Public Support for Foreign Aid: The Role of Development Project Characteristics

October 23, 2025

Abstract

In donor countries, public support matters for government decisions on foreign aid, however, there is comparatively little evidence about how citizens evaluate aid projects. Using a large-scale conjoint experiment with data from France, Germany, Great Britain, and the U.S., we show that individuals favour aid projects targeting basic needs—water, sanitation, hygiene, food security, and health, especially when projects are effective, located in countries who need it, and have good governance. We find these preferences are broadly consistent across countries, with the U.S. an outlier on promoting economic growth and aversion for projects in the MENA region. We also find that aid sceptics are less likely to choose projects delivered through NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa. Our findings reveal structured, multidimensional public preferences for aid programmes, offering clear insights for policymakers seeking to align foreign aid strategies with public opinion in a time of declining support.

Keywords: public opinion, data, foreign aid

1 Introduction

Foreign aid, historically considered an issue that enjoyed little public interest or concern (Almond, 1950; Smillie and Helmich, 1998; Macdonald, 2025), has become increasingly politically significant and contentious in donor countries. This is true both when we consider the political and economic pressures on donor countries to adjust their aid budgets, priorities, and delivery approaches, and also when we examine the increasingly divided profile of public opinion on foreign aid in donor countries.

In the 2020s, the aid policy domain has been characterised by significant cuts to aid budgets across donor countries (OECD, 2025). For example, in the UK, where 0.7% of GNI was spent on aid since 2013, this was first cut to 0.5% in 2021 (Loft and Brien, 2024) and then again to 0.3% in 2025 (Loft and Brien, 2025). Similarly, in the United States, President Trump implemented several measures to decrease aid spending. This included a 90-day freeze on aid assistance and a request to rescind aid for both the current and previous fiscal years, resulting in an 8.3 billion reduction in aid. These actions were further followed by deeper cuts to aid in the Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request (Kates et al., 2025). Cuts were also the backdrops for evolving policy approaches, as shown in Figure 1, below, which traces the aid disbursement levels for 13 goals monitored by the OECD, with investments in infrastructure, social protection, and health being some of the largest aid expenditure areas in 2022. [1]

In the public opinion domain, evidence from longitudinal studies across donor countries tracking the evolution of attitudes shows that public views on giving aid have become much more divided. Survey studies such as Torres-Raposo et al. (2025) show substantial in the percentage of those who support aid. For example, in France 66% of respondents supported aid in 2019, compared to 56% in 2025, with similar negative trends in Great Britain, Germany, and the United States.

Nevertheless, aid remains a fundamental and effective approach to tackle global poverty (Mahembe and Odhiambo, 2021; Alvi and Senbeta, 2012; Collier and Dollar, 2001), with public opinion acting as an important constraint against budget cuts, and as an incentive to keep governments working to tackle global poverty (Tobias Heinrich et al., 2018; Tingley,

[1] In section S.1 of the online supplementary material, we provide a more extensive analysis of differences between the public and their governments.

2010).

The existing literature has focussed on the study of factors affecting public support for aid spending conceptualising support as a broad question of giving or not giving aid (Hudson et al., 2012; Paxton and Knack, 2012). Evidence shows that the public has structured (Milner and Tingley, 2013) and responsive (Theresa Heinrich et al., 2016) attitudes towards aid, shaped by moral (Bauhr et al., 2013) and material factors (Doherty et al., 2020). Studies seeking to capture this broad concept employed survey questions capturing public concern for global poverty, support for 'government efforts', or for increases or cuts to aid budgets (Henson and Lindstrom, 2013), with researchers highlighting the poor measurement validity of many of these indicators (Hudson et al., 2012).

However, research on public attitudes across aspects of foreign policy, including aid (Bayram and Graham, 2022; Kallbekken and Aasen, 2010; Czaplińska, 2007; Small et al., 2007) shows that beyond the broad support for aid, individuals also hold strong, consistent preferences for specific details when it comes to policy approaches. This is also reflected in the proliferation of research using conjoint experiments (K. Bansak et al., 2021) to estimate multidimensional policy preferences. These studies show that individuals can engage with choices trading off policy packages with different attributes across domains including labour (Gallego and Marx, 2017), health (Jan et al., 2000), and development aid (Doherty et al., 2020).

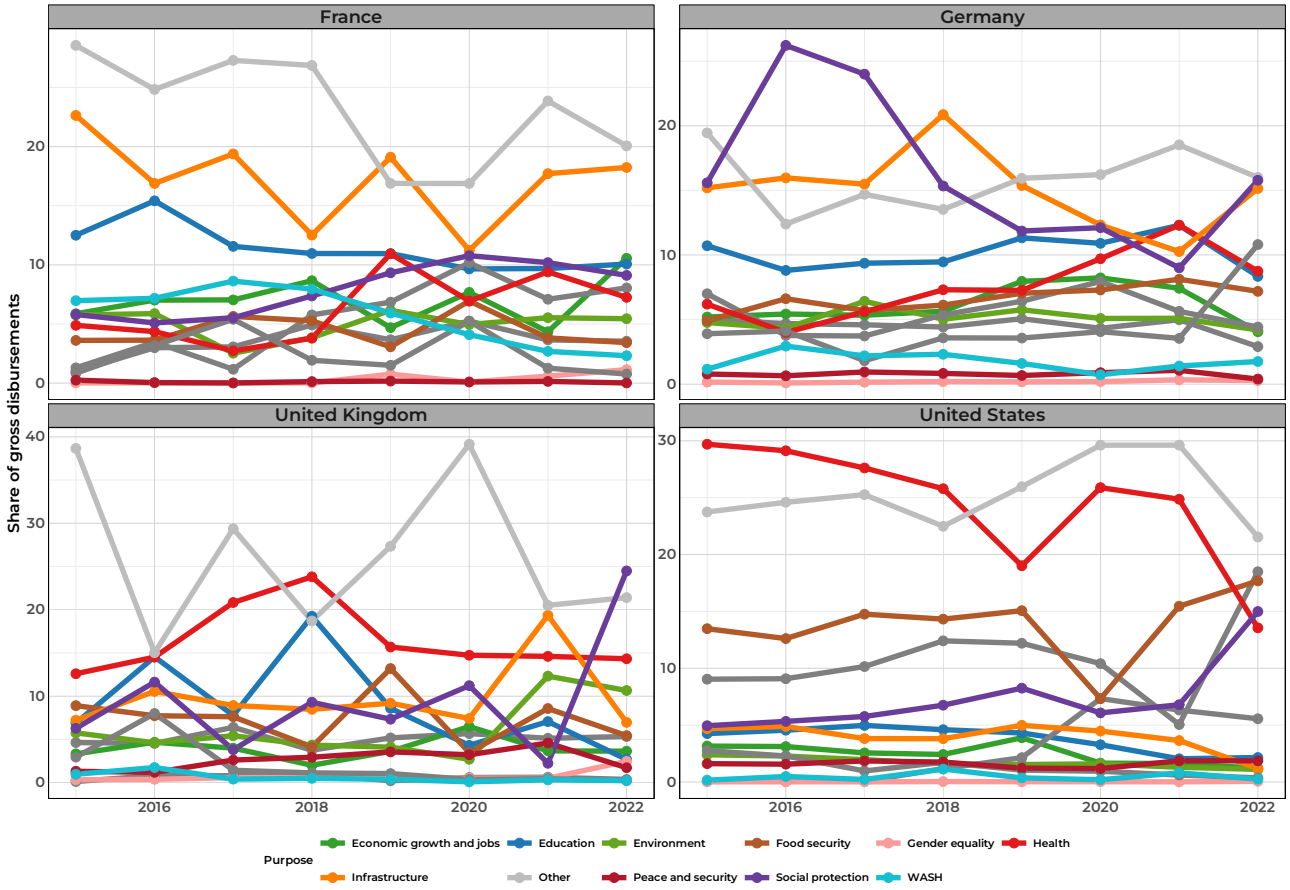

Figure 1: Aid disbursements by purpose.

Notes: This figure reports the official development assistance commitments (as a share of all gross disbursements) from all four donor countries, grouped by purpose of aid. The data covers 2015 to 2022. We categorised aid funds based on the 10 categories included in our conjoint experiment. Projects that were unable to categorise or did not include this information were categorised as *Other*. *Source:* Creditor Reporting System, OECD.

The overlap between the question of giving aid and how should aid programmes be delivered matters to better understand public opinion. Specifically, variation on support for aid, broadly framed, can help shed light on how public support for different aid policy approaches varies across individuals with different attitudinal profiles. But also, investigating this can help better understand the underlying world views of supporters and opponents, and show whether and how they vary in their degrees of support for instrumental, conditional, or altruistic delivery approaches. And thirdly, it can provide important evidence to inform governments' and third sector organisations' efforts to identify publicly-supported delivery strategies, or to tailor public communications approaches to different public seg-

ments.

In this paper, we contribute new evidence on public attitudes on aid delivery approaches by using new conjoint experimental data with respondents making choices between two potential aid projects with different characteristics. Our conjoint design characteristics include varying aid projects' goals, delivery approaches like channels and conditionality, and recipient country characteristics. We present data collected across France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, going beyond existing evidence which focuses on the United States (n = 26,169), and highlighting the degree to which aid attitudes are consistent or diverge across major donor countries. Secondly, based on rich survey data connected to the conjoint experiment, we propose a more robust measure of broadly-framed support for aid and use it to understand how public preferences for aid delivery approaches varies across the broad aid support continuum.

Our analysis yields three key findings. First, levels of need and governance, efficacy, and goals, are the project characteristics with the strongest effect on respondents' choices. Respondents are significantly more likely to choose highly effective aid projects that target areas including water, sanitation and hygiene, food security and health, in countries with high levels of need but also high levels of governance. Existing diplomatic, strategic or economic ties, delivery through NGOs, or conditionality around social policy, democracy, and human rights also have significant positive, but smaller effects on respondents' choices.

Secondly, we find a high degree of consistency on these results across the four countries of our study. However, the U.S. is a notable outlier on goals (compared to the other three countries, projects targeting jobs and economic growth are more likely to be chosen), regions (projects for countries in the Middle East and North Africa are less likely to be chosen), and ties (countries with existing ties are more likely to be chosen).

Thirdly, we find significant variation on the importance and significance of the aid project characteristics across the aid support continuum, broadly framed. While both aid supporters and opponents are likely to choose projects with high levels of need, high levels of effectiveness, and tackling goals around WASH provision, aid supporters are significantly more sensitive to varying levels of all attributes compared to aid opponents. Aid opponents instead focus on regions (they are significantly less likely to pick countries in the Middle East and North Africa), and delivery channels (significantly less likely to support projects

delivered through NGOs).

These findings are important for scholars of public opinion and foreign aid, digging into preferences for more concrete development efforts as well as for policymakers and NGOs who seek to build or protect public support for aid. There is widespread support for aid that targets country in real need and aid that works, both because it is effective, and because it goes to countries with good governance. However, where issues are more politically polarising - such as projects targeted toward gender equality and the environment - policymakers may need to target specific constituencies of support.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we review the existing literature on factors affecting public attitudes to aid, including newer studies using conjoint experiments to elicit preferences for different policy approaches. We translate the factors from the literature into attributes for a new conjoint experiment, and discuss the strategy to connect individuals' levels of support for aid, broadly identified, with their specific preferences for policy attributes. In the final section, we discuss the results from our experiment, and draw implications both in terms of understanding of public attitudes to aid, and how practitioners can apply these results to better engage donor publics with development aid and efforts to tackle global poverty more broadly.

2 Literature

2.1 Individual-Level Determinants of Aid Support

The literature on individual-level determinants of support for foreign aid is characterised by three primary strands of explanation: rational/prudential approaches (i.e., cost-benefits), moral explanations, and socio-demographic factors. Prudential approaches have focused on the public's perceptions of aid's cost-effectiveness on aid support, with lower perceived costs correlating to increased support (Hurst et al., 2017). Additionally, concerns about aid inefficiencies, such as corruption and wastage, have consistently shown negative impacts on support (Bauhr and Charron, 2018). Notably, the perceived benefits, whether accruing to the donor or recipient country, foster greater support for foreign aid (Henson and Lindstrom, 2013). The literature underscores that tangible advantages, like economic and security in-

terests, can even sustain support for aid to countries with human rights violations (Tobias Heinrich et al., 2018).

Moral obligations constitute an alternative explanation, with attitudes rooted in reducing harm, caring for others' welfare, and principles of equality, justice, and reciprocity (Bayram, 2016; Kertzer et al., 2014). Generalised trust also enhances support, as individuals consider those less privileged as part of their moral community (Bayram, 2017). Lastly, socio-demographic factors, including gender, religiosity, age, income, and ideological stance, exert influence, with conservatives generally less supportive of aid compared to their liberal counterparts (Bayram and Holmes, 2020; Burkot and Wood, 2017).

Within this domain, research has focused on investigating public attitudes towards the international distribution of aid, including but not limited to which countries to disburse aid, and for what programmes (Greene and Licht, 2024; Doherty et al., 2020; Zimmermann and Smith, 2011).

2.2 Methodological Limitations of Existing Research

While this literature has identified important drivers of aid support, there are limitations that constrain our understanding of public preferences. First, most studies treat aid support as a unidimensional concept, typically measured through broad questions about whether governments should increase, maintain, or decrease aid spending, or through agree/disagree scales about general aid provision (Henson and Lindstrom, 2013). These approaches, while useful for capturing overall support levels, provide limited insight into how citizens want aid to be designed and delivered when it is provided.

Second, existing research has difficulty distinguishing between preferences about *whether* to provide aid and the volumes thereof versus preferences about *how* to provide aid. This distinction matters because even aid sceptics may have coherent preferences for aid design when aid is provided, creating opportunities for broader coalition-building that aggregate support measures miss. Studies seeking to capture broad support have employed survey questions capturing public concern for global poverty, or support for 'government efforts', or for increases or cuts to aid budgets, with researchers lamenting the poor measurement validity of many of these indicators

Third, traditional survey methods struggle to capture the multidimensional nature of

aid policy preferences. Real-world aid decisions involve simultaneous choices around recipient countries, project purposes, delivery mechanisms, and conditionalities. Single-item measures or batteries of separate questions cannot reveal how citizens weigh these competing considerations or make trade-offs when attributes conflict. For instance, a citizen might support aid to countries with poor governance if the aid addresses urgent humanitarian needs and includes appropriate conditionalities—a nuanced preference that binary support measures cannot detect (Hudson and VanHeerde-Hudson, 2012).

2.3 Experimental Approaches to the study of Aid Preferences

Recent methodological innovations in survey methods have begun to address these limitations. The proliferation of research using conjoint experiments (J. Bansak K. A. H. et al., 2021) to estimate multidimensional public preferences shows that individuals can engage with choices trading off policy packages with different attributes across domains including labour (Gallego and Marx, 2017), health (Jan et al., 2000), and development aid (Doherty et al., 2020).

Within the domain of international development specifically, experimental approaches have revealed important nuances in citizen preferences. Research across various policy domains, such as aid (Bayram and Graham, 2022; Czaplińska, 2007), climate (Devine et al., 2024), redistribution (Kuziemko et al., 2015), gives strong reasons to expect that beyond broad support for aid, individuals hold strong, consistent preferences for concrete characteristics of different policy approaches. Doherty et al. (2020) used a conjoint experiment to examine how recipient country characteristics—including need, governance, and strategic ties—influence American public support for aid projects. Their findings demonstrated that citizens have sophisticated preferences that go beyond simple support or opposition. However, existing conjoint-based investigations of aid preferences have primarily focused on recipient country characteristics and broad aid allocation decisions. Doherty et al. (2020) focuses on links between donor and recipient, cost of the policy package, and country characteristics). This represents an important but incomplete picture of aid policy preferences.

We extend existing conjoint-based investigations through two main arguments. First, building on previous studies by Doherty et al. (2020), we argue that specific project characteristics enable clearer public judgments. Our conjoint experiment tests how implementa-

tion attributes—such as purpose (WASH vs. gender equality), effectiveness, delivery modality, and conditionality—condition support, offering a more comprehensive understanding beyond the general aid attitudes explored in earlier work (e.g., (Milner and Tingley, 2013) and the recipient-focused experimental studies (e.g., (Doherty et al., 2020).

3 Which characteristics of foreign aid projects matter for public support?

In this section, we outline the attributes selected for our conjoint experiment, drawing on existing literature. We included eight attributes: *Purpose, Region, Level of extreme Poverty, Ties, Mode of delivery, Governance*, and *Conditionality*. We split our sample into two conjoint experiments, where for one conjoint, we excluded the *Poverty* and *Effectiveness* attributes. We also set out our preliminary expectations about how the dimension will impact on individuals' support for aid projects when dimensions are specified.

3.1 Project-Level Attributes

Purpose. We firstly argue that what aid is used for will influence support for providing it. Indeed, Brancati (2014) finds that support increases when people are provided with information about how aid money will be spent and how it would benefit recipients. Czaplińska (2007) and Council of Europe and OECD (2003) find a preference for supporting humanitarian and emergency aid programmes over development aid. Based on the existing literature (Doherty et al., 2020; DiJulio et al., 2015; Torres-Raposo et al., 2025), we expect that "long term" aid such as education, welfare provision, infrastructure, environmental protection and gender equality may be deprioritised in relation to issues that are seemingly more urgent and needs-based, such as access to health services, WASH, food security.

Effectiveness. Previous research has shown that the effectiveness of aid (Milner and Tingley, 2013; Bearce and Tirone, 2010; Winters, 2010) is a significant driver of aid attitudes. In line with these findings, we expect perceptions of aid effectiveness to influence public support (Hudson and VanHeerde-Hudson, 2012; Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa, 2016) . Trans-

parency and accountability can bolster public confidence in aid (Dietrich, 2013). We anticipate that those sceptical of aid will be especially driven by whether or not aid 'works' (Milner and Tingley, 2013).

Mode of delivery. We argue that the modality of aid projects matters for public perception. That is, whether the aid package is implemented through a government aid agency, international organisations, recipient governments, international NGOs, or by the private sector impacts the public's preferences over aid projects. Mixed findings are present in the literature around aid modalities: Milner (2006) observes that in countries where public opinion towards aid is negative, more aid is channelled through IOs. Bayram and Graham (2022) find that public support for multilateral aid is boosted when such aid is 'earmarked', i.e., there is more control over how it is spent, more like bilateral aid. However, Dietrich (2021) finds that public opinion is not sensitive to different channels.

Conditionality. A final aid project attribute that impacts the public's preferences over aid programmes is aid conditionality. Conditionality is often imposed by donors to address concerns about governance. Traditionally, conditionality was associated with economic conditionality, as in the Washington Consensus, promoting free market approaches. However, over time conditionality has broadened to incorporate other aspects, such as governance, and human rights (Bodenstein and Faust, 2017; Molenaers et al., 2015). Some argue that conditionality is not even used to hold recipient governments to account, but instead its primary purpose is precisely to signal to domestic constituencies that their preferences and worries are heard (Fisher, 2015). Given that both public opinion and governmental policies have displayed a preference for conditionality in programs, we anticipate finding support for aid projects that incorporate a conditional element, especially concerning democracy and human rights (Baker 2015).

3.2 Country-Level Attributes

Region. We expect that the geographical region of the recipient country affects support. Geographical proximity has been shown to correlate with higher support for aid (Cashel-Cordo and Craig, 1997; Afonso and Negash, 2024). Doherty et al. (2020) found an aversion

in the U.S. towards aid directed at the Middle East and support for Africa and Latin America. Conversely, Cashel-Cordo and Craig (1997) demonstrate a bias towards lending aid money to South Asia relative to other regions, with Africa being the least popular recipient. Afonso and Negash (2024) found a general sentiment towards recipient nations that shared cultural, linguistic, or geographic ties with the donor country. We expect that aid packages targeted at proximate countries – geographically, culturally, or linguistically – would be given priority over more distant recipient countries.

Level of extreme poverty. We argue that the recipient country's level of need and poverty affects preferences over aid projects. While when it comes to the actual distribution of aid there is a 'middle-income bias' of aid (Dissanayake et al., 2020; Herre et al., 2024), the public have been shown to prefer to allocate aid according to need. Existing research has shown the level of extreme poverty is a significant drivers of aid attitudes (Hurst et al., 2017; Theresa Heinrich et al., 2016; Arvin and Drewes, 2001). Thus, we test whether aid packages targeted at more poverty-stricken countries are favoured over aid packages intended for countries with lower levels of poverty. We expect that aid packages targeted to countries with a greater need will be prioritised over those targeted to countries with lower levels of need.

Country Ties. Beyond the level of need and the region of the country, ties also matter, in particular strategic, economic, and diplomatic ties. For instance, the public may prefer aid to ensure supply of key imports or exports and services from/to recipient countries (Tobias Heinrich et al., 2018; Veen, 2011) or to use it as a tool to leverage over the recipient countries and strengthen ties with allies (Blair and Roessler, 2021; Veen, 2011). Tobias Heinrich et al. (2018) and Afonso and Negash (2024) indicate that while individuals worry about aid going to "nasty" regimes, this is offset if the recipient provides strategic benefits to the donor. Blackman (2018) finds that people are more willing to support aid to countries that are described as U.S. allies in the War on Terror.

Moreover, legacies of colonial histories and connections of shared language or culture frequently influence aid allocation choices. In observational studies of actual aid allocation, such as Alesina and Dollar (2000) and Nielsen (2014), cultural and historic ties matter; e.g., France displays a stronger preference for providing aid to former colonies and political allies. Fewer studies have investigated how public opinion is affected by cultural and his-

torical relationships. Afonso and Negash (2024) and Doherty et al. (2020) find that shared linguistic and cultural ties influence not only a donor's likelihood to provide aid but also the public's support for it. We therefore anticipate that aid programmes to countries with ties will be preferred relative to those with no ties.

Governance. People's support is often contingent on the quality of governance in the recipient country, i.e., the rule of law, accountability, transparency, and levels of corruption. People are more reluctant to support aid to countries with poor governance – especially regarding human rights violations, corruption, and lack of transparency (Doherty et al., 2020; Allendoerfer, 2017; Dasandi et al., 2022). Although, in line with the fact that donor nations often prioritize strategic benefits in their aid allocation (Nielsen, 2014; Alesina and Dollar, 2000), overlooking governance shortcomings in recipient countries, individuals' aversion can be mitigated if the recipient nation is perceived as strategically valuable to the donor (Tobias Heinrich et al., 2018; Afonso and Negash, 2024).

4 Research Design

4.1 Conjoint Experiment Design

To test our arguments, we draw on data from a novel survey of public attitudes toward sustainable development in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, conducted September - October 2022. Respondents are part of YouGov's online panel, and the data are weighted to be nationally representative. The total sample size is n= 26,169 respondents.[2]

Using a choice-based conjoint experimental design, we test the influence of eight factors (attributes) on respondents' support for the project.[3] As shown in Table 1, the attributes measure characteristics of the recipient country (region, level of extreme poverty, ties, and governance) of the aid project itself (purpose, effectiveness, mode of delivery and condition-

[2]Sample sizes: France n= 6,051; Germany n= 6,008; Great Britain n= 8,008; United States n= 6,102

[3]Research on conjoint experiments demonstrates that results, specifically Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs), remain fairly stable even with the inclusion of a larger number of attributes, indicating the robustness of conjoint designs to increasing complexity. This stability is attributed to respondents' adaptive decision-making processes, where they selectively focus on relevant information and filter out less relevant details when faced with more attributes (Jenke et al., 2021).

Table 1: Attributes and Levels: Aid Program Conjoint Design

Attributes	**Levels**
Purpose	Education, Health, Economic growth and jobs, WASH, Social protection, Infrastructure, Food security, Peace and security, Environment, Gender equality
Region	East Asia & Pacific, Latin America & Caribbean, Middle East & North Africa, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa
Level of extreme poverty	5%, 10%, 20%, 40%, 80%
Ties	None, Economic, Historical or cultural, Diplomatic or strategic
Effectiveness	Not very effective, Moderate effective, Very effective
Mode of delivery	Private sector, NGOs, Government aid agency, International Organisations
Governance	Low governance, Moderate governance, High governance
Conditionality	No conditions, Democracy and human rights, Economic policy, Social policy

ality). In choosing the levels for each attribute, we depart from the approach of Doherty et al. (2020) and provide categorical descriptions of attributes as opposed to specific metrics.[4] For example, to show recipient country need and aid effectiveness we provide a simple indicator of the percentage of the population that live in extreme poverty (5%, 10%, 20%, 40%, 80% taken to be representative levels of poverty based on the World Bank's World Development Indicators) and a four-point effectiveness scale (not very effective, moderately effective, effective, very effective). The advantage of this approach, we contend, is that it provides a choice-based conjoint design that is better aligned with respondents' knowledge of foreign aid (Gravelle et al., 2017; Heerde-Hudson, 2014) and how foreign aid is framed in the wider debate (Veen, 2011; Pellicciari, 2022).

Respondents were given the following prompt:

> *"On the next few pages, you will be asked to choose between two possible projects that the [country] government might deliver using its aid budget. You will be asked to indicate which project you support more based on the profile of the country and the characteristics*

[4]In comparison, Doherty et al. (2020) operationalises recipient country need/level of poverty and political freedom using average annual income (adjusted Gross National Income per capita income) and Freedom House's Aggregate Civil Liberties scores.

of the project."

Respondents were then shown two different aid projects, with attributes randomly assigned, and asked to indicate which project they support more based on the profile of the country and the attributes of the project." The outcome variable, "Which of the two aid projects do you support more?" was measured as a simple binary choice of Project A or Project B.

4.2 Split Sample

As previous research has shown that the effectiveness of aid (Bearce and Tirone, 2010; Milner and Tingley, 2013; Winters, 2010), and the level of extreme poverty (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Theresa Heinrich et al., 2016; Hurst et al., 2017), are significant drivers of aid attitudes. We test whether these two attributes have a disproportionate impact on support for an aid project by splitting the sample into two groups. In the full sample group (n=13,053), respondents were shown aid projects with all eight attributes as shown in Table 2. In the reduced profile group (n= 13,116), we excluded the effectiveness and levels of extreme poverty attributes, showing the remaining six attributes only. The gains of this design choice are three-fold: first, we can explore in depth how public weighs the remaining six attributes left; especially for features where foreign aid support has not been extensively explored in a multidimensional setting. Second, we minimise the risk of survey satisfying, as we decreased the number of attributes, which in theory, will increase the quality and precision of our estimates. Last, by randomly allocating respondents to the full profile conjoint or the reduced profile, it allows to estimate the magnitude of their relative importance of these two attributes within the same sample and across samples.

This design choice does come with some costs. First, across-sample comparisons from two random samples, are not the best approach to isolate and measure the effects of satisficing and masking. As we drop relevant attributes, respondents may engage in masking, which may inflate estimates of other correlated features, leading to biased results (J. Bansak K. A. H. et al., 2021). Finally, we get less precise estimates, as we split our sample into two groups.[5]

[5]Sample size is not a substantive concern; based on our power calculations, the reduced-sample conjoint obtains a 0.95 power, with type S and type M errors below 0.05

4.3 Subgroup Analysis

Further, we conduct a subgroup analysis comparing aid supporters and aid sceptics to address fundamental questions about the structure and stability of public attitudes toward foreign aid policy. The theoretical rationale for disaggregating by aid support rests on several key insights from the literature. First, aggregate measures of aid support may mask fundamentally different preference structures among citizens with different baseline attitudes toward aid. While supporters and sceptics may differ in their overall willingness to provide aid, they may also differ systematically in what type of aid they find acceptable when aid is provided.

This distinction is theoretically important because it speaks to competing models of attitude formation. A unidimensional model would suggest that supporters and sceptics differ primarily in the intensity of their preferences, with supporters simply being more willing to accept any form of aid. A multidimensional model, by contrast, would predict that supporters and sceptics have different preference orderings across aid attributes, reflecting distinct underlying value systems and concerns about aid provision (Theresa Heinrich et al., 2016; Veen, 2011).

The political context makes this distinction particularly relevant. Public opinion on aid is increasingly polarised, as evidenced by declining support in major donor countries between 2020 and 2025 (Development Engagement Lab, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d). In this divided landscape, understanding whether sceptics have systematic preferences for certain types of aid projects could reveal pathways for building broader coalitions or, conversely, suggest that divisions are too fundamental to bridge.

From a policy design perspective, identifying shared preferences across supporters and sceptics could inform strategies for maintaining aid programs during periods of declining public support. If sceptics systematically prefer aid with certain characteristics (e.g., high effectiveness, clear conditionalities, strategic benefits), policymakers might design aid packages that incorporate these features to broaden their political appeal.

Based on the literature, we expect aid supporters and sceptics to diverge on several key dimensions. For supporters, we anticipate stronger preferences for projects targeting urgent, needs-based issues (e.g., WASH, health, food security), as these align with moral motivations for aiding the most deprived (Bayram, 2016). Supporters may also favour projects

with conditionality tied to democracy and human rights, reflecting a commitment to ethical governance (Bodenstein and Faust, 2017). In contrast, sceptics are likely to prioritise attributes that signal tangible benefits to the donor country, such as economic or diplomatic ties, or high effectiveness, which address concerns about waste or mismanagement (Milner and Tingley, 2013). We also expect sceptics to express stronger reservations about projects in regions perceived as less deserving or culturally distant, such as the Middle East and North Africa, owing to biases documented in prior studies (Doherty et al., 2020). By comparing these groups, we can assess whether preferences for specific attributes transcend general attitudes toward aid or are shaped by them.

Measurement of Aid Support

Our conjoint experiment was embedded in a panel survey that contains an extensive number of items aimed at capturing different features of individuals' interests, motivations, preferences, and behaviours towards development and sustainable development. We leverage this extensive number of items to explore heterogeneity by using respondents' latent trait of underlying support for foreign aid and sustainable development using a Hierarchical Item Response Theory model (Hierarchical IRT) (Bock and Zimowski, 1997; Zhou, 2019). Hierarchical IRT has some desirable properties compared to some of the canonical latent variable modelling techniques, which we discuss more extensively in Section A.2 in the Appendix. We included 18 items from the 2020 survey reported in Table A.1 in the Appendix. Our selection procedure includes 5 items on attitudes, 9 items on the costs and benefits of foreign aid, and 4 items on cosmopolitan views. Higher values of the latent trait indicate higher levels of support, while lower values indicate lower levels of support.

We employ three approaches to explore heterogeneity, first, by reporting marginal means categorised by respondents' latent trait of support for foreign aid, partitioning our sample using a k-means clustering algorithm (MacQueen, 1967). K-means clustering avoids the ad-hoc assignment of respondents to groups defined by the researcher. Instead, it uses a data-driven algorithmic approach that maximises the grouping of respondents into internally homogeneous groups. Secondly, using the same latent trait scores, we split our sample into quantiles, creating groups of roughly equal size, given the approximately normal distribution of the latent scores. Finally, we used a single-question indicator to gauge respondents'

preferences regarding the level of government spending on aid for poor countries. We classified respondents as *Supporters* if they indicated their willingness to maintain or increase foreign aid, and *Sceptics* for those who expressed a preference for decreasing foreign aid expenditure.[6]

4.4 Attribute Interactions

A core assumption in conjoint experiments is that respondents evaluate aid projects by weighing all attributes and adjusting their preferences based on the specific levels of a set of attributes. However, certain attribute combinations may interact in theoretically meaningful ways, with the effect of one attribute depending on the levels of another. We test two key interactions suggested by the aid literature. First, we examine whether conditionalities serve as a compensatory mechanism when governance is weak. We expect that citizens prefer attaching conditions to aid when recipient countries have poor governance to reduce misappropriation risks, while favouring unconditional aid when governance is strong (Blair et al., 2024). Second, we test whether concerns about aid effectiveness lead to greater demand for conditionalities, expecting higher support for democracy, human rights, and social policy conditions when project effectiveness is uncertain.

5 Results

5.1 All Attributes

Figure 2 shows the results of the main test of the attributes on support for foreign aid projects across all four countries.[7] In line with our expectations, we find that respondents are more likely to choose aid projects that address basic needs, including WASH, food, and health, in a context where levels of poverty are high (40% or 80%), and where the presented effectiveness of the project is high (project is effective or very effective). Conversely, the public is significantly less likely to choose projects targeting goals in infrastructure, gender, social protection, and the environment, in contexts where levels of poverty are low (5% or 10%),

[6]The exact question corresponds to item "track7_4" reported in Table A.1 in the Appendix.
[7]Country-specific results are reported in Figure 3 at the end of this section.

or for projects that are presented as not very effective.[8]

Projects aimed at countries with existing diplomatic, strategic, or economic ties, with moderate or high levels of governance are significantly more likely to be chosen, while countries with no existing ties are significantly less likely to be chosen. Overall, this suggests that respondents take an instrumental approach when evaluating aid projects. With respect to regions, respondents are significantly less likely to pick countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but all other effects are not statistically significant. This specific significant effect is mainly driven by respondents in France and the U.S., where marginal effects for this attribute/level are significantly lower than in Great Britain and Germany. We discuss how results vary by country in more depth in the next section.

Finally, looking at ways of delivery, respondents are more likely to choose projects delivered by NGOs. Moreover, respondents are more likely to choose aid projects with some conditionality. However, while the public's preference for diplomatic and economic ties appears primarily instrumental or strategic, public support for aid projects is more conditional, where citizens more likely favour aid projects when it includes conditionalities around social protection, democracy, and human rights. Projects delivered through the private sector, with no conditions, or with economic conditionality criteria are less likely to be chosen. These findings echo those of Dietrich (2013) who finds that the public are more likely to support aid projects that are delivered by NGOs and less likely to support those that are delivered by the private sector.

[8]We report AMCEs for the full and reduced profiles in Figure A.1.

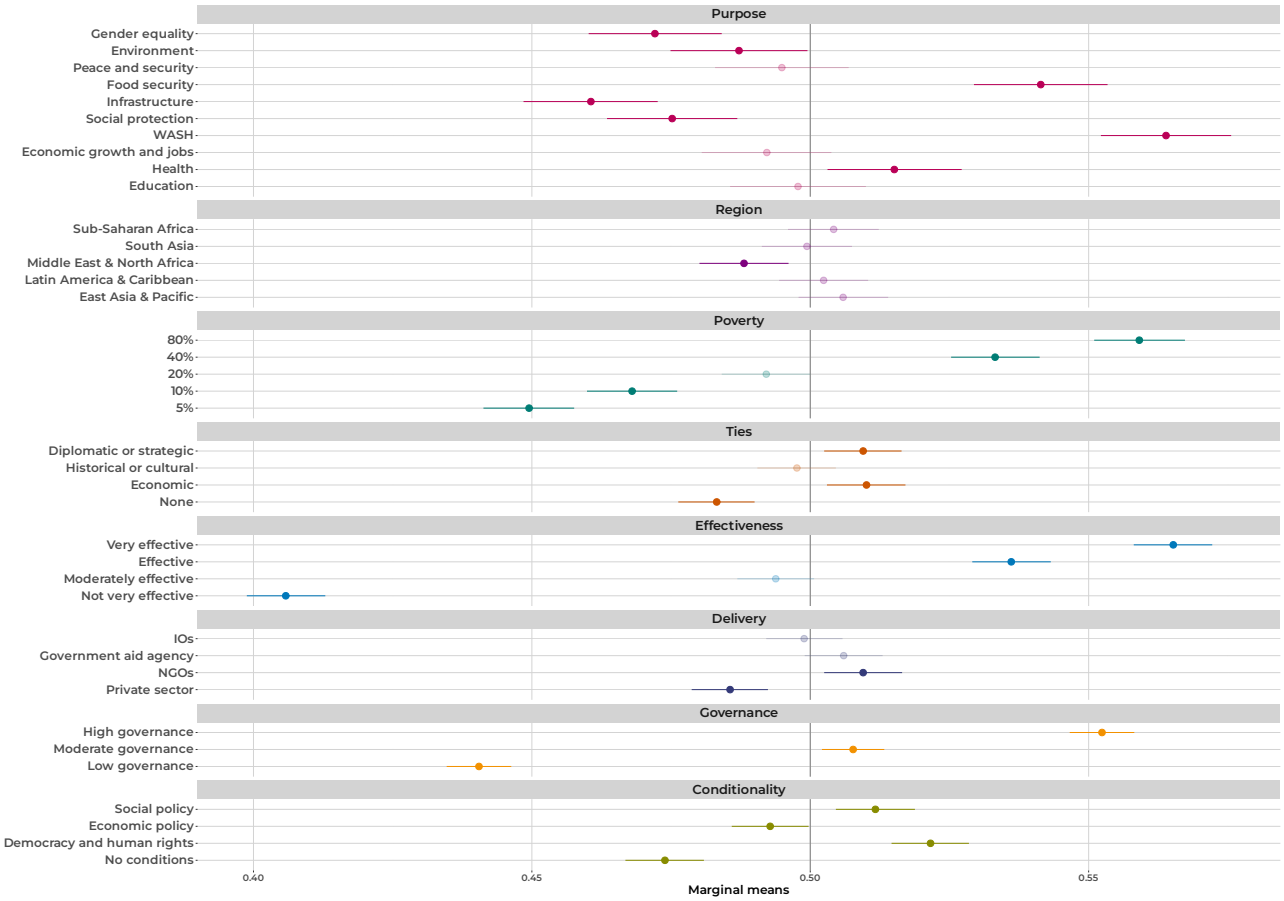

Figure 2: Effects of attributes on probability of support - full set of attributes

Notes: This plot shows estimates the marginal means of the randomly assigned attributes. We report confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to attain nationally representative estimates. The horizontal bar represents 0.5 probability of being selected.

Country-level results Figure 3 reports the marginal means broken down by respondents' countries, focussing on the results of the full profile conjoint, highlighting any substantively significant difference from the reduced-profile conjoint if substantively significant. Figure A.4 in the Appendix shows marginal means for the reduced profile. Our analysis shows that the main results are consistent when we consider the four countries separately. Similarly, higher efficacy project, targeting countries with high levels of governance are also consistently more likely to be chosen. Support for effectiveness exhibits a pronounced and monotonic increase as aid packages report high levels of effectiveness. We find some degree of variation across countries which is worth discussing here.

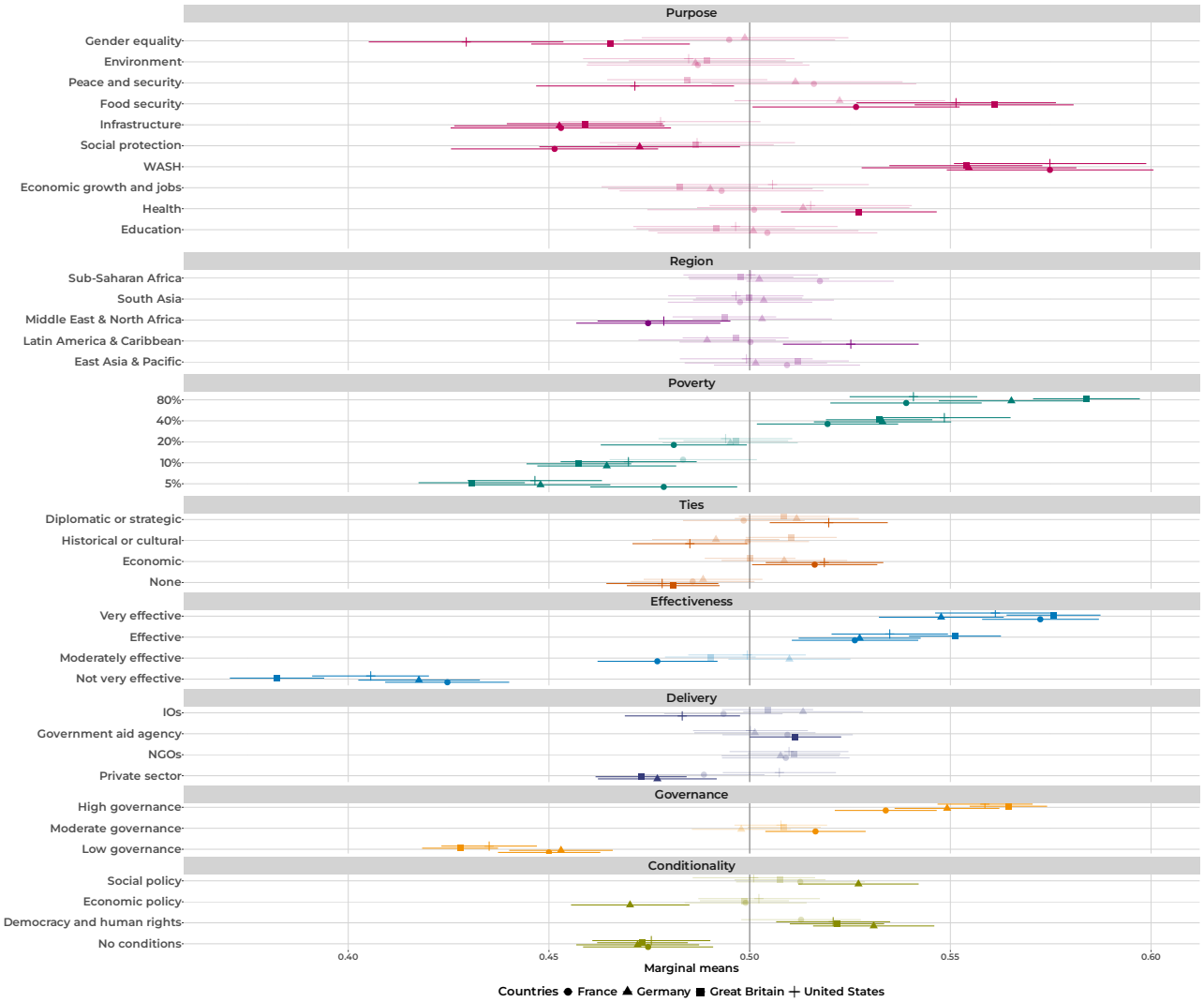

Figure 3: Effects of attributes on probability of support - country results.

Notes: This plot shows estimates of the marginal means of randomly assigned foreign aid project characteristics, broken down by country. The plot reports the estimates for the full profile conjoint. Estimates are based on the benchmark OLS model reported in the Appendix. We report confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to attain nationally representative estimates. The horizontal bar represents 0.5 probability of being selected.

First, when it comes to project goals we find notable differences in preferences for interventions promoting economic growth and jobs between respondents in the U.S. and those in European countries.

Secondly, looking at recipient countries' regions, U.S. respondents are more likely to choose projects for countries in the neighbouring region of Latin America and the Caribbean.

U.S. respondents, together with French respondents are also less likely to support projects aimed at countries in the Middle East and North Africa, driving the significant overall effect we reported in the previous section.

When it comes to country ties, U.S. respondents stand out once more, with a significant effect for historical or cultural level ties, compared to no significance for the other countries. The weak or null effects for Britain and France are especially interesting, given their extensive colonial histories, with our results offering perhaps a more tempered assessment of the importance of these factors in shaping foreign aid allocations (Afonso and Negash, 2024). On the other hand, French and U.S. respondents are more likely to pick projects for countries with which they share either economic or diplomatic ties.

5.2 Split sample analysis

Figure 4 shows the results of the split sample analysis. Here, we analyse support for aid projects in a conjoint profile excluding project effectiveness and levels of poverty. Comparing results from the full profile and the reduced profile approach, we find that project effectiveness and levels of poverty play an important role in shaping public preferences for different aid projects, as shown by the sizeable effects we estimated and discussed in the previous section. However, in our analysis, we obtained similar marginal means for four of the six remaining features, once these two attributes are excluded.

Although, in general, marginal means for those who receive the reduced profile conjoint are slightly higher, once compared to estimates from those receiving the full profile conjoint, these differences tend to be not statistically significant. Across both full and reduced profiles, respondents are more likely to choose projects addressing basic needs (WASH, food, health), favouring countries with good governance, delivery through NGOs, with some degree of conditionality around democracy and human rights, and social policy.

We still observe some notable differences in a set of attributes. Some of the largest differences concern the importance of regions. In the full conjoint profile, projects in Sub-Saharan Africa are significantly more likely to be chosen (no significant effect in full profile approach), and projects in South Asia are significantly less likely to be chosen (also no significant effect in full profile approach). On the other hand, in the reduced profile, we do not observe a significant negative effect for projects carried out in the Middle East and North

Africa.

Secondly, we find that respondents are significantly more inclined to impose conditionalities on foreign aid projects once effectiveness and level of extreme poverty are excluded. Respondents receiving the reduced profile conjoint are less likely to back aid projects without conditionality, and more likely to choose projects that impose promotion and compliance of democracy and human rights, compared to those receiving the full conjoint profile.[9]

Thirdly, we find varying effects for existing ties as well. Historical and cultural ties have positive effects on respondents' choices in the reduced design (no significant effect in the full profile sample), while diplomatic ties lose their significant positive effect. Finally, looking at goals, projects pursuing goals around economic growth are less likely to be chosen in the reduced profile approach (no significant effect in the full profile approach).

These findings tell us that respondents' choices in the reduced profile approach still seek to recover, noisy signals on levels of need using other attributes, such as region, and noisy signals on project effectiveness using other attributes, including levels of governance. Moreover, respondents also appear more inclined to support countries with whom they share historical, cultural, and economic ties, rather than supporting countries where there is no clear signal of need or significant returns to foreign aid redistribution.

[9]Marginal means for "No conditions" for the full conjoint profile: 0.473 and 0.457 for the reduced sample conjoint; Marginal means for "Democracy and Human Rights" for full conjoint profile: 0.521 and 0.539 for the reduced profile conjoint.

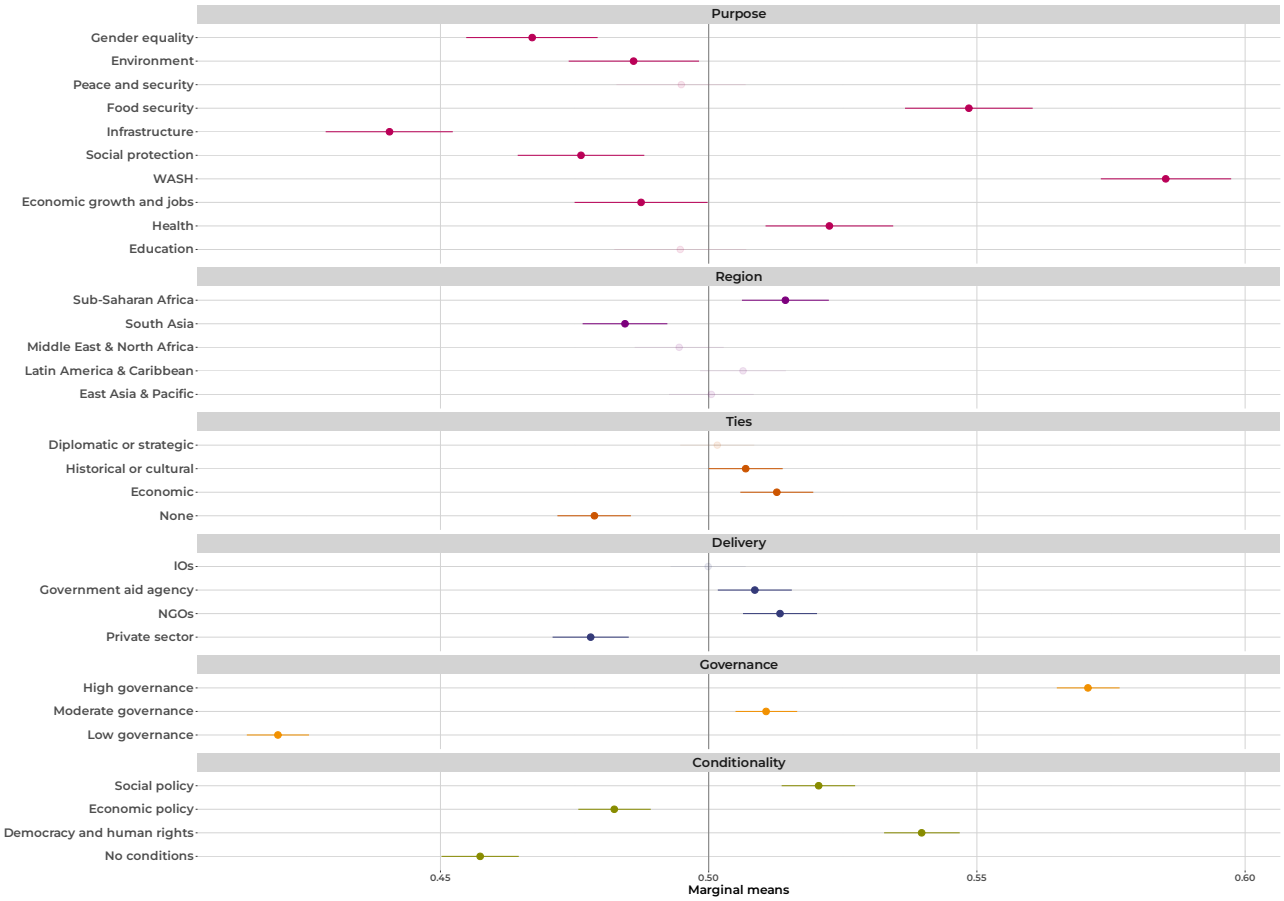

Figure 4: Effects of attributes on probability of support- reduced profile.

Notes: This plot shows estimates of the marginal means of the randomly assigned attributes. We excluded two attributes for this sample: Poverty and Effectiveness. We report confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to attain nationally representative estimates. The horizontal bar represents 0.5 probability of being selected.

5.3 Subgroup Analysis by Aid Support

Figure 5 shows how the full profile conjoint effects vary by levels of support for aid. The corresponding results for the reduced profile sample are reported in Figure A.3 Appendix. Focusing on the k-means clustering approach, we find that existing levels of support for aid are a significant factor shaping aid project choices.

For most attributes, including notably goals, levels of poverty, and effectiveness, aid supporters ([-1.239, -0.202]) show larger marginal effects compared to sceptics ([-3.258, -1.239]). Taking the entire spectrum of the latent trait of support for foreign aid, we find

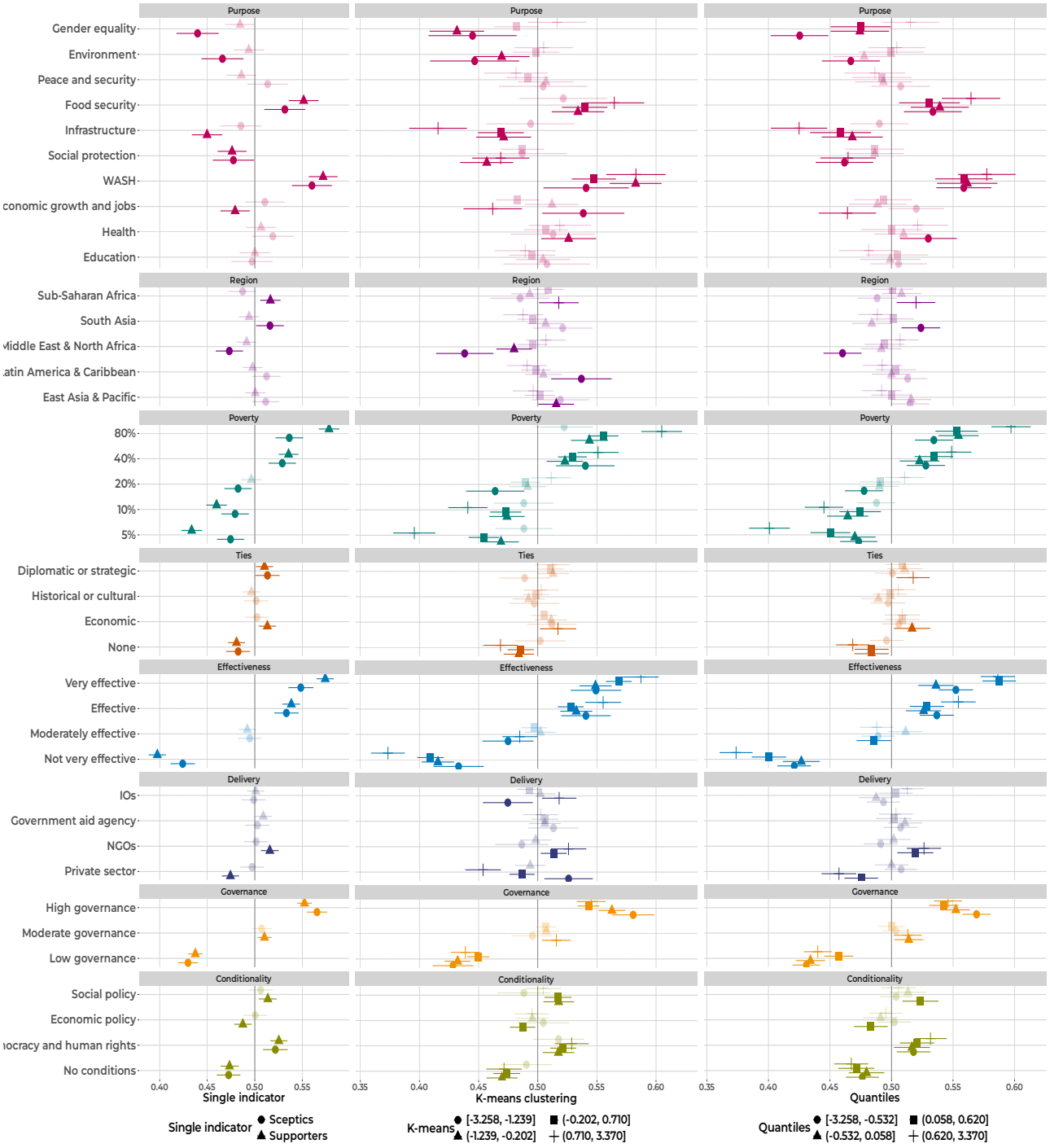

Figure 5: Effects of attributes on probability of support by levels of support for foreign aid.

Notes: This figure shows estimated marginal means for supporters and sceptics of foreign aid. We examine heterogeneity using three approaches: (1) a binary indicator based on willingness to maintain or increase aid spending (left panel); (2) k-means clusters of respondents' latent support (middle panel); and (3) quartiles of the same latent trait (right panel). Estimates are weighted and include 95% confidence intervals with respondent-clustered standard errors. The horizontal line marks a 0.5 selection probability.

that respondents with higher scores on this trait are particularly sensitive to poverty levels and the effectiveness of aid initiatives.[10] Their propensity to endorse aid packages increases monotonically and sharply as aid initiatives report either targeting countries with extreme levels of poverty or achieving higher levels of effectiveness.

Looking across attributes, we find both commonalities and differences for supporters and sceptics. Supporters and sceptics are both likely to pick projects addressing WASH goals, with high effectiveness, targeting countries with high levels of governance, and with higher levels (40%) of extreme poverty. Differences emerge when it comes to regions, delivery channels, and conditionality.

First, strong sceptics punish all projects targeting countries in the Middle East and North Africa, instead rewarding countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. For strong supporters, the effects are much more muted, and often not statistically significant. It is important to note that these specific trends may be related to individual countries' trends, rather than common trends across all countries, which we will discuss in greater detail in the next section.

Second, regarding delivery channels, there is a stark contrast in preferences between highly supporters and highly sceptical respondents. Strong supporters tend to favour projects implemented by international organisations and NGOs, and they are significantly less likely to choose projects delivered by the private sector. In contrast, highly sceptical individuals are much more inclined to prefer projects delivered by the private sector than to support those carried out by international organisations.

Third, regarding conditionality, we find no significant effects of highly sceptics across any of the attribute levels, indicating their choices are not sensitive to these characteristics. We instead find significant effects for weaker sceptics and supporters, who are more likely to pick projects imposing conditions on democracy, human rights, and social policy. At all other levels of support, however, respondents are less likely to support unconditional aid projects. To further exploit the granularity of our data, we complement this analysis by reporting heterogeneity using Bayesian Additive Regression Trees in Section A.3 in the Appendix.

[10]Figure A.2, we report the density functions for each country for the full profile and reduced profile samples.

5.4 Attributes Interactions

Figure 6 reports the *Average Component Interaction Effect* (ACIE) obtained by interacting conditionality with governance and effectiveness. The results on aid conditionality, dependent on the levels of aid projects' governance, overwhelmingly show that across different levels of governance, the probability of choosing an aid package with some type of conditionality is higher than for aid projects with no strings attached. However, contrary to our expectations that the likelihood of preferring aid programmes with conditionality would be higher for low governance contexts, we see that there are no statistically significant differences between governance levels (low, medium, or high).

The right panel on Figure 6 shows that for different levels of aid effectiveness, the probability of choosing a project with conditionalities criteria around *democracy and human rights* and *social policy* are significantly higher than for aid packages with no conditionality. As in the previous case, when we compare these probabilities for different levels of effectiveness, these are nearly identical, suggesting that respondents do not consider conditionalities as a mechanism to offset poorly performing aid packages.

Several explanations may account for these findings. Respondents may place a significantly higher weight on other attributes, such as purpose or governance, thereby disregarding or discounting the conditionality attribute. Attributes such as levels of poverty and region, which may serve as signals of need intensity (to the point of urgency), can significantly influence respondents' support for aid projects, potentially overriding concerns about conditionalities, which may be perceived as bureaucratic hurdles or sources of delay. Respondents may doubt the enforceability of such conditions (Scholl, 2009) and their country's capacity to monitor compliance with such provisions. They may also perceive the inclusion of conditionalities as infringing on recipient countries' sovereignty and self-determination (Collier et al., 1997). Some respondents may believe that attaching conditions contributes to reducing aid effectiveness either by increasing compliance costs, delaying disbursement, or overstretching recipient states' administrative capacity (Shah, 2018).

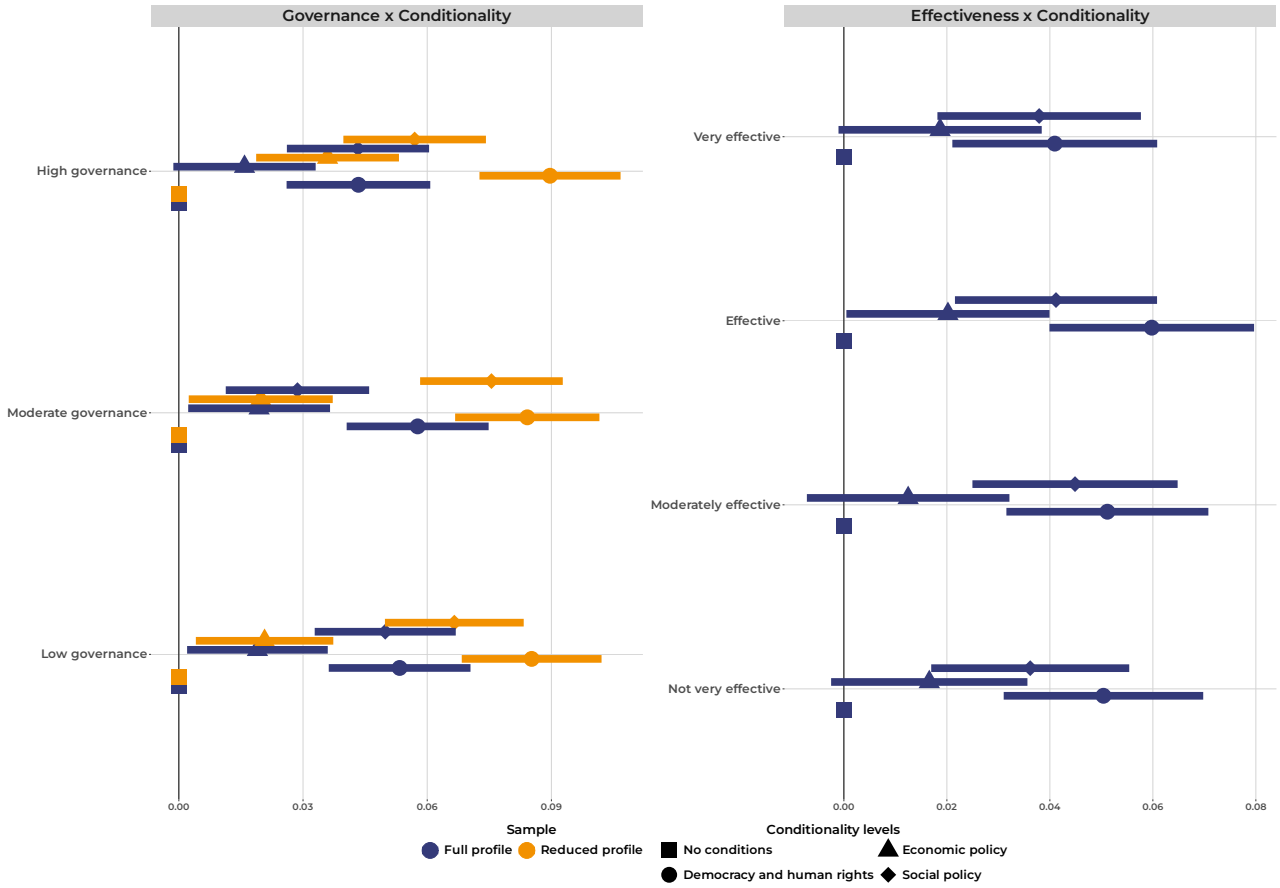

Figure 6: Attributes interactions.

Notes: This figure shows the *Average Component Interaction Effect* from interactions between Governance and Conditionality (Left panel) and Effectiveness and Conditionality (Right panel). Estimates capture the propensity to select a project with a certain level of conditionality, given the level of Governance or Effectiveness. We constructed confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to be nationally representative. The horizontal vertical line at 0 represents the benchmark category.

6 Conclusion

Our results align with the previous literature that foreign aid project characteristics can affect people's support of these projects (Doherty et al., 2020). We find that respondents in the four donor countries are most supportive of projects where aid is focused on basic necessities – WASH, health, and food security. We contend that this finding is consistent with Maslow (1954)'s hierarchy of needs theory. Respondents in donor countries may have subjective

beliefs that poor countries are in a continuous and deep-rooted state of need for basics, so policy areas around WASH, health, and food security would address these issues. The magnitude of the marginal means is in line with the level of priority of these needs within their ranked structure, finding more pronounced effects for basic needs.

There is considerably less support for projects that target infrastructure, gender equality, social protection, and the environment. One argument that would explain the lower level of support for these issues is that respondents may regard issues as secondary issues that developing countries may not need to address in the short-term. Alternatively, people may be engaging in a cost-benefit calculation, where they place long-term welfare gains to these areas, but these gains are significantly discounted as they are expected to realize in the future. This stands in contrast to WASH, health, and food security which may be seen as immediate and visible policy areas that should yield short-term undiscounted welfare gains (Czaplińska, 2007).

The literature also shows that people are more likely to support foreign aid to countries that share the same language and are geographically close (Afonso and Negash, 2024; Cashel-Cordo and Craig, 1997). Looking at both group analyses, we do not observe strong preferences in selecting aid projects targeted to a specific region in the world. However, we observe that the public in general is averse to supporting projects in the Middle East and North Africa. This attribute also provides a cue of recipients' race, ethnicity, and/or religious background. As Baker (2015) points out, preferences for supporting different racial/ethnic groups are shaped not only by the recipient's race/ethnicity and their level of need, but also by donors' beliefs of recipients' level of agency over their state of deprivation. Furthermore, there is evidence that aid appeals that emphasise out-group characteristics such as names, race, ethnicity, and religion tend to obtain fewer charitable donations versus more universalistic aid appeals that focus on the recipient's need (Linos et al., 2021).

However, it is difficult to disentangle what is driving the low levels of support for the Middle East and North Africa. We suggest it may be that respondents consider the Middle East and Northern Africa "out-group members" as our sample is predominantly white Christians, or alternatively that respondents view the Middle East as relatively better off and therefore less deserving of aid. Geographical proximity does not seem to enter respondents' calculus, as regions such as South Asia and Latin America attain higher marginal means

than this region. It is worth pointing out that these results are mainly driven by our samples in the United States and France, where the propensity to support projects in this area are the lowest (see Figures A3 and A4). This could be explained by the emergence of Islamophobic sentiment which has been more prominent and vocal is some countries (Valfort, 2018). Furthermore, our result aligns with Doherty et al.'s (2020) findings for the case of the U.S., where Americans are generally less likely to support projects in this region.

Surprisingly, our findings would suggest that historical legacies with former colonies does not influence foreign aid preferences. As we observe in the case of France and Great Britain, historical ties bear no weight in the propensity of supporting projects that include this characteristic. Furthermore, we find null or negative levels of support for projects in North Africa, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. There is evidence that the poverty levels in recipient countries is an important factor influencing donor governments' strategic foreign aid allocation (especially for Scandinavian countries, see (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Hurst et al., 2017; Theresa Heinrich et al., 2016)). Our results show that need is also a consideration for donor publics: they are significantly more supportive of aid projects allocated in a country with substantially high levels of extreme poverty (above 40%). While our design does not allow us to identify the reasoning underpinning need as a key attribute for our sample, evidence shows that both prudential and moral considerations may drive these results (van Heerde & Hudson 2010). Donor country governments also weigh the effectiveness of aid in their strategic foreign aid allocations (Milner and Tingley, 2013). In the case of donor publics, we observe effectiveness is an important feature when deciding which foreign aid project to support. This attribute attains the highest marginal marginals means for very effective and effective levels and produces the lowest estimate for not very effective level, across all attributes and levels.

One relatively unexplored feature is the public's preference on which actors should be responsible for delivering foreign aid projects. Citizens' preferences over which institution(s) should deliver foreign aid can be explained by how individuals balance sharing the burden of the costs of foreign assistance versus their concerns over control of foreign aid policy by their governments (Bayram and Graham, 2022). Our study identified that the public is less favourable to projects delivered by the private sector and marginally more favourable to projects implemented by NGOs. However, there is some heterogeneity in this attribute by country (see Figures 2 and A.4 in the Appendix).

Overall, our findings demonstrate that donor publics have identifiable preferences for aid projects. Individuals care a great deal about helping the most deprived, support projects that will ensure access to primary needs, and where aid is seen to be effective. Using our split sample design, we show that these results are consistent across our two groups, with few exceptions. We also find differences in latent support for foreign aid, with highly sceptical respondents less likely to support aid projects addressing gender equality and the environment. Given the centrality of feminist development policy and climate policies to the success of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda, policymakers must contend with a divided public in building and maintaining support for foreign aid.

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Appendix: Public Support for Foreign Aid: The Role of Development Project Characteristics

October 23, 2025

A.1 Average Marginal Component Effect

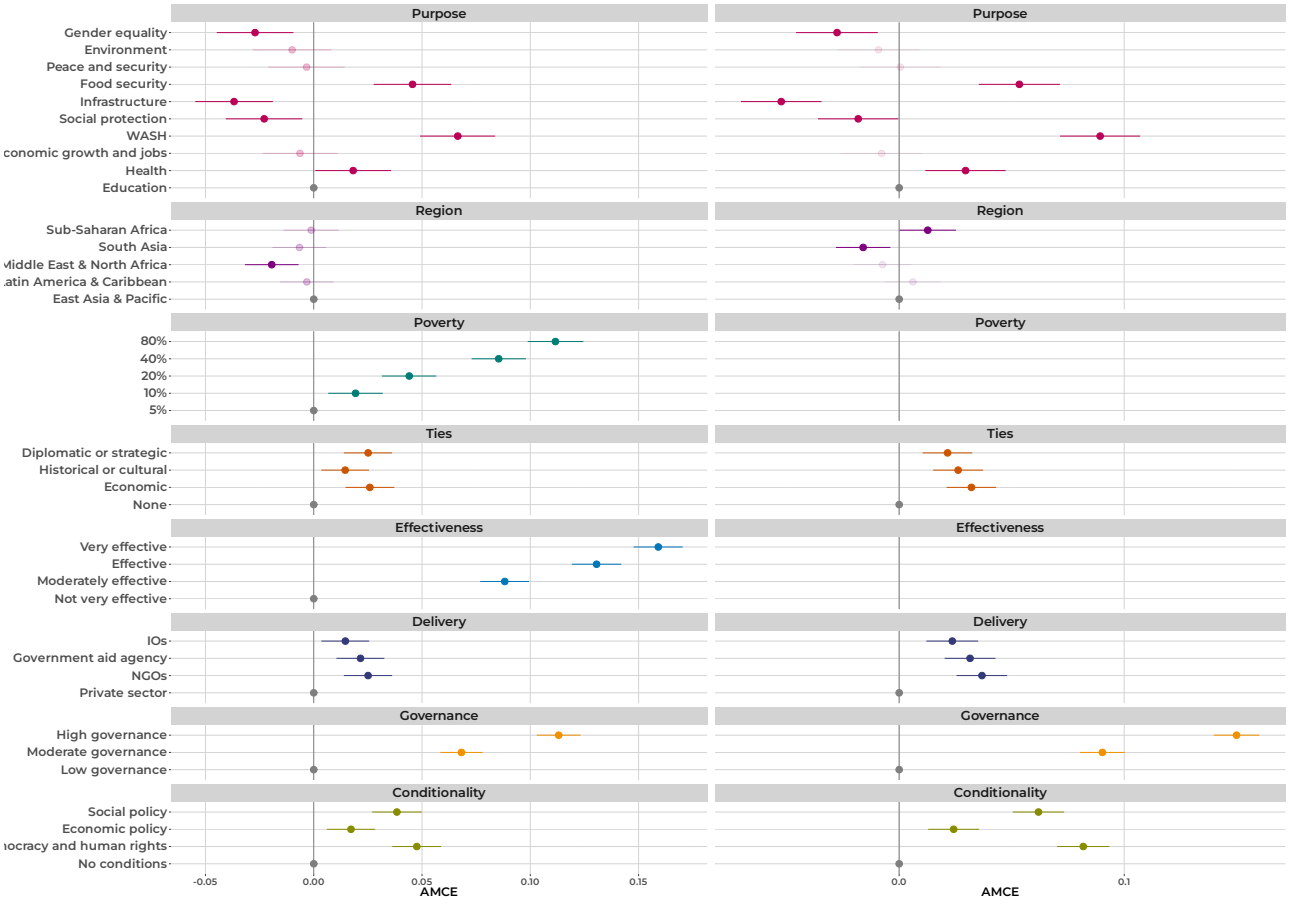

Figure A.1: Average marginal component effects for full and reduced profile samples

Notes: This plot shows estimates the AMCEs of the randomly assigned attributes for the full (left) and reduced (right) profiles. We report confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to attain nationally representative estimates.

A.2 Hierarchical Item Response Model to Measure Respondent's Latent Traits

To estimate respondents' latent support for foreign aid and sustainable development, we employed Hierarchical Item Response Theory. This approach addresses some limitations of conventional dimension reduction techniques, such as evenly spaced response categories on the latent continuum, allows items to carry different weights, and can easily accommodate a mixture of binary, ordinal, and nominal response data. Furthermore, Hierarchical IRT also eliminates the two-stage process of first computing individuals' latent traits and then performing subgroup analysis based on respondents' characteristics. Moreover, Hierarchical IRT outperforms other dimension reduction approaches in terms of bias, accuracy, and coverage (Zhou, 2019). Table A.1 lists the items included in this analysis. Figure 5 in the main manuscript reports the subgroup analysis for the full profile sample, while Figure A.3 presents the corresponding results for the reduced profile sample. Figure A.2 shows the distribution of respondents' latent trait for all countries and both samples.

Table A.1: Items included in the Hierarchical IRT

Variable ID	Question wording	Response categories
General attitudes		
track5_w4	Which best describes how you feel about levels of poverty in poor countries?	6
track6_w4	Please indicate the extent to which you think that the UK government should give overseas aid, where a score of	11
track7_w4	Do you think that the government should increase or decrease the amount of money that it spends on over	6
track9_w4	Overall, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'Very ineffective' and 10 means 'Very effective,' how effective do you think government spending on overseas aid is?	11
erad_w4	Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement. Extreme poverty will be eradicated for all people everywhere by the year 2030.	6
Costs and benefits		
ben1_w4_1	Overseas aid to poor countries strengthens Britain's political influence in the world.	6
ben1_w4_2	Providing overseas aid really helps to promote Britain's national security.	6
ben1_w4_3	Overseas aid improves people's lives by providing access to education, healthcare, clean water, and sanitation.	6
ben1_w4_4	Overseas aid increases economic growth in poor countries.	6
cost1_w4_1	Most overseas aid does not get to the intended recipients.	6
cost1_w4_2	A lot of overseas aid from the UK ends up in the pockets of corrupt politicians in the developing world.	6
cost1_w4_3	Most overseas aid is spent on programmes that don't help reduce poverty.	6
cost1_w4_4	The UK cannot afford to give overseas aid.	6
cost5_w4	Using a scale where 0 means 'Overseas aid makes countries too dependent on charity' and 10 means 'Overseas aid helps countries become self-sufficient'	11
Cosmopolitan views		
cos1_w4_1	What happens to people in other countries makes a difference to my life.	6
cos1_w4_2	I have a duty to ensure that my actions do not harm people living in other countries.	6
cos1_w4_3	I enjoy visiting other countries and learning about other cultures.	6
cos1_w4_4	I have very little in common with people living in other countries.	6

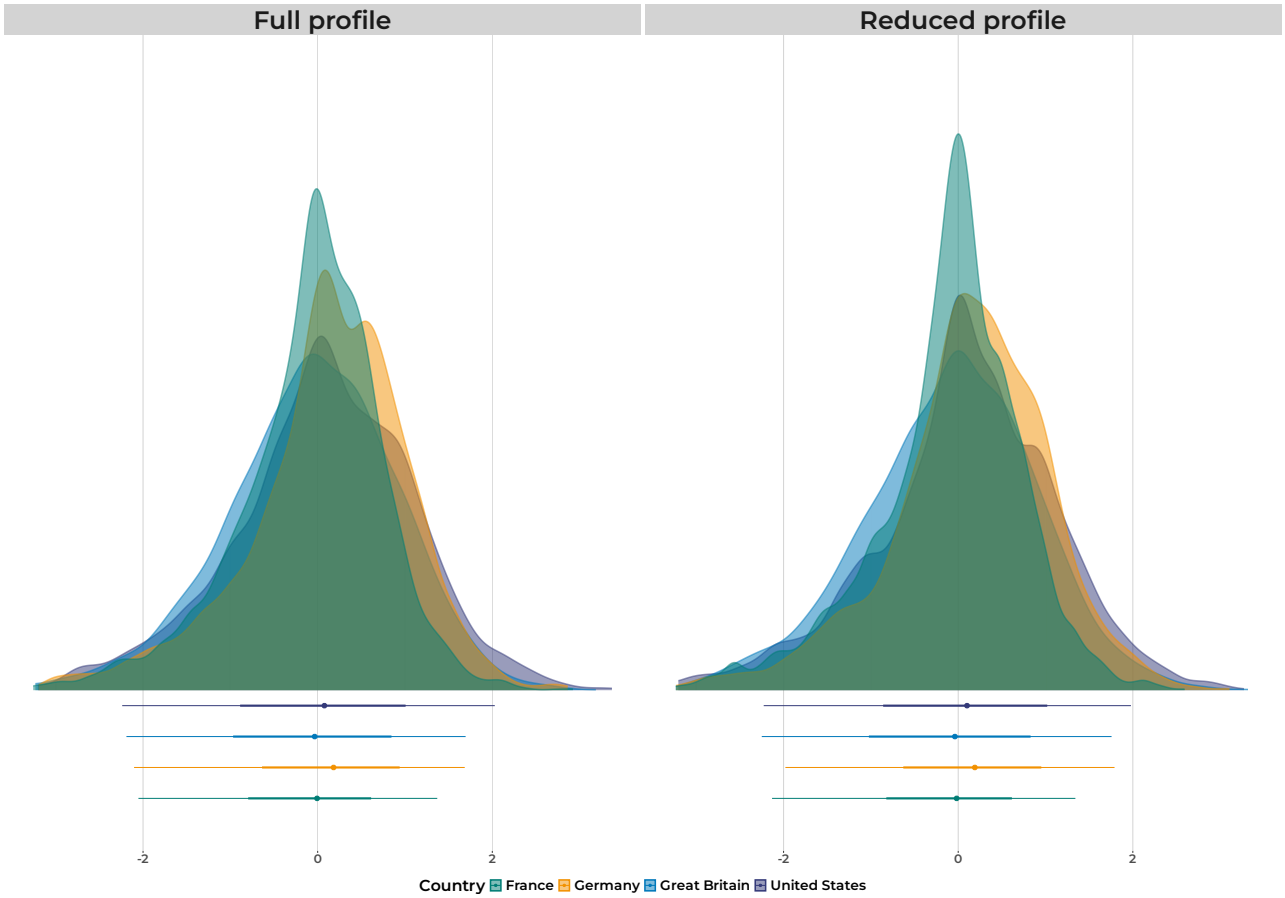

Figure A.2: Distribution latent trait using Hierarchical Item Response Model.

Notes: This Figure reports the distribution of the latent trait for support for foreign aid. We partition the samples by country and by sample. Latent traits were estimated using Hierarchical Bayesian Item Response using items reported in Table A.1. The plot on the left shows the distribution for the Full profile sample, whereas the plot on the right shows the distribution for the Reduced profile sample.

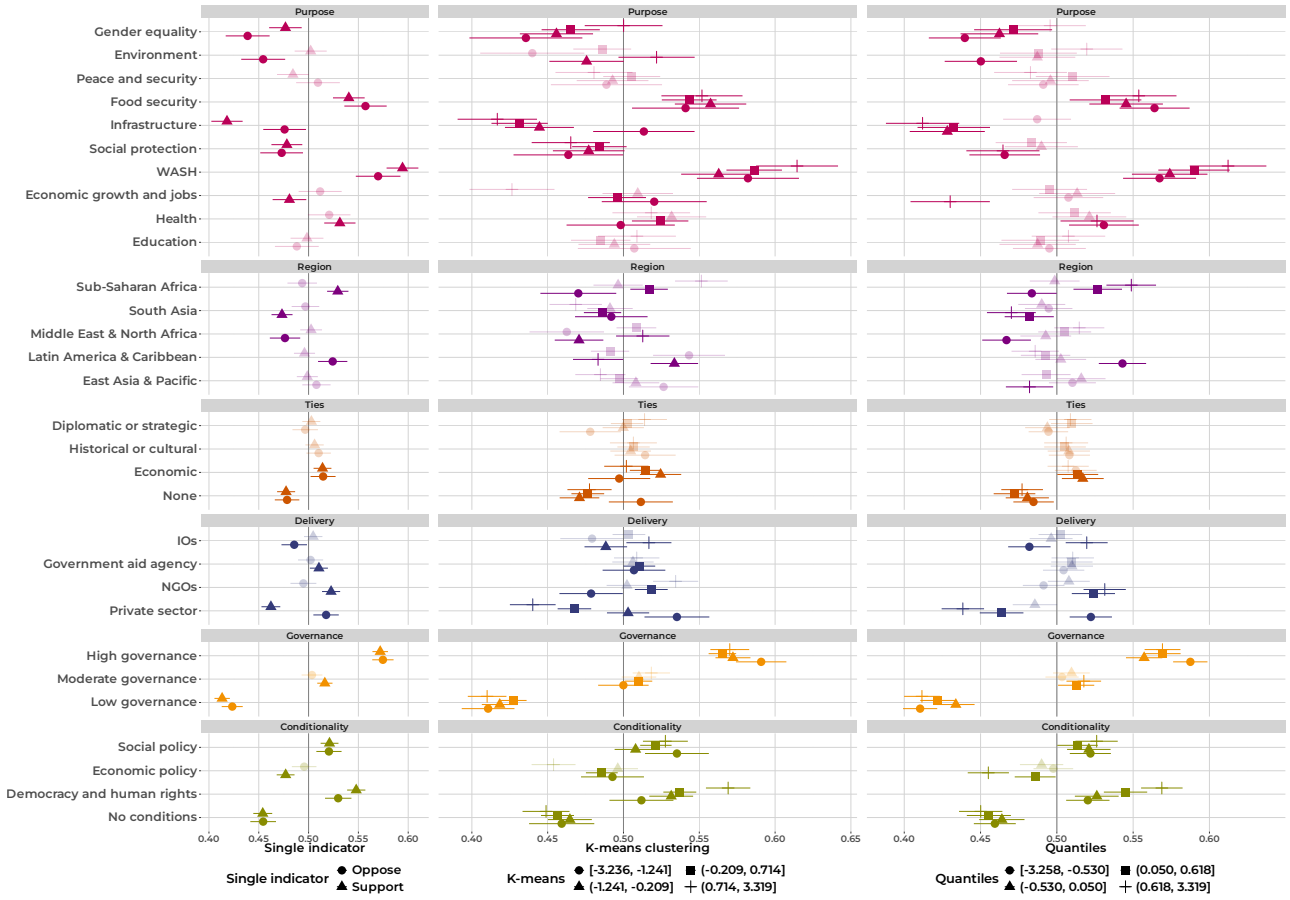

Figure A.3: Effects of attributes on probability of support by levels of support for foreign aid - reduced profile sample

Notes: This figure reports the estimated marginal means between supporters and sceptics of foreign aid for the reduced profile sample. We use three complementary approaches to explore heterogeneity across these groups. First, we construct a binary indicator from a single question measuring willingness to maintain or increase foreign aid expenditure in the national budget. Respondents who answered "maintain" or "increase" are classified as *Supporters*, while those favouring a decrease are classified as *Sceptics*. Results from this two-group comparison are displayed in the left-hand panel. The middle and right-hand panels use respondents' latent trait of support for foreign aid. In the middle panel, we group individuals via k-means clustering, whereas in the right panel, we divide them into quartiles. In all three panels, we report confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to attain nationally representative estimates. The horizontal bar represents 0.5 probability of being selected.

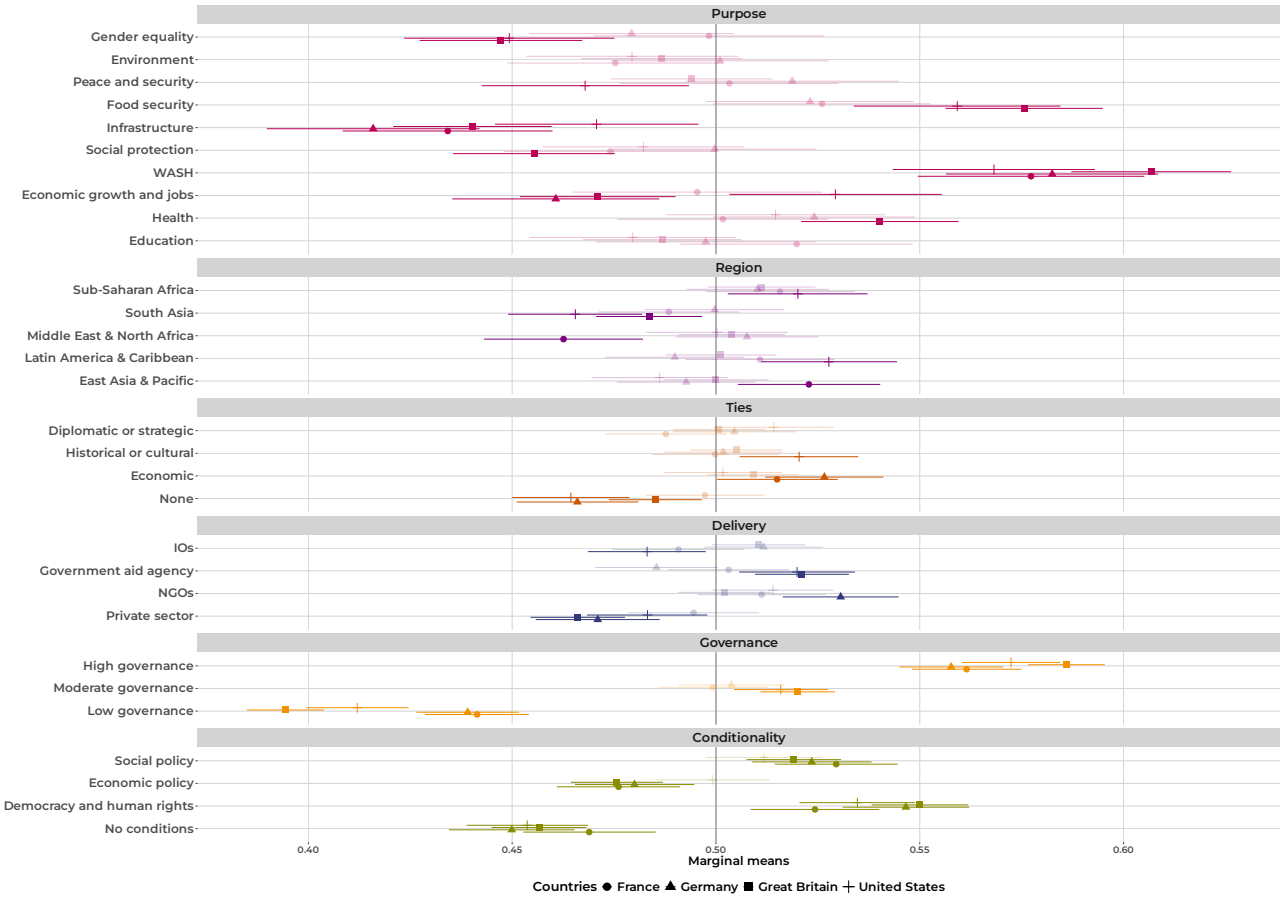

Figure A.4: Effects of attributes on probability of support - country results reduced-profile.

Notes: Note: This plot shows estimates of the marginal means of randomly assigned foreign aid project characteristics, broken down by country. The plot reports the estimates for the reduced profile conjoint. Estimates are based on the benchmark OLS model reported in the appendix. We report confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to attain nationally representative estimates. The horizontal bar represents 0.5 probability of being selected.

A.3 Bayesian Additive Regression Trees

Heterogeneity using BART. We extended our heterogeneous treatment effects analysis using *Bayesian Additive Regression Trees*, which identify heterogeneity using multiple non-linear functional forms. BART has multiple benefits when exploring heterogeneity: 1) It eliminates the researcher's degrees of freedom of choosing ad hoc model specification or sub-group analyses to obtain significant findings, 2) it reduces the chances of obtaining type-I errors by conducting multiple sub-group analyses. 3) It yields *individual-level marginal effect* (IMCE)

that allows comparing the magnitude and direction of these predicted individual-level estimates using relevant moderators (Zhirkov, 2022; Robinson and Duch, 2024).

Our preferred metric for exploring IMCEs is through the latent trait partitioned utilising K-means clustering. We investigate estimates where the marginal means show borderline significance to determine if a specific group influences these effects. The graphs at the top display the IMCEs sorted in ascending order, while the plots at the bottom illustrate the distribution of IMCEs across the various K-means groups. For the ”Health” attribute/level, across all IMCE values, the proportions of respondents from each group are relatively similar. For the 'Economics' ties attribute/level, we observe that respondents with higher scores on the underlying trait are more likely to express strong support. For the ”Democracy and human rights” conditionality, we observed a sharp increase in the level of support, predominantly driven by respondents with the highest scores on the underlying trait ((0.710, 3.370]).

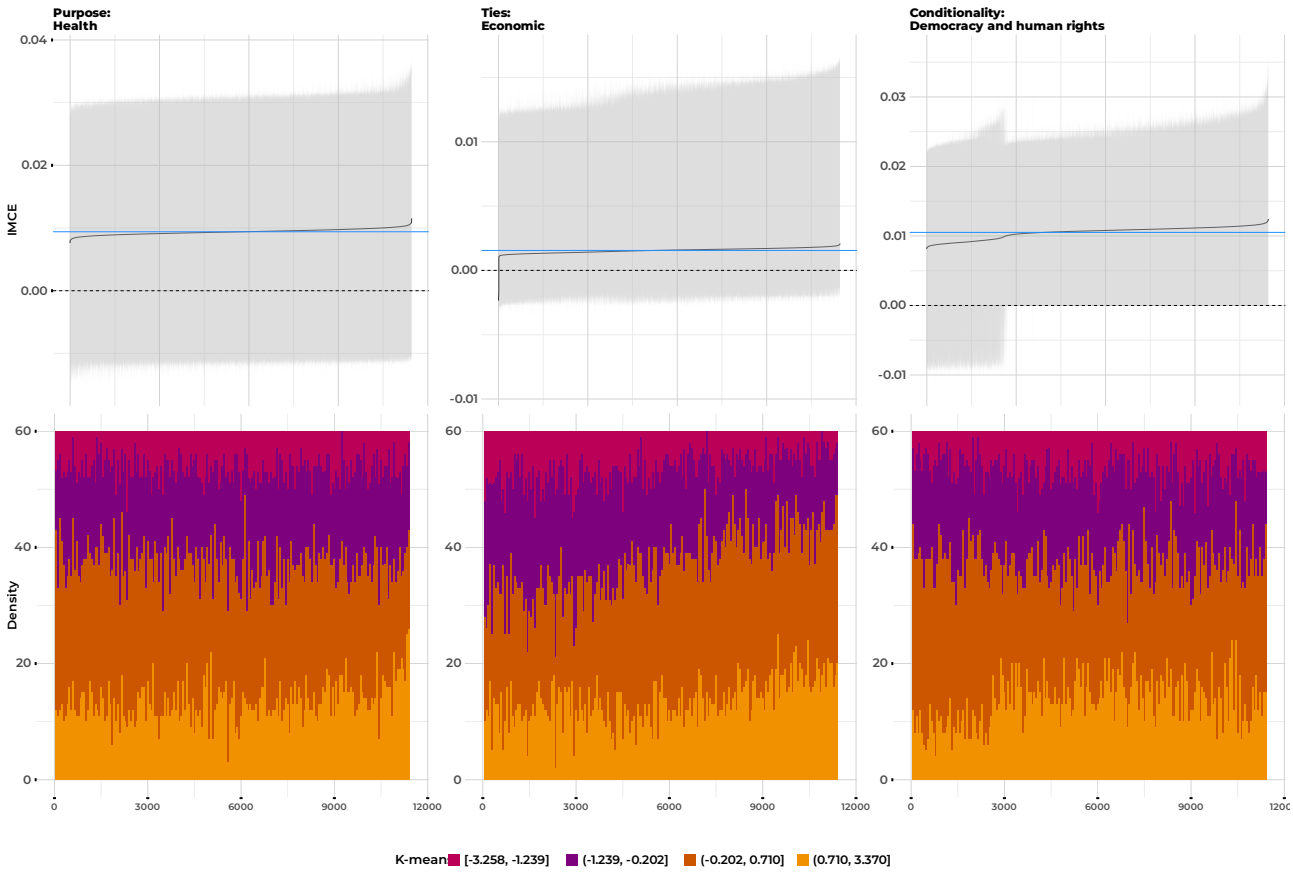

Figure A.5: Comparison of IMCEs for multiple attributes by support foreign aid.

Notes: Point estimates are reported in the top graph. The ribbon indicates 95% credible intervals for the IMCEs, and the solid blue horizontal line in the top panel indicates the estimated average AMCE. The plots at the bottom show the proportion of respondents for each group and for each estimated IMCE.

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Supplementary Material: Public Support for Foreign Aid: The Role of Development Project Characteristics

October 23, 2025

S.1 Do Citizens' Preferences Match their Government's Policies

A key policy question is whether governments' aid allocations and programme designs are congruent with citizens' preferences regarding the features of aid packages. In this section, we examine this question by providing a descriptive analysis of government aid packages over the last decades. We focus on aid disbursements from all four countries. For the conjoint estimates, we report confidence intervals using a 95% confidence level and cluster standard errors at the respondent level. Estimates are weighted to attain nationally representative estimates. The horizontal bar represents 0.5 probability of being selected.

Table S.1: Summary of Indicator by Attribute/Level

Attribute/Level	Indicator	Source
All level - Selected Attributes		
Purpose	Creditor Reporting System - Budget Identifier Sector	OECD (2025)
Region	Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions	OECD (2025)
Poverty	Share of population living in extreme poverty	World Bank (2025)
Governance	Worldwide Governance Indicators: Control of Corruption	World Bank (2024)
Conditionalities	Not explored	-
Ties		
Historical or cultural	European overseas colonies and their last colonizer	Our World in Data (2023)
Common Language	The World Factbook	CIA (2025)
Diplomatic or strategic	Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index	Lowy Institute (2024)
Economic	Import shares from recipient regions	World Bank (2025b)
None	Not explored	-
Effectiveness	Worldwide Governance Indicators: Government effectiveness	World Bank (2024)
Delivery		
Delivery	Channel of Delivery - Creditor Reporting System	OECD (2025)
International Organisations	Share of aid assistant split by multilateral or bilateral	OECD (2025)

Purpose We examine countries' earmarked ODA disbursements, following a similar categorisation used in our conjoint, with four additional categories capturing areas not included in our study. In Figure S.1, we observe considerable differences between governments' aid allocations and citizens' priority preferences. For example, the French and German governments allocate a relatively large share of funding to infrastructure, the environment, and social protection, areas that respondents in these countries are among the least likely to prioritise. A similar pattern is observed in the United Kingdom and the United States, particularly in areas such as social projects and healthcare expenditures. Nonetheless, we also find policy alignment: citizens' aid spending priorities from these two countries match their governments' aid spending priorities regarding disbursement for security.

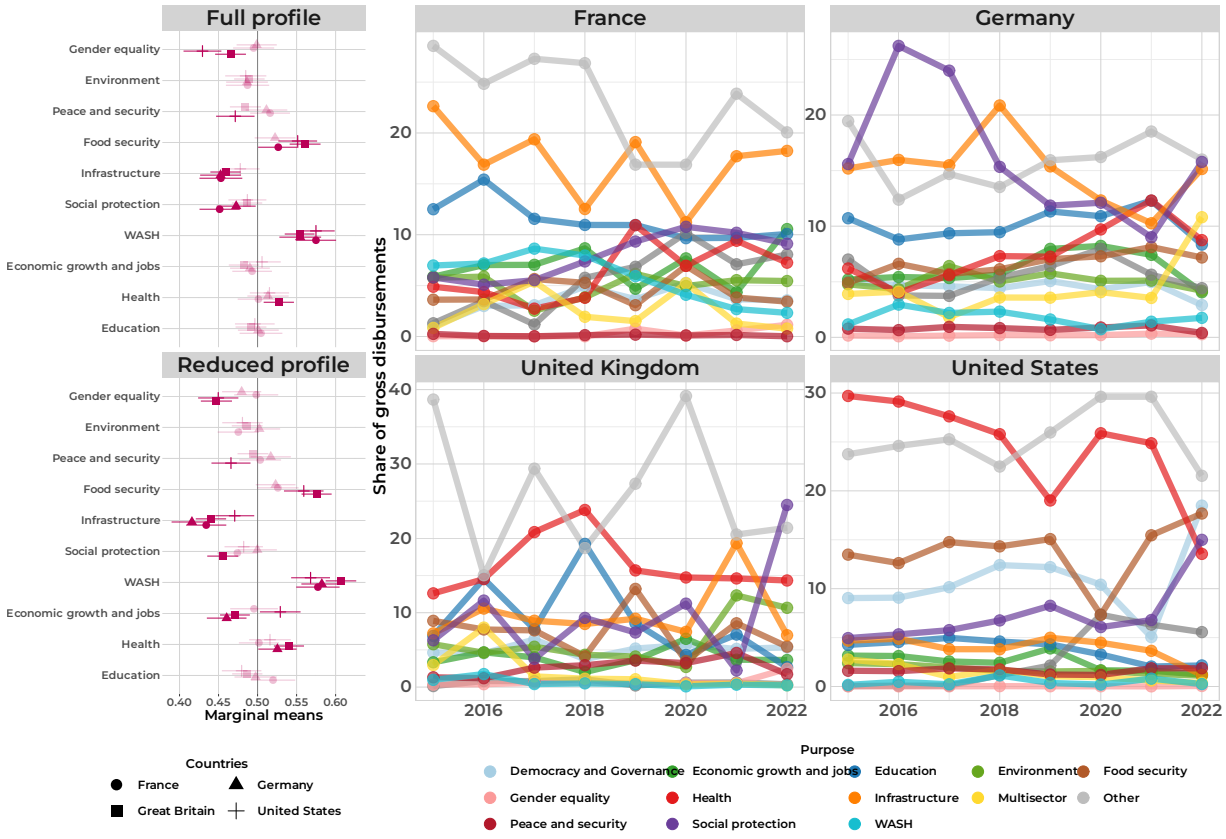

Figure S.1: Aid disbursements by levels purpose.

Notes: This figure reports the official development assistance commitments (as a share of gross disbursements) from all four donor countries, grouped by purpose of aid. The data covers 2015 to 2022. We categorised aid funds based on the 10 categories included in our conjoint experiment, plus two additional categories: *Democracy and Governance* and *Multi-sector*. Projects that were unable to categorise or did not include this information were categorised as *Other*. *Source:* Creditor Reporting System, OECD.

Region In Figure S.2, we report the share of aid disbursements allocated to countries in the five regions included in our conjoint. The results indicate that, although French and U.S. citizens offer little support for aid initiatives directed to North Africa and the Middle East, their governments allocate a significant portion of the aid funds to these regions. In the case of the U.S, as Doherty et al. (2020), point out, this result may be driven by Americans' anti-Muslim sentiment (Oskooii et al., 2021; d'Urso and Bonilla, 2023; Panagopoulos, 2006). In contrast, our findings reveal a strong alignment between American attitudes toward aid packages aimed at South American countries and the U.S.'s aid allocation to this region.

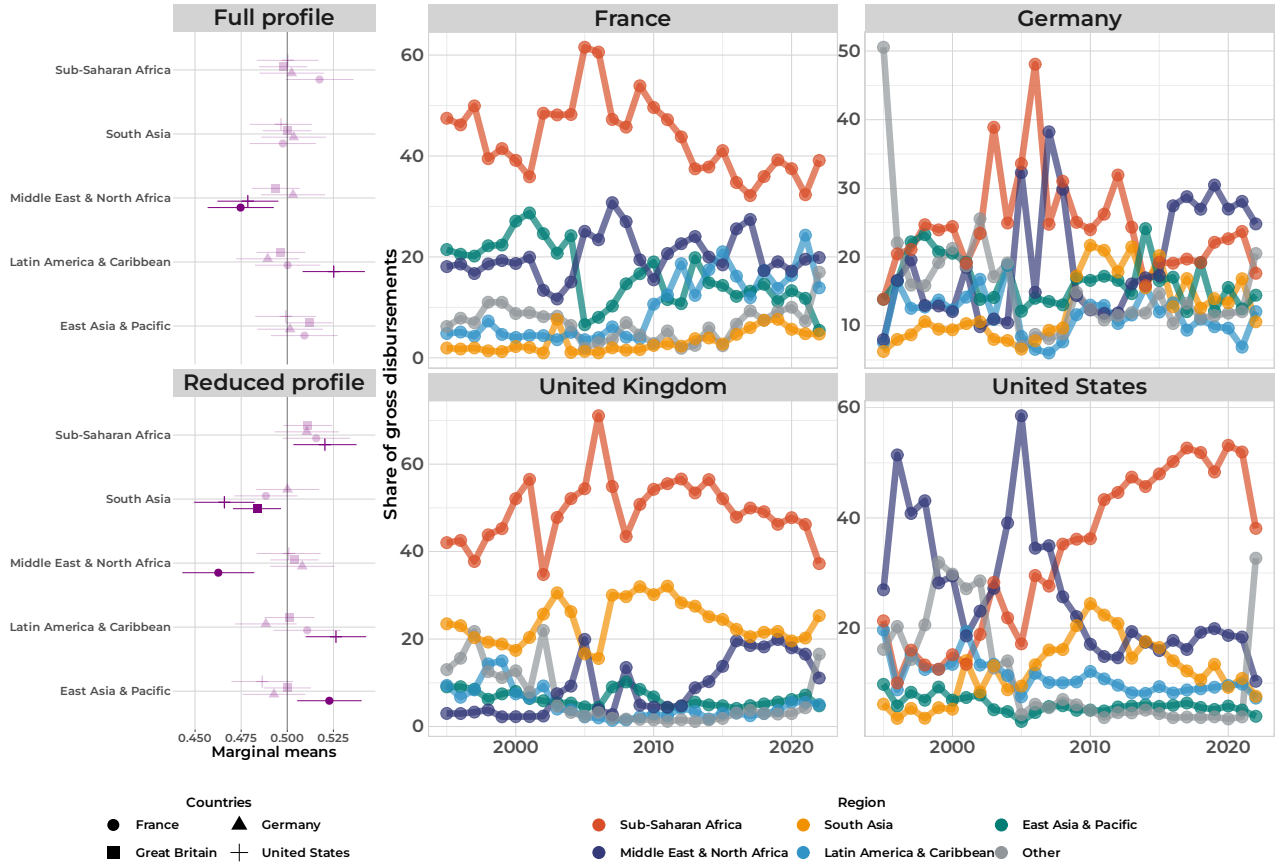

Figure S.2: Aid disbursements by recipient region.

Notes: This figure shows official development assistance (share of total gross disbursements) by four donor countries, disaggregated by aid purpose, from 2015 to 2022. Aid recipients were grouped according to the four regions included in the conjoint experiment. Countries and territories outside these regions are classified as *Other*. *Source:* Creditor Reporting System, OECD.

Governance We examine how governments allocate aid spending based on recipients' governance levels. Figure S.3 depicts the share of aid disbursements categorised by their capacity to control corruption. We used the *Control of Corruption* index, developed by the *World Governance Indicators* of the *World Bank* as our governance metric. Our findings indicate that all four countries allocate a significant portion of their aid to nations with high levels of corruption. However, this trend is likely to be driven by the fact that aid is also directed to poorer countries with low governance levels.

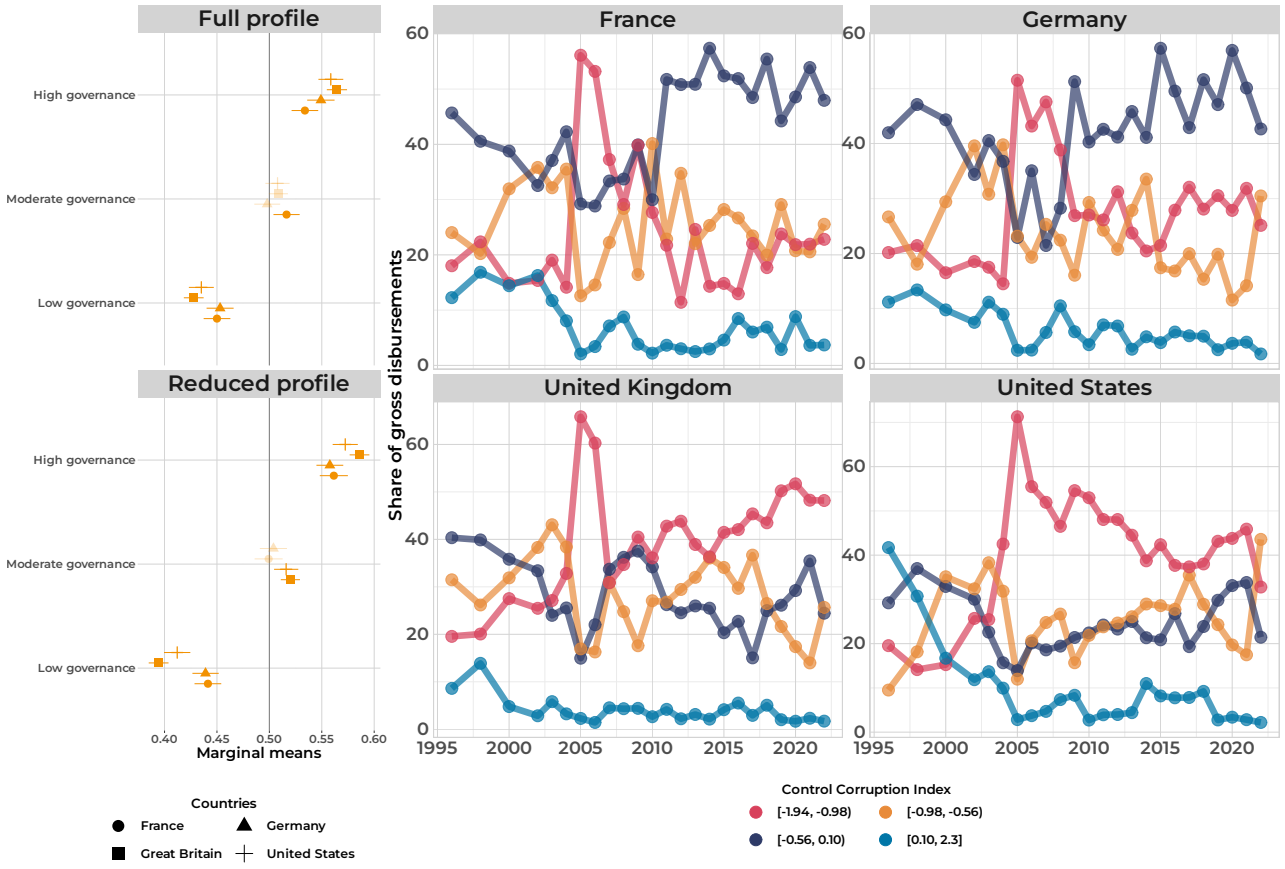

Figure S.3: Aid disbursements by recipient countries' levels of corruption.

Notes: This figure reports official development assistance (share of total gross disbursements) for all four countries from 2015 to 2022. Recipient countries are categorised in four groups based on their score on the *Government Effectiveness* index, which captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies. The values of the *Government Effectiveness* index range between -2.5 and 2.5. Higher values represent higher levels of government effectiveness. *Sources: Creditor Reporting System, OECD.* and *Worldwide Governance Indicators, World Bank.*.

Poverty Across all countries, we find that respondents strongly prefer aiding countries in severe need rather than those experiencing limited hardship. However, we find that extreme levels of poverty seem to exert only a limited influence on the government's aid allocation patterns. In Figure S.4, we present the share of aid disbursements based on the levels of extreme poverty in recipient countries. Extreme poverty is defined as the percentage of a country's population living under $3 per day. We categorise recipient countries into quartiles based on this metric. For France and Germany, we observe a trend of allocating aid to the poorest countries, as well as an upward trend in providing aid to countries with moderate levels of extreme poverty. Regarding the United States, we observe a downward trend in its aid to countries facing extreme levels of poverty. In contrast, the United Kingdom exhibits a distinct trend of allocating aid primarily to countries facing severe levels of poverty and deprivation.

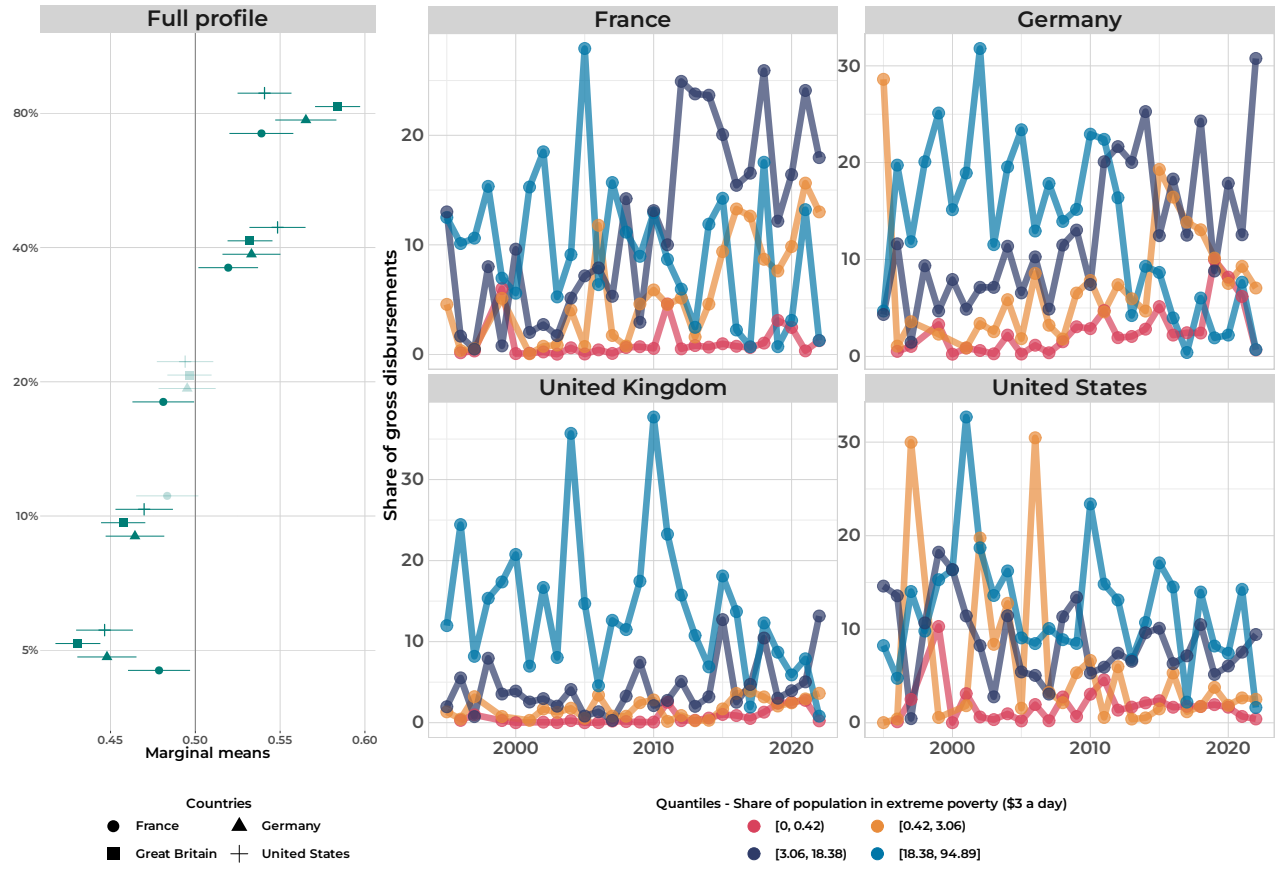

Figure S.4: Aid disbursements by share of population living in extreme poverty.

Notes: This figure reports official development assistance (share of total gross disbursements) for all four countries from 2015 to 2022. Countries are categorised in four groups (quartiles) based on the share of their population living in extreme poverty. Extreme poverty is defined as living below the International Poverty Line of $3 per day. *Sources: Creditor Reporting System, OECD* and *Poverty and Inequality Platform, World Bank*.

Ties We examine whether respondents consider their ties with recipient countries when making decisions about aid allocation. Specifically, we investigate the importance of economic, diplomatic, strategic, historical, and cultural connections. Figure S.5 reports the share of gross disbursements across the five regions included in our survey. In terms of economic ties, we focused on the proportion of imports from recipient countries. The evidence shows a consistent trend across all countries, indicating that a significant portion of aid spending is directed towards recipient countries with stronger economic ties. This policy allocation is in line with respondents' preferences from the France and the United States.

Regarding historical ties, we utilised a binary metric to assess whether the recipient coun-

try was a former colony of the donor country using data from the Our World in Data (2023) that contains information of the last coloniser. Our findings reveal distinct aid allocation strategies: France tends to favour non-former colonies, whereas Great Britain has favoured providing aid to former colonies over non-former ones, but a relatively small margin. However, we find that respondents do not put significant weight on having strong historical or cultural ties with recipient countries.

Finally, we explored whether shared cultural ties, measured by the common language between donor and recipient countries, influenced aid allocation. Our results indicate that France strongly favours aiding non-French-speaking nations, while Great Britain and the US allocate a significant portion of their aid expenditure towards non-English-speaking nations.

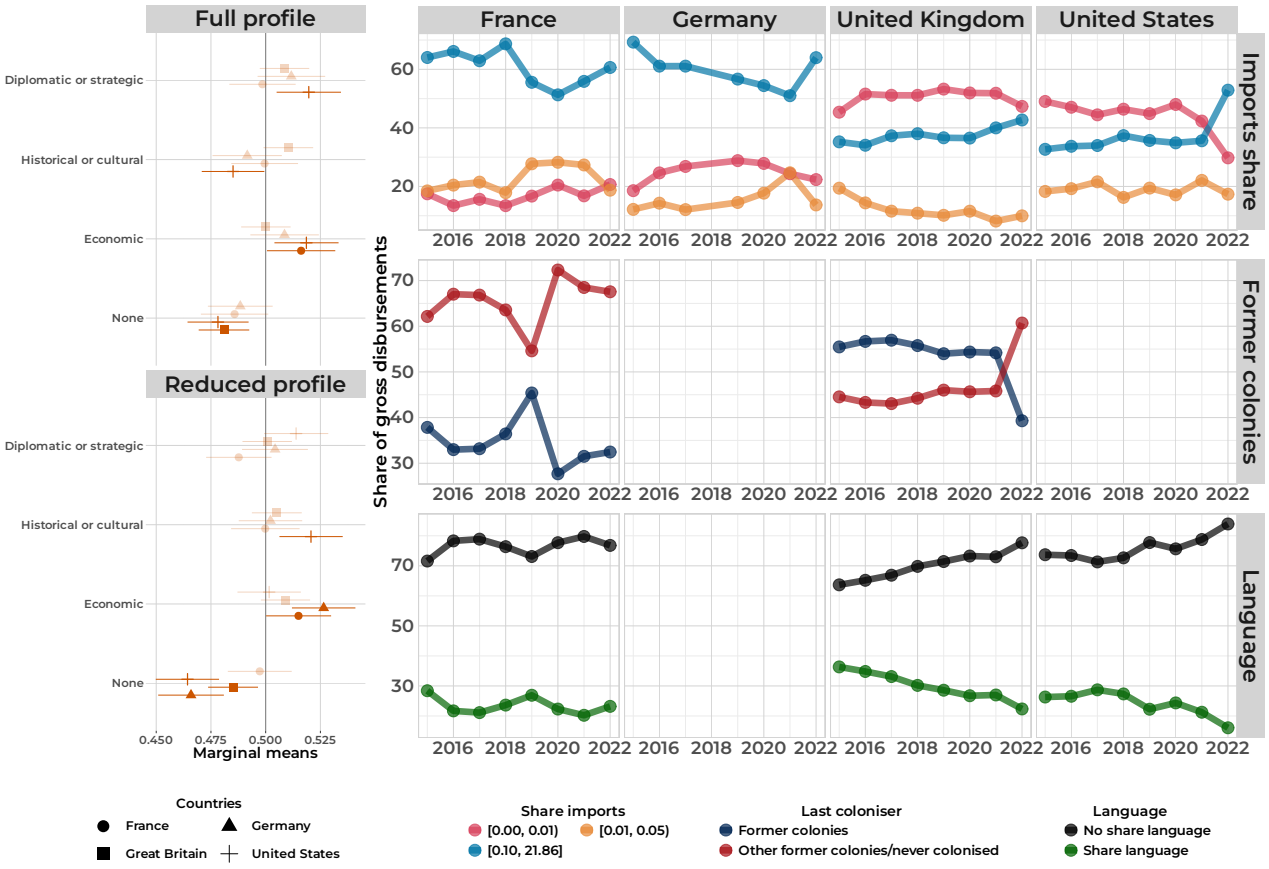

Figure S.5: Aid disbursements by share of import, former colonies, and shared linguistic heritage.

Notes: This figure reports official development assistance (share of total gross disbursements) for all four countries from 2015 to 2022. Countries are categorised into three groups based on the share of their imports from aid-recipient countries over their total imports. *Sources: Creditor Reporting System (OECD)* and *WITS–UNSD Comtrade*.

Effectiveness Across all countries, we observe that respondents show a strong aversion to providing aid packages with low or moderate effectiveness. Figure S.6 reports the share of aid disbursements by recipient-country government effectiveness, measured using the *World Bank* Government Effectiveness indicator. To illustrate patterns, we divide recipient countries into four quantiles based on this indicator. The results suggest that donor governments allocate most of their aid spending to countries with moderate to low levels of government effectiveness. Similar to the findings concerning governance, these results may be primarily influenced not by the country's level of government effectiveness, but rather

by recipient countries' levels of development and poverty.

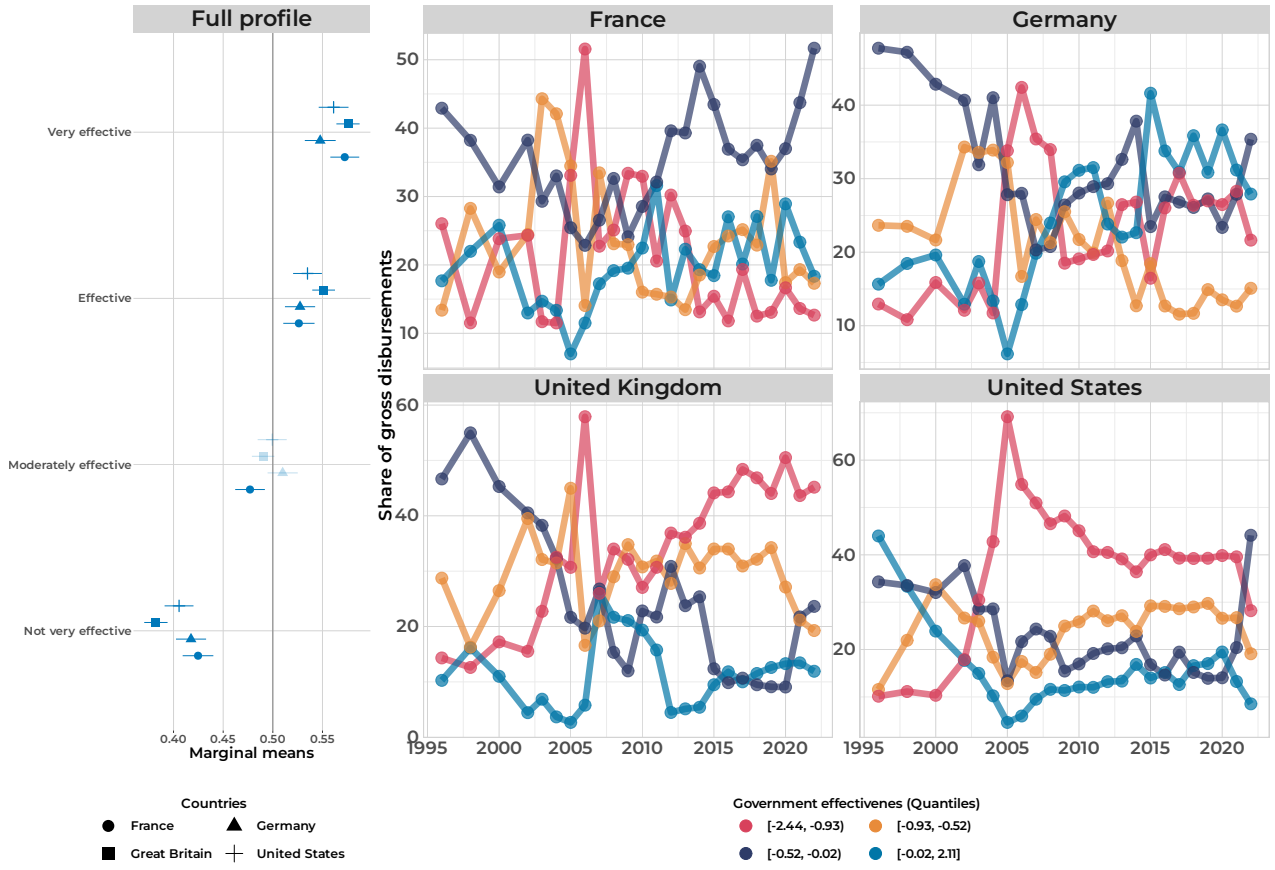

Figure S.6: Aid disbursements by recipient government effectiveness.

Notes: This figure reports official development assistance (share of total gross disbursements) for all four countries from 2015 to 2022. Recipient countries are categorised in four groups based on their score on the *Government Effectiveness* index, which captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies. The values of the *Government Effectiveness* index range between -2.5 and 2.5. Higher values represent higher levels of government effectiveness. *Sources: Creditor Reporting System, OECD.* and *Worldwide Governance Indicators, World Bank.*.

Delivery Our survey shows significant differences among countries regarding who should play a key role in delivering foreign aid projects. As illustrated in Figure S.7, respondents from Great Britain and the United States are somewhat more supportive of their government's foreign aid agencies in executing aid initiatives. In the case of France, we observe that this matches respondents' preferences, as a substantial share of aid expenditure is implemented by their aid agency. In contrast, Great Britain's government diversifies its disbursements across predominantly international organisations and NGOs based in recipient countries. At the same time, across all three European countries, the private sector consistently shows less support for implementing assistance programmes. This matches their government's aid allocation, channelling a small portion of their aid initiatives to the private sector. In the case of the US, respondents generally express less enthusiasm for international organisations taking the lead in carrying out aid initiatives; however, their government delegates a significant portion of its aid initiatives to these organisations.

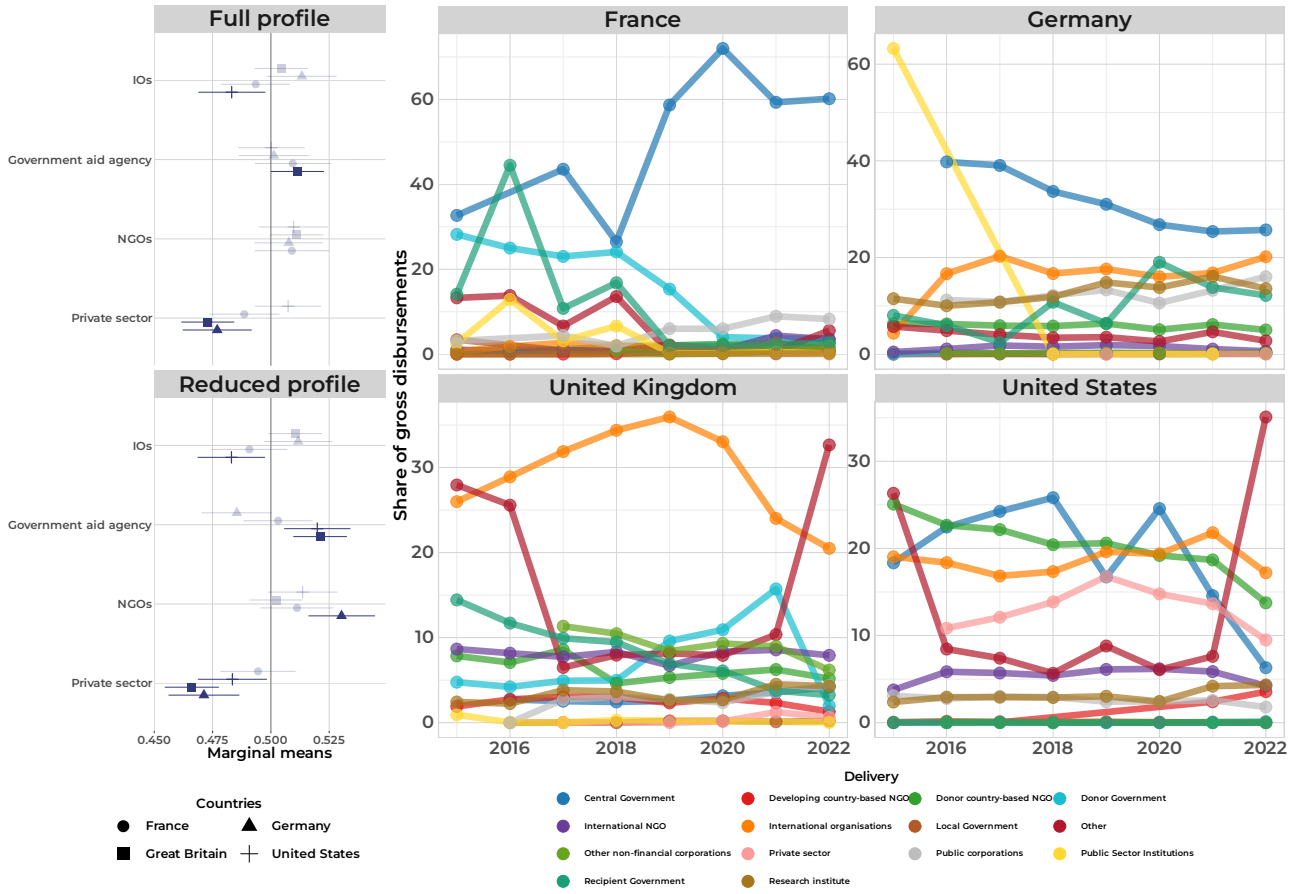

Figure S.7: Aid disbursements by delivery method.

Notes: This figure reports official development assistance as a share of their aid expenditure per year for all four countries from 2015 to 2022. Aid disbursements are categorised using IATI codes that report the delivery channel. Undefined channels of delivery were excluded from this analysis. *Source: Creditor Reporting System, OECD.*

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