

When International Organizations Help Domestic Leaders Avoid Blame for Unpopular Policies*

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Abstract

Recent studies on the capacity of international organizations (IOs) to influence state behavior have explored their ability to shift public opinion, a crucial mechanism for changing state policies. While the IPE literature often focuses on conflicts between IOs and domestic leaders, cases where their interests align are understudied. We argue that leaders can leverage IO endorsements to increase support for controversial policies and deflect political blame, but that this strategy's effectiveness depends on the perceived traits of the IOs. Our survey experiment in Japan demonstrates that leaders can cite IO endorsements to reduce opposition to a tax increase, a prototypical case of an unpopular but necessary policy to maintain social welfare programs. Additionally, we find that the effect of IO endorsements is strongest when respondents perceive the IO as reflecting their country's interests, while perceptions of impartiality and expertise, often highlighted in the literature, are less significant. Our findings offer a new perspective on when IOs can influence public opinion and call attention to the positive consequences of the political bias of IOs.

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1 Introduction

A central theme in international political economy (IPE) is the capacity of international organizations (IOs) to influence state behavior despite their lack of enforcement mechanisms. One active research agenda is whether IOs can shape public opinion and intervene in domestic political processes by criticizing status quo state policies. Recent studies have shown that informing citizens of international law violations can decrease their support for various controversial practices, including import restrictions (Chaudoin, 2014), torture (Wallace, 2013), treatment of refugees and asylum seekers (Strezhnev, Simmons and Kim, 2019), border closures during pandemics (Kobayashi et al., 2023), and whaling (Kuzushima, McElwain and Shiraito, 2023). While domestic elites may prefer to ignore recommendations that run counter to their own goals, they may have the incentive to heed IO criticisms that are echoed by the public.

That said, this IPE literature has tended to focus on cases where the preferences of IOs and domestic leaders are in conflict. Specifically, IOs are described as a counterweight to domestic leaders, who may be tempted to pursue policies that are harmful to the international community. To some extent, this reflects longstanding debates in international relations, discussed vividly in Keohane's (1984) *After Hegemony*, on whether multilateral institutions can alter state behavior to manage interstate conflicts and provide more global public goods. In this context, what matters is the ability of IOs to turn attitudes against current or proposed policies through *criticisms*.

Much less is known about the cases of preference alignment, where IOs *endorse* initiatives that would conform domestic policies to international standards or norms but might be unpopular domestically. These are, however, quite common. For example, the United Nations monitors and praises countries and institutions that meet Sustainable Development Goals standards (United Nations, 2024). The World Health Organization (WHO) endorses domestic policies for public health interventions (Reuters, 2020) and the International Monetary Fund for anti-corruption policies (International Monetary Fund, 2024). These examples are theoretically important, because they require us to consider the strategic imperatives of national governments. While criticisms are, to varying degrees, foisted on states, endorsements can be used to serve domestic goals. They can thus offer insights into two questions. First, can IO endorsements nudge public opinion, and therefore be used by governments to deflect blame and legitimize unpopular policies? Second, what traits of IOs make them more persuasive messengers?

The literature on the effectiveness of IO messages provides, at best, only partial answers to both questions. On the first, as we have noted, most studies have focused on criticisms,

not endorsements. In the security domain, UN Security Council (UNSC) authorizations have been shown to mobilize public opinion for the use of force (Chapman, 2009; Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Matsumura and Tago, 2019), counterterrorism activities (Recchia and Chu, 2021), and humanitarian interventions (Wallace, 2019). Yet, it is unclear whether similar mechanisms function across a broader range of IOs' mandates, including trade, finance, environment, and human rights. Moreover, vignettes in most existing survey experiments describe informational cues from IOs but do not mention which domestic actor is delivering that message to the public. Greenhill (2020), for example, is one of the few exceptional studies that examine the effect of IO endorsements on environmental and refugee issues, but it does not consider the role of domestic actors in transmitting the information. In practice, it is unlikely that citizens receive information directly from IOs; instead, message transfer is likely mediated by domestic sources. As a result, these studies do not tell us whether the information is still convincing to voters when delivered by domestic actors, particularly a government that has strategic incentives to persuade the public.

On the second question, most studies focus on one particular IO that specializes in the relevant policy domain, such as the UNSC on security policies and the World Trade Organization (WTO) on import restrictions (Chaudoin, 2014). However, the effectiveness of messages is likely to depend on the perceived traits of the messenger, such as the expertise to produce accurate information, political bias or the lack thereof, and in-group versus out-group status. Experimental designs that consider only one IO do not allow us to identify which traits make them persuasive. While some studies compare the effectiveness of endorsement from different IOs (Greenhill, 2020; Recchia and Chu, 2021), which features of IOs make them trustable information sources are not explicitly tested. Although the degree to which IOs possess such features may seem obvious to scholars, this belief may not necessarily be shared by the public, especially when their messages are cited by a government with its own strategic or partisan goals.

This paper lays out theoretical answers to these questions and tests them empirically. First, we argue that IO endorsements can allow governments to deflect blame and increase public support for necessary but unpopular policies. The prototypical case is when citizens are not fully convinced of the urgency of certain public goods, such as reducing government debt or combating climate change. These often entail immediate costs, but the benefits accrue gradually or manifest far off in the future. There may also be disagreements about the effectiveness and efficiency of the intervention. When IOs' endorsements buttress policies espoused by domestic governments, they may assuage voter concerns about the competence and motives of their leaders.

Second, we hypothesize that the effectiveness of IO endorsements is moderated by two

features of the IO, reflecting different views about IOs in the international relations literature. Specifically, we expect that IO should be more effective in persuading the public when it is perceived to be capable of providing expert knowledge and not be biased towards a particular country or political actor. We term the first feature *capacity* and the second *interests*.

We test these theoretical expectations using a survey experiment in Japan. Its design differs from existing studies in terms of its outcome policy area, treatment design, and measurement of respondents' beliefs about IOs.

Respondents in our experiment are shown a vignette wherein the government hypothetically proposes an increase in the consumption tax rate, after which they are asked about their support for both the government and the policy. The consumption tax is an ideal scenario because of its tension between unpopularity and necessity. Tax hikes are generally unpopular because they impose a direct financial cost on individuals. Consumption taxes, which are analogous to value-added taxes, are particularly disliked by the public because they are more regressive than other taxes, such as on inheritances or capital gains. That said, there is broad domestic agreement that some type of tax increase is necessary due to high public debt and continuing social demand for welfare programs. Economists see the consumption tax more positively than the public, because it is difficult to evade and applied universally, ensuring stable tax revenue. In short, despite the strong public opposition, experts view it as necessary to maintain the social insurance system without further strain on the national debt.

The randomized treatments are the identity of the IOs. In the vignette, treatment-group respondents are informed that the government proposing the tax hike is citing support from one of three IOs: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Group of Seven (G7), and the UN. One novelty of our experimental design is that the endorsement is not conveyed directly to the public by the IO itself. Rather, the IO's support is explicitly referenced by the government as a justification for the policy proposal. This design allows us to test the effectiveness of the IO's endorsement as a persuasive tool for the government, which has clear incentives to use the endorsement strategically. In particular, we test not only whether the IO's seal of approval increases support for the policy, but also whether it reduces blame on the government for the unpopular proposal.

In addition to the average effects of the endorsements, we estimate conditional effects based on respondents' perceptions of the IOs, which is a crucial step to understanding the determinants of IOs' persuasiveness. Specifically, we measure how respondents evaluate each IO's policy expertise, independence from member states' interests generally, and independence from the Japanese government's interest specifically. Estimating the effect of IOs' endorsements moderated by these traits allows us to test whether their persuasiveness is

contingent on the IO's perceived capacity and interest.

The results of our experiment confirm that IO endorsements can reduce backlash against unpopular policies, but our theory on the conditions under which they are persuasive is only partially corroborated. First, the endorsement is most effective if from the G7, followed by the IMF. The UN's endorsement does not have a significant effect on public opinion. Second, this variation is a function of respondents' evaluations of the IOs. While we expected that the message would be most persuasive when people perceive the endorser as an expert, politically neutral actor, we did not find supportive evidence for these hypotheses. Instead, endorsements were most influential on those who believed that the pertinent IO reflected the Japanese government's interests. These suggest that IO endorsements are most useful to domestic policymakers when people perceive the IOs to be sympathetic to national interests, rather than detached from it.

Our study contributes to the literature on IOs' influence on public opinion and the functions of IOs more broadly. First, we provide empirical evidence that membership in an IO can benefit domestic policymakers by providing a persuasive tool to shift public sentiment. IOs' endorsements can help policymakers alleviate voter backlash against economic policies that are unpopular, complementing earlier studies that examine the mobilizing use of IOs on security matters. Second, and more importantly, our results indicate the need for research on additional dimensions of IOs that may be important for their functions. According to conventional wisdom in IPE, IOs' credibility as providers of global public goods is damaged if they are manipulated by certain member states for their own interests. Yet, our experimental results suggest that citizens may be more likely to accept IOs' recommendations when they perceive the IOs as reflecting their own state's goals. While one experiment alone cannot give a definitive answer, the political bias of IOs may be a virtue, not a vice, under certain conditions.

2 Theory

2.1 How Leaders Use IOs to Persuade the Public

Government leaders must occasionally make controversial decisions. For example, a preferred policy may be unpopular because its short-term costs are steep despite sizable long-term benefits, such as gas taxes to reduce pollution. Even if the action is not controversial, the leaders themselves may be mistrusted due to their partisanship or perceived incompetence. When facing such headwinds, one strategic option is to use endorsements from external actors whom voters see as credible to deflect blame or marshal support for the action.

One important source of endorsements is international organizations (IOs). To take a re-

cent case, the Japanese government discharged treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant, which suffered major damage from the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, in 2023. This was deeply controversial, both domestically and internationally, because of concerns about its effects on public health and regional aquaculture. In order to justify its policy, the Japanese government repeatedly cited endorsements from the International Atomic Energy Agency that the water was safe to be released into the Pacific Ocean.¹

That said, whether this strategy of relying on IO endorsements is actually effective in pacifying public opposition is not well understood. Many studies suggest the plausibility of the blame deflection argument, but few provide empirical evidence about the effect of IO endorsement on public opinion. The IPE literature provides theories about how leaders can strategically use IOs to implement necessary but unpopular policies. Membership in trade agreements can strengthen the state's credible commitment to the domestic implementation of open trade policies by providing political shields at economic downturns (Mansfield and Milner, 2012). In the field of finance policy, the conditionality attached to IMF loans, such as austerity measures, provides a shield allowing governments to deflect political blame by attributing the unpopular policy to external forces (Vreeland, 2003). Overall, joining IOs helps leaders make their commitment credible by increasing the cost of renegeing (Simmons, 2000) and send reassuring signals to international investors (Gray, 2009).

Likewise, an extensive literature on blame-shifting or blame-avoidance points to the possibility that IOs can help governments avoid domestic backlash. Most studies on blame-shifting focus on cases where governments deflect responsibility on to domestic actors, such as former leaders (Shea and Poast, 2020), subnational governments (Beazer and Reuter, 2019), and courts (Whittington, 2005), but some find that international actors can also be a useful scapegoat, particularly the European Union (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2023) and the IMF (Vreeland, 2003; Fujita, 2023).

By referencing endorsements from IOs, domestic leaders may be able to avoid popularity loss when implementing unpopular policies that are necessary short-term evils to avoid worse-off long-term outcomes. Despite the plausibility of this argument, however, causal evidence as to whether this blame-shifting strategy actually works is limited, except for Aytaç (2021), which compares the effectiveness of different blame-avoidance strategies in Turkey.

We are not the first to highlight the importance of domestic leaders' incentives when considering the effect of IOs on public opinion. Strezhnev, Simmons and Kim (2019) find that IO *criticisms* of international law violations can undermine public support for domestic elites, even when those leaders mount counter-arguments to justify their actions. Our study

¹Nikkei Asia, (July 4, 2023): <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Environment/IAEA-gives-Japan-approval-to-release-Fukushima-water-into-Pacific>

differs from theirs in that it focuses on how leaders can voluntarily and strategically reference *endorsements* from IOs to minimize political backlash. A more closely related literature finds that UN endorsements can increase public support for the use of force (Chapman, 2009; Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012) and military coalitions (Recchia and Chu, 2021). However, these do not fully explore whether leaders can use such endorsements strategically to increase public support in non-military context, which are more common, or when and how differences among IOs can alter the value of their endorsements.

2.2 When IO Endorsements May Work

When examining whether domestic leaders can utilize information from IOs to persuade the public, a natural question arises: under what circumstances does this strategy prove effective? One dimension is priors about the policy intervention itself. It may be easier to nudge public opinion on a low-salience issue that many citizens are neutral about than on one that most stringently oppose. A second dimension, which we focus on in this paper, is attributes of the endorse that lead citizens to believe the information presented. The prevailing consensus suggests that individuals are more inclined to believe information originating from sources they trust, but what determines that trust? We examine two factors: does the source have the capacity to provide accurate information, and does it have—or is it seen as having—the incentive to provide impartial information? The former depends on whether the information source has enough expertise to evaluate the policy effectively, while the latter depends on the perceived degree to which that information is impartial to political interests. We label these two factors as *capacity* and *interests*, and elaborate on them below.

2.2.1 Capacity: Does the Endorser Have Enough Expertise?

First, belief about the endorser’s expertise is an important factor in successful persuasion. As documented in the political communication literature, whether the endorser is seen as knowing more about the policy than the recipient is a necessary condition for persuasion (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). If the recipient is skeptical about the ability of endorsers to accurately evaluate the policies, any endorsements or criticisms are unlikely to be convincing.

Do IOs satisfy this requirement? Many constructivists would answer yes, insofar as the authority of IOs lies in their expertise (Haas, 1992). In particular, economic IOs, such as the IMF and the World Bank, are staffed by professional economists who share a set of common frameworks to provide solutions to common problems (Broome and Seabrooke, 2017; Littoz-Monnet, 2017). Even in the absence of enforcement mechanisms, IOs’ knowledge and expertise are important assets in influencing states’ behavior.

Nevertheless, the public may not believe in the capacity of IOs. Various empirical studies have demonstrated that the public’s perception of expertise does not necessarily mirror that

of the experts themselves. For example, public beliefs about economic policies are not easily changed by professional economists' advice (Sapienza and Zingales, 2013). Likewise, public health professionals' recommendations do not matter to respondents who do not acknowledge their expertise (Heinzel and Liese, 2021). The distinction between subjective and objective degrees of expertise is particularly relevant in our context, because ordinary citizens are unlikely to be familiar with IOs. In short, despite scholarly agreement about the high degree of IOs' expertise, whether the public agree remains an open question.

2.2.2 Interests: Does the Endorser Have an Incentive to Convey Sincere Information?

Even if the endorser is seen as having the expertise to evaluate the policy, the recipient may not be persuaded if they suspect that the information is distorted by political interests. In other words, the recipient may believe that the endorser knows what is best, but not that the endorser is telling the truth. This is likely to be problematic on the international stage, as the public may not be familiar with IOs in the first place. They may also suspect that IOs are driven by the self-interest of their member states in two ways: the politicization of IOs and the alignment of interests between the endorser IO and the target government.

First, many IO scholars have noted that IOs are controlled by the interests of major states. Davis and Wilf (2017) argue that accession to the WTO is determined by diplomatic ties rather than the degree of trade liberalization, suggesting that these IOs are discriminatory clubs. The politicization of IOs is often blamed as a cause of inefficiencies in the decision-making process and resultant policy outcomes. Lipsy and Lee (2019) show that political distortions within the IMF produces more generous conditions and more frequent lending to allies of the United States and European countries. In short, IOs may be less collections of impartial experts than political organizations whose decisions are biased in favor of major powers. If these views are shared by the public, citizens may be skeptical about any IO endorsements, even if they do not doubt the IOs' capacity to produce accurate information.

The second consideration is the alignment of interests between the IO and the target government. When the two do not share common interests, the former's endorsement may look more credible because of perceived impartiality. By contrast, when the political interests of the endorser and the government are deeply entwined, citizens may suspect that they are colluding to manipulate public opinion. For example, Chapman (2009) shows that the UN Security Council's authorization of the use of force is most effective when its members are ideologically distant from the U.S. government. Analogous cases are found in research on bureaucratic delegation in domestic politics. When the government cannot credibly commit to a policy, regulatory agencies whose actions are legally shielded from the government can pro-

vide additional credibility (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016). Likewise, the independence of central banks ensures that monetary policy is not subject to political business cycle manipulation (Alesina and Stella, 2010). In summary, even if the public acknowledges that IOs have the capacity to provide high-quality policy recommendations, concerns about the politicization of IOs and potential collusion between IOs and the government may disqualify them as a trust-worthy information source.

3 Research Design

To examine whether—and when—IOs can help leaders persuade domestic publics or avoid political backlash, we conduct a survey experiment to test the conditions under which IOs are seen as credible interlocutors. In practice, it is unlikely that multiple IOs make identical policy recommendations at the same time, making it difficult to estimate endorsement effects using observational data. To overcome this limitation, we design an experiment that randomly assigns policy endorsements from different IOs, and then test whether these improve support for the government’s proposal for a highly controversial policy: raising taxes. Our research plan, including the survey instrument and methodology, were pre-registered with Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP, ID: 20230618AA).

3.1 Case Context

Japan, like many advanced-industrialized societies, faces a linked demographic and fiscal crunch. Lengthening life expectancies have steadily increased healthcare and pension costs, even as declining fertility rates have caused the labor force to shrink. In addition, sluggish economic growth since the mid-1990s has caused poverty rates to rise (Shirahase, 2021), generating more stress on automatic fiscal stabilizers such as unemployment insurance and pension costs. The share of social security contributions in GDP has risen from 7.5% in 1990 to 13.3% in 2021, ranking it well above the OECD average of 9.0% (OECD, 2023*a*). This fiscal expansion has been financed by ever-expanding government debt, which sat at 254% of GDP in 2022, far outstripping the OECD average of 89% (OECD, 2023*b*).

Given growing budget constraints, the Japanese government has repeatedly floated the need to raise tax rates. Specifically, it has targeted increases to the consumption tax, which is akin to value-added taxes (VAT) in Europe and goods and services taxes (GST) in Canada and Australia. A 3 % consumption tax was first adopted in 1989, but its rate has steadily risen over the course of three decades, reaching 10 % in 2019.² Consumption taxes have a number of desirable properties compared to other revenue mechanisms. Because it is assessed

²A lower rate of 8 % is set for medical products, as well as food and drink consumed at home. See Tanaka (2022) for a comprehensive discussion of the politics underlying the consumption tax.

on every transaction, whether for final or intermediate products, it is difficult to evade and does not discriminate across economic activities, thus minimizing market distortions. Revenues also tend to be more stable across the business cycle and applies relatively uniformly across age groups, unlike corporate or personal income taxes. Furthermore, the current consumption tax rate in Japan is still significantly lower than that in European countries, making further increases justifiable. In fact, the consumption tax has become the backbone of the Japanese budget, with its revenue share increasing from 4.6% in 1990 to 23.4% in 2023 (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

The public, however, does not share this ardor. Newspaper opinion polls have consistently shown that a majority disfavors not only a consumption tax increase, but also the consumption tax itself (McElwain and Noble, 2016). For one, consumption tax hikes directly increase the prices paid by consumers, and so have properties similar to inflation. For another, because the poor consume a higher share of their income, the consumption tax is criticized as being more regressive than capital gains or inheritance taxes. At the same time, there are disagreements about *how* added tax revenue should be spent, with more support for expanding social insurance programs than on the redemption of government bonds (Kawata, McElwain and Nakabayashi, 2023).³

Despite possible public opinion headwinds, further consumption tax rate increases are very much on the political agenda. They have long been backed by the Ministry of Finance (Kato, 2003), and they enjoy the support of major business federations, who prefer it to increases in corporate or payroll taxes (Tanaka, 2022). The government also may not have the luxury to defer or delay taxes indefinitely. For one, the Bank of Japan began to loosen its cap on yields on Japanese government bonds in August 2023, and as a result, the cost of borrowing has begun to rise (Nikkei Asia, 2023). For another, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's administration has pledged to significantly boost defense expenditure and childcare budgets.

These factors combine to make the consumption tax hike a good case for testing the effect

³There has been limited resistance from interest groups regarding any proposed consumption tax hikes, with major economic organizations and labor unions expressing support. Notably, the Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) has consistently advocated for further increases. In 2018, just a year before the scheduled increase from 8% to 10%, it strongly recommended adhering to the planned tax hike, asserting that it would contribute to a sustainable, generational social security system and fiscal stability (Keidanren, 2018). Labor unions also backed the increase to 10%, contingent on the introduction of measures to benefit low-income individuals (Japan Trade Union Confederation, 2015). Furthermore, while political parties have differed on the type of tax increase to implement (e.g., the Japan Communist Party advocates raising estate taxes and corporate and individual income taxes (Japanese Communist Party, 2012)), the general consensus, even among opposition parties, has been for the necessity of some type of tax increase. The increase to 5% in 1997 was adopted under a coalition government of the LDP (center-right), Japan Socialist Party (leftist), and New Party Sakigake (centrist). Similarly, the increase to 10% was agreed to by the Democratic Party (center-left), LDP, and Komeito (centrist) (Tanaka, 2022).

of IO endorsements. First, its issue salience was high in October 2023, when we conducted our experiment. Respondents were thus making evaluations with some awareness of the pros and cons. Second, domestic elites believe the policy is necessary but also know it is unpopular. As such, their reliance on external support to make their case is reasonably realistic.

Concretely, our survey instrument is designed as follows.⁴ Respondents are first informed that the Japanese government is considering an increase in the consumption tax rate, through the following prompt:

“The Japanese government raised the consumption tax from 8% to 10% starting from October 1, 2019, with the aim of supporting the existing social security system. Additionally, there are plans to further increase the consumption tax to 12% in the future. The government has explained that the purpose of this tax hike is to decrease the ratio of public debt (government borrowing) in the overall fiscal landscape.”

Next, they are asked to evaluate the government as well as the proposed tax raise on a seven-point Likert scale, using the following questions, which serve as the dependent variables:

DV1: “If the government made such an announcement, how would your support for the current administration change?”

DV2: “Do you support this consumption tax increase?”

Baseline support to both questions was low, which is not surprising given general public antipathy to tax increases. Among respondents in the control group, 66.2% opposed and 15.5% favored the tax increase, while 64.7% opposed and 7.4% favored the proposing government (average means of 2.7 and 2.6 on the original 7-point scale, respectively). Please refer to Appendix Section B for the full distributions.

3.2 Treatment

Prior to asking respondents’ opinions about the two outcomes, we randomly assign endorsements of the tax increase from various IOs. By comparing the control group with the treatment groups, we test the effect of IO endorsements on support for the policy and the government. Our underlying hypotheses are as follows.

H1.1: People are more likely to *support an increase in the consumption tax rate* when it is endorsed by international organizations than when it is not endorsed.

⁴Please refer to Appendix Section A for the full survey instrument.

H1.2: People are more likely to *support the government* when the policy is endorsed by international organizations than when it is not endorsed.

We chose three IOs as endorsers: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations (UN), and the Group of Seven (G7). Differences between these three IOs and the control group allow us to assess whether and why their persuasiveness varies. While the universe of IOs is large, we chose these three for their theoretical relevance.

First, we believe that the IMF is the most important IO in our context, partly because it is one of the most widely discussed IOs in the IPE literature theoretically, and also because it is the most likely to endorse a tax increase in practice. In fact, when Japan raised the consumption tax from 8% to 10% in 2019, the IMF praised the policy because it would contribute to the reduction of Japan’s mounting public debt.

The G7 was chosen because of its strong influence on financial policy-making in East and South East Asian countries since the Asian financial crisis (Walter, 2011). For example, former Prime Minister Naoto Kan proposed a consumption tax to 10 % in 2010 in part due to the G7 meeting in Canada, when European finance chiefs made him acutely aware of the severity of the debt crisis in Greece during the Global Financial Crisis. In addition, the G7 has high public visibility. Unlike the IMF, the G7 serves as a tool to demonstrate to the domestic public that domestic leaders are addressing national interests on the global stage (Bonhomme, 2014). Relatedly, Japan hosted a high-profile G7 meeting in May 2023, two months before our survey. As such, we believe that public awareness of the G7 is highest among the three IOs.

Finally, we included the UN because it has been studied extensively. While the existing literature has shown that UN endorsements are effective in certain domains, including the use of force, deforestation, refugees, and human rights, it is unclear whether they matter for economic policy. We expect that endorsements from the UN on tax increases are unlikely to be as persuasive as from the IMF or the G7, because citizens may not see the UN as specialists on economic issues. However, the UN was used as one treatment arm in order to test the scope conditions of our argument empirically.

H2.1: Endorsement from the *IMF* has a stronger effect than endorsements from the G7 or the UN.

Respondents in the treatment groups read the following sentences after reading the prompt. Those in the control group did not see such information.

“Furthermore, the Japanese government has highlighted that the [*IMF (International Monetary Fund) / United Nations (UN) / Group of Seven (G7)*] has

expressed praise for the consumption tax increase, recognizing its contribution to Japan’s fiscal reconstruction.”

We should note that these three IOs are reasonably familiar to Japanese citizens. Our survey included an instrument that asked respondents to evaluate their knowledge of the IMF, the G7, and the UN. More than 80% answered that they had at least heard of or knew some details about these organizations. While self-reported answers undoubtedly have some bias, we believe that there is no *prima facie* reason to assume that these IOs are obscure institutions to our sample population. The full distribution of responses can be found in Appendix Section F.

3.3 Moderators

Comparing treatment effects across different IOs allows us to examine whose endorsements are more persuasive. However, to test our hypotheses about the perceived expertise and interests of IOs directly, it is necessary to measure those subjective beliefs explicitly. Therefore, our survey instrument asked respondents to evaluate their perceptions of the three IOs prior to treatment assignment.

To estimate whether respondents believe that the endorsing IOs have sufficient capacity to evaluate the proposed policy, we use the following question: “*Do you think the following international organizations have expertise in finance and economics (have detailed knowledge and can provide effective advice)?*” Using this question, we test the following hypothesis:

H2.2: Endorsements from international organizations that are *perceived to be more expert* have a stronger, positive effect.

We also measure the extent to which respondents believe that information from IOs is distorted by political interests in two ways: (1) whether a given IO is viewed as a group of experts or as political actors, and (2) whether IOs’ decisions are seen to reflect the interests of the Japanese government. First, we examine where respondents stand on two conflicting views of the IMF, the G7, and the UN. For each, the first statement read, “[*The IMF/G7/UN is a group of independent experts separate from the interests of each country*”, and the second statement read it is “*a group of politicians representing the interests of each country*.” Respondents were asked to evaluate how close their opinion is to these statements using a 7-point discrete scale.⁵ This question will be used to test the following hypothesis:

⁵The 7-point scale is: “*Very close to the first*,” “*Close to the first*,” “*Somewhat close to the first*,” “*Neither close to the first nor the second*,” “*Somewhat close to the second*,” “*Close to the second*,” and “*Very close to the second*.”

H2.3a: Endorsements from international organizations that are *perceived to be politically independent from member states’ interests* have a stronger, positive effect.

Second, we measure the extent to which respondents believe that the IOs’ decisions reflect the interests of the Japanese government. If they believe that the IOs and the Japanese government share the same interests, they may doubt the impartiality of IO endorsements. We asked respondents to rate the extent to which they think the intentions of the Japanese government are reflected in the decisions of the endorsing IOs. We collapse the 7-point scale into three categories: “Japan’s interest reflected,” “Neither,” and “Not reflected.” This question is used to test the following hypothesis:

H2.3b: Endorsements from international organizations that are *perceived to be politically independent from the Japanese government’ interests* have stronger, positive effects.⁶

3.4 Sampling

Our survey experiment was conducted on July 3rd–6th, 2023. Respondents were recruited through *Cross Marketing*, one of the largest survey vendors in Japan. We employed quota sampling by age (19-70), gender, and prefecture to match the most recent national census distribution. 7871 respondents participated in the survey, and the final sample size in our analysis, after excluding incomplete or irregular responses, was 6391. Each treatment and control condition has an equal probability of assignment, and the randomization was blocked based on the respondents’ party identification (supporters of the LDP, of other parties, or independents) to ensure that the treatment assignment was balanced in terms of political orientation. All conditioning variables used in our analysis were asked prior to the treatment assignment.

4 Results

The results of our survey experiment can be summarized as follows. First, we find that endorsements from the IMF and the G7, but not from the UN, had positive effects on both government approval and support for the consumption tax increase. However, we failed to

⁶In the pre-registration document, we hypothesized a combination of H2.3a and H2.3b that wrote, ‘Endorsements from international organizations that are *perceived to be politically independent from government interests* has a stronger effect,’ and used the two questions to test this single hypothesis. However, we decided to separate these into two sub-hypotheses to make it clearer that we are testing two different aspects of political independence, one from the member states in general, and one from the Japanese government in particular.

confirm our hypotheses regarding the perceived expertise and independence of IOs. We originally expected that the endorsement effect would be stronger among those who perceive the endorsing IOs as independent experts insulated from political influence. However, our results show that the endorsement effect is greater among those who perceive the endorsing IOs as actors who share a common interest with the target government. Exploratory analyses reveal that the endorsement effect is stronger among those who have favorable attitudes towards the endorsing IOs and support the government parties. These results suggest that, contrary to our expectations, perceived interest alignment may be more important in predicting the success of the IOs' endorsements.

4.1 Average Treatment Effect

We present the estimated average treatment effect of endorsements from IOs on two outcome variables: support for the government and for the proposed policy. The raw distribution of the outcome variables for each treatment group is presented in Appendix Section B. Figure 1 shows the average treatment effect (ATE) estimates of the endorsement from the G7, the IMF, and the UN. The x-axis shows the estimated size of treatment effects, computed by difference-in-means with block-randomization adjustment. The square symbols are point estimates of the effect on government support, and the triangle symbols are those of policy support. The horizontal lines represent the 95% confidence intervals, with black denoting statistical significance and gray indicating no significance at the 95% confidence level. “BH ✓” indicates that the null hypotheses are rejected even after multiple testing correction by the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure (Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995).

We find that endorsement from the G7 has a positive and statistically significant effect on both outcomes. It has the largest estimated effect size (0.173 on government support, and 0.178 on the policy) and is distinguishable from zero at the 95% confidence level. The IMF's endorsement also has a positive and statistically significant effect on government approval but not on policy approval, although the difference between the two is marginal. The effect estimates for the IMF are the second largest among the three treatment arms (0.109 on government support, and 0.112 on the policy). While whether to reject the null hypotheses of zero effect is ambiguous since the p-value is 0.04 for the government support outcome and 0.06 for the policy outcome, we interpret them as weak but positive evidence of the effectiveness of IMF endorsements. By contrast, the UN's endorsement does not appear to impact either outcome. The effect estimates of the UN endorsement are the smallest (0.07 on the government support, -0.01 on the policy), and it is clear that we cannot reject the null hypothesis of zero effect. Overall, our results suggest that endorsements from the G7 and the IMF have positive effects while those from the UN do not.

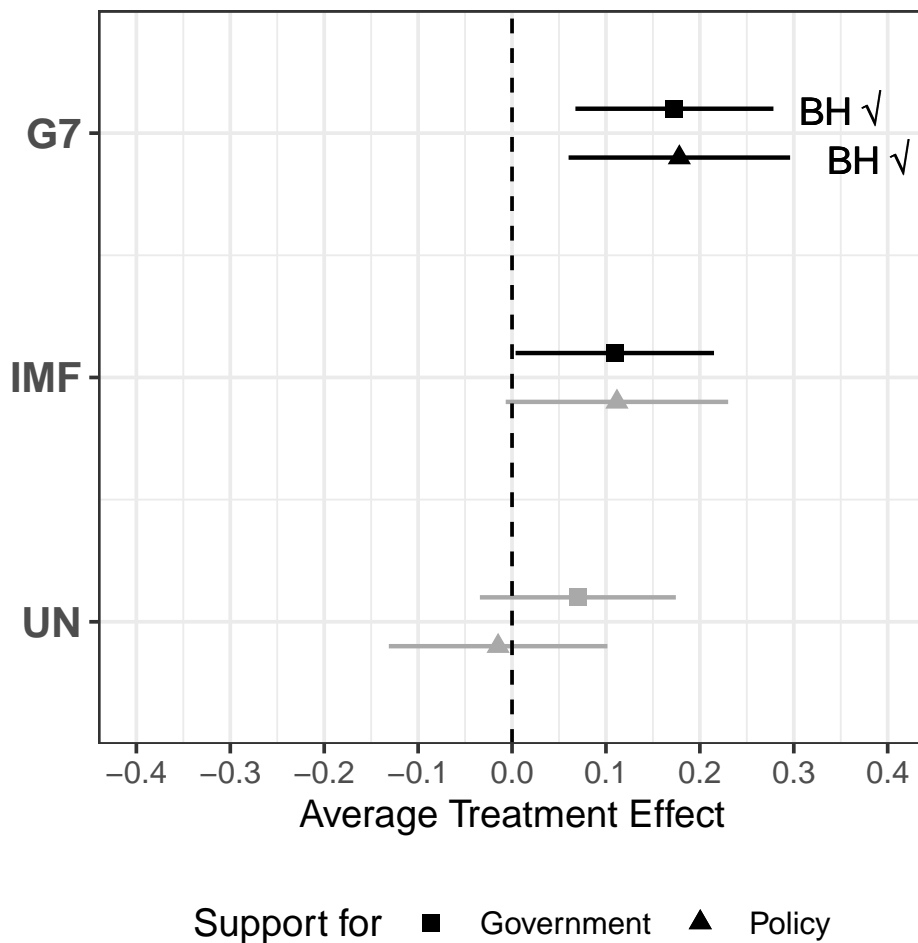


Figure 1: **Average Treatment Effect**

This figure shows the treatment effect estimates of endorsements from three international organizations: the G7, the IMF, and the UN. The effects are estimated by difference-in-means between those who were shown that the tax increase is endorsed by these IOs (treated groups) compared to those who were not shown any endorsement (control group). Randomization is blocked by party identification. The outcome variables are government approval (square symbol) and support for the proposed policy to increase consumption tax (triangle symbol). The x-axis shows the size of the treatment effect estimates, and the y-axis specifies the name of the international organization for each treatment group. Horizontal lines represent the 95% confidence intervals, with black lines indicating statistical significance and gray lines indicating no significance.

These results partially confirm our hypotheses but not completely. The positive effects of the G7 and the IMF treatment are consistent with our expectation that endorsements from IOs have a positive effect on public opinion about the tax hike (H1.1), as well as approval for the proposing government (H1.2). However, we had originally predicted that

the IMF’s endorsement would be most effective, not the G7 (H2.1). We explore reasons for this disconnect in the next subsection. By contrast, the null effect of the UN treatment is consistent with our prior expectations that not all IOs can sway public opinion in the same way. While existing studies show that UN endorsements can change public opinion on military, human rights, and environmental issues (Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Recchia and Chu, 2021; Greenhill, 2020), our finding implies that it may not be as effective when it comes to economic issues. Since we fail to observe any significant effects from the UN treatment, we focus on the IMF and the G7 treatments in the following sections; the results about the UN treatment are presented in Appendix Section E.

4.2 Heterogeneous Effects by the Perceived Capacity and Interests of IOs

We move on to examining how respondents’ subjective *perceptions* of IOs influence the variability in treatment effects. We first examine how the effects vary across the two hypothesized dimensions: the perceived capacity and interests of the endorsing IOs.

Figure 2 shows the treatment effect estimates conditional on how much expertise respondents perceive the endorsing IOs possess. We collapse the original 7-point scale into three categories, where 1-3 is labeled as “No expertise,” 4 is “Neither,” and 5-7 is “Expertise.” We compute the treatment effect estimates for each subgroup by difference-in-means with block randomization adjustments, and the number of observations for each is specified in parentheses. The distribution of the perceived expertise for each IO is presented in Appendix Figure C.1.

Contrary to our expectations, the degree of perceived expertise did not explain variations in the treatment effect. The effect estimates do not vary much across subgroups for all treatment arms and outcomes. While we expected the endorsement effect to be stronger among those who perceive the endorsing IOs to be experts (H2.2), we did not find any evidence to confirm this hypothesis.

Figure 3 shows the treatment effect estimates conditional on the perceived independence of the IOs from their member states’ interests. As with our analysis on perceived expertise, we also collapse the original 7-point scale into three categories: “Independent from States’ Interests”, “Neither”, and “Subject to States’ Interests.” The distribution of the perceived impartiality for each IO is presented in Appendix Figure C.2.

We do not find supportive evidence for our hypothesis that the endorsement effect is stronger among those who believe the endorsing IOs are groups of experts rather than groups of politicians (H2.3a). In fact, the effect estimates appear stronger among those who do *not* perceive the IOs to be impartial. The G7 endorsement is positive and statistically significant

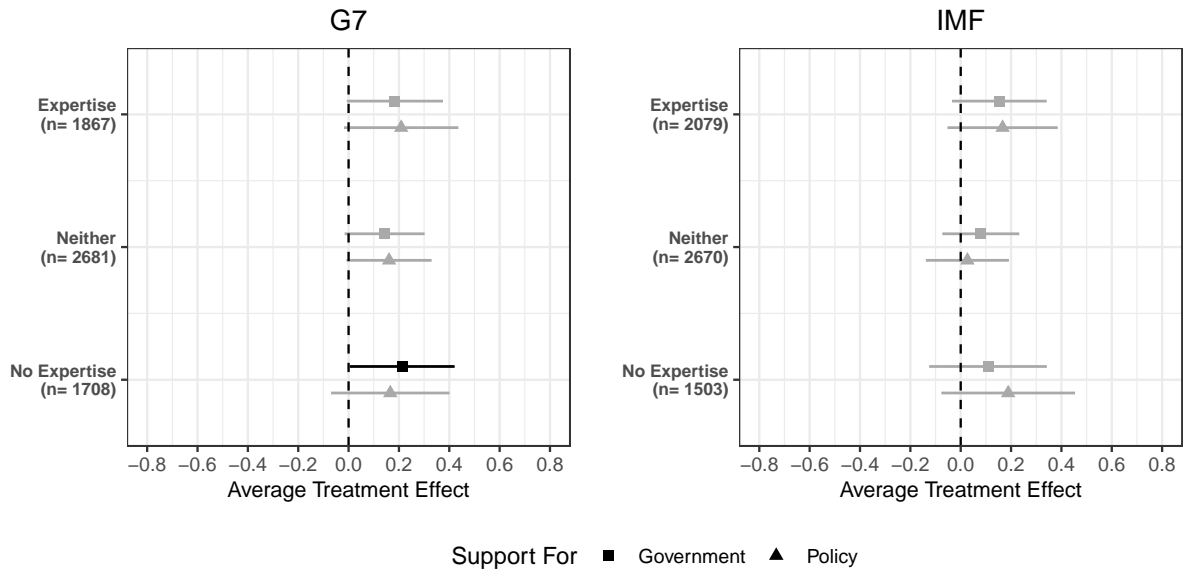


Figure 2: **Heterogenous Treatment Effect by the Perceived Expertise of the G7 and IMF**

These figures show the treatment effect estimates based on the perceived expertise of the endorsing international organizations. The left panel displays the effect of endorsement from the G7, and the right panel shows that from the IMF. Perceived expertise is measured by the question, “Do you think the following international organizations have expertise in finance and economics (have detailed knowledge and can provide effective advice)?” Responses are recorded on a 7-point scale, where 1 means “Strongly Disagree,” 4 means “Neither Agree nor Disagree,” and 7 means “Strongly Agree.” Respondents are divided into three groups: “Expertise” if their answer is above 4, “Neither” if their answer is equal to 4, and “No Expertise” if their answer is below 4. The number of observations in each subgroup is specified under the y-axis labels.

among those who believe that the decisions of the G7 are controlled by members’ interests, while the effect estimates among the other two subgroups are not statistically significant. Specifically, the point estimates are 0.211 on the government and 0.306 on the policy among those who think the G7 is “a group of politicians representing the interests of each country”, while they are 0.142 and -0.076, respectively, among those who believe the G7 is “a group of independent experts separate from the interests of each country.” The same pattern is also observed for the IMF, whose endorsement has a positive and statistically significant effect on government support among those who perceive the IMF as not impartial. The point estimates are 0.215 on the government and 0.132 on the policy among those who think the IMF is subject to members’ interests, while they are only 0.041 for the government and 0.080 for the policy among those who believe the IMF is independent.

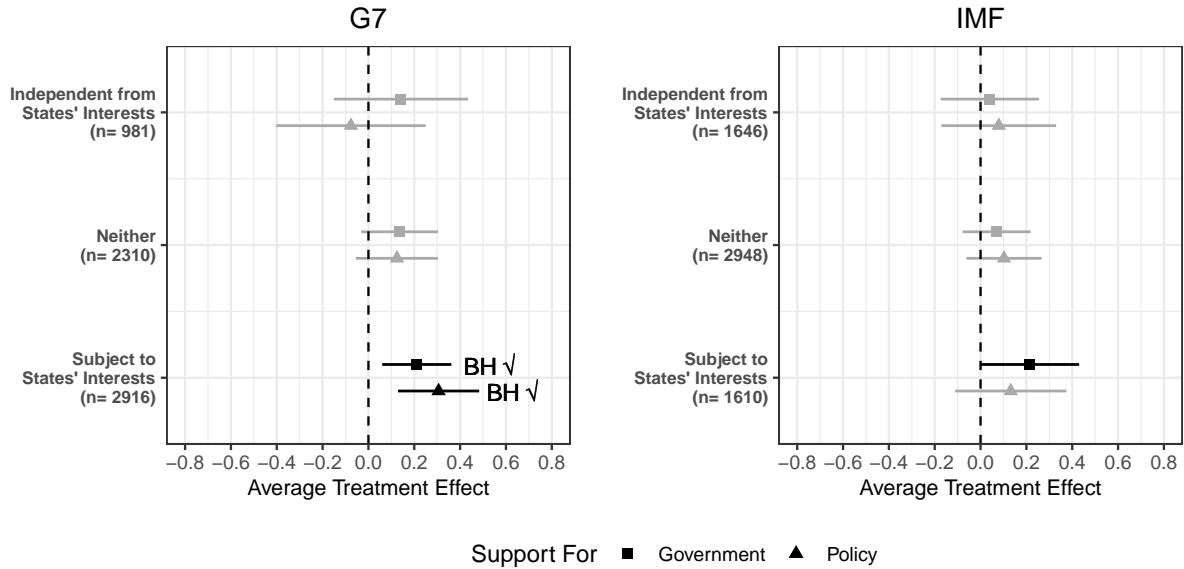


Figure 3: **Heterogenous Treatment Effect by the Perceived Neutrality of the G7 and IMF**

These figures show the treatment effect estimates conditional on the degree of respondents' perceived impartiality in the endorsing international organizations. The left panel displays the effect of endorsement from the G7, and the right panel shows the effect of endorsement from the IMF. The effect estimates for respondents who perceive the G7 (IMF) as agreeing with the statement, "a group of independent experts separate from the interests of each country," are placed in the top row of each panel. The effect estimates for those who perceive the G7 (IMF) as agreeing with the statement, "a group of politicians representing the interests of each country," are placed in the bottom of each panel. The effect estimates for respondents who neither agree nor disagree with these statements are placed in the middle. The number of observations in each subgroup is specified under the y-axis labels.

Figure 4 shows the treatment effect estimates conditional on respondents' views about the interest alignment between IOs and the Japanese government specifically, rather than member states generally. To measure this, we asked respondents to rate the extent to which they think the intentions of the Japanese government are reflected in the decisions of the endorsing IOs. We collapse the 7-point scale into three categories: "Japan's interest reflected," "Neither," and "Not reflected." The raw distribution of the perceived shared interests with Japan is presented in Appendix Figure C.3.

Interestingly, our results show the opposite pattern from our expectation (H2.3b) that endorsements would be more persuasive to those who perceive the IOs to be independent. The treatment effects are stronger among those who believe that the endorsing IOs strongly reflect Japanese governments' interests. The effect estimates among those who think the G7

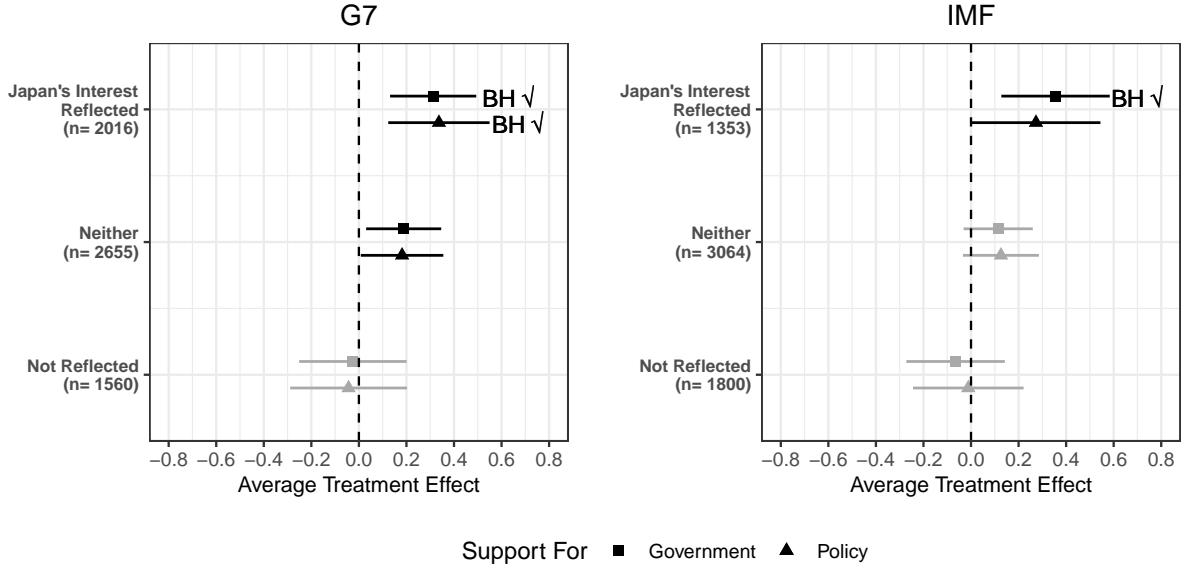


Figure 4: **Heterogenous Treatment Effect by the Perceived Reflection of Japan’s Interests**

These figures show the treatment effect estimates conditional on the degree of perceived alignment of Japan’s interests with the endorsing international organizations. The left panel displays the effect of endorsement from the G7, and the right panel shows the effect of endorsement from the IMF. Respondents are divided into three groups based on their perceived degree of reflection of Japan’s interests in these international organizations: “Reflected” (presented at the top), “Neither” (middle), and “Not Reflected” (bottom). The number of observations in each subgroup is specified under the y-axis labels.

reflects Japan’s interest are 0.312 on the government and 0.337 on the policy, while they are -0.043 and -0.025, respectively, among those who believe the G7 is impartial. Similarly, the estimates for those who believe the IMF reflects Japan’s interest are 0.356 on the government and 0.273 on the policy, while they are -0.012 and -0.065, respectively, among those who do not. In short, our results imply that, contrary to our expectations, citizens trust IOs more when their interests are perceived to be aligned with their government.

Overall, our results fail to confirm our initial hypotheses regarding the capacity and the interest of IOs. Our original intuition was that endorsements from IOs are more persuasive when they are perceived to be politically independent experts. Instead, our results suggest that the perceived interest alignment between the endorsing IOs and the endorsed government may be the key for successful persuasion. This finding is surprising, as we had expected that such interest alignment may be seen as a source of collusion, which may impair the integrity of the endorsement. We examine this point more in the following section.

4.3 Heterogenous Effect by Perceived Favorable Attitudes to IOs and Partisanship

Why do we fail to observe any supportive evidence for our hypotheses about IOs’ policy capacity and interests? Impartial expertise may not be enough for the public to trust IOs, because they may be seen as unknown, distant, and unaccountable actors. Instead, as Figure 4 suggests, IOs may need to be perceived as actors who share common interests with one’s own country to be convincing. In other words, IOs may have to be seen as an ally or an in-group actor, not just an independent but distant third party, to win public trust and effectively influence public opinion.

This argument originates from the literature on affective partisanship, which argues that animus towards non-preferred parties drives attitudes toward government policy (Iyengar et al., 2019; Druckman et al., 2021). Scholars have long observed how people use mental shortcuts to understand complex issues, such as relying on various “cues” from trusted sources. In many cases, the public interprets political information through the lens of their partisanship (Zaller, 1992; Berinsky, 2019, 2007), including on foreign policy (Hayes and Guardino, 2011) and endorsements (Bush and Jamal, 2015).

Greater trust is not limited to domestic actors. At times, people also turn to foreign sources that they consider to be in-group for information. For example, during the 2003 Iraq War, many Democrats relied on sources from European allies and UN officials, whom they perceived as trustworthy (Murray, 2014). Dragojlovic (2015) generalizes this specific case, arguing that foreign messages from friendly countries are often perceived as more persuasive than that from domestic advocates. Similarly, numerous studies suggest that trade preferences can be attributed to in-group favoritism (Brutger and Rathbun, 2021; Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Mutz and Kim, 2017). In addition, public support for the Investor-State Dispute Settlement mechanism decreased when disputes against their country were filed, likely due to the stimulation of in-group versus out-group dynamics in media coverage (Berinsky, 2007). These studies suggest that, for the public to trust IOs, they must be seen as allies, or at least share common interests with one’s country.

To examine this possibility, we present additional results regarding the following two factors: favorable attitudes towards the endorsing IOs and partisanship.⁷ While the perceived shared interest between IOs and Japan, discussed in the preceding section, measures the closeness between the endorsing IOs and the Japanese government, these new factors measure two additional dimensions. The first (favorability) is shared interests between the

⁷For the conditional effect based on other moderators pre-registered but not reported in the main paper, please refer to Appendix Section D.

endorsing IOs and the respondents themselves, and the second (partisanship) is between the Japanese government and the respondents.

Figure 5 shows the treatment effect estimates conditional on favorability towards the endorsing IOs. As with other conditioning variables, we asked respondents to rate their attitude on a 7-point scale, and then collapsed responses into three groups. The raw distribution of favorable attitudes for each IO is presented in Appendix Figure C.4. We find that the treatment effect is stronger among responses who like the endorsing IOs. Among respondents who have favorable attitudes, endorsements from both the G7 and IMF have a positive effect on support for the policy. Among those who neither have favorable nor unfavorable attitudes, the G7's endorsement still has a positive effect, but the IMF's endorsement loses significance. By contrast, the treatment effect estimates are almost zero among those who have unfavorable views of the IOs. These results suggest that the endorsement effect is stronger among those who have favorable attitudes towards the endorsing IOs.⁸

Figure 6 shows the treatment effect estimates conditional on party identification. The raw distribution of the proportion of supporters for the governing coalition (LDP and Komeito), opposition parties (other parties), and independents is presented in Appendix Section H. We find that the treatment effect is strongest among respondents who back the ruling parties, but we do not find any significant results among opposition supporters or independents. One possibility is that respondents may have inferred that the endorsement implies that the IOs are supporting the ruling parties. Therefore, government supporters are willing to listen to the advice from the IOs while pro-opposition respondents are not.⁹

In summary, our results suggest that the perceived interest alignment may be more important in predicting the success of the endorsements than the perception of the endorsers being impartial experts. Specifically, we find that the treatment effect is stronger among respondents who perceive that the endorsing IOs reflect Japan's interests, have favorable attitudes towards those IOs, and support the ruling parties. Theoretically, these findings match the affective partisanship literature, extrapolated to the international dimension. Contrary to our initial expectation that for IOs to be successful policy advisors, they need to be seen as independent and knowledgeable experts, our results reveal that the public may be more sensitive to whether the IOs are trustworthy allies or intermediaries to their own country, as well as to themselves.

⁸In fact, this is consistent with the assumption in other endorsement experiments, where the treatment effect of endorsement is equivalent to the support level of the endorsers (Bullock, Imai and Shapiro, 2011).

⁹Another related interpretation is that the correlation between party identification and the stronger effect is spurious, and that other important confounders affect both. Indeed, studies have found that respect for international and domestic institutions are highly correlated, and personality traits such as social trust can explain both (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2020). It could be that such personality traits are confounders for party identification and stronger treatment effects.

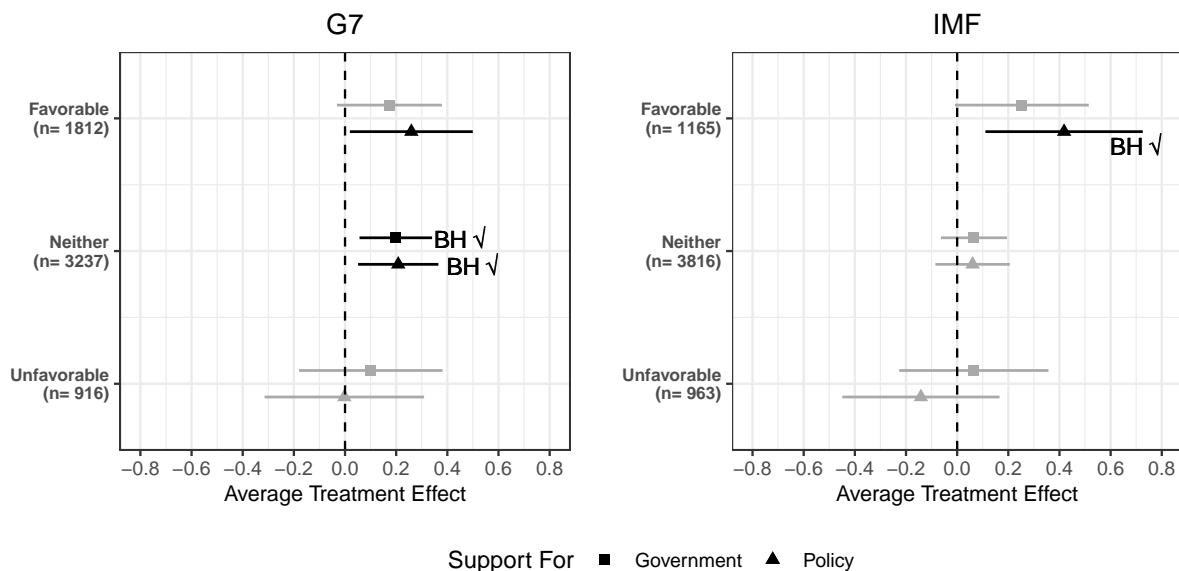


Figure 5: **Heterogenous Treatment Effect by Favorable Attitudes to the G7 and IMF**

These figures show the treatment effect estimates conditional on the degree of respondents’ favorable attitudes towards the endorsing international organizations. The left panel shows the effect of endorsement from the G7, and the right panel shows the effect of endorsement from the IMF. Responses are recorded on a 7-point scale, where 1 means “Unfavorable,” 4 means “Neither,” and 7 means “Favorable.” Respondents are divided into three groups: “Favorable” if their answer is above 4, “Neither” if their answer is equal to 4, and “Unfavorable” if their answer is below 4. The number of observations in each subgroup is specified under the y-axis labels.

4.4 Discussion

Two counter-intuitive findings in our experiment require elaboration. The first is that endorsements are more effective when from the G7 than the IMF, despite the latter being more relevant in the policy domain and better studied in the IPE literature. The other is that an IO’s endorsement is most effective when it is perceived to share or reflect the interests of the target country, rather than when it is seen as an impartial, expert arbiter. Here, we discuss the implications of these results, including whether they are specific to the case context.

The most surprising outcome was that endorsements from the G7 were consistently more influential on respondents’ attitudes than those from the IMF. The IMF is often discussed as the primary IO on political economy matters (Simmons, 2000; Mansfield and Milner, 2012), but there is little research on the G7, at least in the context of domestic public opinion. After all, it is a much narrower club of wealthy nations that primarily serves as a forum to discuss global issues relating to trade, security, and climate change. It is not based on

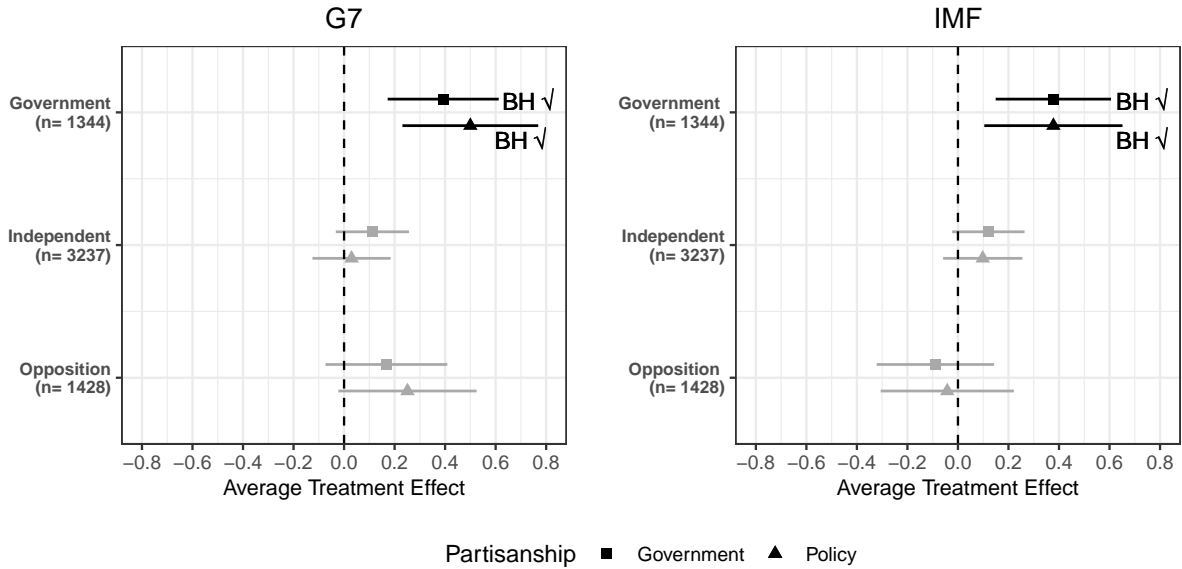


Figure 6: **Heterogenous Treatment Effect by Party Identification**

These figures show the treatment effect estimates conditional on party identification. The left panel displays the effect of endorsement from the G7, and the right panel shows the effect of endorsement from the IMF. Respondents are divided into three groups: “Government” if they support the ruling parties (LDP or Komeito), “Opposition” if they support parties other than LDP or Komeito, and “Independent” if they do not show support for any of these parties in this survey. The number of observations in each subgroup is specified under the y-axis labels.

a treaty or international convention, and it lacks a permanent secretariat to administer or enforce agreements.

One possibility is that this finding is a function of the experimental setting. Japanese citizens in July 2023 may simply have had more affinity for the G7, because the Japanese government had hosted the annual G7 summit in Hiroshima in May of that year. In our survey item on favorable attitude towards the three treatment IOs, used in Figure 5, the mean ratings for the G7 were marginally higher (4.17) than for the IMF (4.02) or the UN (3.98). However, it is not necessarily obvious why affinity should matter more than expertise or impartiality, which other studies of public opinion in Japan have found to matter more for persuasiveness (McElwain, Eshima and Winkler, 2021).

Another possibility is that the G7 matters because it represents the interests of individual countries on which Japan is reliant. Even if the G7 does not matter intrinsically, respondents may have been hesitant to ignore pressure or advice from allies, particularly the United States, for fear of spillover effects into other policy domains. We tested this by estimating the treatment effects conditional on favorable attitudes towards the United States generally,

as well as support for the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty specifically. However, we do not find any evidence that the effect of the G7 endorsement is stronger among those who answered favorably on either item.¹⁰

A third interpretation, which we believe is most aligned with recent research in international relations, is that many citizens do not believe any IO is actually impartial. Davis (2023), for example, describes international organization as “discriminatory clubs” for like-minded states with common security interests that use vague membership criteria for inclusion and exclusion as carrots and sticks to advance goals on other policy domains. Even within IOs, member states have sought to increase its representation and voice to push forward competing economic and security visions (Lipsy, 2017). While many of these studies focus primarily on national- or elite-level policy negotiations, this belief in IO biases may have filtered into the mass public’s consciousness as well. That our respondents are more persuaded by IOs that share common interests with the Japanese government reflects this point. If all IOs are “discriminatory clubs,” then citizens may trust those in which their nation has greater influence and will discriminate in their favor. In other words, IOs are more likely to be judged on the in-group or out-group dimension, rather than on impartiality or expertise.

A related question is whether persuasiveness is a function of prior preferences about the subject matter. The treatment sought to encourage acceptance of tax increases as a solution to mounting fiscal debt. We chose this subject matter precisely because such policies are unpopular, especially when their purpose is to redeem government bonds rather than to pay for additional redistributive programs (Kawata, McElwain and Nakabayashi, 2023). If IO endorsements are substantively weak and opposition to tax hikes are deeply ingrained, then the former may only have reinforced support among those who were more prone to accept the latter in the first place. However, we find the opposite result. As shown in Figure D.4 in Appendix D, the G7’s endorsement had the largest positive effect among those who were *not* worried about the Japan’s mounting debt. In other words, IO endorsements appear to have changed the minds of respondents who were less inclined to believe the relevant policy was necessary. This suggests that endorsements may be even more effective on issues that are less controversial, although further research is obviously necessary to confirm the generalizability of our findings.

5 Conclusion

While recent studies have explored how international organizations can influence public opinion, those in the IPE domain have primarily focused on instances where IOs criticize

¹⁰The results are presented in Appendix Section G.

domestic leaders for policies that harm their citizens or the global community at large. In this paper, we examined whether positive *endorsements* from IOs can also shift public attitudes, and which traits of IOs make them more persuasive. We designed a novel survey experiment to examine the effect of IOs' endorsements on a contentious and politicized issue: raising the consumption tax in Japan. Our results provide supportive evidence that endorsements can increase public support under certain conditions. Specifically, we found that endorsements from the IMF and the G7 increased support for the tax hike, while those from the UN did not. Contrary to our initial expectation that impartial experts would be more persuasive, the endorsement effect was strongest when respondents perceived that the endorsers reflected the interests of their country. Our findings suggest that international organizations can influence public opinion even when endorsing highly unpopular policies, but the effect depends on how citizens perceive the endorsers' motives.

We advance the literature on the influence of IOs in two ways. First, we show a new strategic benefit of IO membership to domestic governments. The IPE literature has theorized that IOs can provide a political cover for governments facing a risk of popularity loss during economic downturns (Mansfield and Milner, 2012). However, micro-level evidence on this mechanism has been scarce, partly due to the difficulty of identifying the causal path through which IOs influence public opinion. By focusing on public responses to policy endorsements by IOs, we provide experimental evidence that IO endorsements can increase support for an unpopular policy.

Second, we suggest the need to recalibrate the “value” of international organizations. Many studies have noted that IOs can suffer from a credibility gap when they prioritize the interests of more powerful nations (Lipsy, 2017; Davis, 2023), both in member selection and internal decision-making processes. However, our experiment indicates that impartiality may be less critical, at least in the context of nudging public sentiment. We do not mean to imply that the politicization of IOs is necessarily beneficial. Rather, their ability to persuade voters does not depend on perceived neutrality and expertise, but rather on the perception that they share common interests with the target state. In other words, IOs aiming to persuade domestic publics should focus on signaling that they are not in an antagonistic relationship with the target governments and are sympathetic to domestic concerns.

That said, further research is necessary to tease out these psychological mechanisms. Specifically, we need a more holistic understanding of the various ways IOs intervene in domestic affairs and how the public perceives these interventions. Most citizens likely do not spend much time thinking about international institutions, except when IOs take leadership in global crises, such as the WHO during the COVID-19 pandemic, or when IOs explicitly criticize governments, such as the UN when one state imperils the security of another. These

contexts often involve conflicts of interest between IOs and domestic governments, likely leading to negative public sentiment toward IOs. However, much of what IOs do involves endorsing or praising governments for “good” behavior, such as anti-corruption initiatives or sound macroeconomic management. The balance of endorsements versus criticisms likely varies across states, domains, and IOs. For example, Japan may be in good standing with many IOs, but it has been criticized by the EU for retaining the death penalty and by the International Whaling Commission for permitting commercial whaling. Russia has faced sanctions from various IOs, including the UN, for its invasion of Ukraine, and many Asian nations retain negative sentiments towards the IMF for its punitive policies during the Asian Financial Crisis.

Furthermore, the weight of IO endorsements may vary by policy domain. We chose the case of a tax increase precisely because it is a controversial issue. Even if higher taxes are necessary for long-term fiscal health, citizens may have strong negative reactions to further strains on their short-term economic well-being. That IO endorsements can change opinions even in this case suggests they may be even more persuasive in policy areas with lower salience, such as climate change conventions. However, low-salience policies may also be domains where the public lacks knowledge of or attachment to the relevant IOs. As our paper shows, the G7 is an interesting case: it comments on a wide range of issues, including climate change, geopolitical security, and trade, allowing its endorsement can be used strategically across domains. However, it may have minimal salience to the vast majority of states, which are non-members. These are empirical questions best answered through further research.

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