The Review of International Organizations
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-025-09604-4

SI: PUBLIC OPINION AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

China's leadership in the United Nations: Image management and institutional legitimacy

Sabrina B. Arias[1] · **Rachel A. Hulvey**[2]

Accepted: 21 July 2025

Abstract

The public in democratic states increasingly views China as a threat. As China takes on leadership roles in key United Nations (UN) agencies, we examine how such positions affect its image in democratic societies where collaboration with China is often met with skepticism or rejection. We argue that a rising power can use IO leadership to improve its image among foreign publics. However, these efforts may have negative effects on the perceived legitimacy of IOs, which may be subsequently viewed as subject to major power capture. We test these expectations in pre-registered survey experiments in Brazil—a China-friendly case—and France—a China-skeptical case—finding that while China's leadership of the UN enhances its image in the skeptical country context, it negatively affects IO legitimacy in both populations. To a lesser extent, US leadership of IOs also reduces their legitimacy, suggesting publics are also concerned about great power control of IOs broadly. These findings advance our understanding of China's image management and IO legitimacy, contributing to broader debates on China's growing role in global governance.

Keywords International organizations · China · United nations · Legitimacy

Responsible Editors: Lisa Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg

Names are in alphabetical order; equal authorship is implied.

✉ Sabrina B. Arias
sarias@lehigh.edu

Rachel A. Hulvey
rahulvey@iu.edu

[1] International Relations, Lehigh University, PABethlehem, USA

[2] Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

Published online: 27 September 2025

1 Introduction

Rising powers can face steep challenges in navigating the world stage. In China's case, efforts to project soft power—through Confucius Institutes, global media campaigns, or high-profile events like the Olympics—have often been met with suspicion or resistance among foreign audiences, where China is often seen as a threat. This image deficit complicates the conduct of even routine trade and commercial engagement. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in democratic societies, where public opinion has turned sharply negative. This growing distrust has complicated both China's soft power outreach and its ability to engage in economic statecraft. Public diplomacy programs like Confucius Institutes have closed, Chinese firms such as Huawei have been blocked from infrastructure projects, and public pressure has driven calls to ban Chinese apps, including TikTok. These examples are all symptoms of a deeper skepticism that increasingly constrains China's global ambitions. How does China navigate a world where its material reach is expanding, but its global image is increasingly rejected?

While much of the scholarly focus has centered on China's cultural diplomacy, we highlight an underexplored strategy: its campaign for leadership within the rules-based international order. China now leads four of the 15 specialized United Nations (UN) agencies (Trofimov et al., 2020). This includes organizations with mandates for facilitating cooperation on technology, agricultural and food security, aviation safety, and development (the International Telecommunications Union, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization). China characterizes these leadership campaigns as a way to improve its image as a nation dedicated to involvement in the UN specifically, and in multilateralism more generally.

Western powers, however, portray China's leadership of IOs as a major threat to the status quo.[1] In the US, for instance, the Trump 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, accusing the World Health Organization—a UN agency—of being a propaganda tool for China to positively shape how the global community perceived 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] What is the impact of China's leadership of UN agencies, and to what extent do these efforts facilitate positive views of China among democratic audiences? In other words, does leadership of international organizations accomplish the intended goal of improving China's image, or does it cause backlash?

We contend that for a rising power like China, leadership in international organizations offers a pathway to improve its image, particularly in democratic societies. Within the rules-based international order, active participation in multilateral institutions signals a commitment to global norms and cooperation. By taking the helm

[1] Wall Street Journal, September 29, 2020, How China is Taking Over International Organizations.

[2] NPR, April 21, 2020, National Security Adviser O'Brien Alleges WHO Is 'Propaganda Tool For The Chinese'.

of UN agencies, China creates an opportunity to present itself as a responsible and legitimate actor—one that operates within, rather than against, the existing order (Johnston, 2003). Among democratic audiences, involvement in international organizations can signal respect for the rule of law, institutional norms, and the status quo. For China, the United Nations is a uniquely powerful platform for image rehabilitation, offering a rare opportunity to counter its image as an assertive or revisionist power.

However, major states taking leadership of IOs is unlikely to be costless for the IOs themselves: We theorize that great power leadership negatively impacts IO legitimacy. China and the United States compete over executive leadership of organizations and frame the other side as harming the mission of the organization.[3] We theorize that perceptions of great power capture damages the reputation of IOs among international audiences. Our study thus assesses two of the core areas proposed by Dellmuth and Tallberg (2026): how China's leadership of IOs affects public opinion of China, but also how this drives public opinion of IOs.

To test these expectations, we conducted a pre-registered survey experiment on representative samples of 530 respondents from Brazil and 536 respondents from France. We select these populations to assess the effects of image management on diverse samples, including in a more China-friendly context (Brazil) and a China-skeptical context (France). Furthermore, these are countries in which IOs are a relatively high salience topic and important diplomatic partners in which Chinese public diplomacy specifically attempts to frame China as a responsible power. We test the effect of China's leadership of the UN as Secretary General of a specialized agency, mirroring real-world examples such as those noted above. We examine how such leadership affects China's image and ability to obtain tangible foreign policy benefits, as well as the effects of its leadership on perceived IO legitimacy.

We find that China's leadership has positive effects on its image in the more skeptical context of France, for example resulting in an increase in China's image and support for Franco-Chinese cooperation. This highlights an important benefit that China obtains from leading UN organizations. Surprisingly, we do not observe such effects in Brazil, which we posit may be due to China's already higher favorability in that population. Also in line with our expectations, Chinese leadership of the IO leads to negative effects on perceptions of IO legitimacy, resulting in a decrease in perceived IO legitimacy by 11 percentage points in France and 7 percentage-points in Brazil. Surprisingly, however, American leadership also reduces perceived IO legitimacy—though to a lesser extent— which suggests that IO legitimacy is susceptible to perceptions of capture by great powers in general.

Our findings contribute to the literature on how states deploy images to achieve goals in international relations (e.g., Herrmann et al., 1997). A positive image among foreign populations matters for a country's power (Nye, 1990; Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012), and the foreign policy choices that a state makes can play a role in contributing to this power (e.g., Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2009). We add to these findings, considering IO leadership as one such foreign policy activity that can

[3] Wall Street Journal, September 29, 2020, How China is Taking Over International Organizations.

appeal to foreign audiences in order to improve a country's image. We also show instrumental benefits — that China's UN leadership can lead to a greater desire for foreign policy cooperation. IO leadership serves as a means of improving a state's image among skeptical audiences (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Carpenter, 2014; Morse & Pratt, 2022) towards greater acceptance by international society (Goffman, 1959, 1963; Adler-Nissen, 2014: 154) and can be seen as responsible leaders of the international system.

We also join a growing body of research that examines China's increasing involvement in the UN and the consequences (Johnston, 2003, 2019; Haug & Waisbich, 2024); Kastner et al., 2020; Lam & Fung, 2024; Foot, 2024). We add to work on China's impact on world politics, especially when it comes to global audiences' perceptions of China (e.g., Nye, 2012; Shambaugh, 2015; Repnikova, 2022; Green-Riley, 2023; Mattingly et al., 2024). Building on this work, we provide a strategic explanation for China's increasing engagement in IO leadership based on enhancements to its image: China can signal a responsible image to international audiences that increases its favorability among publics most likely to view it as a threat. As we show in the experiment, this not only leads to greater legitimacy—an essential aspect of a rising power cultivating followers for its global leadership—but also has an impact on support for international cooperation (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990; Broz et al., 2020; Allan et al., 2018; Chu & Recchia, 2022). This suggests both the hard and soft benefits of image improvement.

This work also has implications for IO legitimacy (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015; Dellmuth & Schlipphak, 2020) and the relationship between public opinion and IOs (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2026). Given the increasing challenges that IOs face from backlash and retrenchment (Walter, 2021; Von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019; Gray, 2018), leadership by major powers can impact the perceived legitimacy of IO activities (e.g., Tago & Ikeda, 2015; Chapman and Reiter, 2004). On the other hand, concerns about great power capture and the subsequent politicization of IOs erode member state confidence (Farrell & Finnemore, 2013; Lenz & Viola, 2017; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Our findings suggest that leadership by major powers does erode IO legitimacy compared to leadership by more neutral states. This could have meaningful effects on the ways that states participate in IOs since member state participation and confidence are vital resources for IO vitality (Gray, 2018; Arias et al., 2025). If IOs are perceived to be captured by the political interest of great powers, the public may no longer see IOs as independent actors (e.g., Chaudoin, 2016; Brutger & Strezhnev, 2022).

2 China's challenge: an image problem in democracies

As China emerges as a rising power, it faces an image problem. An image is the cognitive and evaluative construction individuals hold of other countries (Boulding, 1959: 120). Images represent cognitive schemas or mental models that help to process information. For instance, images such as enemy and ally are often those that officials and the public use to categorize their foreign relations (Herrmann, 1985;

Herrmann et al., 1997). Image problems arise when the image a state wishes to project is inconsistent with the image that others hold (Jervis, 1989: 14).[4]

China's image problem is especially stark in democratic nations. Authoritarian powers are more likely to be perceived as threatening by citizens in liberal democracies, who perceive them as a harmful global influence. The 'China threat' narrative has become prominent, negatively impacting China's image in democracies (Nye, 2012; Green-Riley, 2023; DeLisle, 2020).[5] Following the United States, many democratic countries shifted their stance of describing China through the lens of an economic partner to declaring that China is an adversary and rival state. Following the United States' declaration of China as an adversary, a strategic outlook paper published in 2019 by the European Union labeled China a "systemic rival." Human rights abuses highlighted in the media have also contributed to the decline in China's image in democratic states.[6] China's assertive foreign policy—for example, in the South China Sea — and its communication strategy also contribute to creating an aggressive and threatening image among democratic populations (Shirk, 2023; Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023).

Why would a state like China care about its image among democratic publics? The desire for a positive image is not only based on the need for good standing or status but is instrumental in accomplishing strategic goals. In this sense, a positive image among foreign populations can contribute to a country's soft power (Nye, 1990; Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2012) and even its hard power. In democratic countries where China wishes to conduct people-to-people exchanges, increase its market share, broaden its cultural appeal, and gain trading partners, the skepticism and caution of audiences starkly limits China's ability to achieve its foreign policy and economic goals, whereas positive perceptions can lead to increased cooperation (e.g., Chu & Recchia, 2022). The success of China's Belt and Road Initiative is based on countries continuing to join and participate. However, many democratic members such as Italy are withdrawing. Narratives about China's "debt trap diplomacy" create a negative image of China as an untrustworthy partner, challenging the bilateral ties that Chinese leaders are attempting to strengthen and the image it seeks to cultivate as a responsible leader. Indicating its rising domestic importance, Chinese scholars are actively examining how to craft a more favorable international image and improve the reception of China's proposals and programs around the world (Xiao & Mingchong, 2024; Lu & Zhu, 2024; Li & Yinquan, 2018). CCP officials call for strengthening China's image and better telling China's story to global communities as an urgent policy priority.

Against increasing backlash in democracies where it seeks to develop trade ties and cooperation, it is unclear what strategies an authoritarian power like China can deploy to overcome its image problem with democratic audiences. Even innocuous

[4] Image 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 et al., 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 et al., 2014: 7).

[5] E.g., Pew, August 31, 2023; Pew, December 5, 2019.

[6] Morcos, "France's Shifting Relations with China.".

language programs to teach foreign students Mandarin in the United States have generated limited impact and at times had negative effects on public perceptions of China (Green-Riley, 2023). Mattingly et al. (2024) found that China's economic model is attractive in developing countries, but democracies have largely rejected China's Belt and Road Initiative and China's offers of investment. Even the democracies that joined, such as Italy, later revoked membership.[7] If development projects, cultural initiatives, and leader visits have faced challenges in improving China's image in democracies, is there another type of strategy that China could use to enhance its image in foreign publics by engaging in IOs, and why might such a strategy be likely to succeed?

3 Theory: rising powers, IO leadership and image management

To mitigate its image problem, one strategy that China pursues is engagement in international organizations. While Chinese engagement in IOs has received increasing attention in IO scholarship, its *leadership* of such institutions remains undertheorized. We argue that IO leadership serves as a means of improving its image among skeptical audiences (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Carpenter, 2014; Morse & Pratt, 2022). We suggest that when these image management strategies succeed, states that were previously portrayed as members of the outgroup receive greater acceptance by international society (Goffman, 1959, 1963; Adler-Nissen, 2014: 154) and can be seen as responsible leaders of the international system.

To improve its image, China not only engages but actively leads international organizations. This strategy fits as part of the broader shift in China's role on the world stage from passively participating in international organizations under Deng Xiaoping's strategy of maintaining a low profile (韬光养晦) to a more assertive role under Xi Jinping (Yan, 2014). Chinese leaders emphasize the United Nations (UN) as a key platform for showcasing global leadership (Foot, 2014). China contributes funding and capacity building to support UN initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (Haug & Waisbich, 2024). While these efforts remain modest in scale (Parizek & Stephen, 2021a, 2021b), they are carefully framed to promote win-win cooperation and a shared future (Nathan & Zhang, 2022), underscoring China's commitment to multilateralism. China also engages in IOs through means such as placing its nationals in international civil service positions (Fung & Lam, 2021, 2022; Haug et al., 2024; Lam and Fung, 2024), participating in standard-setting working groups (Voo, 2019), and, as we highlight, leading UN agencies. Chinese nationals are increasingly occupying influential roles. For instance, China has led four of the 15 UN specialized agencies, including the FAO, ITU, UNIDO, and ICAO (Fung and Lam, 2021; Trofimov et al., 2020; Lam & Fung, 2024).[8]

Working through multilateral bodies like the UN provides several benefits to China's image. It reassures those wary of China's intentions (Doshi, 2021: 104). China desires to improve its image through the leadership of multilateral bodies to reduce

[7] CSIS, 2023, Italy Withdraws from Belt and Road.

[8] See Figure A-2.

doubts, distrust, and perceptions of China as a threat (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003; Goldstein, 2001). This strategy centers on "the importance of marketing its views in order to bolster its international image" (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003: 30). 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. Engagement in international institutions can be a signal of restraint (Ikenberry, 2000).

Furthermore, leadership in international organizations is an effort to signal integration with the global community and contribute to its image as a responsible rather than a revisionist state. As China rose, the United States called on it to be "responsible stakeholder" by engaging and integrating with the global community.[9] Engagement was positioned as a tool for China to express its willingness to integrate rather than overturn the status quo. It is also a tool that can be used to suggest that China is operating within appropriate and settled rules rather than deviating from the pathways that others accept as appropriate (Goddard, 2020). In its communications to both domestic and international audiences, Chinese leaders emphasize that China's engagement on the world stage reflects its image as a responsible great power (负责任大国).[10]

China's involvement in the UN also signals respect for principles that democratic audiences value. Participating in international organizations demonstrates respect for the rule of law by suggesting an adherence to the rules and principles of an organization and a desire to lead the agency to ensure it achieves these mandates. Since China must engage in elections to obtain leadership positions, it suggests a willingness to comply with the democratic norms of international organizations. As engagement has signaled a commitment to multilateral norms (Johnston, 2003), leadership amplifies these signals.

Finally, leading an IO can enhance a state's image by improving its perceived legitimacy as a result of its association with a highly legitimate institution. IO endorsement of a state and its activities is a powerful signal of an 'acceptable' image because the IOs symbolize legitimacy and neutrality (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). For example, when a great power secures the support of the United Nations in the context of military interventions, it conveys information that signals the legitimacy of the operation (Tago & Ikeda, 2015; Chapman & Reiter, 2004). Others have found that for states with questionable images, IOs like the European Union provide a seal of approval that reassures and alleviates concerns (Gray, 2009). Similarly, engaging with the UN and obtaining leadership roles also signal an acceptance of China's candidacy and vetting by the member states voting in elections for secretary-general positions and can extend the penumbra of institutional legitimacy to China. Organizations such as the UN have an especially favorable image among democratic audiences.[11] While elites tend to view IOs as more legitimate than the population (Dellmuth et al., 2022),

[9] See also statement by Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State, September 21, 2005.

[10] People's Daily, "China Demonstrates the Image of a Responsible Great Power" (中国展现负责任大国形象), June 22, 2018.

[11] Pew, September 5, 2024.

the UN is perceived as considerably more legitimate than China in most democratic countries.

There are thus several ways by which engagement with an IO can enhance a rising power's image. Building on these claims, we argue that leadership — a specific form of IO engagement — is a means by which a rising power can construct a positive image, signaling a desire for engagement and responsible leadership rather than revisionism. We theorize that IO leadership increases favorable opinions of the rising power among democratic audiences (Chu, 2025; Chapman & Li, 2023). We preregister a series of explicit expectations about the effects of IO leadership on China's image. By leading an important IO, such as the UN agencies, a state can enhance its image and deny opportunities for challengers to enhance their own (Morse & Pratt, 2022), resulting in image benefits. Image management through leadership is particularly salient for China, given its perceived deficit. We anticipate that leading IOs—and particularly IOs with high levels of perceived legitimacy, such as the UN—improves China's image among democratic audiences.

H_1: **China's leadership of the UN improves China's image**.[12]

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 image of either the state or the IO it leads: leadership in this case is less informative of a signal about the state's image and role in the international system (e.g., Chapman, 2007). In addition, within democratic societies, the United States has historically had less of an image problem and generates considerably less threat perception. It therefore has less room to gain the benefits of leading IOs.

H_2: **American leadership of the UN has less effect on the US' perceived image compared to China's**.

While a major power's leadership of an IO may improve its image, especially among democratic audiences, it may simultaneously impact the IO. International organizations are valued among member states for their neutrality and independence (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). Great power leadership of IOs may instead cue domestic audiences that the great power wishes to use the appointments to achieve strategic goals, negatively impacting institutional legitimacy. This skepticism is rooted in the historical inconsistency of great powers (Farrell & Finnemore, 2013), who often contradict their stated positions through actions that prioritize national security interests over international norms. As China and the US increasingly compete for influence (e.g., Carrozza & Marsh, 2022; Owen, 2025), such fears are particularly salient.

[12] We originally pre-registered hypotheses with expectations about 'reputation' rather than 'image,' but which were substantively identical. We believe that image is the more precise term that captures our theoretical quantity of interest, and therefore choose to use 'image' here. As Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth (2014) point out, greater conceptual clarity is needed in the scholarly study of reputation.

These fears are not unfounded. Within the rules-based order, great powers compete to use international organizations to achieve their interests (Owen, 2025). The US, for instance, has been criticized for undermining the legitimacy of IOs it underwrote due to its frequent divergence in practice from stated values (Finnemore, 2009; Hurd, 2007; Goldsmith, 2018). Such contradictions pose a risk to the legitimacy of IOs when these great powers assume leadership roles. Rather than faithfully executing the role of a civil servant, a major power is often seen as using IO leadership to achieve foreign policy objectives. For great power leadership, the public may no longer see IOs as independent actors but rather as agents of great powers' foreign policy (e.g., Chaudoin, 2016; Brutger & Strezhnev, 2022). On the other hand, leadership by small or medium powers can be perceived as more neutral (e.g., Björkdahl, 2007; Panke, 2010). States such as Switzerland have often made favorable contributions to international organizations because of the perceived neutrality, and are seen as trustworthy agents who will follow the mandate of the organization rather than geopolitical interests.

Given that democratic audiences possess greater uncertainty about China's intentions and its alignment with the status quo orientation of the UN, we expect that China's leadership will lead to lower perceptions of IO legitimacy. Within democratic societies, China is viewed as a member of the out-group. The media in these countries frequently promotes the narrative of a "China threat" (Yang & Liu, 2012). The public in these countries specifically contests China's regime type, leading to fears of China using international positions to diffuse authoritarianism. Given that global publics generally have quite positive views of the UN as an institution[13]— and thus, implicitly positively perceive the Western status quo orientation of the institution—we expect that China's leadership could have negative effects on perceptions of institutional legitimacy, even while perceptions of China might improve. As a great power, leadership by the United States may also have a negative effect on IO legitimacy among some audiences. However, since we are interested in perceptions among democratic audiences, we expect that this effect will be smaller than the impact of China's leadership. As another democratic country, democratic audiences have trusted the United States more and have had fewer doubts about the US undermining the liberal aspects of the institution. While they may still be unsettled about the potential for US nationals to act out of geopolitical interests, there is greater trust in the US and its intentions.

Taken together, these facts lead to our next set of theoretical expectations: that China's leadership of the UN decreases perceptions of legitimacy, and that the effects of leadership will be negative for both great powers, but greater in the case of China's leadership than for the US.

H_3: **China's leadership of the UN decreases the UN's perceived legitimacy**.
H_4: **American leadership of the UN has less effect on the UN's perceived legitimacy compared to China's**.

[13] Pew, August 31, 2023.

4 Experimental design

4.1 Population selection

To assess our expectations about the effects of China's leadership of the UN on its image, we deploy between-subjects survey experiments in two representative populations: Brazil, a country with a relatively favorable baseline towards China, and France, a country with a relatively unfavorable baseline. These cases provide several important advantages for our empirical analysis. First, they represent substantively important populations in which to test our theoretical expectations. 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.[14] Brazil has long been a focal point in Beijing's strategy to expand its global influence. In 2024, Chinese officials actively lobbied for Brazil's inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative to forge closer ties with Latin America's most influential economy and contribute to China's image as a global leader in development.[15] 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% in 2002 to 70% in 2020, a trend largely attributed to concerns over China's policies in Xinjiang and broader human rights issues.[16] From China's perspective, France is an important country to improve relations with to use as a bridge to better relations with Europe. Exemplifying this strategy, President Macron's visit to China amid heightened US-China tensions was interpreted by many as an attempt by China to use France as a mediator to foster collaborative channels between China and the West.[17]

Our case selection thus highlights two important political contexts for China's image improvement efforts, and real-world cases that are important to China's foreign policy in which Chinese leaders invest considerable time courting. A second benefit of our case selection is our contribution to efforts to better understand political dynamics outside of the US context. While many public opinion studies leverage a US sample, we believe that attending to public attitudes in other parts of the world is an important normative goal for political scientists. Indeed, as has been pointed out recently (e.g., Colgan, 2019; Bassan-Nygate et al., 2024), political science studies exhibit an American bias in their data sources. Further, we believe that fielding this

[14] Berg and Beana, "The Great Balancing Act: Lula in China and the Future of U.S.-Brazil Relations."

[15] The Diplomat.

[16] Morcos, 2022, "France's Shifting Relations with China."

[17] CNN, 2024, "In Europe, Xi looks to counter claims China is aiding Russia in Ukraine."

study in the US context would be a poor choice for generalizability, as politicized attitudes towards China are unique compared to other countries.

We conducted this survey on a nationally representative sample of the general public with Dynata, a survey firm that recruited and paid respondents as part of their panel. Respondents were recruited based on census percentages for representative groups on age and gender. All respondents 18 and up were eligible to complete the survey. Our sample consists of 530 respondents from Brazil and 536 respondents from France. Surveys were expert-translated into Portuguese and French and administered online via Qualtrics from November 8 to December 18, 2023. Because of data quality concerns, all respondents included in the final sample successfully passed an attention check. The full survey text can be found in the Appendix.

The experimental results validate our expectation of different baseline attitudes towards China between Brazil and France (Fig. 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).

4.2 Experimental design

Respondents first complete a pre-treatment demographic questionnaire to gather relevant moderators related to international outlooks and perspectives on China—including questions on foreign policy orientation, perception of China as a friend,

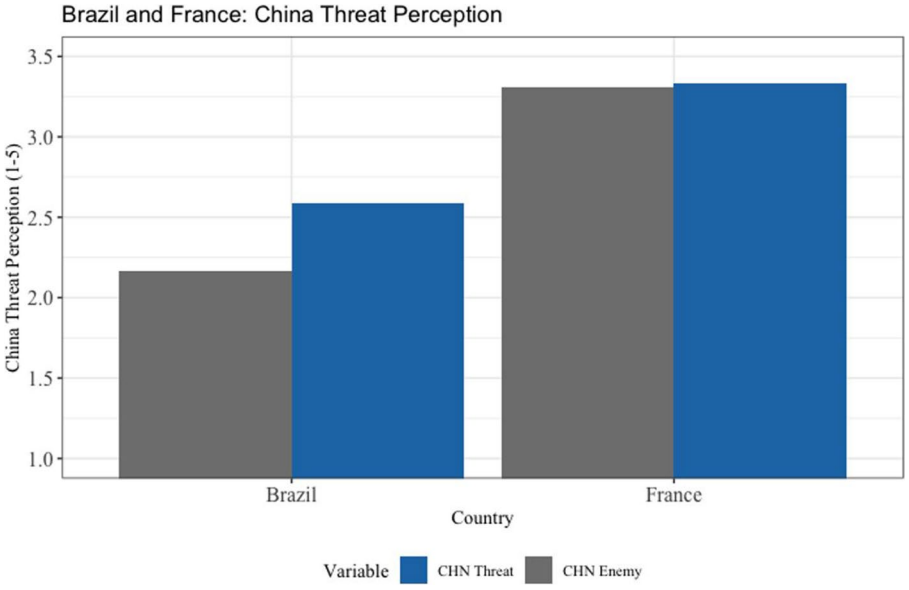

Fig. 1 China Threat Perception. Note: The 'Threat' question asks respondents to rank their agreement with the statement, 'This country poses a threat to my country.' on a scale of 1–5 with response options of definitely agree (5), somewhat agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), somewhat disagree (2), and definitely disagree (1). The 'Enemy' question asks respondents, 'Do you consider China to be a friend or enemy of Brazil/France?' on a scale of 1–5 with response options of ally (1), friendly (2), not sure (3) unfriendly (4), and enemy (5)

enemy, and relative threat—as well as a conventional battery of core demographic questions. To mitigate the negative effects of respondent inattention, we include a pre-treatment attention screener that doubles as a 'bot' filter (Berinsky et al., 2014), as well as a 'captcha' question. Prior research demonstrates that removing inattentive respondents *before* the treatment is assigned does not lead to bias (Aronow et al., 2019). We remove respondents who do not complete the study or fail the screener.[18]

After completing a pre-treatment demographic questionnaire, subjects are presented with one of three vignettes describing IO leadership: 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. In addition to operationalizing our key theoretical mechanism—that IO leadership should affect perceived images—we also construct the vignette to be externally valid. At international organization elections, China has won positions in competitive elections.[19] The text describes China's leadership in a way that reflects real-world media reports of China winning elections at international organizations in Western media.[20] To ensure participant understanding of IO elections, the vignette describes the important functions of UN specialized agencies and also provides information about how the director of the agency exercises power, in addition to reporting on which country's national was elected to lead the agency. The sample treatment text for the China condition is included below; treatment texts for the other conditions are included in the Appendix.

> 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 UN 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.

Our selection of China, the US, and Switzerland as the treatment conditions also reflects a consideration of external validity. Though these experimental conditions are hypothetical, given that all three of these countries *have* led IOs before, they are all plausibly realistic. To increase the salience of the vignette treatments, the relevant

[18] Descriptive statistics and balance tests can be found in the Appendix.

[19] See China's leadership depicted in Appendix A.4. This includes leadership of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Telecommunications Union, and the International Civil Aviation Organization.

[20] Wall Street Journal, 2020, How China is Taking Over International Organizations.

information is highlighted in bold, underlined, and italicized text, and respondents are asked to summarize the vignette article.[21]

We select a Swiss national as the control condition, both because Switzerland is a country that is active in diplomacy and therefore plausible as a nationality that could be an IO executive, and because democratic audiences are more likely to perceive it outside of a geopolitical lens due to its stated neutral stance. We acknowledge that no country is truly neutral and audiences in different parts of the world may see Switzerland as more aligned with the West—particularly as Switzerland increasingly deviates from its historically neutral role (e.g., ECFR). However, we assert that Switzerland is perceived as more neutral than average country in democracies. Indeed, a 2022 poll conducted in 18 countries illustrates that Switzerland's neutrality is both salient and perceived as a positive attribute (Presence Switzerland Image Monitor, 2022).[22] Since democratic audiences already widely hold positive opinions of Switzerland and hold negative views of China, it is a hard test to find any positive significant result moving from a Swiss national to a Chinese national. Switzerland is viewed positively in both countries in our study, and the baseline levels of support are relatively similar in both cases, though somewhat more so in Brazil.[23] This suggests that our results would be unlikely to be driven by different perceptions of Switzerland between the two populations. Alternative choices of control conditions also would entail major drawbacks, for example, a 'no country' control would raise information equivalency and external validity concerns, as would a 'technocrat' control. Selecting a fictional country control is also not a clearly preferable alternative (Brutger et al., 2023).

After the manipulation, all respondents answered a series of outcome questions assessing their attitudes toward the US, China, Switzerland, and the UN, allowing us to examine how IO leadership shapes the perceived image of the leading country.[24] To quantify this effect, we construct an image index for each country using two measures of confidence and trust.[25] First, we adapt (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2021: 1300)'s concept of legitimacy as confidence—an indicator that captures general faith in an actor's appropriate exercise of authority. While legitimacy perceptions are multifaceted, confidence serves as a useful proxy. Second, public opinion studies often operationalize legitimacy through trust (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015; Dellmuth & Schlipphak, 2020; Voeten, 2013). We adapt the standard question of trust from the Eurobarometer. Both confidence and trust tap into the same core theoretical expectation: that China's leadership in IOs enhances its image in the eyes of foreign publics.

[21] Results from our manipulation check strongly support that the treatment worked as intended: in both France and Brazil, respondents in the China treatment were able to identify China as the executive head and respondents in the US treatment were able to identify the US as the executive head ($p < 0.001$ in all cases).

[22] Future work could also investigate cases in which IOs are led by technocrats to completely remove country-level influence.

[23] The median level of public approval of Switzerland is 68.9 and 54.7, and the share of people with a high or moderately high impression of Switzerland is even more similar, with 93 in Brazil and 89 in France, Presence Switzerland Image Monitor, 2024.

[24] Full questionnaire is available in the Appendix.

[25] The standard Cronbach's α is 0.91 for China, 0.91 for the US, and 0.86 for Switzerland.

Given our focus on democratic audiences—where negative views of China's legitimacy are deeply entrenched—it sets up a hard test as the resulting image index will be more resistant to change. These measures also allow our results to be compared to key benchmarks in the literature. In the measures for the impact of country leadership on international organizations, we deploy the same measures of legitimacy operationalized as confidence and trust, as well as assessing IO reputation.[26]

We also assess the impact of leadership on China's image through the lens of a rising power's ultimate objective: improved foreign policy relations. We construct a foreign policy cooperation index following (Myrick, 2021), combining foreign publics' willingness to cooperate with China, incorporating both general support for cooperation and specific indicators such as diplomatic engagement, aid reception, and business partnership measures.[27] An enhanced image is instrumental in accomplishing concrete foreign policy objectives. China seeks concrete benefits from a stronger global image, including greater trade opportunities, reinstated diplomatic meetings canceled in the West, renewed support for firms facing restrictions (e.g., Huawei, TikTok, DeepSeek), and revived participation in initiatives like the Belt and Road, which some democracies have exited. Even seemingly apolitical outcomes, such as student exchanges at China's top universities, have declined to historic lows due to pandemic disruptions and rising threat perceptions that deter Western students from studying in China. The Chinese Communist Party seeks to improve each dimension of cooperation as a display to foreign publics of China's arrival as a global leader as well as to create legitimacy internally of the Party and its ability to implement a successful foreign policy.

Further, we explore geopolitical outcomes relevant to a rising power by asking respondents to evaluate their preferences for Chinese leadership. We adopt Mattingly and Sundquist (2023)'s measure, which gauges whether respondents prefer Chinese or American leadership. Given the vignette's focus on international organizations and the rules-based order, we examine the extent to which democratic publics are willing to accept Chinese leadership *relative to the United States*. Though less central to our core theoretical argument, these indicators are theoretically significant, as scholars debate the prospects of a transition from a US-led to a Chinese-led global order (Broz et al., 2020; Allan et al., 2018). We therefore include these exploratory results in the Appendix.

4.3 External validity: salience of china's IO leadership

Public diplomacy has been shown to have measurable effects on public opinion (e.g., Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2009; Goldsmith et al., 2021). We build on such prior work in our theoretical claim: that by taking leadership of UN agencies, China seeks to improve its image by signaling to domestic populations in democratic states that it is a non-threatening, responsible, and legitimate actor committed to operating within the framework of the liberal international order. However, this depends on

[26] Effects of leadership on country reputation and approval could not be assessed due to a data collection error.

[27] The standard α is 0.84 for China and 0.87 for the US.

the assumption that international publics receive this signal—in other words, that populations pay attention to IO leadership and associate participation in IOs like the UN with these features. The Chinese Communist Party operates under the assumption that foreign publics pay attention to its engagement in multilateral organizations as it invests substantial resources and effort towards this aim. We provide support for this assumption with two key pieces of evidence: first, we demonstrate that publics in France and Brazil are likely to receive signals regarding leadership of IOs. Second, we demonstrate that China utilizes its engagement with IOs to convey an image of a responsible power.

First, we contend that publics in Brazil and France are likely to receive information about IO leadership. To do so, we deploy data collected by Parizek (2024), who constructs a dataset of all articles discussing IOs from the Global Flows of Political Information database, which is representative of worldwide online news content. Covering all countries 2018–2021, Parizek finds 2,777 articles about UN organizations in Brazil and 1,440 in France. This ranks Brazil 21 st out of all countries (84th percentile) in terms of its attention to UN issues, and France 53rd out of all (59th percentile).[28] These results align with public opinion data: For example, in recent polling, 54% of Brazilian respondents believed that their country should be more involved in the UN, and thus may have incentives to pay attention to political developments at the UN that may be conducive (or inhibit) the accomplishment of this goal.[29] Thus, attention to IO affairs in these contexts is relatively high. While this does not constitute direct evidence that *IO elections* are high-salience events, it is not unreasonable to expect that they would surface in these types of media environments, especially when elections would represent major shifts in institutional leadership.[30]

Second, we argue that China actively engages in a public diplomacy strategy that emphasizes its engagement with—including leadership of—IOs to enhance its image with such publics. For example, in public statements directed at audiences in France and Brazil, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized China's role as a responsible power. Themes of stability, predictability, and order through global governance were common, with specific emphases on upholding an "equal and orderly multipolar world."[31]

More generally, China actively promotes its UN engagement within global communications, ostensibly with the goal of improving its image among foreign audiences and being perceived as a responsible power. For example, China's international media organization, China Global Television Network (CGTN), which is designed to reach English-speaking audiences in foreign countries, launched a channel called "UN Insider." In a message about CGTV's launch of UN Insider, China's Ambas-

[28] The results are nearly identical expanding the analysis to include news on all IOs.

[29] FES Global Census 2022. Further supporting this expectation, the baseline level of trust in the UN in our survey experiment—i.e., among respondents in the control group—is 0.65 out of 1 in France and 0.66 in Brazil. Baseline perceptions of UN legitimacy were 3.55 out of 5 in France and 3.69 in Brazil.

[30] Future work could fruitfully explore the degree to which global publics pay attention to different dynamics of IO politics—including such major activities as the introduction of new programs, institutional reforms, and changes in leadership, building on burgeoning scholarly interest in IO media attention (e.g., Parizek, 2024; Rauh & Parizek 2024; Mikulaschek & Parizek, 2025).

[31] E.g., Statement by Xi Jinping, January 25, 2024; Statement by Xi Jinping, August 15, 2024.

sador to the UN Zhang Jun noted that China has "been a leader, a pacesetter, and a role model" at the UN and will continue to play the role of a "responsible major country" by supporting multilateralism with the UN playing a central role.[32] Within CGTV content, China's leadership is highlighted, including coverage of China's Security Council Presidency. In the appendix, we include evidence from text analysis of China's CGTV communications, which shows that this venue of Chinese public diplomacy discusses IOs to a large extent.[33]

This empirical evidence buttresses the core assumptions necessary for the external validity of our study: that global publics are likely to receive information about China's leadership of IOs, and that this information is deployed by China to advance its public diplomacy effort of being perceived as a 'responsible power.' We now turn to our experimental results.

5 Empirical results

If our main expectation laid out in Hypothesis 1 is correct—that is, if China is able to leverage the informal powers of executive leadership to enhance its image—then we should expect its perceived image to be higher in the *China* condition compared to the *Control* condition. To recall, we evaluate image, our theoretical quantity of interest, as well as foreign policy outcomes, the instrumental policy goals that China would aim to accomplish by improving its image. In the first section of our results, we focus on comparing the results for China compared to the control condition, in the following section, we compare these results to the US condition to test Hypothesis 2, that American leadership of the UN has less effect on the US' perceived image compared to China's.

We next test our hypotheses about the impact of China and US leadership on IO legitimacy. To test Hypothesis 3—our expectation that China's leadership has negative effects on the UN's legitimacy—we compare our outcome measures of IO legitimacy in the *China* condition compared to the *Control* condition. To place these findings into context, we compare them to the effects of US leadership, which we expect to be negative but less than China's impact among democratic audiences. In Hypothesis 4, we assert that the effect of leadership by the US should be less than for China, both in terms of its effect on country image and IO legitimacy. In other words, we expect $|China - Control| > |US - Control|$ for country image and IO legitimacy outcomes. We present the results of the index outcomes to assuage concerns about multiple comparisons. Individual outcomes on the legitimacy, cooperation, and reputation measures can be found in the appendix, as well as exploratory results on leadership.

[32] Ambassador Zhang Jun's Message to the Premiere of CGTN "UN Insider," September 16, 2023.

[33] Figure A.3.

5.1 China's image

Somewhat surprisingly, given French skepticism and Brazilian openness towards China and its intentions, we find that, compared to the control condition, Chinese leadership of IOs had moderately positive effects on its image among French respondents, but not among Brazilian respondents (Fig. 2).[34] China's leadership of the UN agency improved its perceived image as well as public support for different types of foreign policy cooperation in France compared to the control condition, but across all outcomes in Brazil, China's leadership had no significant effects, though the effects on image are directionally positive in Brazil as well.

Why would China's leadership have larger effects in the French case than in Brazil, given that Brazilians are *ex ante*, relatively more favorable towards closer relations with China than the French public? We suggest that this difference may be attributable to ceiling effects. Because French respondents started with a lower baseline favorability towards China and Switzerland, there was more room for them to substantially improve in response to the treatment. Bearing this in mind, the magni-

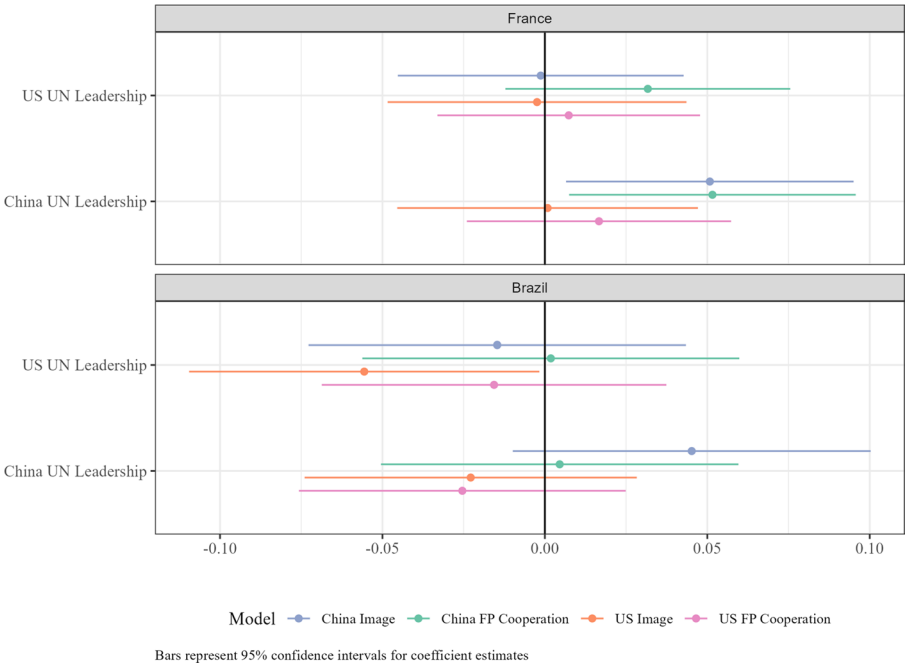

Fig. 2 Effects of IO leadership on country images: Index outcomes. Note: For individual outcomes, see Figure A-3. For tabular model results, see Tables A-5 — A-9. For estimated effects from models without controls, see Figure A-5

[34] We present our main results with control variables. Because some respondents are missing data on control measures, they are excluded from our empirical models with controls. We report on the number of respondents missing on each control measure and include models without controls in the appendix. These estimates are generally robust without the inclusion of controls. However, because some precision is lost, a small number of results lose statistical significance without controls, though they are directionally robust.

tude of the difference in the effect on China's image between France and Brazil does not achieve statistical significance ($z = 0.16$, $p = 0.88$), so this difference should not be over-interpreted. Furthermore, in both cases, Chinese leadership of the UN agency leads to a directionally positive change in its image across all indicators compared to the control condition, suggesting that though the magnitude of the effects may vary depending on country contexts, there does appear to be some consistency in the way that publics respond to IO leadership. One can infer, then, that for most international audiences, the effects of IO leadership are Likely to be positive, providing overall support for Hypothesis 1.

To better characterize these results, we can explore the results on the individual outcome measures that comprise the indices, which are included in the appendix.[35] Our findings indicate that China's leadership in UN organizations correlates with a roughly six-percentage-point increase in trust among French respondents compared to the control (see Figure A-3, 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, respondents exhibited an 8 percentage point increase in their 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. However, it is noteworthy that China's UN leadership does not seem to influence French public opinion regarding the desire for diplomatic engagement.

Our exploratory results also suggest that leadership of IOs can confer an increase in support for China's global leadership relative to that of the United States. 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 support for China following its leadership role in the UN. This is a powerful win for Chinese foreign policy goals to gain an image as a great power and global leader, especially as it increasingly competes with the US for leadership of the global order and courts Brazil to join its marquee Belt and Road Initiative.

5.2 US image

Do these image gains tell a 'China story' or do they generalize to other states? We expect that because public opinion about China tends to be negative in democracies, and furthermore that international publics lack information about China's intentions relative to more established Western powers, China's leadership of IOs is more likely to affect its image compared to leadership by Western powers. Our results generally support this expectation: we find that the marginal effects of leadership are larger for China's image than for America's ($z = 2.06$, $p < 0.05$ in France; $z = 1.77$, $p < 0.1$ in Bra-

[35] We also conduct exploratory tests of heterogeneous effects on core demographics and do not observe consistent significant results, which suggests that our results are fairly consistent across different demographic groups. Results of heterogeneous effect tests are not included here because these tests were not pre-registered, but are available upon request.

zil). Characterizing the substantive differences between the effects (Fig. 2), the effects of US leadership in France are null across all measures, and significant but substantively small in Brazil, and are much smaller than the positive image effects of China's leadership treatment condition obtained in the French case. American leadership of the UN leads to no statistically significant impact on its image relative to a baseline condition of the Swiss leading the UN in either country. This suggests that China, rather than the US, possesses the opportunity to reap image management benefits from the UN. It also provides evidence in support of Hypothesis 2, that the US will not gain from IO leadership in the same way that we have found China's image to profit.

5.3 China's leadership and IO legitimacy

While we have shown that China's leadership of IOs can have positive effects on China's image, 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 lower perceptions of IO legitimacy (Hypothesis 3). 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 (Fig. 3). For instance, in France, the legitimacy of the UN under Chinese leadership declined by about 11 percentage points compared to Swiss leadership. In Brazil, the effect is similarly negative but somewhat less pronounced, with a 7 percentage point decrease. These results also hold in exploratory analysis of the disaggregated results (Figure A-4), in which we observe that the negative effects of China's leadership are particularly salient in the case of UN reputation ("What do you think the effect of China leading the United Nations agency will be on the reputation of the United Nations' and approval 'How much do you approve or disapprove of the United Nations after the election of the official from China to lead the UN agency?') Our theory does not directly posit a rationale as to why responses to measures of reputation would move independently from measures of trust and confidence. One potential explanation could be that legitimacy perceptions are shaped more strongly by normative considerations such as procedural fairness, while reputational outcomes may be more tied to effectiveness and delivery of public goods (see, e.g., Arias et al., 2025) on the importance of procedural fairness for legitimacy. Future work can better explore the microfoundations of these important public attitudes towards IOs to better understand how reputation and legitimacy may reflect different theoretical quantities.

This difference in effects between the two samples 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.[36] 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.

[36] Pew, August 31, 2023.

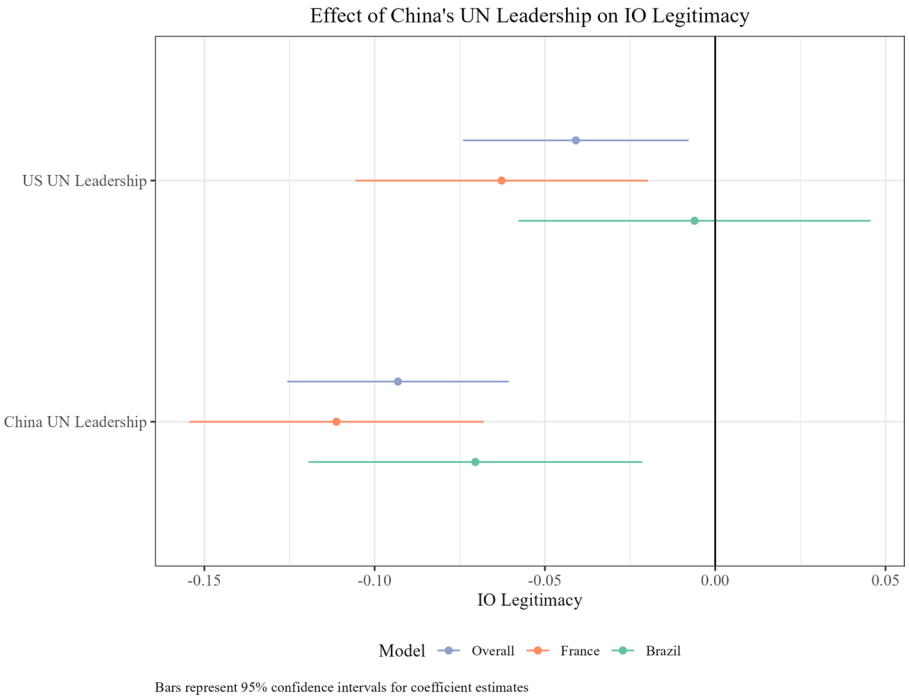

Fig. 3 Effects of leadership on IO legitimacy: Index outcomes. For individual outcomes, see Figure A-4. For tabular model results, see Table A-10. For estimated effects from models without controls, see Figure A-7

5.4 Great power capture?

Are these negative effects on institutional legitimacy unique to China—a rising power with potentially uncertain motives—or do they reflect a more general dynamic of backlash against great power capture of IOs that are valued for their independence and neutrality?

Our evidence is somewhat mixed—leadership by China leads to more negative evaluations of the UN in both France and Brazil. In France, but not in Brazil, US leadership also has a negative effect on IO evaluations ($z = -1.77$, $p < 0.1$). In both cases, the negative effect on IO legitimacy is markedly stronger for China, and the difference between the US effect and the China effect on perceived IO legitimacy is statistically significant ($z = -2.44$, $p < 0.05$ in France; $z = -2.65$, $p < 0.01$ in Brazil). France's high baseline favorability can also help to explain why US leadership of the UN agency also has a negative effect on perceived IO legitimacy in France, resulting in a 6 percentage point decrease in the legitimacy index—though again, the negative effects are particularly salient when it comes to the reputation sub-item but not legitimacy or trust sub-items— and not in Brazil. Despite these negative IO reputational effects driven by US leadership of the IO in the French study, the magnitude of the impact is still much smaller than the effects of Chinese leadership—the effect is approximately half as severe as that of China's, with a decrease of approximately

5 percentage points in the overall model, though the result is not significant when examining the Brazilian sample only. This reflects a similar pattern to the magnitude of leadership effects on country image.

These findings generally support our expectation in Hypothesis 4. Indeed, the differences between country leadership on UN legitimacy are not statistically different from each other, nor are they tremendously different from baseline levels of support under Swiss leadership. However, it remains the case that great power leadership, whether by China or the US, is viewed less favorably than the more neutral Swiss leadership. Though Western powers may be seen more favorably than rising powers like China, IOs should still heed this potential source of legitimacy erosion.

6 Conclusion

Engagement in the UN can have meaningful benefits for a rising power. We theorize that by obtaining leadership positions in well-regarded IOs, China is employing an image management strategy to craft an image as a "responsible power" that improves its image among populations where it particularly languishes: democratic publics. China's investment of time and resources to secure IO leadership positions aims—at least in part—to cultivate support among democratic publics to further its broader foreign policy goals. However, our theory also anticipates that such efforts by powerful states might also lead to negative perceptions of the IO, as global publics fear capture by great powers, particularly when they may lack information about the intention of the state in question. In our survey experiment, we test and find evidence for these expectations. We examined how IO leadership impacts China's image in democratic nations, which is arguably the hardest case for China to find any effect of enhancing its image. We find that individuals in France—a China-skeptical population—rate China's image more favorably when China leads IOs, though in Brazil, a more China-friendly public, there is less room for China's image to be improved via this mechanism. We do not find the same effect for the US leadership of organizations. This suggests that one of the major benefits the UN offers China is the currency of a positive image as a responsible stakeholder. At the same time, Brazilian audiences — an important player in the competition between the US and China — increased their preference for a China-led rather than US-led international order after learning of China's IO leadership. Future work should also extend these findings to China's efforts beyond leadership, including China's funding, staffing, and partnerships with the United Nations, and to probe the salience of such efforts with global publics in different types of states—including China's domestic audience.

The results of China improving its image as a responsible power provide a new narrative in the ongoing debates about the implications of China's leadership for global governance (Weiss & Wallace, 2021; Johnston, 2019), and expand our understanding of China's soft power foreign policy (Green-Riley, 2023; Repnikova, 2022). While some have argued that China is engaging in international organizations to make the world "safe for autocracy" (Weiss, 2019), our results suggest an additional, but overlooked motivation: a desire to improve China's image and shape public opinion.

Our findings also hold important policy implications in a political context in which the United States is increasingly withdrawing from IOs rather than investing in funding and leadership. Recent examples include the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO and the UN Human Rights Council, the initiation of withdrawal from the World Health Organization, and the exit from the Paris Climate Accord. These actions suggest a broader trend of retreating from international institutional leadership. While the US has held considerable soft power among democratic audiences, there have been noticeable declines during the last Trump administration. Democratic audiences may be less trusting of the United States leading international organizations given US exit.[37] Building on these trends, future research should explore the impact of an American power vacuum within IOs. Are the findings that China benefits from leading IOs heightened when the U.S. withdraws rather than competes within these institutions, and how does this impact perceptions of great power capture and potential leadership by the US going forward?

While this article tackles a challenging case for China's global image—democratic publics—future research should widen the lens to include a broader range of states. Chinese officials have made a concerted push to win over the Global South, a region that has shown both interest in China's engagement and unease with its rising power and assertiveness (Shirk, 2023). Does leveraging IO leadership grant China added legitimacy for such audiences? For smaller states in particular, China's leadership at the UN could signal a commitment to multilateralism and help soften threat perceptions. On the other hand, it could create caution due to fears of great power capture. The same effect may hold among autocratic audiences where leaders are also skeptical of China. Chinese officials have attempted to overcome this by establishing multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Involvement and leadership in multilateral and regional international organizations may also contribute to image improvements that lead to a greater desire to collaborate with China in autocracies and should be explored in future work (Goldstein, 2001).

Our results also supported our expectation that China's leadership of IOs has negative effects on IO legitimacy, as well as a broader pattern of backlash against great power competition. Leadership by both China and the US reduces perceptions of legitimacy, though the effects are more than twice as large in the case of China—and the negative response to US leadership only occurs in the case of France. While this result supports our theoretical expectations that uncertainty and perceived threat lead to negative effects 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 & Viola, 2017; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). We tested a scenario in which IO leadership was determined by a competitive election, though IOs employ a variety of mechanisms to select leaders. Future work can explore whether elections mitigate concerns about great power capture, signaling the selection of a high-quality candidate, or exacerbate these concerns, showing that even in open processes, IOs are dominated by powerful members. As IOs confront increasing backlash, retrenchment, and member state withdrawal (Walter, 2021; Von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019), such evidence is particularly important for identifying a source that could affect global perceptions of and confidence in IOs.

[37] Joseph Nye, Financial Times, Trump and the End of American Soft Power, March 8, 2025.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-025-09604-4.

Author contributions To research design and conceptualization: S.A. (50%), R.H. (50%); statistical analysis: S.A. (50%), R.H. (50%); writing: S.A. (50%), R.H. (50%). For helpful comments on earlier drafts, the authors would like to thank Ricky Clark, Margaret Kenney, Julia Morse, and Jonas Tallberg, as well as conference participants at the International Studies Association Annual Meeting, American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Political Economy of International Organizations Conference, China Center Workshop at the University of Pennsylvania Workshop, and Dimensions of Great Power Competition Workshop at the University of Surrey.

Funding This work was supported by funding from the Center for the Study of Contemporary China and the GAPSA-Provost Award from the University of Pennsylvania.

Data availability The datasets analyzed in this study and replication materials are available on Dataverse (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TTSUF8).

Declarations

Compliance with ethical standards This study was pre-registered at OSF and was reviewed by the University of Pennsylvania IRB (854127 and 851391).

Competing interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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