

China's Leadership of IOs: Reputational Gains, Distributional Politics, and Institutional Legitimacy*

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Abstract

Do rising powers like China obtain benefits from leading IOs? We theorize that a rising power like China may leverage leadership of IOs informally—to enhance its reputation—and formally—to reward like-minded states. We also theorize that distrust over the rising power's leadership decreases IO legitimacy. To examine informal influence, we conduct a survey experiment in Brazil and France. While China's leadership of the UN enhances its reputation, it also lowers IO legitimacy. Surprisingly, US leadership of IOs also reduces their legitimacy, suggesting public concern about great power control broadly. To investigate formal influence, we analyze original data on 12,481 projects from 11 IOs and conduct an elite conjoint experiment, finding limited evidence of executive influence over IO projects either directly or via bureaucratic decision-making. These results illustrate that rising powers gain reputational rather than distributional benefits from leading IOs, but at the cost of lowering IO legitimacy.

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Introduction

Do the leaders of international organizations (IOs) influence the operations of agencies, or does IO independence preclude such influence? Do rising powers like China use these positions to burnish their reputations and shape the international order? In many ways, China appears strategically positioned to influence international order from within by assuming the top post of IOs. China now leads four of the 15 specialized United Nations (UN) agencies (Trofimov, Hinshaw, and O’Keeffe 2020), and this institutional authority could be instrumental in marshaling resources, distributing benefits to supporters, and burnishing China’s reputation as a leader of the global order. Western powers portray China’s leadership of IOs as a major threat to the status quo.¹ For example, the US recently accused the World Health Organization, a UN agency, of being a propaganda tool for China to positively shape how the global community perceives its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of these accusations, the Trump administration paused US funding pending a review of how China influences the organization.²

Gaining leadership of IOs may offer a pathway to change world politics by reforming established institutions, and to enhance China’s status as a leading power. China has stated a desire to shape global governance through a more assertive grand strategy (Doshi 2021; Goldstein 2020; Yan 2014; Economy 2022). This motivation matches theoretical expectations that rising powers are motivated to contest established orders to better align international rules with domestic preferences.³ Rising powers’ are argued to be dissatisfied with the Western-led multilateral system because they lack influence and status, have a different vision of norms and principles, and perceive the international system as unfair (Binder and Payton 2022; Foot 2024).

Leading major IOs could present opportunities for rising powers to shift the status quo by rewarding friends and allies, punishing rivals and enemies, and enhancing posi-

¹Wall Street Journal, How China is Taking Over International Organizations.

²NPR, National Security Adviser O’Brien Alleges WHO Is ‘Propaganda Tool For The Chinese’

³See also Organski (1958); Huntington (1993); Gilpin (1981); Acharya (2018).

tive reputations. On the other hand, attempts to influence IOs can be constrained by bureaucrats, who are expected to act as neutral agents above inter-state rivalries (e.g., [Abbott and Snidal 1998](#); [Pollack 1997](#); [Nielson and Tierney 2003](#)). If IOs are designed to be independent, changes in leadership may not affect IO operations. If elections to executive leadership offer member states the opportunity for inequitable influence, IOs risk losing their legitimacy. Furthermore, attempts at influencing IOs by executives may undermine the legitimacy of IOs, as global publics may come to view the organizations as agents of adversarial states' policies ([Chaudoin 2016](#); [Tallberg, Bäckstrand, and Scholte 2018](#); [Brutger and Strezhnev 2022](#)).

As a state motivated to take on a more prominent role on the world stage and with a different vision of international politics from Western powers such as the US, China offers a useful analytical lens to test whether IO heads can shift the status quo. China is investing significant resources in obtaining the top leadership positions of UN agencies, suggesting China values the possibilities for international influence these positions hold.⁴ We theorize two distinct pathways by which executive heads can influence IO operations: first by formally influencing bureaucratic decision-making and second by accruing reputational gains. We develop quantitative tests for each pathway, specifically examining the case of China's election as IO head, and find that executive heads have limited opportunities to substantially shift IO politics, but that some meaningful benefits of IO leadership accrue to China's reputation.

First, leading a major IO offers China an opportunity to improve its reputation and thus gain informal influence. As a rising power, China faces an image problem from rising perception as a threat to existing values and institutions ([Medeiros and Fravel 2003](#)). By collaborating through international institutions and even assuming leadership roles, China seeks to paint a responsible image as a great power that contributes to multilateralism

⁴China would not be the first state to use IOs to reward like-minded states, following an established pattern set by the US (e.g., [Dreher, Sturm, and Vreeland 2009](#); [Clark and Dolan 2021](#); [Andersen, Hansen, and Markussen 2006](#); [Kersting and Kilby 2016](#)), nor would it be the first to seek status enhancement through prominent roles in IOs (e.g., [Malone 2000](#); [Nye Jr 2011](#)).

(Goldstein 2001). Building from the literature on reputation management (Adler-Nissen 2014; Morse and Pratt 2022), we expect that gaining the highest position of leadership within IOs has a positive impact on China’s reputation. However, we also expect that leadership by China, a non-Western power seen as a potential threat to the status quo, reduces the perceived legitimacy of the IO. To test these expectations, we conduct a pre-registered survey experiment on representative China-friendly samples (Brazil) and China-skeptical samples (France) and find that China’s leadership has positive effects on its perceived reputation in the more skeptical environment, highlighting an important benefit that China obtains from executive leadership. In line with our expectations, Chinese leadership of the IO leads to reduced perceptions of IO legitimacy. Surprisingly, however, American leadership also reduces perceived IO legitimacy, which suggests that IO reputation is susceptible to perceptions of capture by great powers in general.

Second, we test whether a rising power alters the distribution of goods by real-locating institutional benefits to friendly countries away from rival states. Executive heads could influence bureaucratic decision-making by implicit (Johnston 2014; Clark and Dolan 2021) and explicit cues (Schroeder 2014; Copelovitch and Rickard 2021) over project allocations. We conduct a pre-registered elite conjoint survey experiment with IO staff to test the mechanisms of executive influence on IO staff via a ‘pleasing the principal’ mechanism, in which IO staff anticipate a leader’s preferences based on nationality cues, or an ‘agenda-setting mechanism,’ in which leaders overtly indicate their preferences. We find that neither mechanism biases independent decision-making by IO bureaucrats. Finally, in addition to influencing the distribution of goods indirectly via bureaucratic decision-making, IO heads may also wield independent influence over such decisions. To examine this direct mechanism, we construct an original dataset capturing 12,481 projects of 11 different UN agencies from 1988-2022 and show that China’s election to lead agencies has little effect on the distribution of goods towards its partners or away from its rivals.

Despite signs that states greatly value the leadership role and invest considerable time and resources into election campaigns at the international level, we find that overall,

leaders are constrained from assuming an activist role, though they do obtain some reputational benefits. There is limited evidence—despite concerns from Western states—that Chinese executive leadership has strong effects on IO operations. Rather, our evidence suggests that IO bureaucratic independence is robust to these potential sources of influence. On the other hand, states can obtain meaningful boosts to their reputation as a result of leading IOs, which explains why they invest so greatly in their efforts to lead IOs despite being unable to shape the formal distribution of goods. Our theory of executive leadership thus contributes to important debates in international cooperation, including the importance of executive heads in IOs (e.g., [Hall and Woods 2018](#); [Tallberg 2010](#); [Copelovitch and Rickard 2021](#)), the role of individuals in international policymaking (e.g., [Heinzel 2022](#); [Clark and Zucker 2023](#)), and state influence, reputational management, and IO legitimacy (e.g., [Hurd 2008](#); [Adler-Nissen 2014](#); [Brutger and Strezhnev 2022](#); [Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023](#); [Morse and Pratt 2022](#)).

Executive Heads and IOs

While international relations scholars have given great attention to the design, effectiveness, and influence of IOs, the role of IO heads and their influence on institutional outcomes is much less well understood ([Manulak 2017](#); [Hall and Woods 2018](#)).⁵

Under both realist (e.g., [Mearsheimer 1994](#)) and rationalist-institutionalist (e.g., [Abbott and Snidal 1998](#)) theories, IO outputs are determined by the preferences of state principals, leaving limited room for executive heads to change the direction of the organization. Institutional design is meant to constrain bureaucratic shirking. Specific design features like monitoring ([Pollack 1997](#); [Nielson and Tierney 2003](#)) and limited institutional control over budgetary and staffing matters ([Pollack 1997](#)) are built into IOs from their inception to create formal constraints on bureaucratic agency. The UN Secretary-General, for instance, has limited legal and policy-making authority. Likewise, in the European Union, the dominance of large member states limits the agency of the executive head and constrains institutional reform [Moravcsik \(2018\)](#). For these reasons,

⁵But see [Cox \(1969\)](#); [Schechter \(1987\)](#) for early work on the topic.

many argue that the leaders of IOs are merely figureheads who fall short of the power commanded by the political leaders of countries and other organizations.

Constraining the influence of the executive head not only facilitates the principal-agent bargain that states strike in delegating authority to IOs, but is also an important feature that contributes to IO vitality and legitimacy.⁶ If executives wield undue influence over the IO's activities, domestic populations may lose trust in the organization, viewing it as agents of adversarial states' policies rather than an independent actor, and may threaten to revoke funding (Chaudoin 2016; Tallberg, Bäckstrand, and Scholte 2018; Brutger and Strezhnev 2022). Ultimately, this erosion of trust and legitimacy reduces states' abilities to delegate meaningful authority to IOs and work through organizations to achieve benefits.

However, independence is a critical characteristic that enables IOs to accomplish the cooperative goals that states have in establishing the IO in the first place (Abbott and Snidal 1998), which may create latitude for executive influence. States like China expend tremendous effort and resources to obtain positions as leaders of IOs, which suggests that states believe that they can obtain some benefits by doing so.⁷ Executive heads influence key financial decisions in IOs, manage institutional relationships with members (Cox 1969), and coordinate agreements amongst members (Hall and Woods 2018). Executive heads are involved in raising institutional funds, including core funds that are not earmarked for specific purposes (Hall and Woods 2018) and coordinating the contributions from member states (Manulak 2017). Executive heads can also exert political influence over the allocation of programmatic spoils. For example, Carnegie and Marinov (2017) find that states direct more foreign aid to their former colonies when they hold the presidency of the Council of the EU. The US has also deployed its influence to

⁶Legitimacy can be defined as “the normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed,” (Hurd 2008, 34).

⁷For example, during its campaign for leadership of FAO, China forgave \$78 million in outstanding debts to Cameroon, whose candidate for the post subsequently withdrew from consideration (Fung and Lam 2020).

benefit its allies, including through lower costs and conditions from loans (Dreher, Sturm, and Vreeland 2009; Stone 2008), greater access to the funding and resources of the IO (Clark and Dolan 2021; Andersen, Hansen, and Markussen 2006), and faster distribution of loans (Kersting and Kilby 2016).

Leaders also hold the power of information and ideas to compel the IO to change. Through agenda control, leaders influence the likelihood of achieving solutions to bargaining problems, define issues and construct focal points, avoid issue cycling, and shape distributional outcomes (e.g., Pollack 1997; Tallberg 2010). Similarly, executive heads set institutional priorities, defining and implementing strategic plans (Schroeder 2014). Existing staff of the institution may shift their activities in response to the preferences of the executive head without any direct application of executive power. For example, Copelovitch and Rickard (2021) note that the autonomy of World Bank Managing Directors allows them to set new agendas through country-level visits, contacts with ministers, and joint collaborations.

China and the UN

A rising power with an aim of shaping global governance presents an ideal lens for analyzing this unresolved question: do IO executives influence the operations of agencies, or does IO independence preclude such influence? China has aggressively pursued positions of leadership within IOs, and Chinese nationals hold an increasing number of the top leadership positions at IOs, though the share still remains relatively small (Parizek and Stephen 2021*a,b*). China advocates for the hiring and promotion of Chinese nationals within IOs (Fung and Lam 2021*a*) and actively encourages its nationals to participate in UN standard setting and working groups (Voo 2019). We therefore focus on the case of China as an analytical lens by which to examine implications of our expectations of executive influence.

Our theory of executive leadership implies two means by which China may pursue its goal of achieving influence through the leadership of IOs. First, China may use the platform of institutional leadership to enhance its reputation among foreign audiences.

Informal influence is a key mechanism by which states influence international politics generally (e.g., [Ikenberry 2011](#)) as well as IO politics specifically (e.g., [Stone 2011](#)). Second, China may seek to influence the ways in which IO bureaucrats conduct their work to bias the distribution of benefits within the organization.

China desires to improve its image through the leadership of multilateral bodies to assuage doubts, distrust, and perceptions of China as a threat ([Medeiros and Fravel 2003](#); [Goldstein 2001](#)). This strategy centers on “the importance of marketing its views in order to bolster its international image” ([Medeiros and Fravel 2003](#), 30). Leadership of IOs is one attempt to create a more favorable image and reputation as a cooperative player. For instance, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is part of China’s attempt to counteract the “China threat” narrative by portraying itself as a constructive regional player working to promote peace and stability.

The UN sits at the center of China’s vision to play a leading role in global governance ([Fung and Lam 2021a](#); [Foot 2024](#)). By operating within the structure of the UN, China seeks to assuage threat perception and craft an image as a power that relies on multilateral solutions rather than unilateral: working through multilateral bodies like the UN seeks to reassure those wary of China’s intentions ([Doshi 2021](#), 104). Importantly, China’s leadership of IOs promotes a view of multilateralism that is distinct from the status quo, advocating for a “multilateralism with Chinese characteristics” which calls for IOs to promote greater global fairness and justice.⁸

Leading IOs such as the UN not only is a tool to promote China’s vision of multilateralism but also a strategy to enhance China’s reputation as a rising power that supports rather than challenges existing institutions. Reputations are perceptions about an actor’s past behavior that are used to predict future behavior ([Mercer 1997](#); [Miller 2003](#); [Renshon 2017](#)). A rising power’s reputation for engagement is closely scrutinized ([Johnston 2003](#)). Engagement in IOs aligns with the framework historically advocated by the US and other Western countries, thus serving as a reputational indicator that a

⁸See, for instance, Policy Planning Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Using Xi Jinping Thought as a Guidance to Promote Multilateralism with Chinese Characteristics.”

rising power is responsible and non-threatening to the global order (Johnston 2019).⁹

Theoretical Expectations

We pre-register a series of explicit expectations about the effects of IO leadership on reputation. By leading an important IO, such as the UN agencies, a state can enhance its reputation and deny opportunities for challengers to enhance their own (Morse and Pratt 2022). As a state improves its reputation in the eyes of international audiences, this can facilitate future tangible benefits, leading to more influence and authority more diffusely in international politics. Reputation management through leadership may be particularly salient for China, given its perceived deficit. We anticipate that leading IOs improves China’s reputation as a responsible stakeholder among international audiences.

H_1 : China’s leadership of the UN increases China’s reputation.

But China’s partnership with the UN may also have backlash effects on perceptions of the legitimacy of the IO, as occurred in the earlier example of US accusations against the WHO. China’s partnerships may impact views about IOs no longer as independent actors but rather agents of Chinese foreign policy (e.g., Chaudoin 2016; Brutger and Strezhnev 2022).

While such dynamics might hold in any case of a rising or major power leading an IO, we expect this effect is especially powerful in the case of China because of the salient “China threat” narrative. Many countries react with suspicion due to the uncertainty of China assuming a leadership position on how the UN will change as a result (Fung and Lam 2021a). Those in the West question the intentions of officials and whether Chinese officials will remain neutral in global leadership positions. In the US, the Trump

⁹Reputation in this sense is similar to other concepts discussed in the IR literature such as prestige and status, both of which are stated issues of importance to China. Prestige is defined as “public recognition of admired achievements or qualities” (Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014, 16) and status is defined relative to other states as “collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes” that must be granted by members of the international community (Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014, 7).

Administration created a rhetorical campaign against China that questioned whether Chinese officials governing global bodies could remain neutral and independent from the demands of the Chinese Communist Party.

Furthermore, the popular legitimacy of IOs involves beliefs that the perceived ideology of IOs shapes these views.¹⁰ Individuals are more likely to support IOs that they perceive as ideologically closer to their own political values [Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth, and Tallberg \(2023\)](#). China, as a country that supports a *statist* ideology, focused on control by governments, may create a different perception of the organization and the values it supports from Western countries that often champion liberal values ([Voeten 2021](#)).

H₂: China’s leadership of the UN decreases the UN’s perceived legitimacy.

Because IOs are generally already aligned with the status quo of Western powers, and because the preferences of such states are already well-known, leadership by Western leaders such as the US is not expected to have large effects on the reputation of either the state or the IO it leads. Leadership by Western powers could also reinforce perceptions that the values of the IO align with those of the population.

However, an alternative explanation may be that any major power that leads an IO might be perceived as a case of institutional capture, therefore reducing the perceived legitimacy of the IO and potentially of the leading state ([Finnemore 2009](#); [Lawson and Zarakol 2023](#)). This skepticism is rooted in the historical inconsistency of great powers ([Farrell and Finnemore 2013](#)), who often contradict their stated positions through actions that prioritize national security interests over international norms. The US, for instance, has been criticized for undermining the legitimacy of IOs it underwrote, due to its frequent

¹⁰Ideology entails prescriptions about how international institutions should work and the purposes of international collaboration, containing propositions about “how issues should be resolved” and “who should resolve them” ([Voeten 2021](#), 17). It defines what is good, how resources should be distributed, and where power resides. Ideologies thus have distributional consequences by offering prescriptions about who should benefit ([Voeten 2021](#)).

divergence from stated values and actions. Such dichotomies pose a risk to the legitimacy of IOs when these great powers assume leadership roles.

H₃: American leadership of the UN has less effects on the US' perceived reputation compared to China's.

H₄: American leadership of the UN has less effects on the UN's perceived legitimacy compared to China's.

In addition to pursuing reputational gains, China may also seek to influence the ways in which IO bureaucrats conduct their work to bias the distribution of benefits within the organization. Chinese executive heads may redirect organizations' focus to better reflect its unique ideology and worldview. Its leaders may be motivated to align international programs with an alternative ideology from the currently dominant liberal approach. China's ideology is oriented toward supporting the rights of states, favoring redistributing resources away from the West (Voeten 2021, 24).

Given China's different ideological orientation, China's leadership could entail changes that reshape the formal distribution of benefits. Experts and leaders are rarely neutral but bring a set of values and preferences to their role (Voeten 2021). Great powers oversee the distribution of benefits within regimes and can dole out privileges to those with similar needs and interests when they hold positions of authority in IOs, as the US has been shown to do. The executive can directly influence project allocation through their operational role, or this influence could be mediated by IO bureaucrats.

Existing employees of the organization interested in promotion and self-advancement could prioritize projects in accordance with the interest of the executive head (Clark and Dolan 2021). The employees of any organization consider the interests of their superiors and seek to prioritize these preferences out of concern for career advancement—this could take place implicitly, as bureaucrats anticipate what they expect the leaders' preference to be. This influence could also be explicit, through leader agenda-setting. As the preferences of the executive head become known—in this case, to prioritize China's allies for institutional benefits—employees that execute programs could respond to satisfy the

needs of the principal. As the executive head makes speeches and frames the need to pursue changes, the staff could begin to adopt the ideas and values of the leader (Johnston 2014). The civil servants of the organization could adopt China’s interest in promoting development needs and creating a ‘community of shared future’ as appropriate.

H₅: Chinese leadership of IOs will increase the number of IO projects and activities directed towards China’s like-minded countries.

In contrast, institutional design theories expect that, due to designs that constrain the agency of executive heads, Chinese leaders of IOs would have limited influence, and should not be able to capitalize on such leadership positions to develop informal influence. Executive heads are expected to behave as neutral agents without biases, and Chinese executives may be particularly sensitive to such criticisms. Several Chinese leaders respond to press inquiries about their role that they are neutral civil servants rather than political entities. The Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization, Dongyu Qu argued, “I’m not [a] political figure; I’m FAO DG.”¹¹ The umbrage that leaders feel when claims of bias are directed toward China suggests that China’s leaders could be socialized to the goals of the organization and their role as civil servants.

To examine these various pathways by which China may exert influence over IOs through executive leadership, we employ a multi-method strategy.

Influence on Reputation

Experimental Design

To assess the effects of China’s relationship with IOs on public perceptions of China, we deploy between-subjects survey experiments in representative populations: Brazil and France.¹² We first select Brazil, a country with a relatively favorable baseline

¹¹Politico, Chairman FAO: Western powers pressure China’s UN food boss to grip global hunger crisis.

¹²We conducted this survey on a nationally representative sample of the general public with Dynata, a survey firm. We recruited 533 respondents from Brazil and 537 respondents from France. Because of data quality concerns, all respondents included in the final sample successfully pass an attention check.

towards China, and France, a country with a relatively unfavorably baseline. Brazil is a representative case of developing states. Brazil, as a member of the BRICS countries, often maintains close relations with China. During the Lula administration, Brazil’s approach to China is described as “active non-alignment” to maintain cooperation with China amid geopolitical rivalry between China and the US.¹³

France represents a more status-quo-oriented public, and therefore a case where we expect attitudes to be harder to shift. This public is expected to be generally representative of attitudes in industrialized Western states. As a pivotal member of both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), France’s stance on China is shaped by its membership and alliance with the US. This was exemplified in a 2019 European Union strategic paper, which characterized China as a ‘systemic rival.’ French public opinion towards China has seen a marked shift, with unfavorable views rising from 42 percent in 2002 to 70 percent in 2020, a trend largely attributed to concerns over China’s policies in Xinjiang and broader human rights issues.¹⁴ Despite this growing wariness, France has demonstrated a willingness to engage with China; a notable instance being President Macron’s visit to China amid heightened US-China tensions, interpreted by many as an attempt to position France as a mediator to foster collaborative channels between China and the West.

Our experimental results validate these different baseline attitudes towards China (Figure 1). French respondents were more likely to perceive China as a threat (average score of 3.25 out of 5) and as an enemy (3.24 out of 5) compared to Brazilian respondents (2.22 and 2.58 out of 5 respectively).

After completing a pre-treatment demographic questionnaire, subjects are presented with a vignette describing IO leadership.¹⁵ Respondents are randomly assigned

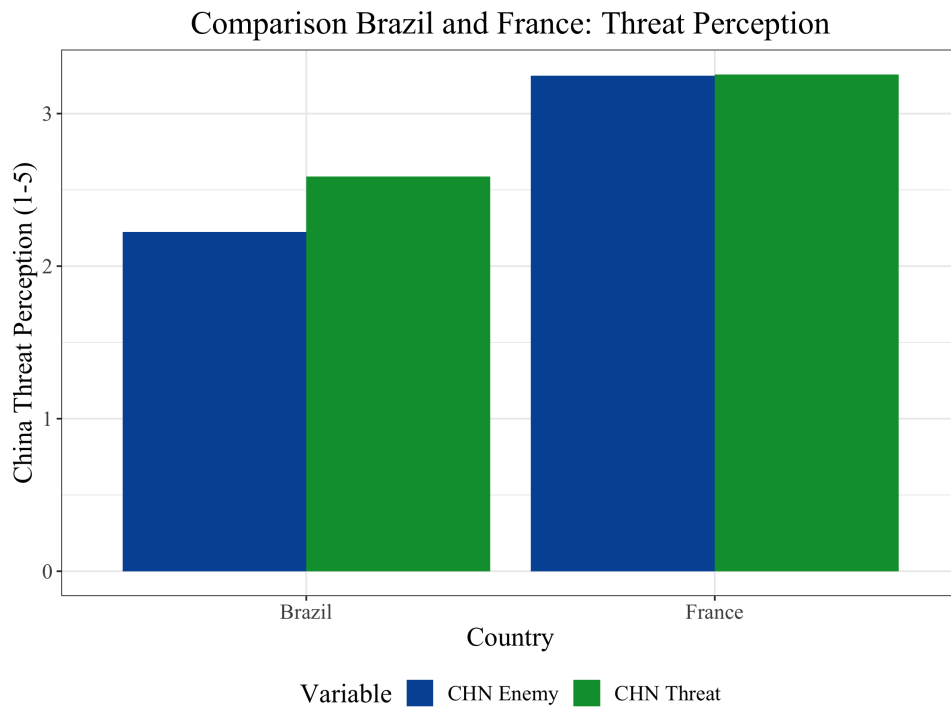
More detail on the experimental design as well as the survey text can be found in the Appendix.

¹³Berg and Beana, “The Great Balancing Act: Lula in China and the Future of U.S.-Brazil Relations”, [See here](#).

¹⁴Morcos, “France’s Shifting Relations with China”, [See here](#).

¹⁵For full details of the treatment text, see Appendix Section [A.2.2](#).

Figure 1: China Threat Perception



Note: The 'Threat' question asks respondents to rank their agreement with the statement, 'This country poses a threat to my country.' on a scale of 1-5. The 'Enemy' question asks respondents 'Do you consider China to be a friend or enemy of Brazil/France?' with response options of 'Ally, friendly, unfriendly, enemy, not sure'.

to receive one of the three treatment conditions: a control, in which a Swiss national is elected as the IO head, the China condition, in which a Chinese national is elected as the head, and a US condition, in which an American national is elected as the IO head. To increase the salience of the vignette treatments, the relevant information is highlighted in bold, underlined, and italicized text, and respondents are asked to summarize the vignette article.

After the manipulation, all respondents answered a series of outcome questions about their attitudes towards China and China's leadership, as well as the legitimacy of the US and the UN. We also ask respondents to express their views about foreign policy outcomes. Most notably, we adopt a measure from [Mattingly et al. \(2023\)](#) asking respondents about their preferences for global leadership, including whether individuals prefer for the US or China to play a greater leadership role in global affairs. Drawing from [Myrick \(2021\)](#), we develop several indicators specific to each country's foreign policy toward China and the US. We also develop indicators about the perceptions of IO legitimacy following [Tallberg and Zürn \(2019\)](#) and [Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth, and Tallberg \(2023\)](#). Since these measures have high internal coherence, we create an index.¹⁶

To test our main expectation laid out in Hypothesis 1—that is, if China is able to leverage the informal powers of executive leadership to enhance its reputation—then we should expect its perceived reputation to be higher in the *China + IO* condition compared to the *China* condition. To evaluate Hypothesis 2, we take the difference in the dependent variable of IO legitimacy in the *China + IO* condition compared to the *China* condition. To place these findings into context, we compare the differences with the US. In Hypothesis 3, we explore the impact relative to the US to test whether the *China + IO* condition is higher than the *USA + IO* condition. Finally, we compare the means of the *China + IO* condition and *USA + IO* condition to determine the relative impact on IO legitimacy (Hypothesis 4). Under a great power capture framework, negative effects on IO legitimacy and the leading state would be apparent under both cases of US and

¹⁶Cronbach's α is 0.85, indicating high internal consistency. We use the standardized measure which takes into account factor loadings.

Chinese leadership, but would not be present

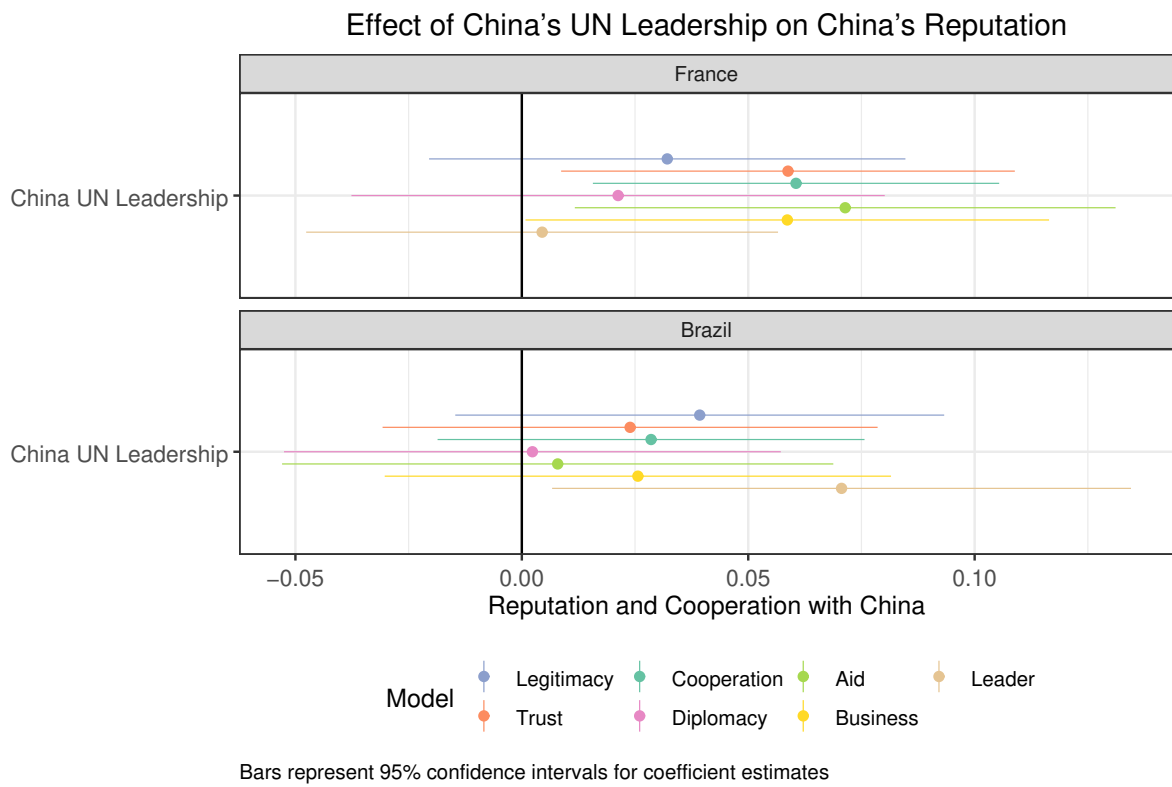
Impact on Reputation

Somewhat surprisingly, given French skepticism and Brazilian openness towards China and its intentions, we find that Chinese leadership of IOs had positive effects on its reputation among French respondents, but not among Brazilian respondents. Firstly, our findings indicate that China's leadership in UN organizations correlates with a roughly six-percentage-point increase in trust among French respondents (see Figure 2, top panel).

In addition to status, China's ability to gain a leadership role within the UN fosters specific foreign policy benefits in its relations with French respondents. Specifically, when presented with the scenario of China leading the UN in the treatment condition, respondents exhibited a six-percentage-point increase in their agreement with the potential for Franco-Chinese cooperation. In addition, China's leadership within the UN raises French support for accepting Chinese aid and engaging in infrastructure development initiatives led by China. This trend suggests public endorsement in France for involvement with China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative, particularly when China is seen as partnering with the UN through leadership roles. A similar pattern holds when considering business deals. However, it is noteworthy that China's UN leadership does not seem to influence French public opinion regarding the desire for diplomatic engagement. This could be attributed to a prevailing expectation among French respondents that diplomatic endeavors are a standard aspect of government policy, relatively unaffected by other external factors

In contrast, Brazilian respondents exhibit relatively constrained responses across a spectrum of indicators (see Figure 2, bottom panel). Within our sample, the perception of China's leadership at the UN is predominantly viewed favorably. Those informed about China leading the UN demonstrate a higher average approval of China, as reflected across various indicators such as trust, legitimacy, and foreign policy, albeit not significantly. However, one particular measure is especially striking. When Brazilian respondents are presented with the hypothetical scenario, 'Suppose either China or the United States will be the most powerful nation in the world in ten years. Would you prefer the United States or China?', we observe a significant increase—a seven-percentage-point rise—in

Figure 2: China's leadership



Note: China's leadership of UN agencies leads to positive changes in China's status in France and Brazil. In France, we find the most significant changes. For full model results with control variables, see Appendix Tables A-5 and A-4.

support for China following its leadership role in the UN. China's engagement in the UN and assumption of leadership roles holds a significant policy implication: it suggests it helps tilt the balance between the US and China in China's favor.

While one may have expected that China's leadership would have stronger effects on Brazilians due to their relative *ex ante* openness towards closer relations, we suggest that the difference in results between France and Brazil can instead be attributed to ceiling effects. Because French respondents started with a lower baseline favorability towards China, there was more room for them to substantially improve in response to the treatment. In both cases, Chinese leadership of the UN agency leads to a directionally positive change in its reputation across all indicators, suggesting that though the magnitude of the effects are likely to vary depending on country contexts, one can infer that for most international audiences, they can be expected to be positive, providing overall support for Hypothesis 1.

Are these reputational gains a 'China story' or do they generalize to other states? We find that across several indicators of status and foreign policy goals, American leadership of the UN leads to no statistically significant impact on support relative to a baseline condition of the Swiss leading the UN. This suggests that China, rather than the US, possesses the opportunity to reap reputational benefits from the UN, particularly when leadership shifts from a relatively neutral, but more Western country, to China—a country with more unknown intentions and a higher threat perception. It also confirms the direction of Hypothesis 3, that the US will not gain status from IO leadership in the same way that we have found China's status to profit.

Impact on IO Legitimacy

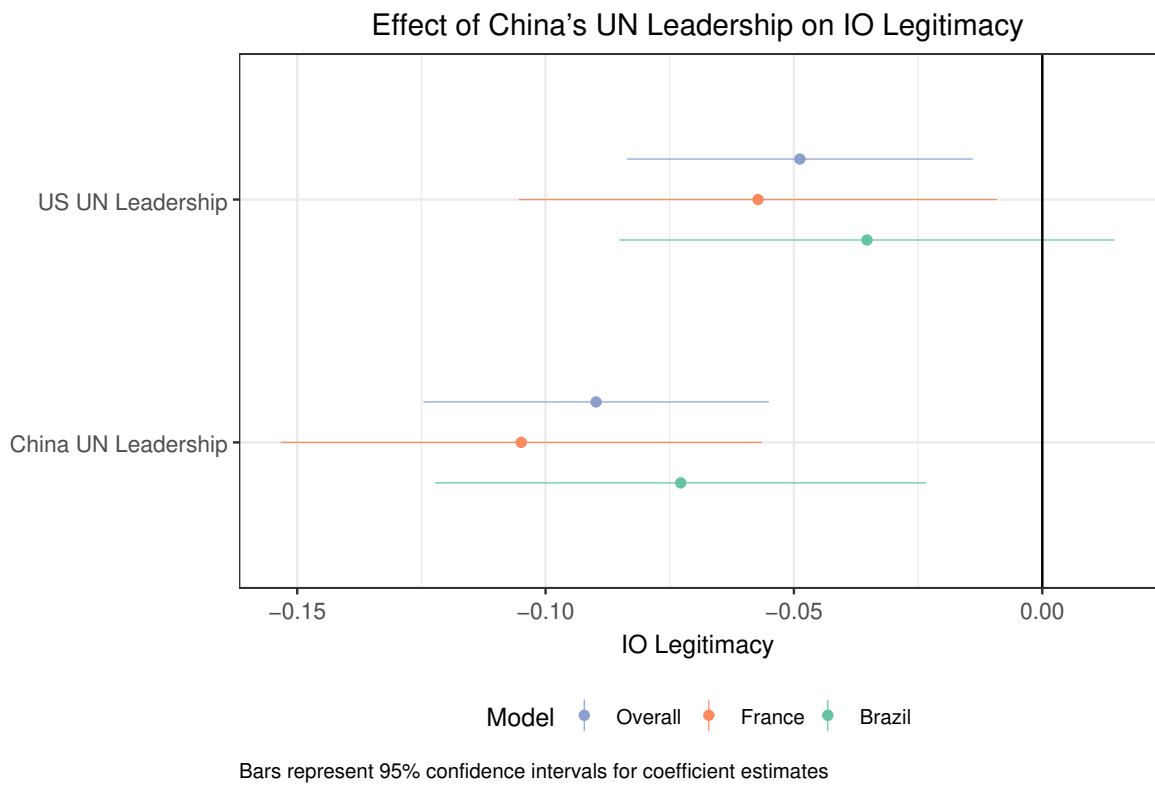
While we have shown that China's leadership of IOs can have positive effects on China's reputation, does it have an impact more directly on IO legitimacy? We hypothesized that by raising the threat of changes in the operation of the UN, Chinese leadership of IOs could lead to backlash effects and lower perceptions of IO legitimacy (Hypothesis 2). Our findings reveal that China's leadership diminishes the perceived legitimacy of the UN with a nine percentage point drop in the aggregate sample, a trend consistent

across the French and Brazilian contexts. For instance, in France, the legitimacy of the UN under Chinese leadership declined by about ten percentage points compared to Swiss leadership. In Brazil, the effect is similarly negative but somewhat less pronounced, with a seven percentage point decrease. This difference may reflect variation in baseline favorability towards the UN in the different contexts: a recent poll in both countries found that 61% of French respondents viewed the UN favorably compared to only 53% of Brazilian respondents.¹⁷ Just as French respondents' lower baseline towards China left more room for their evaluations of the country to rise, their higher baseline towards the UN left more room for their evaluations of the institution to fall. Once again, though, in both cases we observe directionally consistent results, suggesting the generalizability of Hypothesis 2's expectations across different country contexts.

Interestingly, American leadership also negatively impacts IO legitimacy when compared to Switzerland, though the effect is approximately half as severe as that of China's, with a decrease of approximately five percentage points in the overall model, though the result is not significant when examining the Brazilian sample only. While our original expectation in Hypothesis 4 was that US leadership *would not* have a significant effect on IO leadership because US preferences and values are already well known, this data provides mixed support. It suggests a somewhat complementary alternative explanation that great power leadership, whether by China or the US, is viewed less favorably than the more neutral Swiss leadership. This may reflect a perception that major powers exert undue influence over IOs. Though US leadership has a slightly negative effect on perceived IO legitimacy, the negative effect is less pronounced than under China's leadership, suggesting that our original expectation was not unfounded.

¹⁷Pew, August 31, 2023.

Figure 3: IO Legitimacy: US and China's Leadership



Note: China and US leadership of UN agencies leads to negative changes in IO legitimacy. For full model results with control variables, see Appendix Table A-6.

Influence Over Staff

Experimental Design

As we set out in Hypothesis 5, China’s leadership of IOs should lead to more goods being allocated to like-minded countries. We test the impact of the IO head on bureaucratic decision-making through a survey experiment with an elite sample of IO staff from the UN specialized agencies that combines a conjoint, between-subjects vignette, and within-subjects vignette design. This experimental design allows us to directly compare the effects of executive influence against object project-level features—including region, recipient regime type, priority, issue area, and collaborators—in the decision-making processes of IO staff.¹⁸

We first test the ‘pleasing the principal’ mechanism. We consider principal-agent dynamics where the staff anticipate the preferences of the principal through the cues associated with a leader’s nationality. This mechanism operates indirectly without the direction of the executive head. Instead, the existing staff of the institution may shift their activities in response to the nationality of the executive head without any direct application of executive power. Existing employees of the organization interested in promotion and self-advancement could prioritize projects in accordance with the interest of the agency head (Clark and Dolan 2021). As staff members react to “please the principal” employees that execute programs could respond to satisfy the needs of the Secretary General. To test the pleasing the principal mechanism, we implement a between-subjects vignette treatment, informing respondents of the nationality of the executive head (American, Chinese, or Swiss). We again include Switzerland as our control condition. To increase the strength of the treatment, we ask respondents a comprehension check question about nationality and remind respondents of the nationality of the executive head in between rounds of conjoint tasks.

We then test the mechanism of agenda setting. Executive heads attempt to con-

¹⁸More details on the conjoint experimental design can be found in the Appendix, along with descriptive statistics.

vey impartiality as neutral civil servants. However, they can communicate their vision for the organization through speeches, statements, and even visits from officials made during tenure. For instance, at the ITU, Secretary General Zhao from China argued the ITU should adapt its mission to include development, while the newly elected American, Doreen Bogdeen Martin promotes gender equality. Staff are mindful of geopolitical signals. For instance, collaborating with the World Bank—an American-led and Western-oriented organization—conveys different information about priorities than collaborating with the AIIB—a bank created by China.¹⁹ To test the agenda-setting mechanism, we implement a within-subjects vignette treatment, randomizing the order of treatments across subjects to mitigate any potential order effects. The levels of the agenda-setting mechanism are cooperation with the AIIB or the World Bank, where the World Bank represents the control level. To increase the salience of both vignette treatments, the relevant information is highlighted in color, bold, underlined, and italicized.

In this study, the population of interest is international bureaucrats who have worked at IOs. We field the experiment by advertising through LinkedIn (Clark 2021). We recruit a total of 200 employees who completed at least 1 conjoint task, for a total of 3214 distinct choice tasks. After being presented with the vignette treatments, respondents are presented with a series of 5 paired technical cooperation projects, each on a new screen, and containing various levels of the attributes shown in Table 2. After each pair of profiles, respondents are asked to rate and choose between the projects. Respondents are then asked to select the attribute that was most important in making their decisions, as well as an open-end question in which they are asked to explain how they made their decision.

¹⁹Although these organizations may not be familiar to the general public, we argue our elites will recognize these organizations.

Table 1: Conjoint Design Specification

Attribute	Levels
Region	<i>Asia</i> Latin America Africa
Measure of Political Freedom	<i>Not free</i> Partly free Free
Project Priority	<i>Low priority</i> Medium priority Highest priority
Project Collaborator	<i>None</i> World Bank Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
Project Focus	<i>Economic development</i> Climate change Women’s empowerment

Notes: Levels used as baselines are italicized.

Results

Following [Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley \(2020\)](#), we estimate marginal means (MM) for each attribute level.²⁰ MM reflect the probability that a respondent will support a particular climate plan with a particular attribute level, averaging over the distribution of the remaining climate plan attributes. Values over 50% indicate that the attribute level increases overall favorability of the plan, while values under 50% indicate it decreases favorability.

We find that neither the pleasing the principle nor the agenda setting treatments have significant effects on respondents’ decision-making, either in the China treatment condition (Figure 4) or in the US treatment condition (Figure 5) compared to the baseline Swiss condition, or in a supplementary comparison of the US vs China conditions (see Appendix). If IO staff selected projects in an effort to please the principle or respond to

²⁰We cluster standard errors by respondent since each respondent completes multiple tasks.

the principle’s agenda-setting, we would expect to see that they allocate more projects to Asia, to AIIB collaborations, and to not-free or partly-free countries in the China and AIIB treatment conditions, as these priorities are more aligned with Chinese preferences for the international order. Alternatively, in the US and World Bank conditions, we would expect pleasing the principle and agenda-setting to result in more favorability for projects in Latin America, free countries, and collaborations with the World Bank. In no cases does the Chinese executive treatment or the US executive treatment induces a statistically significant response from the Swiss executive condition. The agenda setting treatment (Figure 6) is even less pronounced, where for the most part the results are identical in both conditions.

While IO staff did not respond strongly to either the pleasing the principle or the agenda-setting treatments, we do observe that they respond to project-level features in their decision-making. Project priority is by far the most salient attribute for all respondents in selecting projects (see Figure A-8 in the Appendix), which suggests that while respondents evaluate the projects in rational and predictable ways, executive influence plays a minimal part in this decision-making process.²¹ Overall, this evidence suggests that bureaucrats in IOs retain independence in decision-making over IO projects despite implicit and explicit signaling from executives.

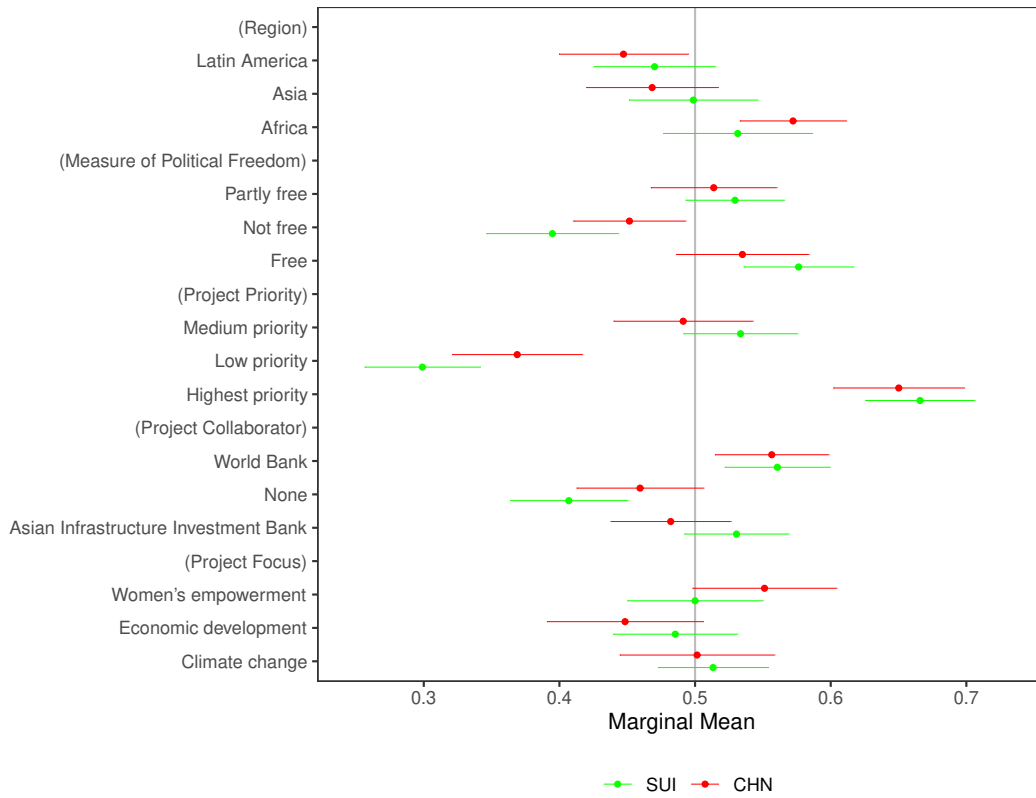
Influence Over the Distributional Benefits

In addition to exerting influence over bureaucratic decision-making, executives may also be able to influence the distribution of goods directly (Cox 1969; Hall and Woods 2018; Carnegie and Marinov 2017).

To analyze the relationship between China’s executive leadership and changes in IOs’ policies and further test the expectations of Hypothesis 5, we collect original data on UN projects. The *UN Project Database* captures country-year data on projects of 11

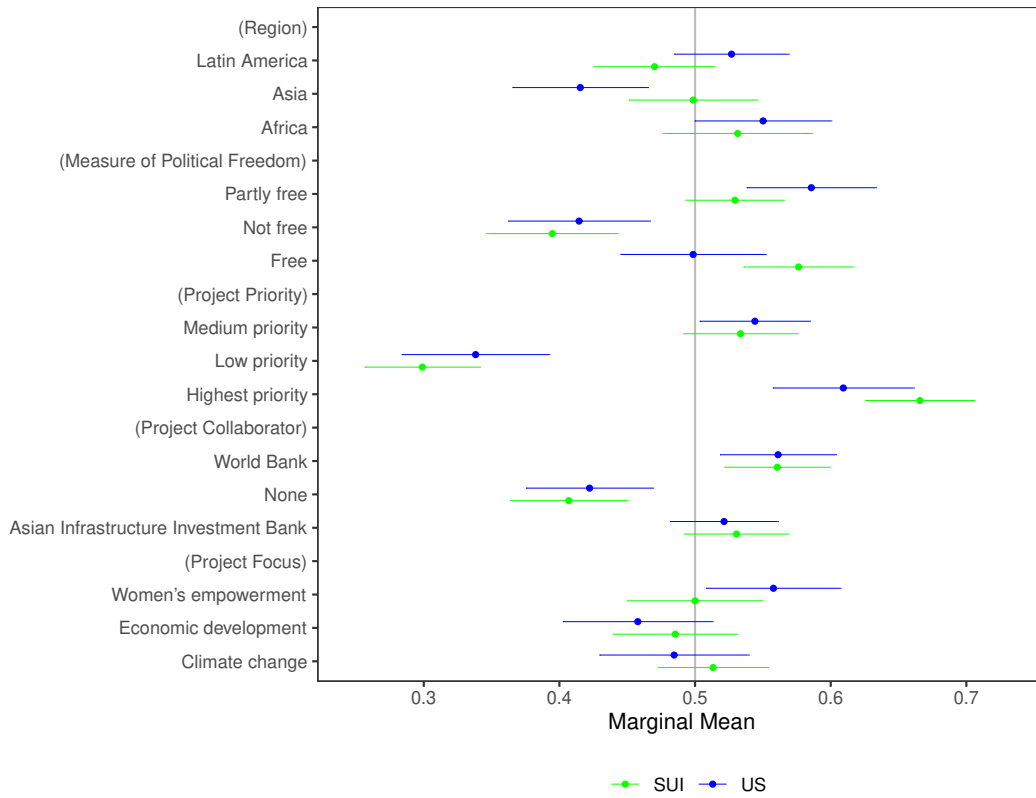
²¹MMs and Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) are shown in the Appendix. We also include diagnostic plots which show that each level of each attribute was shown in equal proportion and that there was no systematic preference for the right- or left-hand profiles

Figure 4: Nationality Treatment: China vs. Switzerland



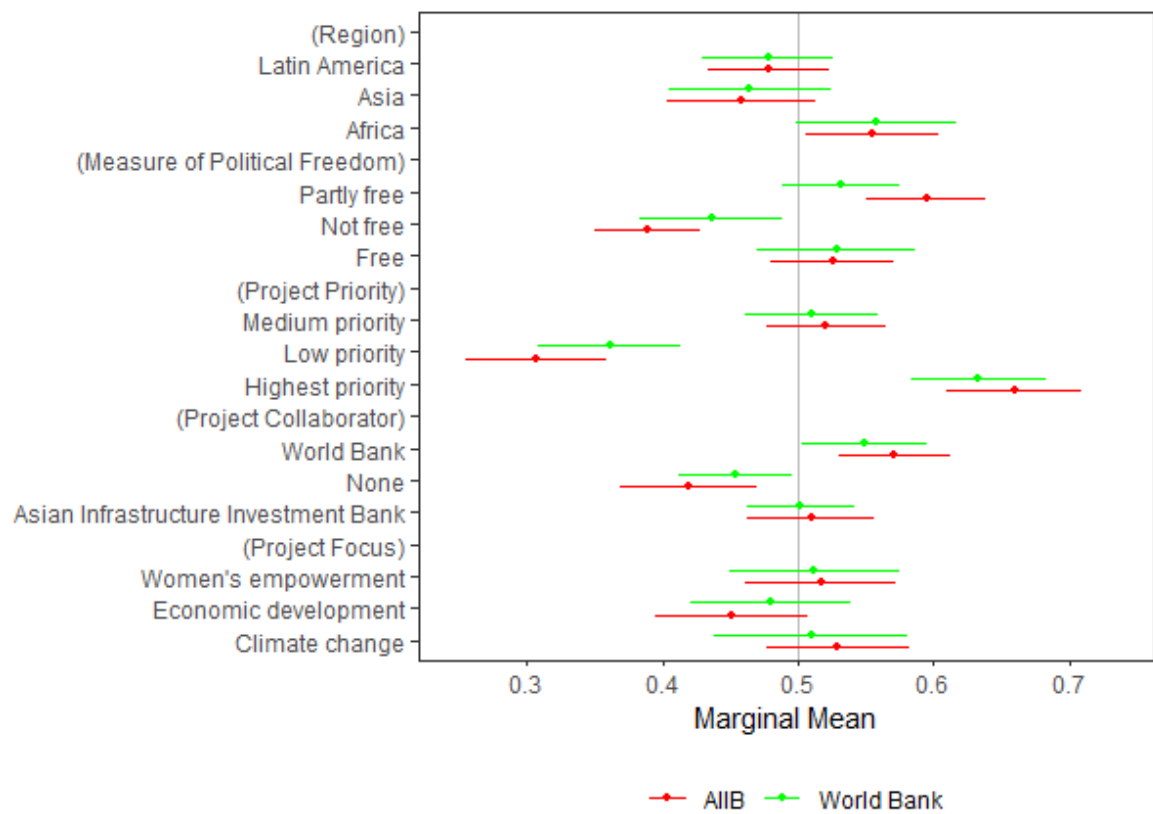
Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for the Marginal Mean (MM) of each attribute level.

Figure 5: Nationality Treatment: US vs. Switzerland



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for the Marginal Mean (MM) of each attribute level.

Figure 6: Agenda Setting Treatment



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for the Marginal Mean (MM) of each attribute level.

UN agencies, including funding, topic, participants, and funders. Our database contains 12,481 country-projects from 1988 to 2022. Our dataset allows us to look at variation in the allocation of goods through awarding contracts, initiating projects, and allocating funding. [Kaya, Kilby, and Kay \(2021\)](#) coin the term “supplementary multilateralism” as a condition when the great power uses multilateral benefits to reinforce and reward those who share close political alignments. In our case, projects rather than lending represents a form of supplementary multilateralism where the countries selected for capacity building, workshops, and funding, are those that the great power wishes to reward with spoils from the UN.

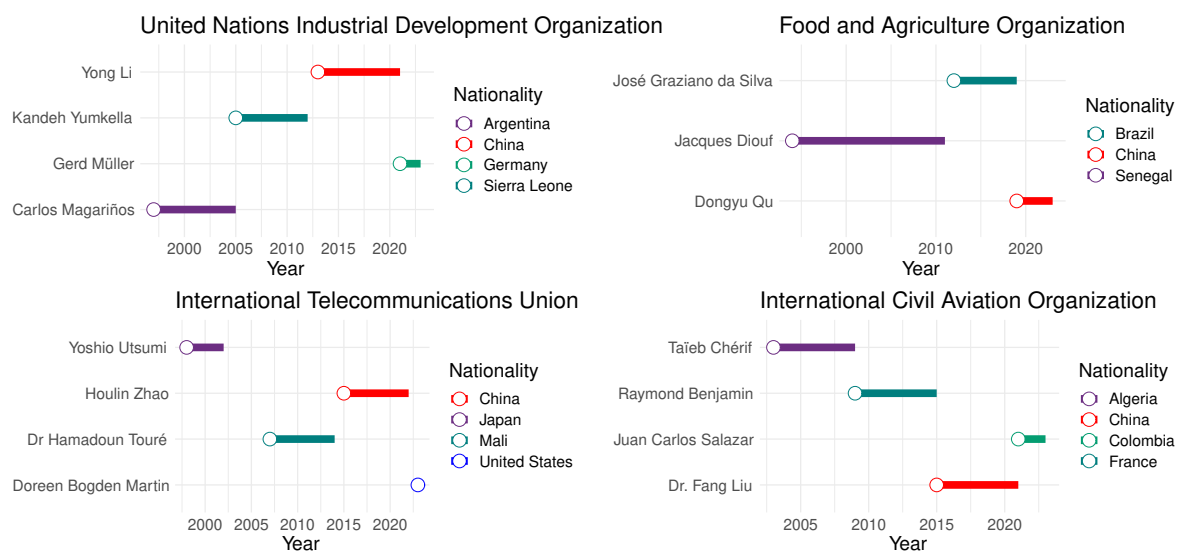
We organize our selected IOs to compare the positive cases where a Chinese national is elected to lead a specialized UN agency to control cases where the nationals of other member states lead. The organizations that China leads are the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and the UN Industrial Development (UNIDO) (Figure 7).²² We compare the four positive cases where China leads the organization (FAO, ICAO, ITU, and UNIDO) to the other UN agencies that China has not led, though in these control cases, we are able to examine the elections of other member states as executive heads as placebo tests. This allows us to understand whether China uses its unique opportunity to contribute to shaping the organization.

To determine whether there are any descriptive trends that match with the expectations of executive influence over project allocation, we test whether China’s allies receive greater shares of projects after it is elected and whether US allies receive a lower share. We establish thresholds of alignment at three different levels of strictness based on UN Ideal Point estimates [Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten \(2017\)](#): in the 90th percentile of alignment, in the upper quartile of alignment, and higher than median alignment.

We conceptualize the treatment of China’s executive leadership in two ways: first, as an indicator for the years during which China served as head, capturing its direct influence over decisions, and second, as an indicator that also includes all years after

²²See also Figure 7 in the Appendix.

Figure 7: Organizations with Chinese Leadership



Note: For the positive cases that China leads, we map the length of the tenure and the other countries that previously led the organization.

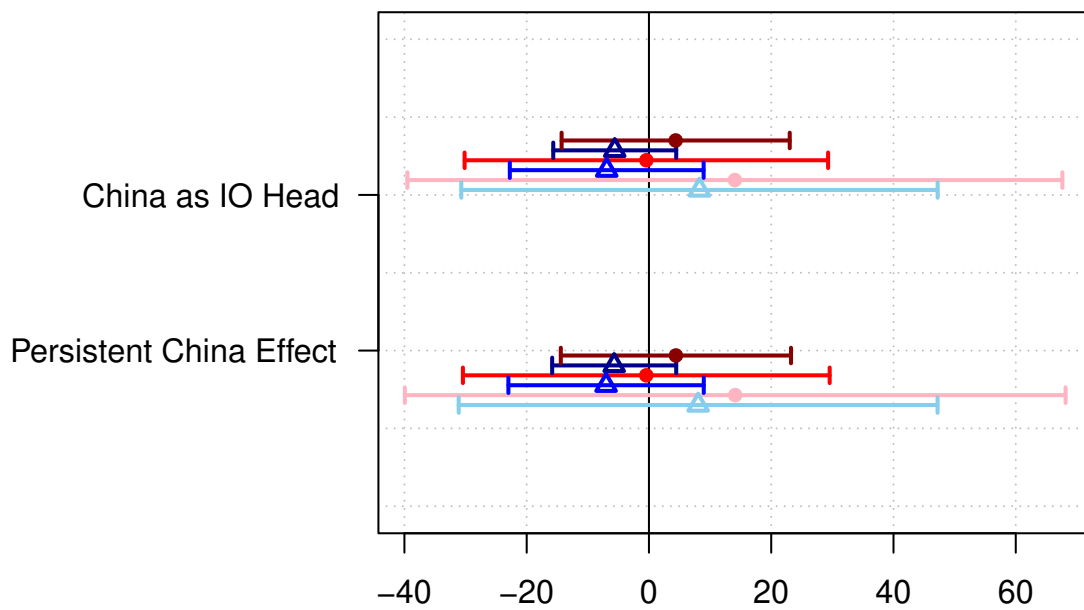
China's serving as executive head, which captures persistent changes to organizational priorities.²³ We predict the share of IO projects allocated towards states that are close to China or the US using linear regression models with country and IO fixed effects and clustered standard errors. The results, shown in Figure 8 corroborate our expectations that executive leadership has limited effects on trends in project allocation. Closer levels of alignment with the US are shown in increasingly dark shades of blue, while closer levels of alignment with China are shown in increasingly dark shades of red. At no level of alignment does the election of a Chinese executive head affect the projects allocated to Chinese or US partners, either while China is the executive head or in the years afterward.

These results are robust to alternate specifications which we show in the appendix. First, because the dependent variable is a count, we estimate a Poisson model.²⁴ Second, we conduct a placebo test predicting project allocation when non-China countries serve

²³We do not include a treatment of China's election years because a one-year measure is too noisy to reliably capture the effects of executive leadership.

²⁴There was no evidence of over-dispersion to suggest that a negative binomial model was called for.

Figure 8: China's serving as executive head has little effect on the allocation of IO projects



Note: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals with IO and year fixed effects and clustered standard errors. The dependent variable is the count of projects awarded to allies in a given year. China's partner countries are those with ideal point distance from China or the US on UNGA voting (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017) in the 90th percentile (dark red and dark blue), the smallest quartile (medium red and medium blue) and closer than the median country (light red and light blue). The first set of results on an indicator of China's election, the next, are the years that China served as executive head, and the last are all years after which China was elected.

as executive head, and find no significant patterns of project allocations resulting. Third, we operationalize the dependent variable as a share of IO-year projects instead of a count. Fourth, we show that results are robust to alternate specifications of closeness to China besides ideal point scores. Drawing on the economic measures employed in [Broz, Zhang, and Wang \(2020\)](#), we show that our results hold with four new measures of closeness: whether high-level officials from the state attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, whether the state has a bilateral investment treaty or free trade agreement with China, and whether the country is geographically positioned along the trade routes that China demarcated as priorities for investment.

Conclusion

In IOs, IR scholarship has tended to discount the role of executive heads as mere figureheads, yet Western leaders have increasingly expressed concern about the potential influence that China’s executive leadership may be having on the nature of global governance. Our work on executive influence tests expectations that executives may be able to influence IO operations to affect the status quo, leading to harmful effects on IO legitimacy, and that rising powers might simultaneously reap reputational benefits. However, we show that concerns of potential IO biasing due to executive influence appear to be overstated: while China is taking a larger leadership role in IOs, we do not observe systematic effects of this leadership on the activities of these organizations, either through direct influence over project allocation or via indirect influence over bureaucratic decision-making. Our analysis of IO projects shows that Chinese leadership of IOs does not significantly shift the allocation of institutional benefits towards China’s like-minded states, and our conjoint experiment potentially challenges views that IO staff will work to “please the principal” or respond to explicit agenda-setting by US or Chinese executives. By illustrating that the influence of the executive to change institutional priorities is limited, we demonstrate that the constraining nature of IO design is functioning reasonably well, and that member states can continue to have faith in the neutrality of their agents.

It is important to note that our findings do not preclude that China may be shaping

IOs from within. For instance, rather than influencing macro-trends of the organization, great power leadership of IOs may have more nuanced results. Western officials point to China’s influence over Taiwan affairs within the UN system, which is less discernible when analyzing project allocation at scale (Fung and Lam 2021*b*; deLisle et al. 2022). Future work should probe whether executive influence may be heterogeneous across issue areas, perhaps depending on issue salience. Future research should also examine alternative means by which executive heads may wield influence over IO politics, such as through votes, coalition building, and using rhetorical strategies (e.g., Yang 2021).

While IO leaders may not exert influence over the distribution of goods, this position holds tangible benefits for the member state with a national in a position of power. We theorize that China, as a rising power, dedicates time and resources to securing IO leadership positions because of the reputational benefits of IO leadership. In our survey experiment, we test and find evidence for the value China gains from leadership positions at the UN in terms of reputational benefits. We find that individuals in Brazil and France rate China’s reputation more favorably when China leads IOs. We do not find the same effect for the US. This suggests that one of the major benefits the UN offers China is the currency of a positive image as a responsible stakeholder. Future research should probe how China deploys these reputational gains, for example in the partnerships China constructs between its global initiatives and the UN.²⁵

The implications of our findings of leadership on IO legitimacy are mixed. Our theoretical framework predicts that a rising power’s influence negatively impacts IO legitimacy. While we find null results that China manipulates the provision of benefits toward its partners, we find that domestic publics negatively evaluate the legitimacy of IOs after great power leadership of UN agencies. Leadership by a relatively neutral country, like Switzerland, leads to more positive evaluations of IO performance. Though the negative effects of China’s leadership are twice as strong, leadership by both China and the US reduces perceptions of legitimacy. While this result supports our theoretical expectations that uncertainty and perceived threat lead to strongly negative effects

²⁵This includes the Belt and Road, AIIB, and World Internet Conference.

on IO perceptions as a result of China's leadership, it also suggests that great power leadership more generally is a channel that could result in the erosion of institutional legitimacy (Lenz and Viola 2017; Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Future research should expand this line of inquiry to additional global audiences to ascertain whether audiences in developing countries view China taking the helm of organizations more positively. As IOs confront increasing backlash, retrenchment, and member state withdrawal (Walter 2021; Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019), such evidence is particularly important for identifying a source that could affect global perceptions of and confidence in IOs.

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Supplementary Materials for China’s Leadership of IOs: Reputational Gains, Distributional Politics, and Institutional Legitimacy

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January 14, 2024

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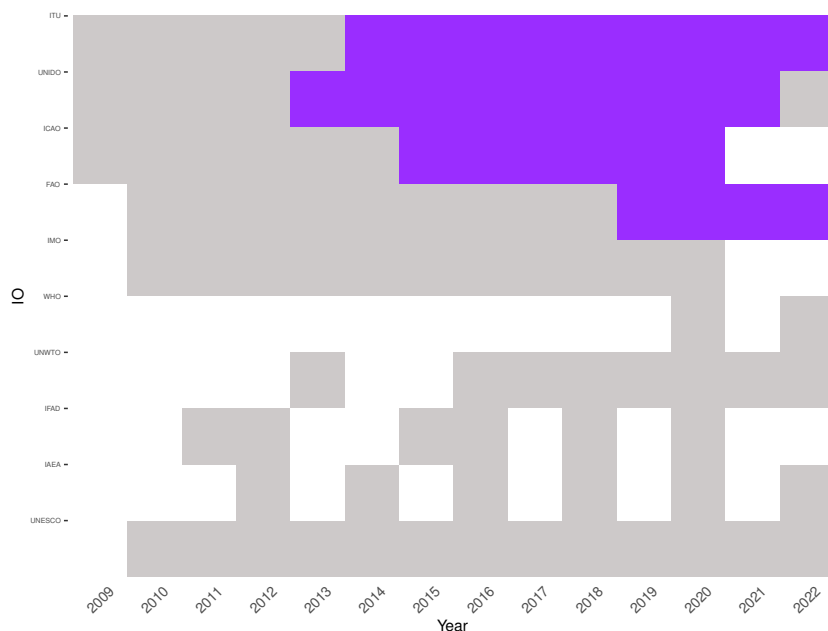
A Empirical Appendix

A.1 Project Analysis

Table A-1: Summary Statistics

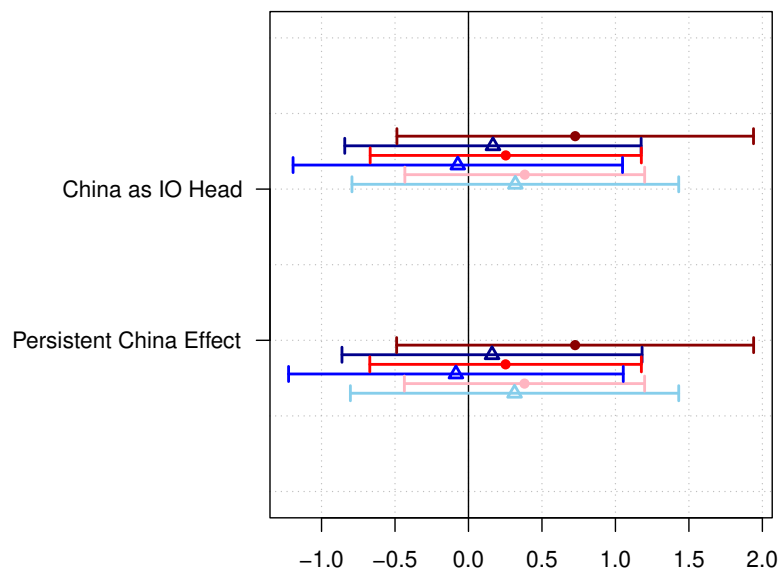
	IO	Num. Projects	Data Begins	Data Ends	Avg. Yearly Proj.	Avg. US Partner Yearly Share	Avg. CHN Partner Yearly Share
1	FAO	933	2010	2022	161.17	0.05	0.30
2	IAEA	148	2012	2022	45.32	0.23	0.26
3	ICAO	581	2009	2020	57.36	0.03	0.28
4	IFAD	1008	2011	2020	251.75	0.19	0.26
5	IMO	3180	2010	2020	296.55	0.23	0.27
6	ITU	803	2009	2022	93.69	0.06	0.33
7	UNESCO	141	2010	2022	15.45	0.08	0.25
8	UNIDO	537	2009	2022	63.91	0.06	0.36
9	UNWTO	47	2013	2022	11.94	0.13	0.40
10	WHO	64	2020	2022	39.03	0.00	0.27

Figure A-1: Distribution of Treatment



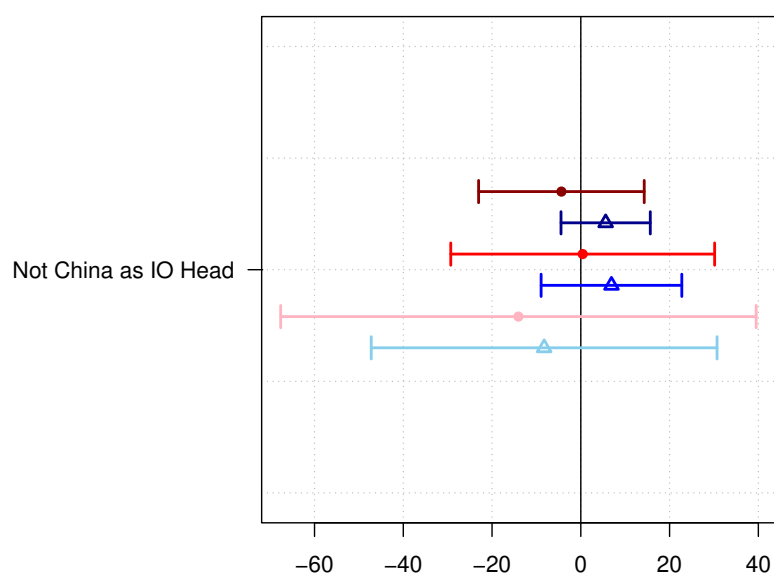
Treated IO-years (i.e., years in which China served as executive heads) indicated in purple, while control years (non-China IO heads) indicated in gray. White IO-years have no project data.

Figure A-2: Main results robust to Poisson models



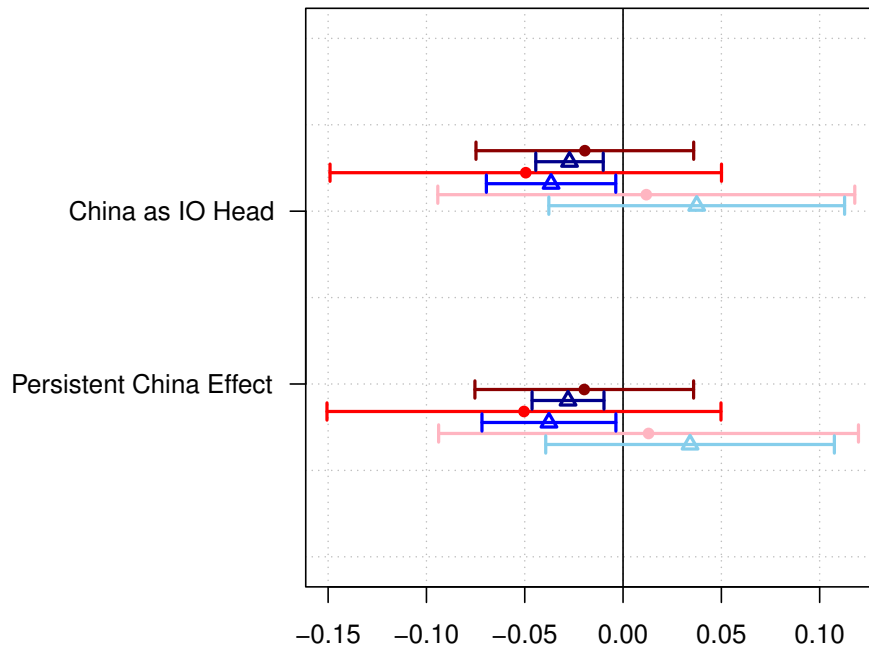
Note: Estimated coefficients from Poisson models with 95% confidence intervals with IO and year fixed effects and clustered standard errors. Allies are countries with ideal point distance from China or the US on UNGA voting (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017) in the 90th percentile (dark red and dark blue), the smallest quartile (medium red and medium blue) and closer than the median country (light red and light blue).

Figure A-3: Placebo test of non-China elections on project allocation



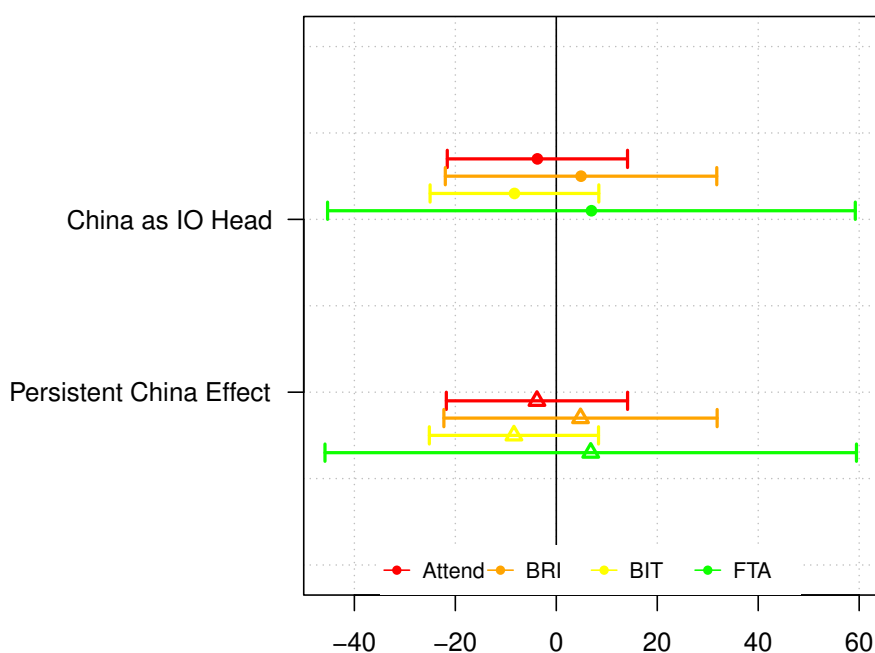
Note: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals with IO and year fixed effects and clustered standard errors. Allies are countries with ideal point distance from China or the US on UNGA voting (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017) in the 90th percentile (dark red and dark blue), the smallest quartile (medium red and medium blue) and closer than the median country (light red and light blue).

Figure A-4: Main results robust to share DV



Note: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals with IO and year fixed effects and clustered standard errors. Dependent variable is the share of projects awarded to allies in a given IO-year. Allies are countries with ideal point distance from China or the US on UNGA voting (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017) in the 90th percentile (dark red and dark blue), the smallest quartile (medium red and medium blue) and closer than the median country (light red and light blue). First set of results on an indicator of China's election, the next, the years that China served as executive head, and the last, all years after which China was elected.

Figure A-5: Main results robust to alternate measures of closeness



Note: Estimated coefficients from OLS models with 95% confidence intervals with IO and year fixed effects and clustered standard errors. Dependent variable is the share of projects awarded to allies in a given IO-year. Allies are countries which sent high-level officials to the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (red), with bilateral investment treaties (yellow) or free trade agreements (green) with China, or geographically positioned along the trade routes that China demarcated as priorities for investment (orange) (Broz, Zhang, and Wang 2020). First set of results on an indicator of China's election, the next, the years that China served as executive head, and the last, all years after which China was elected.

A.2 *Vignette Experiment*

A.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

A.2.2 Questionnaire

Pre-Test

- (*Gender*): What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Neither/Prefer not to say
- (*Education*): What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
 - Elementary or some high school
 - High school graduate/GED
 - Some college/Associate's degree
 - College/university graduate
 - Post-graduate degree
- (*Ideology*): In general, I think of myself as:
 - Extremely liberal
 - Liberal
 - Slightly liberal
 - Moderate, middle of the road
 - Slightly conservative
 - Conservative
 - Extremely conservative
- (*Employment*): Which of these options best describes your situation (in the last seven days)?
 - Employed full time
 - Employed part time
 - Unemployed
 - Student
 - Retired
 - Homemaker
 - Self-employed
- (*Sector*): Which of the following industries most closely matches the one in which you are employed?
 - Forestry, fishing, hunting or agriculture support

- Real estate or rental and leasing
 - Mining
 - Professional, scientific or technical services
 - Utilities
 - Management of companies or enterprises
 - Construction
 - Admin, support, waste management or remediation services
 - Manufacturing
 - Educational services
 - Wholesale trade
 - Health care or social assistance
 - Retail trade
 - Arts, entertainment or recreation
 - Transportation or warehousing
 - Accommodation or food services
 - Information
 - Other services (except public administration)
 - Finance or insurance
 - Unclassified establishments
- (*Age*): How old are you?
 - (*Income*): What was your total household income before taxes during the past 12 months?
 - Less than \$25,000
 - \$25,000-\$49,999
 - \$50,000-\$74,999
 - \$75,000-\$99,999
 - \$100,000-\$149,999
 - \$150,000 or more
 - Prefer not to say
 - (*Trust Government*): How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Brasilia to do what is right?
 - Just about always
 - Most of the time
 - Only some of the time
 - (*Political Interest*): Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs:

- Most of the time
 - Some of the time
 - Only now and then
 - Hardly at all
- *(Foreign Policy Orientation)*: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. *(In response to each statement, respondent selects from: Definitely disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, definitely agree)*
 - The use of military force only makes problems worse.
 - Generally speaking, Brazil can trust other nations.
 - Going to war is unfortunate, but sometimes the only solution to international problems.
 - Brazil is superior to other nations.
 - *(Frenemy)*: We are interested in your views towards several countries. How friendly or unfriendly would you say are relations between Brazil and this country? *(In response to each listed country, respondent selects from: Ally, friendly, unfriendly, enemy, not sure)*
 - China
 - U.S.
 - Germany
 - Egypt
 - Indonesia
 - *(Threat Perception)*: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: This country poses a threat to Brazil. *(In response to each listed country, respondent selects from: Definitely disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, definitely agree)*
 - China
 - U.S.
 - Germany
 - Egypt
 - Indonesia
 - *(Screener)*: We would like to get a sense of your general preferences.

Most modern theories of decision making recognize that decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Individual preferences and knowledge, along with situational variables, can greatly impact the decision process. To demonstrate that you've read this much, just go ahead and select both red and green among the alternatives below, no matter what your favorite color is. Yes, ignore the question below and select both of these options.

What is your favorite color?

- White
- Black
- Red
- Pink
- Green
- Blue

Treatment

You will now be shown a news article. Please read over the article carefully because at the end of this survey you will be asked questions to check your memory and comprehension.

You will be required to view the article for at least 15 seconds, but should feel free to take more time. Then, you will be asked a few more questions.

Respondents are randomly assigned to be shown one of the following treatments and asked to summarize the article in one or two sentences.

(Control): Specialized agencies of the United Nations (UN) perform important functions, including working to eradicate poverty and improve sustainable development; facilitating cooperation between governments on health, safety, and technology; and promoting literacy, education, and other social issues. Elections are held at the United Nations to select the leader of each UN specialized agency, and all countries can vote in the elections.

An official from Switzerland was recently elected to lead a specialized agency of the UN. Several states campaigned actively in the election for the position. The Swiss official will manage the work of the UN agency and lead the employees and staff in developing international projects. The Swiss leader will play an active role in activities like hiring new staff, setting the agency's issue priorities, and creating partnerships with outside organizations and donors.

(China): Specialized agencies of the United Nations (UN) perform important functions, including working to eradicate poverty and improve sustainable development; facilitating cooperation between governments on health, safety, and technology; and promoting literacy, education, and other social issues. Elections are held at the United Nations to select the leader of each UN specialized agency, and all countries can vote in the elections.

An official from China was recently elected to lead a specialized agency of the UN. Several states campaigned actively in the election for the position. The Chinese official will manage the work of the UN agency and lead the employees and staff in developing international projects. The Chinese leader will play an active role in activities like hiring new staff, setting the agency's issue priorities, and creating partnerships with outside organizations and donors.

(US): Specialized agencies of the United Nations (UN) perform important functions, including working to eradicate poverty and improve sustainable development; facilitating cooperation between governments on health, safety, and technology; and promoting literacy, education, and other social issues. Elections are held at the United Nations to select the leader of each UN specialized agency, and all countries can vote in the elections.

An official from the United States of America was recently elected to lead a specialized agency of the UN. Several states campaigned actively in the election for the position. The American official will manage the work of the UN agency and lead the employees and staff in developing international projects. The American leader will play an active role in activities like hiring new staff, setting the agency's issue priorities, and creating partnerships with outside organizations and donors.

Outcome Measures

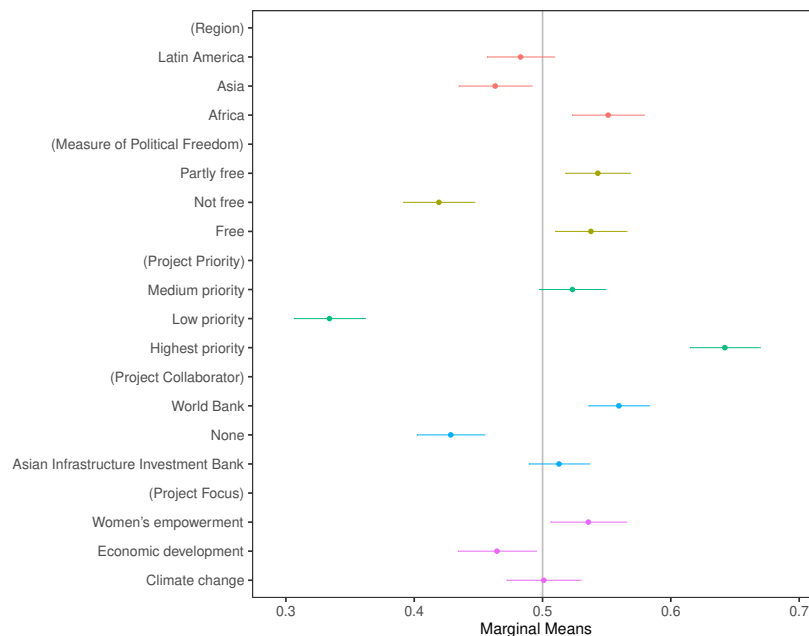
- *(Reputation1)*: What do you think the effect of China/US/Switzerland leading the United Nations agency will be on the reputation of: *(In response to each listed country, respondent selects from: Very negative effect, somewhat negative effect, neither negative nor positive effect, somewhat positive effect, very positive effect)*
 - China/US/Switzerland
 - the United Nations
- *(Reputation2)*: How much do you approve or disapprove of China/US/Switzerland after the election of the official from China/US/Switzerland to lead the UN agency? *(In response to each listed country, respondent selects from: Definitely disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither approve nor disapprove, somewhat approve, definitely approve)*
 - China/US/Switzerland
 - the United Nations
- *(Legitimacy)*: On a scale of 1 (no confidence) to 5 (full confidence) how much confidence do you have in each of: *(In response to each listed country, respondent selects from: No confidence, not very confident, neither confident nor unconfident, somewhat confident, very confident)*
 - China
 - the United States of America
 - Switzerland
 - the United Nations
- *(Trust)*: For each of the following, how much do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? *(In response to each listed country, respondent selects from: Do not trust at all, mostly distrust, neither trust nor distrust, somewhat trust, trust completely)*
 - China
 - the United States of America
 - Switzerland
 - the United Nations
- *(Leadership)*: Suppose either China or the United States will be the most powerful nation in the world in ten years. Would you:
 - Strongly prefer China

- Somewhat prefer China
 - Prefer neither China nor the United States
 - Somewhat prefer the United States
 - Strongly prefer the United States
- *(Cooperation)*: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: this country poses an opportunity for cooperation with Brazil. *(In response to each listed country, respondent selects from: Definitely disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, definitely agree)*
 - China
 - the United States of America
 - Switzerland
- *(Instruments)*: In your opinion, how acceptable or unacceptable is it for the Brazilian government to take the following actions? *(In response to each listed statement, respondent selects from: Totally unacceptable, somewhat unacceptable, neither acceptable nor unacceptable, somewhat acceptable, totally acceptable)*
 - Engage in diplomacy (directly talk with foreign leaders) with the United States of America
 - Engage in diplomacy (directly talk with foreign leaders) with China
 - Receive aid and infrastructure development funding from China
 - Receive aid and infrastructure development funding from the United States of America
 - Engage in business partnerships with firms from China
 - Engage in business partnerships with firms from the United States of America
- *(Manipulation Check)*: In the article you read, the country elected was:
 - The United States
 - China
 - A different country
 - Not mentioned
 - Switzerland
 - Germany

A.3 Conjoint Experiment

A.3.1 Aggregate Results

Figure A-6: Aggregate MMs



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for the Marginal Mean (MM) of each attribute level.

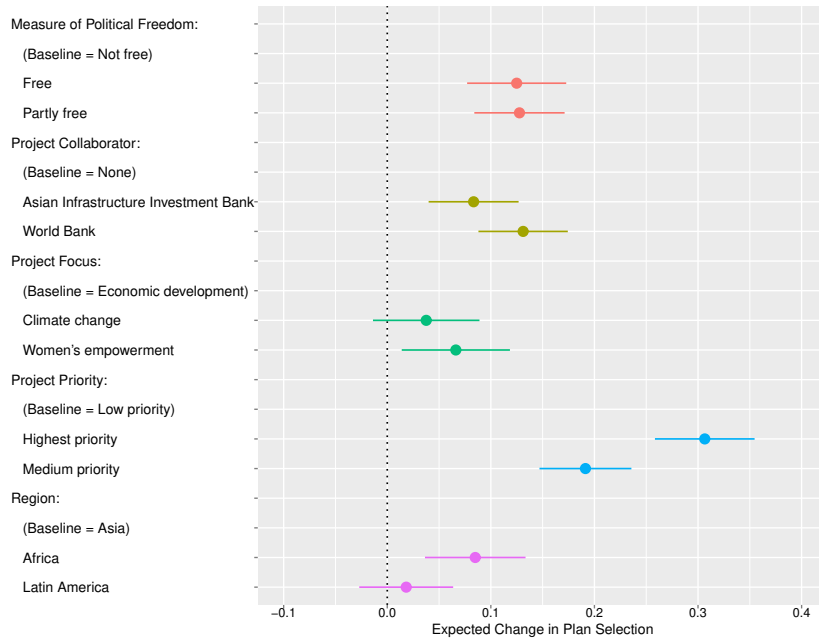
A.3.2 Additional Figures

A.3.3 Descriptive Statistics

A.3.4 Sample

We use LinkedIn’s message advertising which allows us to send personalized messages to individuals working for the United Nations agencies in our dataset. Each employee is invited to participate in our brief survey. Our message reiterates that the survey is anonymous, non-identifiable, and privately administered through Qualtrics. There are roughly 40,000 employees working for United Nations agencies that use LinkedIn. Because elites are generally found to be high-attention survey takers, we do not include any additional screener questions. We also are not concerned about bots taking the survey because of our targeted LinkedIn recruitment strategy. We recruit a total of 200 employees who completed at least 1 conjoint task, for a total of 3214 distinct choice tasks.

Figure A-7: Aggregate AMCEs



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) of each attribute level.

Figure A-8: Most Important Feature

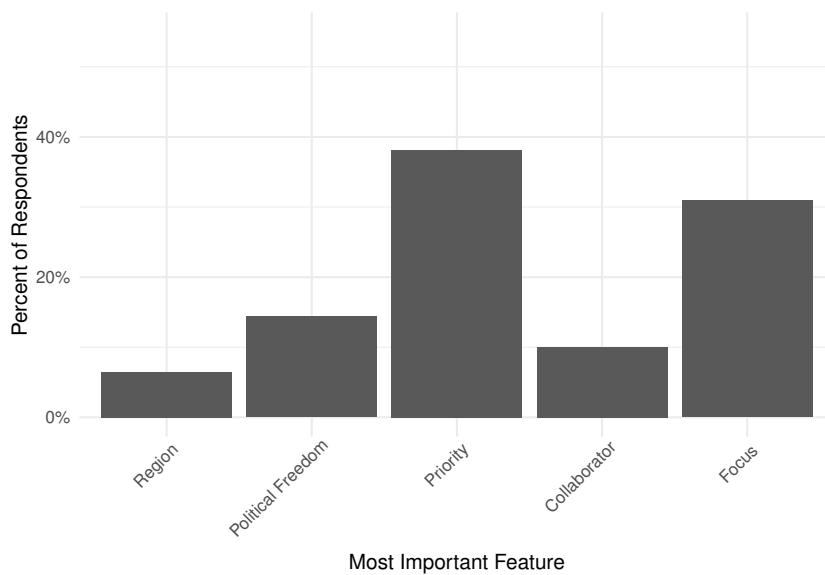
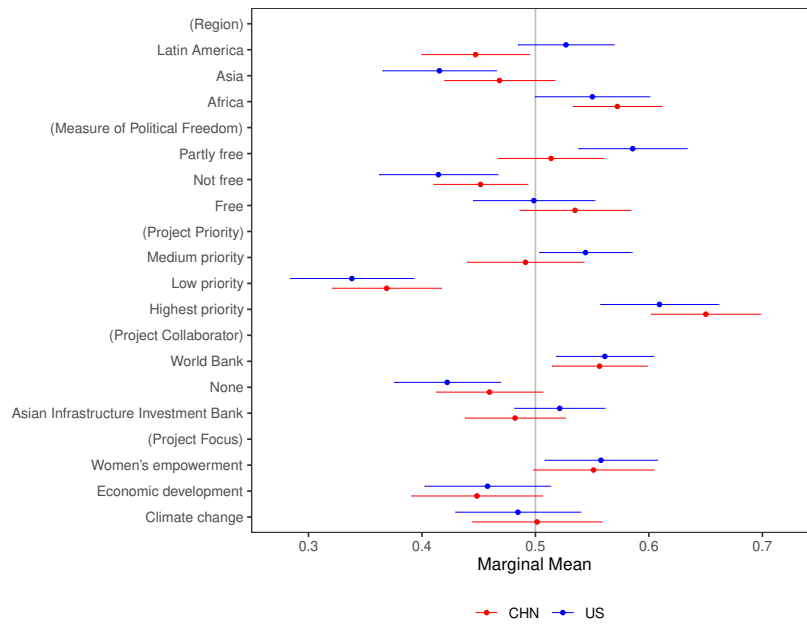


Figure A-9: Nationality treatment: Comparing US and China



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for the Marginal Mean (MM) of each attribute level.

Table A-2: Respondents by IO

IO	Num. Respondents
IMO	180.00
FAO	320.00
IFAD	40.00
UNESCO	80.00
ITU	140.00
UPU	0.00
UNIDO	80.00
ICAO	180.00
IAEA	20.00
WTO	0.00
WHO	440.00
UNDP	498.00

Table A-3: Summary Statistics

Var.	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.
Age	1.0	4.0	6.0	6.3	9.0	14.0
Gender	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.3	2.0	2.0
Years at IO	1.0	2.0	3.0	3.4	5.0	7.0

Note: Age variable is measured in buckets beginning at 16, sequenced by 4 years.

Figure A-10: Most Common Respondent Nationalities

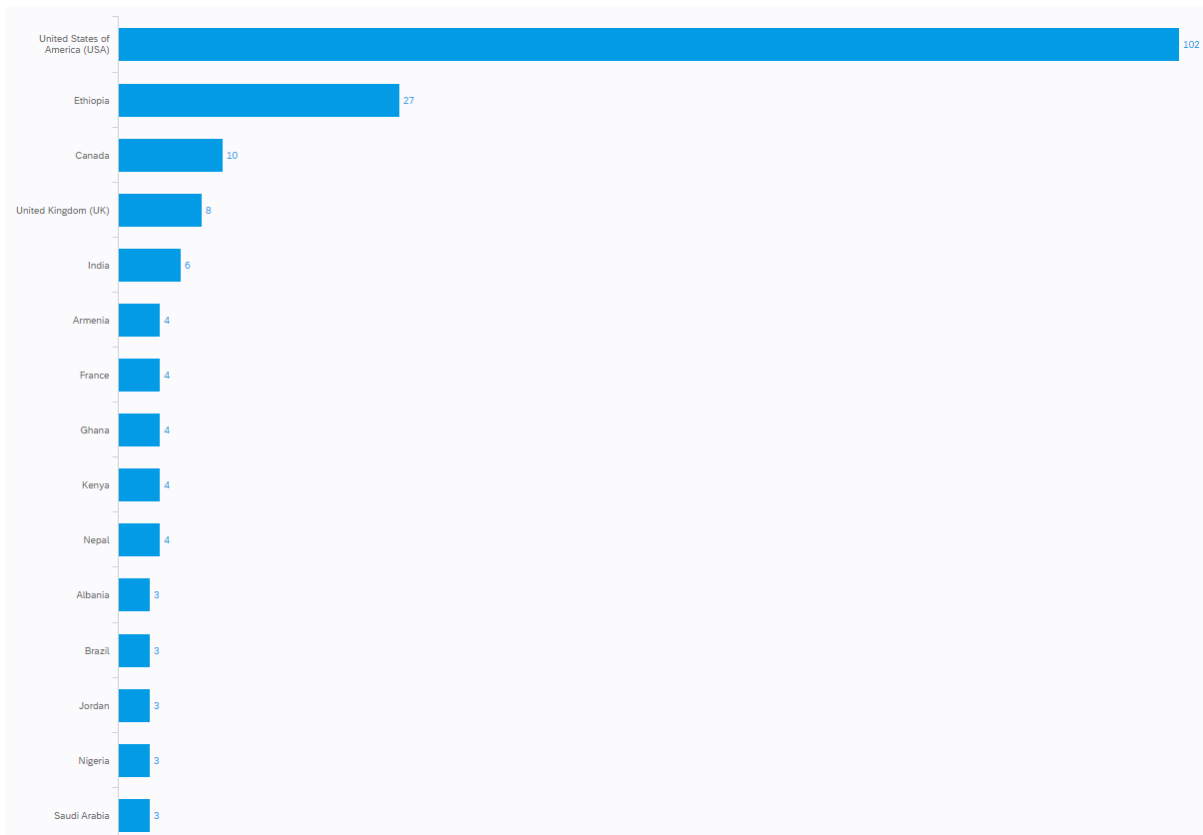
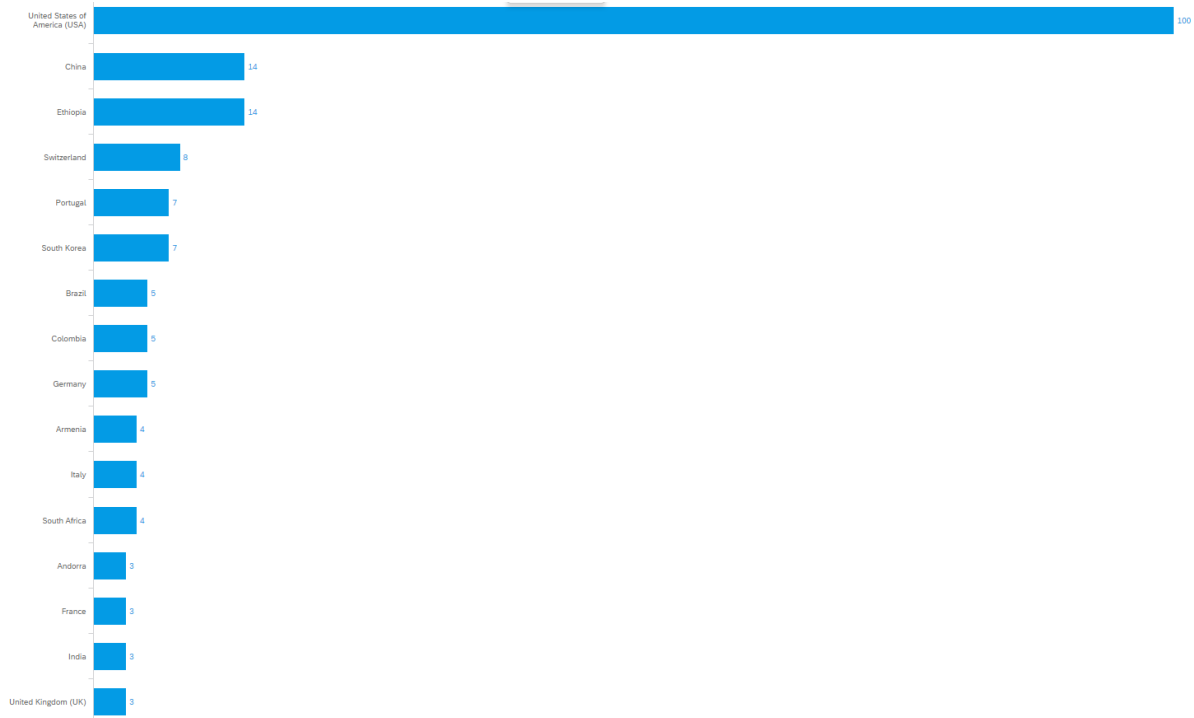


Figure A-11: Most Common Executive Head Nationalities



A.3.5 Assignment to Treatment

Respondents are randomly assigned to receive one of the three treatment conditions in the pleasing the principal treatment and to one of two conditions in the agenda-setting treatment. Respondents receive 5 pairs of technical cooperation projects with attributes on all projects randomly assigned as is standard in conjoint experiments. Attributes are sampled according to a uniform distribution, and there are no restrictions imposed on the combination of attribute levels that may appear. The order of attributes is randomized across respondents, but is constant within respondents (i.e. across profiles).

A.3.6 Survey Flow

1. Survey Introduction
2. Pleasing the principal vignette (randomly assigned to one of three nationality conditions)
3. Agenda-setting vignette (randomly assign the order of one of two conditions)
4. Introduction to conjoint task
5. Conjoint round 1 (5 tasks)
6. Reminder of pleasing the principal condition
7. Agenda-setting vignette (randomly assigned to the other condition)
8. Conjoint round 2 (5 tasks)
9. Demographic questionnaire

Figure A-12: Attribute Proportions

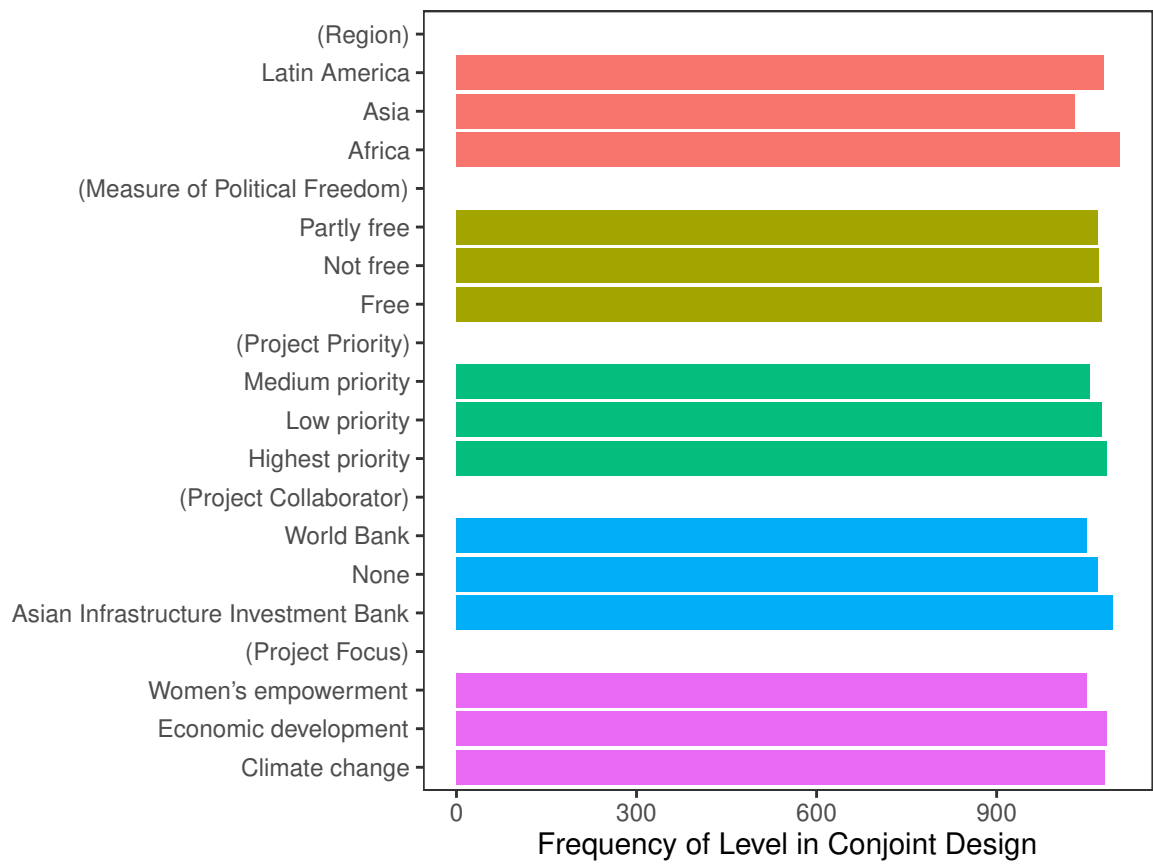
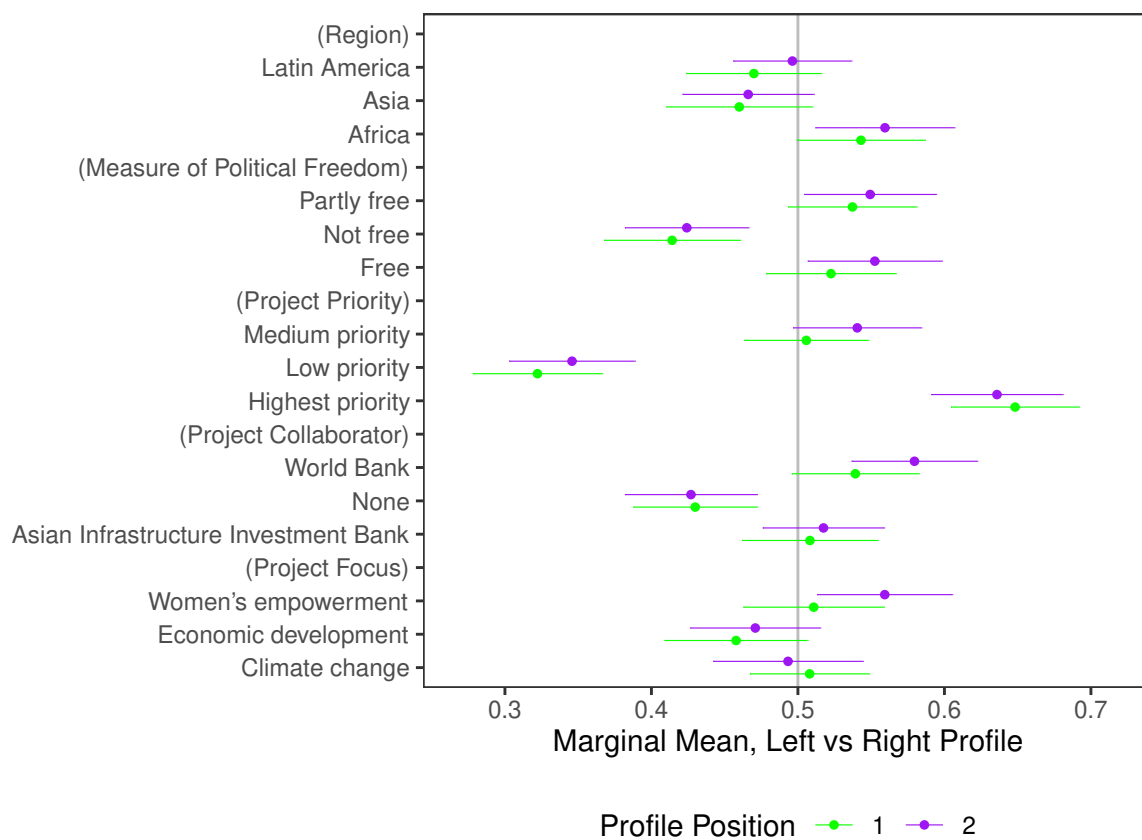


Figure A-13: Left vs. Right Profile Selection, 95% Confidence intervals



A.3.7 Recruitment Message

We send the following message to the employees of IOs requesting that they take our survey through LinkedIn digital advertising services.

Subject: International Organization Academic Research

Dear FIRSTNAME:

I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Political Science at University of Pennsylvania researching international organizations. As part of my academic research, I am interested in learning about the experiences of international organizations' staff.

To better understand international organizations, I developed a brief 10-minute survey to understand how the staff makes decisions about funding, capacity building, and technical cooperation. The survey is anonymous, non-identifiable, private, and approved by the University of Pennsylvania ethics board.

Follow this link to the Survey: [Link](#)

I will use the high-level results for academic publication to build global knowledge about the important role of international organizations. I would be happy to share the survey results, which will include views aggregated from your peers from other organizations.

If you have any questions, I invite you to contact me at hulvey@sas.upenn.edu. I appreciate your time and participation in this research!

Sincerely,

Rachel Hulvey

–

University of Pennsylvania
Department of Political Science

A.3.8 Questionnaire

Introduction Thank you for participating in our short questionnaire! This questionnaire is part of a research study being conducted by the University of Pennsylvania. There are no political objectives of this study, and there are no anticipated risks resulting from your participation. This questionnaire is for academic research purposes only. Your responses are completely anonymous, and will not be identified with you in any way. We appreciate your time and participation!

Screeners

1. Do you currently work or have you recently worked for a multilateral organization?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) No (*Screen out*)

Treatments Pleasing the Principal Treatment

“Imagine that a new executive head has just taken office in your organization. The new executive head is a national of [*China / Switzerland / the United States of America*].”

Comprehension check: What is the nationality of the new executive head of your organization?

Agenda-Setting Treatment

“Imagine that the new executive head of your organization has just signed a cooperation agreement with [*the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) / the World Bank (WB)*].” The executive head noted, “It is a great opportunity for our organization to work with our partners to promote development in the world.”

Comprehension check: With what organization did the executive head sign a cooperation agreement?

Conjoint Task Instructions

“You are about to view a series of technical cooperation project proposals. Specifically, we will show you five pairs of projects proposed and vetted by experts. Next, we’ll show you a sequence of such proposals and ask for your opinion about them in your capacity as a staff member of your organization.

Each proposal will contain several attributes, some of which may be important to you, while others may not (see below). Please carefully consider the characteristics listed in each table before responding to the subsequent questions as you might when working for your organization.

There are no right or wrong answers.”

Attributes
Region: In what region of the world will the project take place?
Measure of Political Freedom: This is an impartial measure of access to political rights and civil liberties
Project Priority: How important is this project in accomplishing the organization’s goals?
Project Collaborator: What organization will be the collaborator on the project?
Project Focus: What substantive topic area will be the focus of the project?

Outcome Measures

1. Do you support or oppose your organization providing funding for Proposal A? (*Asked after each of the five conjoint tasks*)
 - (a) Strongly support
 - (b) Somewhat support
 - (c) Neither support nor oppose
 - (d) Somewhat oppose
 - (e) Strongly oppose
2. Do you support or oppose your organization providing funding for Proposal B? (*Asked after each of the five conjoint tasks*)
 - (a) Strongly support
 - (b) Somewhat support
 - (c) Neither support nor oppose
 - (d) Somewhat oppose
 - (e) Strongly oppose
3. If you had to choose, which of these projects would you prefer your organization provide funding for?
 - (a) Project A
 - (b) Project B
4. Which attribute was the most important in making your choice of projects?
 - (a) Region
 - (b) Measure of Political Freedom
 - (c) Project Priority
 - (d) Project Collaborator
 - (e) Project Focus
5. In just a few words, please explain your response to the previous question (Which attribute was the most important in making your choice of projects?) (*Asked after each of the five conjoint tasks*)

Between conjoint rounds, respondents are provided with a reminder of the pleasing the principal treatment, and the other level of the agenda-setting treatment.

Demographics (Post-Test)

1. For which organization do you or have you recently worked? Select from dropdown list of organizations
 - (a) UNIDO
 - (b) UNESCO
 - (c) ITU
 - (d) FAO
 - (e) ICAO
 - (f) IFAD
 - (g) UNWTO
 - (h) WHO

- (i) IMO
 - (j) IAEA
 - (k) UNDP
 - (l) Other, please specify
2. For how many years have you worked or did you work for the aforementioned organization?
 3. What is your gender?
 4. What is your age?
 5. What is your job title?
 6. Which country are you from (your nationality)?
 7. What country is the current organizational head from? (their nationality)?
 8. Thank you very much for your time. Would you be willing to help University of Pennsylvania researchers learn more about your work in international organizations through a conversation about these topics? If so, please leave your email address below.

A.4 Vignette Experiment

A.4.1 Results with Full Controls

Table A-4: Experimental Results: France (China UN)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	Legitimacy (1)	Trust (2)	Cooperation (3)	Diplomacy (4)	Aid (5)	Business (6)	Leader (7)
China treatment	0.032 (0.027)	0.059* (0.025)	0.061** (0.023)	0.021 (0.030)	0.071* (0.030)	0.059* (0.029)	0.004 (0.027)
US treatment	-0.018 (0.027)	0.004 (0.025)	0.016 (0.023)	0.030 (0.030)	0.013 (0.030)	0.035 (0.029)	-0.011 (0.026)
Education	-0.004 (0.009)	0.007 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.008)	0.021* (0.010)	-0.013 (0.010)	0.007 (0.010)	0.011 (0.009)
Income	0.002 (0.010)	0.004 (0.010)	0.009 (0.009)	0.015 (0.012)	0.013 (0.012)	0.001 (0.011)	-0.013 (0.010)
China Enemy	-0.043*** (0.012)	-0.048*** (0.012)	-0.052*** (0.010)	-0.050*** (0.014)	-0.028* (0.014)	-0.050*** (0.013)	-0.024* (0.012)
China Threat	-0.101*** (0.012)	-0.102*** (0.011)	-0.069*** (0.010)	-0.038** (0.013)	-0.073*** (0.013)	-0.070*** (0.013)	-0.043*** (0.012)
Constant	0.803*** (0.055)	0.771*** (0.052)	0.829*** (0.047)	0.798*** (0.062)	0.741*** (0.062)	0.872*** (0.060)	0.528*** (0.054)
Observations	451	451	451	451	451	451	451
R ²	0.230	0.266	0.221	0.091	0.117	0.145	0.063
Adjusted R ²	0.220	0.256	0.211	0.079	0.105	0.134	0.050
Residual Std. Error (df = 444)	0.228	0.217	0.194	0.255	0.259	0.250	0.226
F Statistic (df = 6; 444)	22.094***	26.793***	21.031***	7.435***	9.780***	12.574***	4.964***

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A-5: Experimental Results: Brazil (China UN)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	Legitimacy (1)	Trust (2)	Cooperation (3)	Diplomacy (4)	Aid (5)	Business (6)	Leader (7)
China treatment	0.039 (0.027)	0.024 (0.028)	0.029 (0.024)	0.002 (0.028)	0.008 (0.031)	0.026 (0.028)	0.071* (0.033)
US treatment	0.010 (0.028)	-0.001 (0.028)	0.023 (0.024)	0.026 (0.028)	0.028 (0.031)	0.022 (0.029)	0.046 (0.033)
Education	-0.005 (0.012)	-0.013 (0.012)	-0.004 (0.010)	-0.016 (0.012)	-0.003 (0.013)	0.0003 (0.012)	-0.005 (0.014)
Income	-0.002 (0.008)	0.008 (0.008)	0.013 (0.007)	0.012 (0.008)	0.013 (0.009)	0.010 (0.008)	-0.017 (0.009)
China Enemy	-0.040** (0.012)	-0.037** (0.013)	-0.051*** (0.011)	-0.066*** (0.013)	-0.039** (0.014)	-0.056*** (0.013)	-0.001 (0.015)
China Threat	-0.117*** (0.010)	-0.115*** (0.010)	-0.096*** (0.008)	-0.062*** (0.010)	-0.106*** (0.011)	-0.077*** (0.010)	-0.062*** (0.011)
Constant	0.912*** (0.049)	0.911*** (0.050)	1.004*** (0.043)	1.061*** (0.050)	0.973*** (0.056)	1.001*** (0.051)	0.544*** (0.058)
Observations	486	486	486	486	486	486	486
R ²	0.355	0.341	0.374	0.223	0.276	0.245	0.092
Adjusted R ²	0.347	0.333	0.366	0.213	0.267	0.236	0.081
Residual Std. Error (df = 479)	0.248	0.251	0.217	0.252	0.280	0.257	0.294
F Statistic (df = 6; 479)	43.883***	41.279***	47.738***	22.874***	30.455***	25.960***	8.117***

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A-6: Experimental Results: Impact on IO Legitimacy

	IO Legitimacy Index		
	Overall (1)	France (2)	Brazil (3)
China treatment	-0.090*** (0.018)	-0.105*** (0.025)	-0.073** (0.025)
US treatment	-0.049** (0.018)	-0.057* (0.024)	-0.035 (0.025)
Education	-0.002 (0.007)	-0.002 (0.008)	-0.001 (0.011)
Income	0.019*** (0.005)	0.011 (0.010)	0.018* (0.007)
China Enemy	-0.016* (0.007)	-0.007 (0.011)	-0.017 (0.011)
China Threat	-0.039*** (0.007)	-0.008 (0.011)	-0.054*** (0.009)
Constant	0.788*** (0.033)	0.676*** (0.051)	0.826*** (0.045)
Observations	937	451	486
R ²	0.122	0.044	0.154
Adjusted R ²	0.116	0.031	0.143
Residual Std. Error	0.220 (df = 930)	0.210 (df = 444)	0.227 (df = 479)
F Statistic	21.460*** (df = 6; 930)	3.403** (df = 6; 444)	14.536*** (df = 6; 479)

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001