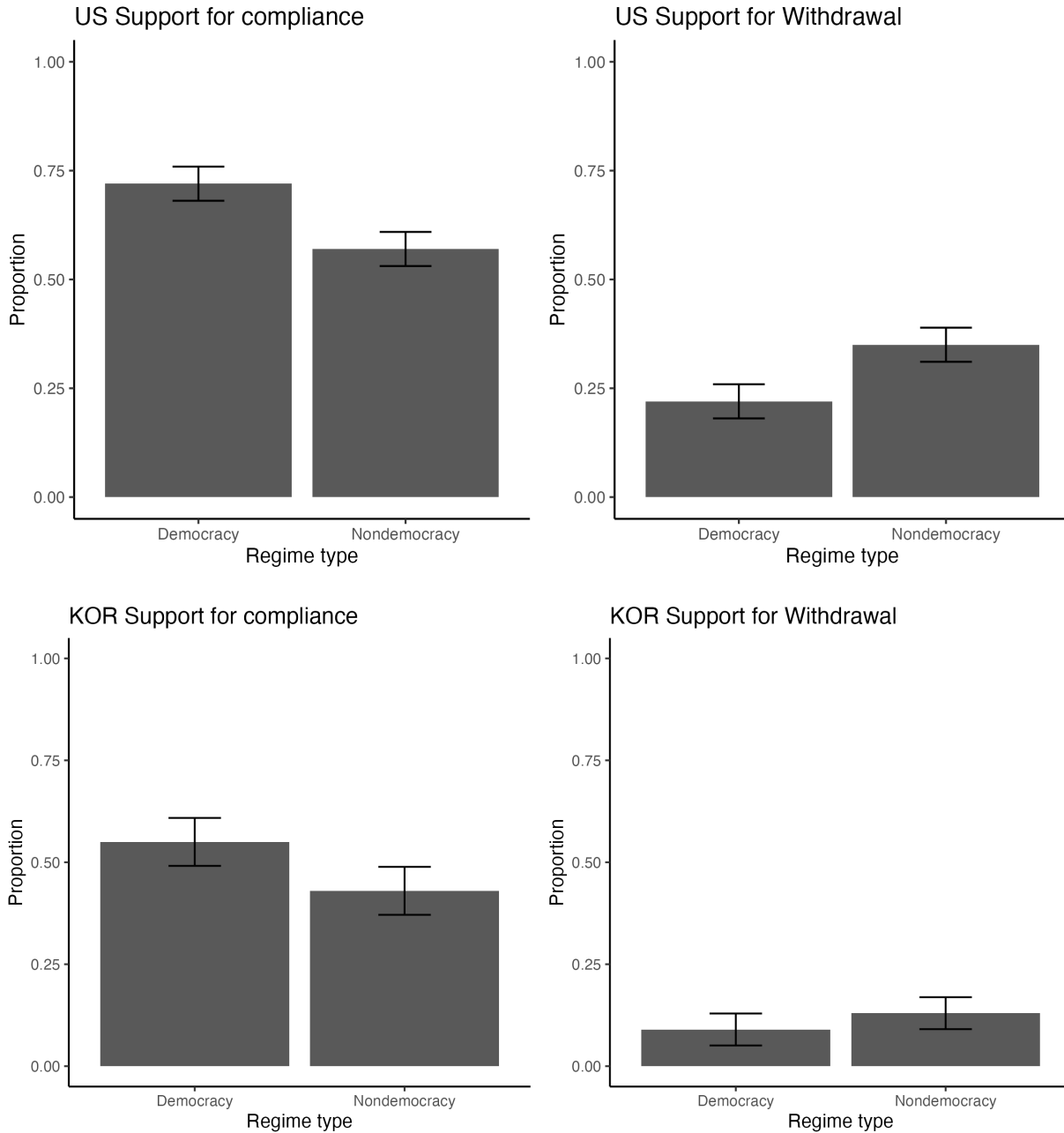


Figure 2: Average public support for the UNSC by treatment group with 95% confidence intervals, for the U.S. sample (top) and the South Korean sample (bottom). The estimates are derived from bivariate OLS regressions.

parable to that of the UN's refusal to authorize the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, when American support for the UN fell by 14 pp to an all-time low (Holyk, 2010). Similarly, willingness to comply drops by 11 pp in South Korea ($p < 0.01$).

Support for withdrawal draws a starker picture. When the UNSC adds authoritarian member states as new permanent members, about 35% of U.S. respondents support withdrawal, representing a 13 pp increase ($p < 0.01$). The treatment also raised withdrawal support for South Korean public by 4.8 pp ($p < 0.05$), representing a 55.3% increase. Considering the diplomatic and security consequences associated with leaving the UNSC, as well as the UNSC's role during the Korean War, it is surprising to see a large treatment effect in South Korea, a middle power confronting existential threats from North Korea.

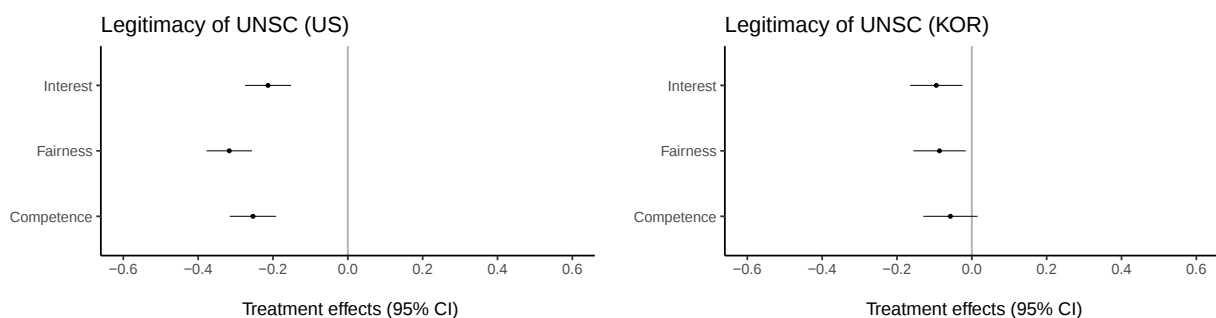


Figure 3: Treatment effects on the perceived legitimacy of the UNSC with 95% confidence intervals. Left: U.S. sample. Right: South Korean sample. The estimates are derived from bivariate OLS regressions.

We find suggestive evidence consistent with the proposed mechanism. We argue that democratic publics view IOs that grant authoritarian members greater decision-making power as less legitimate (H2a) because they hold negative attitudes toward authoritarian states (H2b). To provide evidence for these steps in our framework, we estimate the treatment effect on perceptions of the UNSC's legitimacy.¹⁰ We find strong support for our expectations, even after controlling for the false discovery rate using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure. Figure 3 shows that both American and Korean respondents view the UNSC as less likely to promote their countries' interests and less likely to make fair decisions when authoritarian decision-making power increases, indicating lower input and output legitimacy. The South Ko-

¹⁰We acknowledge that finding the effect of the treatment on mediators and the main outcomes does not provide sufficient evidence for causal mechanism without strong assumptions (Blackwell, Ma and Opacic, 2024). However, such inference could nonetheless be a starting point, informing us that perceived legitimacy *may* be a mechanism. In addition, understanding democratic public's views on authoritarian IO members and IO legitimacy is important in its own right.

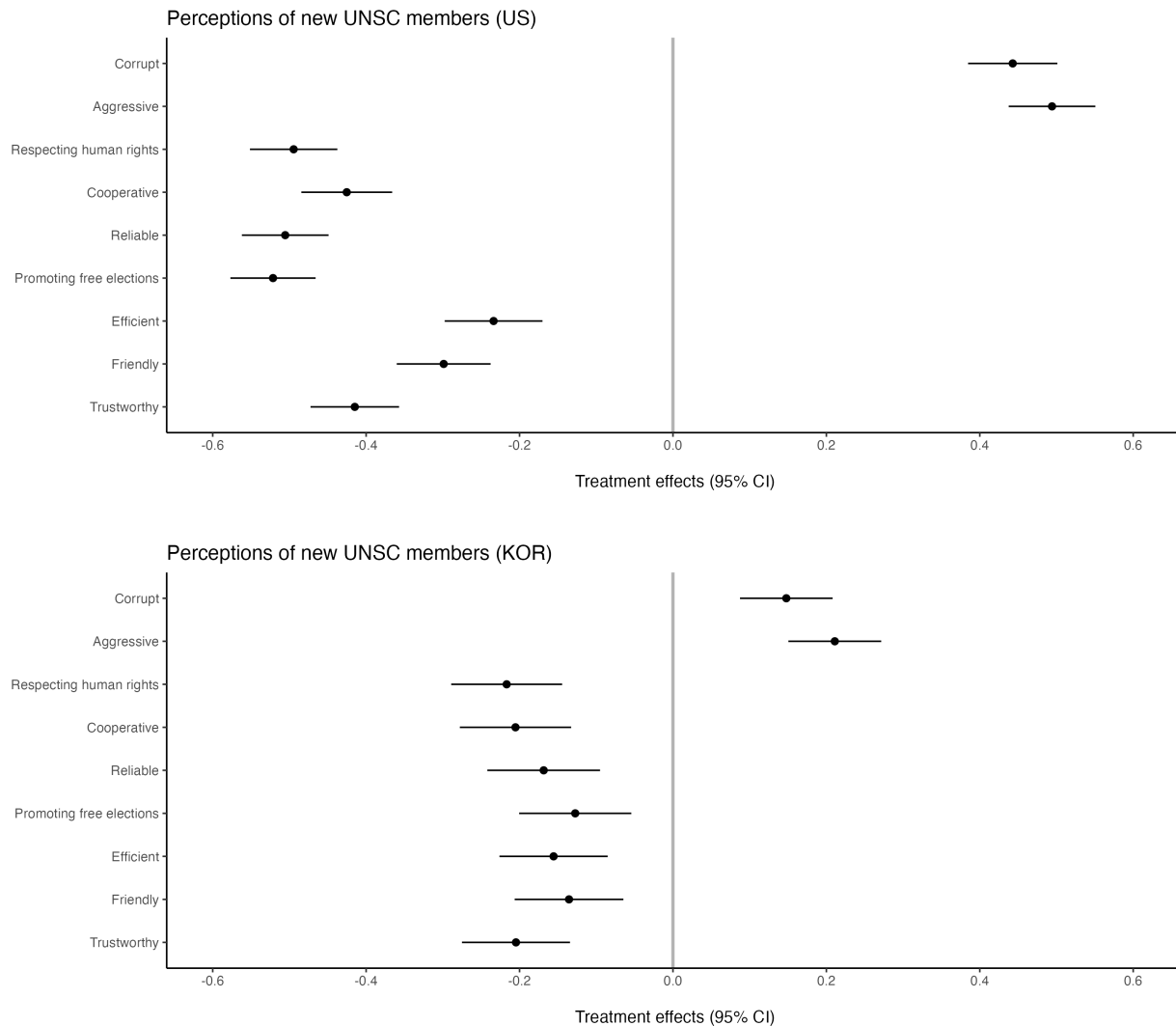


Figure 4: Treatment effects on the perceptions of the new UNSC member with 95% confidence intervals. Top: U.S. sample. Bottom: South Korean sample. The estimates are derived from bivariate OLS regressions.

rean public does not regard the UNSC as less competent under a pro-authoritarian reform ($b = -0.57, p = 0.12$), while the American public does.

Moreover, as depicted in Figure 4, both Americans and South Koreans consistently evaluated new authoritarian permanent members more negatively when they learned about the states' regime type. Across every attribute we measured, respondents judged authoritarian members to be significantly less desirable partners for cooperation: they are seen as more corrupt, more aggressive, less cooperative, less respectful of human rights, less compliant,

less reliable, less likely to promote free elections, less efficient, less friendly, and less trustworthy. This finding is consistent with evidence that democratic citizens hold biased perceptions against autocracies (Barceló and Sheen, 2024).

We address two related alternative explanations. First, respondents might have used regime type as a proxy for security relationship (e.g. assuming a democracy is an ally). Second, the results might have been driven by respondents associating nondemocracies with specific countries that have a negative public image, such as China. To address these concerns, we asked respondents at the end of the survey which countries they had in mind as potential beneficiaries of the UNSC reform, and reported the results in Appendix A. A qualitative reading of the responses indicates that respondents thought of a diverse set of countries: American respondents often mentioned India, Brazil, Germany, Japan, Turkey, North Korea, and Iran, while South Koreans commonly cited Japan, China, and South Korea. Notably, the responses often included nondemocracies with strong security ties (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Turkey for the U.S.) and a democratic adversary (e.g. Japan for South Korea), suggesting that respondents did not automatically assume democracies as allies.

Finally, we note two broader implications of our findings (See Appendix C for full estimates). First, the treatment significantly reduced the American public's ($b = -0.12, p < 0.01$), but not the South Korean public's ($b = -0.02, p = 0.54$), support for general engagement with other IOs. While our theory does not generate predictions about why this might be the case, prior research indicates that citizens tend not to differentiate among specific IOs and rather perceive them as a unitary group (Kaya and Walker, 2014; Bearce and Jolliff Scott, 2019). We thus speculate that empowering authoritarian states in one institution can erode public support for institutionalized multilateralism more broadly. Second, in both the U.S. ($b = 0.12, p < 0.01$) and South Korea ($b = 0.05, p < 0.05$), respondents were more likely to approve of a hypothetical incumbent's proposal to withdraw from the UNSC when they learned that authoritarian states had gained more power.

6 Study 2: IMF Governance Reform

Our first study exploited a hypothetical scenario in the context of the UNSC. Yet, a hypothetical UNSC reform may raise concerns about external validity. To complement Study 1, we turned to the IMF, where an actual governance reform took place.

The IMF's 2016 governance reform provides an important real-world context to test our hypotheses because the IMF's leadership explicitly promoted it as an "important milestone reached to reinforce IMF Legitimacy" (International Monetary Fund, 2011) and a response to longstanding calls for greater equitability. The reform reallocated over 6% of the quota shares from the traditionally dominant Western states to previously under-represented emerging market economies, thereby placing China, Brazil, India and Russia, among the top ten most influential members. China and Brazil were the largest beneficiaries, with each experiencing roughly a 60% increase in its vote shares (China's from 3.81% to 6.08%, and Brazil's from 1.4% to 2.22%).

6.1 Research Design

We fielded Study 2 in October 2025 to effective samples of 1,086 U.S. and 1,150 South Korean adult respondents. The overall structure of the experiment remained similar to Study 1, with two improvements. First, we specified that the reform beneficiaries were "neither adversaries nor formal allies" to rule out the possibility that information about regime type could prime security relations. Second, we added a control condition that described the same governance reform without any regime type information to examine respondents' assumptions about the type of states likely to gain influence in the IMF governance reforms.

After completing pre-treatment questionnaire, all respondents read the following background information about the IMF and their home country's voting power within the IMF:

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is a major international financial organization that helps countries dealing with economic difficulties.

In the IMF, each country's voting power is determined by its financial contributions. Countries with larger contributions can exert influence over important decisions, such as loan recipients and loan sizes. [The United States holds 17.4% of the total decision-making power, making it the most influential member among the IMF's 190 member states. / South Korea holds about 1.8% of the voting power, making it the 16th most influential member among the IMF's 190 member states.]

We then provided information about the 2016 reform, randomly varying the main beneficiaries' regime type.¹¹ One third of respondents were told that many authoritarian member states benefited from the reform, another third that democratic member states benefited, and the remaining third (control group) received information about the reform without any reference to regime type. We held constant the beneficiaries' trade and security ties with the respondents' home country to prevent regime type from working through a causal pathway unrelated to our mechanism. The specific wording is as follows:

In 2016, the IMF reformed its decision-making process to better reflect the interests of rising economic powers.

This reform has allowed many [democratic/authoritarian/blank] countries from different regions to gain substantial voting power within the IMF. One [democratic/authoritarian/blank] country saw its voting share increase by as much as 60%. These beneficiary countries trade with [the US/South Korea]. They are neither adversaries nor allies.¹²

These changes remain in effect as of 2025.

¹¹Our manipulation check suggests that the treatment successfully moved respondents' average beliefs about the power balance between nondemocracies and democracies within the IMF both in the U.S. ($b = 0.663$, $p < 0.01$) and South Korea ($b = 0.429$, $p < 0.01$).

¹²The 2016 IMF reform increased the vote share of China (a nondemocracy) from 3.81% to 6.08%, and that of Brazil (a democracy) from 1.4% to 2.22%. Thus, we would have to use different numbers across treatment groups if we used the vote share. Instead, we mention the *percentage* change of voting power to keep the wording identical between the treatment conditions without deception. This ensures that any effect we identify will be attributed to information about regime type rather than the size of vote share. Note that the phrase, "as much as" has been used across all groups, making it impossible to attribute any results to the use of a particular phrase.

After the vignette, we measured support for compliance and withdrawal from the IMF, both on a 7-point Likert scale. Given the U.S.'s role as the largest shareholder of the IMF, we measured compliance by asking American respondents whether they believe “the U.S. must support the IMF’s overall operations.” In South Korea, which was a borrowing country in the past, we asked whether respondents believe “South Korea must follow the IMF’s economic policy recommendations.” We measured support for withdrawal with the same question in both countries. Like Study 1, we tailored the questions about compliance to each country’s specific relationship with the IMF (McDowell et al., 2024). It would make little sense, for example, for the U.S. Fed to follow policy recommendations from the IMF, nor for South Korea to play a leading role in shaping IMF operations. We are also primarily interested in treatment effects within each country, where country-specific features are held constant, rather than comparing the effect between the U.S. and South Korea.

Similar to Study 1, we measured the perceived legitimacy of the IMF and beliefs about the newly empowered member states on a variety of state attributes associated with reliability and cooperation. We also measured the same exploratory outcomes: general preferences for engagement with other IOs and approval for a president’s proposal to withdraw from the IMF.

6.2 Results

The results are described in Figure 5. Comparing the authoritarian and democracy conditions, we find a significant effect of regime type on support for the IMF, but only among the U.S. public. In the U.S. sample (top panel), pro-authoritarian reform resulted in a 21.9 pp decrease in willingness to comply ($p < 0.01$) and a 17.2 pp increase in willingness to withdraw ($p < 0.01$). These effects are substantively large, representing 32.4% and 82.4% changes. However, neither coefficient reached statistical significance in South Korean sample (bottom panel), suggesting that the South Korean public may weigh information about regime type less heavily than their American counterparts in the IMF context.

The control condition lets us examine what democratic citizens assume about the benefi-

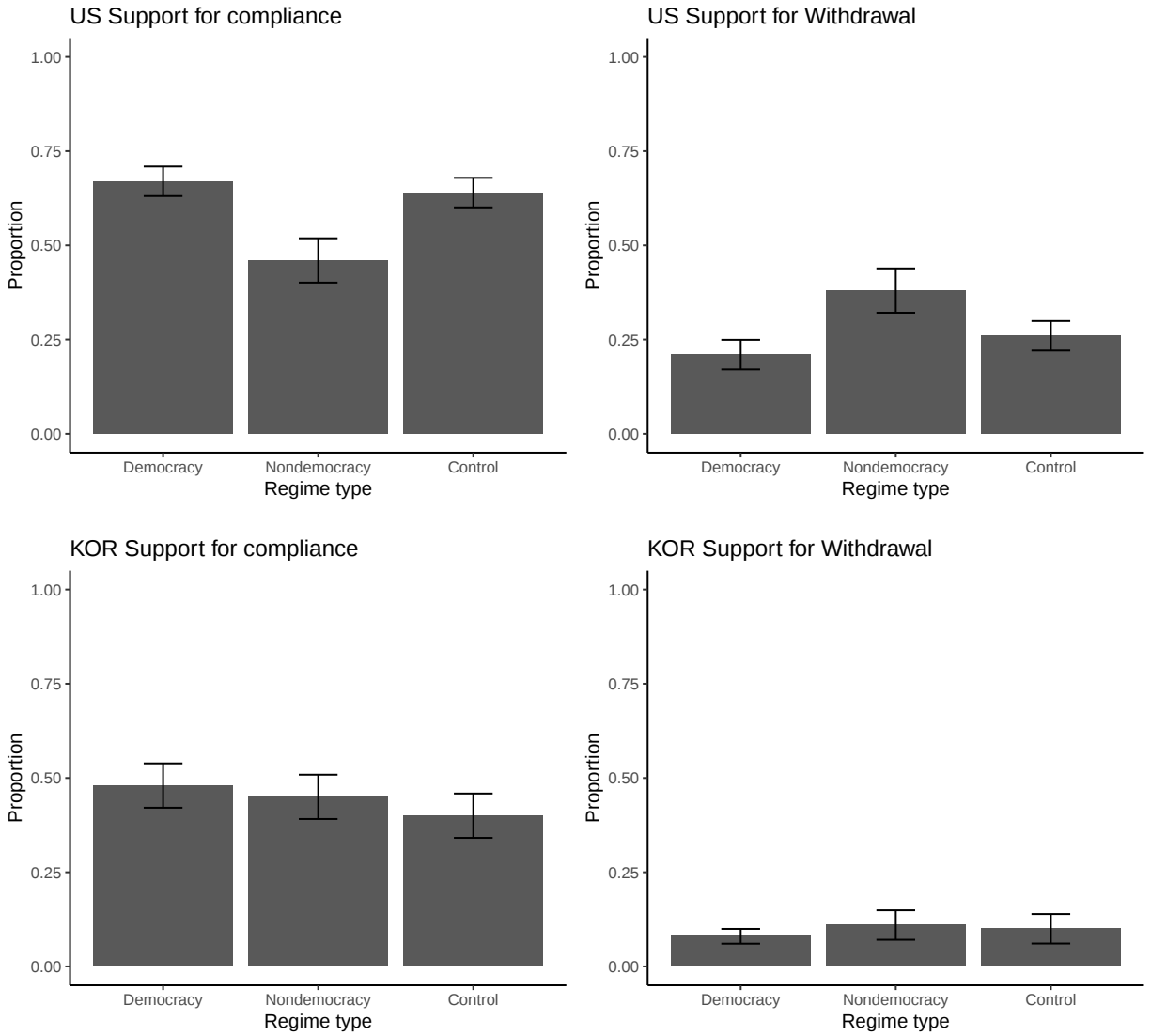


Figure 5: Average public support for the IMF by treatment group with 95% confidence intervals, for the U.S. sample (top) and the South Korean sample (bottom). The estimates are derived from bivariate OLS regressions.

ciaries' regime type. As illustrated in the top panel of Figure 5, the American public appears to have premised their support for IMF governance reform on the assumption that the reform benefits democracies. For both compliance ($p = 0.305$) and withdrawal ($p = 0.091$), respondents told only that “many countries” gained influence supported the IMF at degrees statistically indistinguishable from those specifically informed that democracies gained influence. By contrast, those who learned that it was authoritarian states that benefited most expressed significantly lower support compared to the control condition (compliance: $b = -0.182$, $p < 0.01$, withdrawal: $b = 0.117$, $p < 0.01$). In South Korea, as shown in the bottom panel, respondents in the control group expressed support for compliance that is 8 pp lower than those in the democracy condition ($p < 0.05$), although we observed no statistically significant difference for willingness to withdraw, or when comparing the control and nondemocracy conditions.

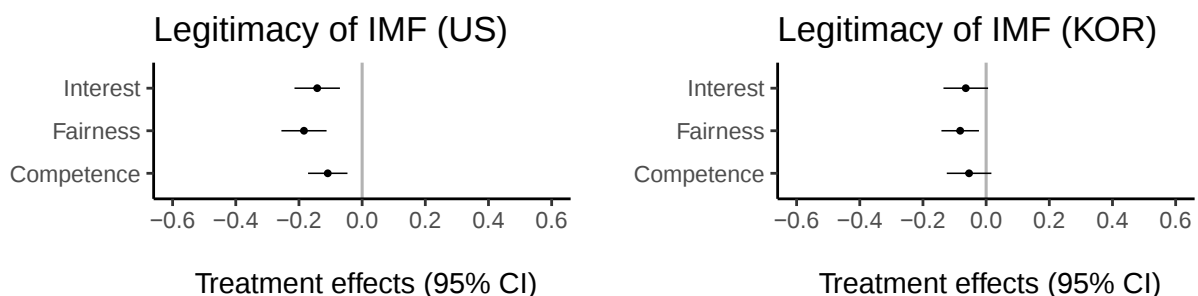


Figure 6: Treatment effects on the perceived legitimacy of the IMF with 95% confidence intervals. The plot compares the nondemocracy condition and the democracy condition. Left: U.S. sample. Right: South Korean sample. The estimates are derived from bivariate OLS regressions.

The results for IMF legitimacy show a similar pattern. Figure 6 presents the effect of the authoritarian treatment relative to the democracy condition. Among American respondents, we observe consistently negative treatment effects on beliefs about national interest, fairness, and competence (all $p < 0.01$). Among South Korean respondents, however, only beliefs about fairness were significantly moved after adjusting the alpha level for multiple hypothesis testing.

We also observe a divergence in perceptions of beneficiaries, as shown in Figure 7.¹³ U.S.

¹³We adjusted the alpha level for multiple comparisons.

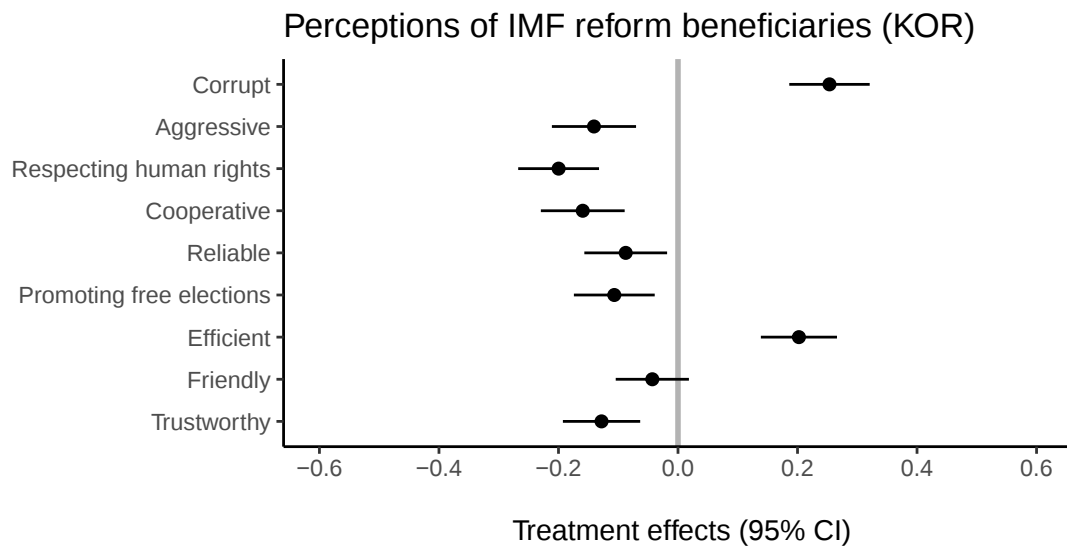
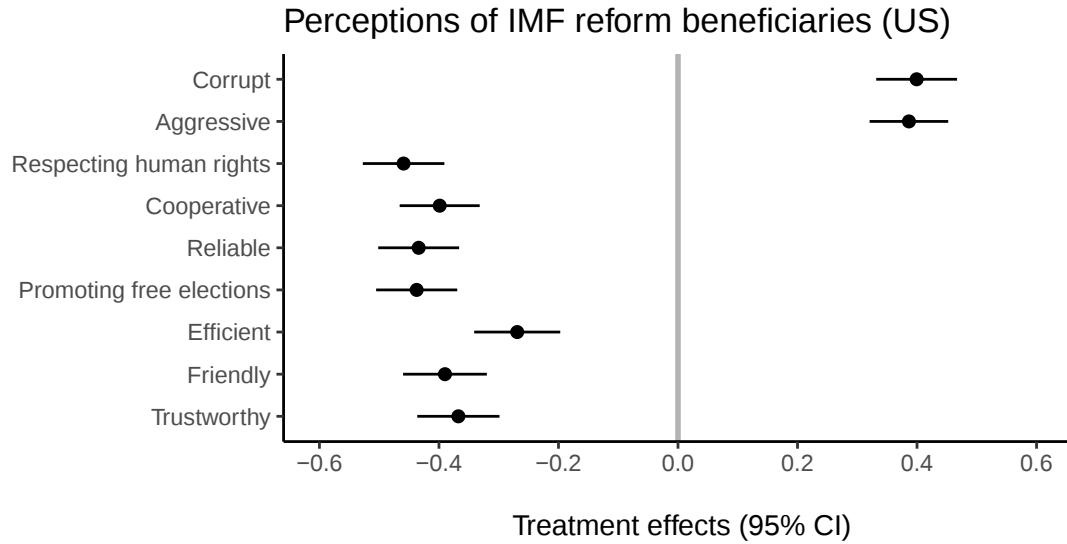


Figure 7: Treatment effects on the perceptions of beneficiaries in IMF with 95% confidence intervals. The plot compares the nondemocracy condition and the democracy condition. Top: U.S. sample. Bottom: South Korean sample. The estimates are derived from bivariate OLS regressions.

respondents attributed markedly more negative traits to nondemocratic beneficiaries relative to democratic ones (all $p < 0.01$). South Korean respondents offered largely similar assessments, but they also viewed nondemocratic member states as *less* aggressive, *more* efficient in policymaking, and no less friendly toward South Korea.

These mixed findings on perceptions of authoritarianism may help explain the null effects on main outcomes in the South Korean sample. If Koreans do not view authoritarian states as less desirable in the IMF context, the empowerment of such states need not diminish the Fund's legitimacy. Two factors may support this assessment. First, South Korea's rapid economic growth under authoritarian rule in the 1960s–1980s may have fostered positive associations between authoritarian governance and economic performance (Kang, 2016, 2017). This accords with our finding that South Koreans view authoritarian states as *more* efficient in the IMF context (See Figure 7). Second, South Koreans' borrower experience may have made salient the division between creditor states and the rest, generating sympathy to the latter. If this is the case, reforms that better represent rising powers would be seen as desirable.¹⁴ The null results, therefore, suggest that regime-type cues may have conditional effects based on a country's historical relationship with a specific IO and country-specific perceptions of authoritarianism within the IO's issue area.

Our exploratory analysis also suggests that a pro-authoritarian reform in the IMF has broader consequences for multilateralism and domestic politics among the U.S. public (See Appendix C). The percentage of American respondents who supported overall engagement with IOs decreased from 72.4% to 61.6% ($p < 0.01$), and approval of a hypothetical president's proposal to withdraw from the IMF increased from 17.8% to 31.5% ($p < 0.01$), upon learning of growing authoritarian influence in the Fund. However, neither effects were statistically significant in South Korea.

¹⁴See Appendix B for the discussion on South Koreans' thoughts on the IMF 2016 reform.

7 Exploring Treatment Effect Heterogeneity

Lastly, we explore heterogeneous treatment effects across three clusters of individual-level predictors of IO support (Bearce and Jolliff Scott, 2019; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2020; Brutger and Clark, 2023). First, we consider material conditions by examining respondents' employment sector and perceived personal economic benefits from globalization. Second, we consider political factors, specifically partisanship and ideology. Third, we evaluate dispositional and demographic factors, including isolationism, general trust in institutions, egalitarianism, ethnocentrism, and college education. We estimate a series of regressions modeling IO support as a function of the interaction between the regime-type treatment and each moderator.

Overall, we find little evidence of treatment effect heterogeneity. Out of 72 interaction coefficients across both studies, only four (all from Study 1) reach statistical significance at the 95% level (See Appendix E). In the American sample, respondents low in ethnocentrism are more supportive of withdrawal from the UNSC following a pro-nondemocracy reform ($b = 0.24, p < 0.05$). In South Korea, respondents who report benefiting from global trade and finance are less willing to comply upon empowerment of nondemocracies in IOs ($b = -0.15, p < 0.05$). Interestingly, education appears to have opposite effects in the U.S. and South Korea on willingness to withdraw. Having a college degree negatively moderates the effect of our nondemocracy treatment among Americans ($b = -0.13, p < 0.05$), but positively moderates the treatment effect in South Korea ($b = 0.13, p < 0.05$).

The overall null heterogeneity results suggest that regime type serves as a cognitive shortcut for a broad swath of democratic publics. Moreover, it is worth noting that authoritarian empowerment appears to have a larger anti-IO effect among individuals whom conventional accounts expect to support globalization and multilateralism, possibly because it conflicts with their prior beliefs about the value of multilateral cooperation.

8 Conclusion

As authoritarian states began to rise, IOs face mounting pressure to adapt their governance structures to reflect the contemporary distribution of global power. This paper demonstrates that democratic citizens are sensitive to such governance reforms partly because regime type of member states is a heuristic cue they use to evaluate IOs' legitimacy. Through four survey experiments, we find that Americans and South Koreans alike are less willing to comply with, and more willing to withdraw from, the UNSC when it admits new authoritarian permanent members. When authoritarian states gain greater influence within the IMF, however, Americans become less supportive of the Fund while South Korean support changes little, suggesting that publics vary in how heavily they weigh democratic procedures and values when evaluating IOs.

We also find that negative reactions to authoritarian influence within IOs are likely driven by democratic citizens' negative perceptions of authoritarian states. Given identical information about economic and security ties, democratic citizens judge authoritarian states to be more corrupt, more aggressive, less reliable, less trustworthy, more prone to rights violations, and illiberal. These judgments make IOs in which nondemocratic states hold influence appear less fair, less beneficial, and less competent in the eyes of democratic citizens. More broadly, our study suggests that increasing representation of authoritarian states in major IOs could foster public discontent toward multilateralism. Such internal power shift may plausibly be linked with recent backlash against globalization in western democracies by creating the perceptions that "the major IOs are no longer on our side."

Additionally, our results show that governance reforms intended to improve representation can reduce legitimacy among particular audiences when the beneficiaries violate those audiences' governance ideals. Governance reforms are often justified as updating representation to reflect shifts in global power, yet in practice this frequently means granting greater authority to authoritarian states. Our findings suggest that such representation comes with real political costs of eroded democratic public support for IOs.

Future work might address some of the limitations of our study. First, we leave open the question of how citizens in nondemocratic regimes perceive pro-authoritarian policies within IOs. Surveying authoritarian public opinion toward these institutions is one promising avenue. In addition, the South Korean null results in the IMF context suggest that citizens do not apply regime-type cues uniformly across all organizations. The effects of the cue may depend on beliefs about the country's historical relationship with it and citizens' perceptions of authoritarianism. Our research design reveals this conditionality but does not adjudicate between these explanations. Moreover, the U.S. results should be interpreted in light of the political context in which the surveys were fielded. In 2025, significant democratic backsliding and sustained elite-driven anti-IO discourse might have made authoritarian influence and IOs unusually salient in the U.S., potentially amplifying the treatment effects. Although the parallel findings from South Korea in the UNSC experiments suggest that the results are not exclusively a product of political discourse in the U.S., replication across additional democracies would strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Finally, our experimental vignette holds constant several important country attributes, including power. While this choice is justified, especially in the UNSC study, because new permanent members are realistically likely to be powerful, future work could examine whether our findings extend to less powerful states in other IO contexts.

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