IO Endorsements, Perceived Alignment, and Public Support for Unpopular Policies[*]

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Abstract

Recent research on international organizations (IOs) has highlighted their capacity to influence state behavior by shaping domestic public opinion, a key channel for policy change. This paper investigates an important extension of this mechanism: whether domestic leaders can proactively leverage IO endorsements to bolster support for contentious policies. Drawing on a survey experiment examining attitudes toward a controversial tax increase in Japan, we test how the effectiveness of this tactic depends on how IOs are perceived across multiple dimensions, including neutrality and expertise. Our results show that referencing IO endorsements reduces resistance to the policy. Crucially, their impact is strongest when the IO is seen as aligned with national interests. In contrast, traits such as impartiality and technical expertise—emphasized in previous studies—play a more limited role. Moreover, the persuasive power of endorsements is concentrated among government supporters, further underscoring the importance of perceived interest alignment as a critical dimension of persuasiveness. These findings offer new insights into when and how IOs shape mass attitudes and call attention to the strategic value of perceived IO biases for domestic elites.

1 Introduction

A central theme in the international organizations (IOs) literature is whether IOs can influence state behavior despite lacking direct enforcement mechanisms. One active research agenda explores how IOs intervene in domestic politics by criticizing or endorsing target states' policies to sway public opinion. Recent studies have shown that informing citizens of international law violations can reduce support for various controversial practices, including import restrictions (Chaudoin, 2014), torture (Wallace, 2013), the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers (Strezhnev, Simmons and Kim, 2019), border closures during pandemics (Kobayashi et al., 2023), and commercial whaling (Kuzushima, McElwain and Shiraito, 2023). IOs appear to be particularly influential in shaping attitudes toward multinational security initiatives. For example, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorizations have been found to mobilize support for the use of force (Chapman, 2009, 2012; Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Matsumura and Tago, 2019), counterterrorism operations (Recchia and Chu, 2021), and humanitarian interventions (Wallace, 2019). Collectively, this research agenda suggests that IOs can marshal support for policies that align with international norms and discourage support for those that contravene them. While domestic elites may prefer to ignore IO pressure that conflicts with their interests, they may be compelled to heed criticisms that resonate with public opinion.

That said, the generalizability of these findings remains unclear along two dimensions. First, how does the effectiveness of IO messages vary with the *perceived traits of the messenger*? Existing research offers some clues. Fang and Stone (2012) develop a formal model in which IOs must hold moderately different preferences than the domestic government in order to persuade it to implement policy reforms. Greenhill (2020), examining IO endorsements on environmental and refugee issues, shows that message effectiveness depends on the legitimacy of the IO, assumed to correlate with characteristics such as inclusive membership and technical expertise. However, as Dellmuth et al. (2022) demonstrate, elites and mass publics do not necessarily evaluate IOs in the same way. Conceptually, the value of new information is likely to depend on perceived messenger traits such as expertise in producing accurate information, political neutrality versus bias, and in-group versus out-group status. But absent explicit measurement, we do not know whether elite—or even academic—assessments of these IO traits, and the sources of persuasiveness more generally, are shared by the public.

Second, how strong are nudges by IOs, particularly when they endorse policies that run counter to citizens' particularistic interests? Prior studies have largely focused on domains where the public has limited prior knowledge or weakly held preferences, such as human rights protections for non-citizens, wildlife conservation, or military interventions abroad.

Cues from the UNSC, for example, may be effective because citizens rarely pay attention to security issues unless it affects them directly. It remains unclear whether similar mechanisms operate in policy areas that are more visible domestically and impose tangible economic costs.

This paper offers theoretical answers to these questions and tests them empirically by examining a scenario where IOs are *less* likely to be effective: an endorsement of an unpopular government proposal to increase the consumption tax. Domestic leaders frequently face countervailing pressure when the provision of public goods with long-term benefits entails immediate economic costs, such as reducing government debt or combating climate change. Even if citizens agree with such policies in principle, they may not be convinced of their urgency, especially when the payoffs accrue gradually or lie far in the future. However, IO endorsements may bolster the initiative's credibility and assuage concerns about the competence and motives of their political leaders. If such messages increase public support for the tax increase, it would lend credence to the broader effectiveness of IO interventions across policy domains. This scenario is also realistic: governments are more likely to invoke IO support when the content and source of the endorsement together offer politically useful justification.

We hypothesize that two features of IOs influence their effectiveness, reflecting distinct perspectives in the international relations literature. Specifically, we expect IOs to be more persuasive when they are perceived as both capable of providing expert knowledge and unbiased toward any particular country or political actor. We term the first feature *capacity* and the second *interests*.

We test these theoretical expectations through a survey experimentconducted in Japan, a case selected for three main reasons. First, Japan is a longstanding member of numerous international organizations, offering a wide range of realistic IO endorsements for analysis. Second, Japan's status as a net contributor to most IOs, rather than a recipient of development or military aid, minimizes concerns that public opinion might be shaped by fears of economic penalties for disregarding IO recommendations. As a result, responses are more likely to reflect the informational value of such endorsements. Third, as a consolidated democracy, Japan provides a context in which public opinion matters to governance. Politicians are incentivized to align with voter preferences to avoid electoral repercussions, while citizens can freely express their views without fear of reprisal, reducing the risk of social desirability bias in survey responses. We believe the combination of these characteristics makes Japan a compelling setting for testing our hypotheses.

Our research design differs from existing studies in its policy area, treatment configuration, and approach to measuring IO perceptions. Respondents are presented with a vignette in which the government proposes an increase in the consumption tax rate, followed by

questions about their support for both the government and the policy. The consumption tax serves as an ideal test case because it exemplifies the tension between unpopularity and necessity. While tax hikes are generally contentious, consumption taxes—analogous to value-added taxes—are disliked because they are more immediate and regressive than alternatives like inheritance or capital gains taxes. Nonetheless, there is broad expert consensus that some form of tax increase is unavoidable, given Japan's rising public debt and the growing costs of pensions and healthcare. Economists, in particular, favor the consumption tax for its universal application and low evasion risk, which contribute to stable fiscal revenue. These features have kept further tax hikes on the political agenda, making the issue familiar to voters.

The randomized treatments vary the identity of the IOs. In the vignette, treatment-group respondents are informed that the government is citing an endorsement from one of three IOs for the tax hike: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Group of Seven (G7), or the United Nations (UN). We chose these organizations because their actual degrees of formality and policy relevance differ, which should influence how they are perceived in terms of both *capacity* and *interests*. A distinctive feature of our experimental design is that the endorsement is not communicated directly to the public by the IO. Instead, the IO's support is referenced by the government as part of its justification for the policy proposal. This allows us to test whether IO endorsements serve as an effective persuasive tool for governments that believe in the policy's long-term merits but are wary of its short-term electoral costs. The salience of the issue in Japan also increases the likelihood that voters' attitudes are colored by underlying beliefs about the government's trustworthiness. Accordingly, our outcome variables capture not only whether the IO's seal of approval boosts support for the policy, but also whether it affects support for the government proposing it.

To assess *why* some IOs are persuasive and others are not, we explicitly ask respondents for their views of the three IOs and test how these perceptions moderate the endorsement effect. We measure how respondents evaluate each IO's policy expertise, independence from member states' interests generally, and independence from the Japanese government's interest specifically. While the importance of these traits has been noted by Fang and Stone (2012) and Greenhill (2020), perceptions of IOs are often assumed rather than measured. Our design thus enables more careful empirical tests and offers a novel approach to identifying when IO endorsements are effective—and why. We also examine whether the effects of IO endorsements vary by respondents' underlying partisanship. To the extent that IO endorsements function as objective, third-party validation, they may be more persuasive among independents and opposition partisans, who are more likely to mistrust the government's competence and motives.

The results of our experiment confirm that IO endorsements can increase support for unpopular policies, but the conditions under which they are persuasive are more nuanced than what we had hypothesized. First, endorsements are most effective when attributed to the G7, followed by the IMF; the UN's endorsement does not have a significant effect on public opinion. Second, this variation is driven primarily by respondents' perceptions of the IO's alignment with national interests. We had expected endorsements to be most persuasive when the IO was viewed as an expert, politically neutral actor. Instead, they were most influential among those who believed the endorsing IO shared the Japanese government's interests. Descriptively, the G7 and IMF did not differ significantly in perceived expertise, but the former was seen as more biased in favor of Japan. This suggests that IO endorsements are most useful to domestic policymakers when the IO is perceived as sympathetic to national interests, rather than detached from them. In addition, we find that these effects are shaped by voters' trust in the government, as endorsements primarily swayed pro-government partisans. This, too, ran counter to our initial expectations, but is consistent with our interpretation that perceived interest alignment is a critical dimension of persuasiveness.

Our study contributes to the literature on IOs' influence on public opinion and on the functions of international organizations more broadly. First, we provide empirical evidence that IOs can shape attitudes even in policy areas where citizens hold strong priors. Their endorsements can help policymakers build support for economically necessary but unpopular policies, complementing earlier research on the mobilizing role of IOs in security matters. Second, and more importantly, our results highlight the need for greater attention to the dimensions of IOs that condition their persuasive power. According to conventional wisdom in international political economy, IOs' credibility as providers of global public goods is compromised when they are seen as tools of self-interested member states. However, our experimental findings suggest that citizens may be more receptive to IO recommendations when the organization is perceived as aligned with their own government's goals. While no single experiment can provide a definitive answer, our results point to a counterintuitive possibility: that political bias may be a virtue, not a vice, under certain conditions.

2 Theory

2.1 IOs as Endorsers: A Review

Government leaders must occasionally make controversial decisions. However, policies that impose steep short-term costs in pursuit of future societal gains are challenging in democratic contexts, where elected actors are sensitive to public preferences. Carbon taxes to

reduce greenhouse gas emissions or toll roads to alleviate traffic congestion, for example, often encounter popular resistance despite their long-term value. Even when a policy is not inherently divisive, mistrust in leaders' intentions or competence—whether real or shaped by partisan bias—can erode support. When facing such headwinds, one strategy is to seek endorsements from external actors whom voters perceive as credible, using their backing to legitimize the policy.

A notable example is the Japanese government's decision to discharge treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant in 2023. Although necessitated by damage from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, the policy faced strong domestic and international opposition due to concerns about risks to public health and marine ecosystems. To defend the decision, the government repeatedly cited endorsements from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which affirmed that the release posed no significant threat (Nikkei Asia, 2023a). International organizations (IOs) like the IAEA can thus serve as credible third parties that governments invoke to justify contentious decisions.

This section elaborates on the conditions under which IO endorsements are likely to be trusted and persuasive. We are not the first to emphasize how domestic political incentives shape public responses to IOs. Prior studies show that UN approval can increase support for military interventions (Chapman, 2009, 2012; Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012) and multilateral coalitions (Recchia and Chu, 2021). Others find that IO criticisms of international law violations can erode public backing for national leaders, even when those leaders attempt to legitimize their actions (Strezhnev, Simmons and Kim, 2019).

However, these findings may not generalize across policy domains. Foreign and security policies are areas where citizens often lack information or hold weak prior opinions, making them more receptive to external cues. Moreover, few studies directly measure how IOs are perceived by the public, or examine whether such perceptions moderate the effectiveness of their endorsements. These gaps warrant careful examination, as citizens may interpret government-cited endorsements not as neutral signals but as strategic appeals that serve the government's interests.

We should note that there is parallel research on blame-shifting or criticism deflection, which is a potential consequence of minimizing policy opposition. Governments often redirect responsibility to domestic actors, such as former leaders (Shea and Poast, 2020), subnational governments (Beazer and Reuter, 2019), or courts (Whittington, 2005). International actors, such as the European Union (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2023) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Vreeland, 2003; Fujita, 2023), can also serve this purpose. However, relatively few studies provide micro-level empirical evidence that IO endorsements directly increase support for the policy itself. One exception is Aytaç (2021), who examines blame-avoidance

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strategies in Turkey, but such studies remain rare, underscoring the need for further exploration of how and when IO endorsements shape public opinion.

In the next section, we elaborate on the conditions under which IO endorsements are likely to be trusted, and the types of individuals they are more likely to persuade.

2.2 When IO Endorsements May Work

When examining whether information from IOs helps persuade the public, a natural question arises: under what circumstances does the nudge prove effective? One dimension involves attributes of the endorser that lead citizens to believe the information presented. Intuitively, individuals are more inclined to accept information originating from sources they trust. But what determines that trust? A second dimension concerns priors about the policy intervention itself. It may be easier to shift public opinion on a low-salience issue that many citizens are neutral about than on one that is enmeshed in partisan conflict and evokes strong opposition among some.

We begin by examining two factors related to the first dimension: whether the source is seen as having the capacity to provide accurate information and the incentive to offer impartial endorsements. The former depends on whether the source has sufficient expertise to evaluate the policy effectively, while the latter depends on the degree to which its information is insulated from political interests. We label these two factors as *capacity* and *interests*. We then discuss how *partisanship* may moderate the effectiveness of IO endorsements, given different propensities among pro- and anti-government voters to support the policy proposal in the first place.

2.2.1 Capacity: Does the Endorser Have Enough Expertise?

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

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

Nevertheless, the public may not share this view. A growing body of empirical research shows that public perceptions of expertise do not necessarily align with expert assessments

(Dellmuth et al., 2022). For example, public beliefs about economic policies are not easily changed by professional economists' advice (Sapienza and Zingales, 2013), and public health recommendations matter little to respondents who do not recognize the credibility of the experts providing them (Heinzel and Liese, 2021). The distinction between subjective and objective expertise is especially relevant in this context, as ordinary citizens are unlikely to be familiar with IOs. In short, despite scholarly agreement about IOs' high levels of expertise, whether the public shares that assessment remains an open question.

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

Even if the endorser is seen as having the expertise to evaluate a policy, the recipient may not be persuaded if they suspect that the information is distorted by political interests. In other words, the recipient may believe that the endorser knows what is best, but not that the endorser is telling the truth. We highlight two scenarios where the public may suspect that IOs are not providing objective information: (1) IOs are controlled by the political interests of major powers, and (2) IOs are colluding with the government being endorsed.

First, many IO scholars have noted that IOs are biased in favor of major states. Davis and Wilf (2017) argue that accession to the WTO is determined more by diplomatic ties rather than by the degree of trade liberalization, suggesting that these IOs function as discriminatory clubs. The politicization of IOs is often blamed for inefficiencies in decision-making and policy outcomes. Ample empirical evidence shows that IMF lending tends to be more generous toward countries with strong ties to the United States (Stone, 2004; Lipscy and Lee, 2019). However, lending driven by the political interests of donors fails to enhance the credibility of reform commitments in the eyes of capital market actors (Chapman et al., 2017). In short, IOs may be less collections of impartial experts than political organizations whose decisions are biased in favor of major powers. If these views are shared by the public, citizens may be skeptical of IO endorsements, even if they do not doubt the IOs' capacity to produce accurate information.

The second consideration is the potential for collusion between the IO and the target government. When the political interests of the endorser and the endorsed government are closely aligned, citizens may suspect that the endorsement is a coordinated attempt to manipulate public opinion. Conversely, endorsements may appear more credible when the IO and the government are not seen as politically entwined, as the public may infer that the endorsement reflects objective policy advice rather than political gain. This reasoning is in line with previous findings in the IO literature. Chapman (2009) shows that UNSC authorization of the use of force can boost U.S. presidential approval when UNSC members are

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ideologically distant from the U.S. government. Relatedly, Fang and Stone (2012) find that the Brazilian and Argentine governments valued IMF policy recommendation only when domestic economists held more extreme policy positions than the IMF. These findings underscore the importance of maintaining some distance between the international endorser and the domestic endorsee to ensure that endorsements are perceived as sincere.[1]

In summary, even if the public acknowledges that IOs have the capacity to provide high-quality policy recommendations, concerns about politicization and potential collusion with national governments may lead citizens to discount their endorsements as self-serving rather than credible.

2.3 Partisanship: Do Voters Trust the Domestic Government?

A non-IO factor that may shape public receptivity to international endorsements is voters' partisanship. Contentious policy issues often align with value-based cleavages, such as political ideology, or attitudes toward the incumbent government. In such contexts, the identity of the domestic policy proposer may serve as a heuristic for evaluating the proposal's merit. As a result, baseline support is likely to vary by party identification. A more nuanced possibility is that partisanship conditions the effect of international cues, either amplifying or dampening their persuasive power.

However, the direction of this interaction is not necessarily obvious. On the one hand, international validation may be more effective among opposition supporters or unaffiliated independents, who are otherwise distrustful of government motives. In such cases, third-party endorsements may help offset skepticism about the proposer's motives. Research on technocratic legitimacy supports this interpretation: Vittori et al. (2023) show that non-partisan experts are generally more trusted than partisan figures, particularly among citizens unsympathetic to the ruling party. Similarly, Iseki and Shinomoto (2024) find that critical commentary from neutral, credible experts can reduce backing for government initiatives. These findings suggest that IO endorsements may have a larger marginal effect on those less inclined to trust the government's intentions.

On the other hand, such endorsements may be more persuasive among government supporters, particularly when they reinforce pre-existing beliefs. The literature on motivated reasoning shows that people tend to embrace information consistent with their prior beliefs and discount contradictory evidence. For instance, Slothuus and de Vreese (2010) find that individuals are more likely to accept frames promoted by their preferred party, especially on polarizing topics. Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus (2013) similarly demonstrate that

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[1]Similar dynamics are found in domestic politics, where independent regulatory agencies and central banks can enhance credibility by insulating decisions from political interference (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016; Alesina and Stella, 2010).

polarization heightens the effect of partisan cues while reducing the weight of substantive information. In this view, IO endorsements——when invoked by governments——may act as reinforcing signals. In line with Taber and Lodge (2006), government partisans may regard the endorsement as credible precisely because it aligns with their political worldview.

Thus, the effect of external endorsements may be conditional on perceived alignment between the IO and domestic leaders. If citizens value the IO's independence—seeing it as detached from domestic politics—the message may carry more weight among opposition partisans or independents. Conversely, if alignment is taken as a proxy for policy quality, government supporters may respond more favorably. The same endorsement may therefore be interpreted in opposite ways, depending on citizens' priors about the IO's credibility and their trust in the government.

This conditionality is particularly relevant in our experimental scenario, where the government explicitly invokes IO support. The persuasiveness of the endorsement is likely to depend not only on perceptions of the IO's expertise and neutrality, but also on the domestic context in which it is delivered. This makes it necessary to test whether public reactions diverge along partisan lines.

3   Research Design

To examine whether—and under what conditions—IOs can help leaders persuade domestic audiences, we conduct a survey experiment to test when IOs are perceived as credible interlocutors. In practice, it is rare for multiple IOs to issue identical policy recommendations simultaneously, making it difficult to estimate endorsement effects using observational data. To address this limitation, we implement an experiment in which respondents are randomly assigned to receive policy endorsements from different IOs, and then test whether these increase support for the government's proposal on a highly controversial policy: raising taxes. Our research plan, including the survey instrument and methodology, was pre-registered with the Evidence in Governance and Politics registry (EGAP, ID: 20230618AA).

3.1   Case Context

Japan, like many advanced-industrialized societies, faces a linked demographic and fiscal crunch. Lengthening life expectancies have steadily increased healthcare and pension costs, while declining fertility rates has caused the labor force to shrink. In addition, sluggish economic growth since the mid-1990s has contributed to rising poverty rates (Shirahase, 2021), generating more stress on automatic fiscal stabilizers such as unemployment insurance. The share of social security contributions in GDP has risen from 7.5% in 1990 to 13.3% in 2021, well above the OECD average of 9.0% (OECD, 2023a). This fiscal expansion has

been financed by ever-increasing government debt, which sat at 254% of GDP in 2022, far outstripping the OECD average of 89% (OECD, 2023b).

Given these budget pressures, the Japanese government has repeatedly floated the need to raise the consumption tax, which is akin to value-added taxes (VAT) in Europe and goods and services taxes (GST) in Canada and Australia. First introduced at a rate of 3 % in 1989, the consumption tax has gradually risen, reaching 10 % in 2019.[2] This tax has several desirable properties: it is assessed on every transaction, including intermediate goods, making it difficult to evade, and it does not discriminate across economic activities, reducing market distortions. Unlike corporate or personal income taxes, it also generates stable revenue across business cycles. Furthermore, Japan's current rate remains lower than comparable VAT rates in European countries, making further increases justifiable. In fact, the consumption tax has become the backbone of the national budget, with its revenue share rising from 4.6% in 1990 to 23.4% in 2023 (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

The public, however, does not share this ardor. Opinion polls show that a majority disfavors not only a consumption tax increase, but also the tax itself (McElwain and Noble, 2016). For one, rate hikes directly increase consumer prices, and so have properties similar to inflation. For another, because lower-income households spend a higher share of their income on consumption, the tax is criticized as being more regressive than capital gains or inheritance taxes. There is also disagreement over *how* additional tax revenue should be spent, with more support for expanding social insurance than for the redemption of government bonds (Kawata, McElwain and Nakabayashi, 2023).

Despite these headwinds, further tax increases are very much on the political agenda. They have long been advocated by the Ministry of Finance (Kato, 2003) and are backed by major business federations, who prefer them to increases in corporate or payroll taxes (Tanaka, 2022). The government's fiscal flexibility may be narrowing. In August 2023, the Bank of Japan began relaxing its cap on government bond yields, which has led to rising borrowing costs (Nikkei Asia, 2023b). At the same time, the government has pledged to boost both defense expenditure and childcare budgets significantly.

These factors make the consumption tax a strong case for examining the persuasive effects of IO endorsements. First, the issue was highly salient in October 2023, when we fielded our experiment, meaning that respondents likely had some familiarity with the arguments on both sides. Second, the policy is one that domestic elites view as fiscally necessary but politically unpopular, creating realistic conditions for reliance on external validation.

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[2]A lower rate of 8 % applies to medical products and food consumed at home. See Tanaka (2022) for a comprehensive discussion.

Concretely, our survey instrument is designed as follows.[3] Respondents are first informed that the Japanese government is considering an increase in the consumption tax rate, through the following prompt:

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

Next, they are asked to evaluate both the policy and the proposing government on seven-point Likert scales, which serve as our dependent variables:

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

> DV2: "Do you support this consumption tax increase?"

Baseline support for both was low, as expected. Among respondents in the control group, 66.2% opposed and 15.5% supported the tax hike, while 64.7% disapproved and only 7.4% approved the proposing government (average means of 2.7 and 2.6, respectively, on the 7-point scale). See SI B.1 for full distributions.

3.2   Treatment

Before asking respondents' opinions about the two outcomes, we randomly assign endorsements of the tax increase from three IOs. By comparing these treatment groups with a control group that received no endorsement, we test whether international backing increases support for the policy or the government. Our underlying hypotheses are as follows.

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

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

We designated three organizations as endorsers: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Group of Seven (G7), and the United Nations (UN). These choices allow us to compare

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[3]Refer to Supplementary Information (SI) A for the full survey instrument.

not only the presence versus absence of an endorsement, but also whether different endorsers vary in their persuasive power.

First, we expect the IMF to be the most substantively relevant and realistic IO in this context, as it has commented on Japan's consumption tax policies in the past. Notably, when the consumption tax was raised from 8% to 10% in 2019, the IMF recommended further hikes to 15% by 2030 and 20% by 2050.[4] As a result, the IMF is arguably the most credible source for fiscal advice. In terms of capacity, it is staffed by professional economists and frequently publishes reports on macroeconomic trends that are closely monitored by financial markets In terms of interests, its recommendations likely reflect—or at least are not antagonistic to—Japanese policy goals, as Japan is the second-largest financial contributor to the IMF, following the United States, based on member quotas as of 2024.[5] However, whether the Japanese public is aware of this alignment remains an empirical question.

Second, the G7 was included as a second endorser because it plays a high-profile role in addressing global issues, particularly fiscal policies, even though it is an informal platform rather than a formal organization like the IMF. For example, European financial chiefs issued joint statements on debt and fiscal policy during G8 and G20 meetings during the Global Financial Crisis.[6] That said, the G7 may be perceived as a less neutral or expert source than the IMF, as it is composed of political leaders rather than technical staff. Its fiscal recommendations may therefore be interpreted as political signaling rather than objective policy guidance. Nevertheless, the G7 had heightened visibility at the time of our study, due to the high-profile summit hosted by the Japanese government in May 2023, just two months before we fielded our survey. This recent exposure, especially in the domestic media, may have enhanced its salience and, potentially, its persuasive power.

The UN serves as a third treatment, functioning as a de facto placebo. On the one hand, UN endorsements have been shown to shape public opinion towards transnational coordination, including military intervention, refugee policy, and environmental governance (Chapman, 2009, 2012; Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Matsumura and Tago, 2019; Greenhill, 2020). It is also arguably the best known IO, although we will confirm this

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[4] "IMF staff scenarios suggest that to finance aging costs, the consumption tax rate would need to increase gradually to 15 percent by 2030 and to 20 percent by 2050. The cost of postponing adjustment is substantial and would benefit the current elderly to the detriment of future generations." Quoted from the Fiscal Policy section of *Japan: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2019 Article IV Mission*, November 25, 2019. `https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/11/24/mcs-japan-staff-concluding-statement-of-the-2019-article-iv-mission`. Accessed on May 21, 2025.

[5] *IMF Members' Quotas and Voting Power, and IMF Board of Governors.* `https://www.imf.org/en/About/executive-board/members-quotas`. Accessed on May 21, 2025.

[6] The Japan Times. "Kan's diplomatic debut in Canada a chance to show leadership skills." June 30, 2010.

empirically in later sections. On the other hand, the UN rarely comments on domestic economic matters such as tax reforms, especially in developed nations. As such, its support for a proposed consumption tax hike may be perceived as incongruous or irrelevant—particularly on an issue where citizens already have strong priors. We therefore expect the UN endorsement to be the least effective, but its inclusion strengthens our ability to isolate effects attributable to issue-specific relevance and perceived expertise.

> H2.1: Endorsements from the *IMF* have a stronger effect than endorsements from the G7 or the UN.

Respondents in the treatment groups read the following sentence after the policy prompt. Those in the control group did not receive any additional information.

> "Furthermore, the Japanese government has highlighted that the [*IMF (International Monetary Fund) / United Nations (UN) / Group of Seven (G7)*] has expressed praise for the consumption tax increase, recognizing its contribution to Japan's fiscal reconstruction."

We should note that these three IOs are reasonably well-known to Japanese citizens. Our survey included an item asking respondents to assess their familiarity with each IO. Over 80% reported having at least heard of or knowing some details about each organization. While self-reported answers undoubtedly have some bias, we believe there is no prima facie reason to assume these IOs are obscure to our sample population. Full response distribution can be found in SI B.2.

3.3   Moderators

Comparing treatment effects across IOs allows us to identify which endorsers are more persuasive. To test our hypotheses about the perceived capacity and interests of IOs directly, however, we must measure these subjective beliefs explicitly. Accordingly, our survey instrument asked respondents to evaluate the three IOs on multiple dimensions prior to treatment assignment. The full text of these moderators can be found in SI A.2.

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

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

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We also measure whether respondents perceive IO information to be distorted by political *interests* in two ways: (1) whether the IO is viewed as a group of experts or as politicized actors, and (2) whether IOs' decisions are seen to reflect the interests of the Japanese government. First, respondents were shown two opposing descriptions of each IO and asked which one was closer to their own view: "*[The IMF/G7/UN] is a group of independent experts separate from the interests of each country*", or "*a group of politicians representing the interests of each country.*" They then evaluated their position on a 7-point discrete scale. This question informs the following hypothesis:

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

Second, we asked whether respondents believe that IO decisions reflect the interests of the Japanese government. This helps us evaluate whether perceived collusion between the IO and domestic authorities shapes endorsement effects. The relevant item was: "*How much do you think the intentions of the Japanese government are reflected in the decisions of the following international organizations?*" In our analyses below, we collapse the 7-point response scale into three categories: "[Japanese Government's Interests] Reflected," "Neither," and "Not reflected." This question is used to test the following hypothesis:

> H2.3b: Endorsements from international organizations that are *perceived to be politically independent from the Japanese government' interests* have stronger, positive effects.[7]

Finally, we examine partisanship as a potential moderator. As discussed in Section 2.3, the literature is divided on how partisan affiliation conditions responsiveness to third-party cues. On the one hand, IO endorsements may have stronger effects among independents and opposition supporters, who are generally more skeptical of the LDP government and therefore more likely to value neutral, external validation. On the other hand, if voters perceive IO backing as consistent with government policy, pro-LDP respondents may find it more persuasive due to motivated reasoning. To assess either pattern, we asked respondents about their partisan identification and test the following competing hypotheses:

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

H3.1: Endorsements from international organizations have stronger, positive effects among opposition party supporters and independents.

H3.2: Endorsements from international organizations have stronger, positive effects among government party supporters.

3.4 Sampling

Our survey experiment was conducted from July 3 to 6, 2023. Respondents were recruited through *Cross Marketing*, one of Japan's largest survey vendors, which maintains a panel of over twelve million members.[8] We set quotas by age (19-70), gender, and prefecture to match the most recent national census, and used convenience sampling within each stratum until quotas were met. See SI B.4 for a comparison of the sample to the population by age and gender.

7,871 individuals participated in the survey, and the final sample size, after excluding incomplete or irregular responses, was 6,391 respondents. This relatively large sample size was necessary given Japan's low rates of partisan identification, which complicates testing of Hypotheses 3.1 and 3.2. In a July 2023 national poll by Asahi Shimbun, Japan's second-largest daily newspaper, 31% of respondents stated affinity with the two governing parties (LDP and Komeito), 18% backed other parties, 46% identified with no party, and 5% did not answer. These figures, especially that of independents, roughly aligns with our own data (see SI B.3), in which 22% identified as government supporters, 24% as opposition supporters, and 54% as independents. As a result, despite a total sample size of 6,391, only 1,344 were government supporters and 1,428 were opposition supporters, as shown in Figure 5 below. For this reason, while each treatment and control condition had an equal probability of assignment, the randomization was blocked based on respondents' partisan affinity (pro-government, pro-opposition parties, or independents) to ensure that the treatment assignment was balanced in terms of political orientation. All conditioning variables used in our analysis were asked prior to treatment assignment.

4 Results

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

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[8] More information on Cross-Marketing's survey panel can be found on their website (Japanese) at `https://www.cross-m.co.jp/monitor`. The survey itself was administered via Qualtrics. Respondents who completed the survey were awarded points redeemable for money, prizes, or airline miles through Cross-Marketing. The specific compensation scheme was not disclosed to the authors. See `https://47208286.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/47208286/files/company/_quality.pdf` for further details.

However, our hypotheses regarding the importance of perceived capacity and independence were not supported. We had expected the effects of IO endorsements to be strongest among respondents who viewed the endorsing IOs as independent experts, insulated from political influence. Instead, the treatment effects were larger among those who believed the endorsing IOs were aligned with the Japanese government's interests. In addition, we find that the positive effects were concentrated among government partisans. These results suggest that, contrary to our initial expectations, perceived interest alignment may be a more important driver of persuasion than perceptions of neutrality or technical capacity. Full regression tables can be found in SI E.

4.1 Average Treatment Effect

We estimate the average treatment effect (ATEs) of IO endorsements on two outcomes: support for the government and support for the proposed consumption tax increase. Raw distributions of both variables are presented in SI B.1. Figure 1 shows the ATE estimates of endorsements by the G7, the IMF, and the UN.

We find that the endorsement from the G7 has a positive and statistically significant effect on both outcomes. It has the largest estimated effect size (0.173 on government support, 0.178 on policy support) and is distinguishable from zero at the 95% confidence level.[9] The IMF's endorsement also has a positive and statistically significant effect on government approval, but not on policy approval, although the difference between the two is marginal. The effect estimates for the IMF are the second largest among the three treatment arms (0.109 on government support, 0.112 on the policy). While whether to reject the null hypotheses of zero effect is ambiguous since the p-value is 0.04 for the government support outcome and 0.06 for the policy outcome, we interpret these as weak but positive evidence that IMF endorsements can be persuasive. By contrast, the UN's endorsement did not impact either outcome. The effect estimates of the UN endorsement are the smallest (0.07 on government support, -0.01 on the policy), and in both cases, we cannot reject the null hypothesis of zero effect.

These results partially—but not completely—confirm our expectations. The positive effects of G7 and IMF treatments are consistent with our hypotheses that international

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[9] While these effects may appear modest on a 7-point scale, they are consistent with results from similar vignette survey experiments. For instance, Pinto, Rickard and Vreeland (2025) report an effect size of 0.24 in a 7–point scale, and McDowell et al. (2024) find effects of 0.156, 0.170, 0.195 on a 5-point scale, with standard deviations of 1.56. and 1.23. Our own outcome variables have standard deviations of 1.5 (government support) and 1.7 (tax policy). Assuming a binary shift of one scale point for some respondents, an average treatment effect of 0.17 implies that 17% of respondents shifted upward by one point—an effect size that is substantively meaningful in public opinion research. As we show in the following analyses, the estimated treatment effects for subgroups are larger than the overall ATEs.
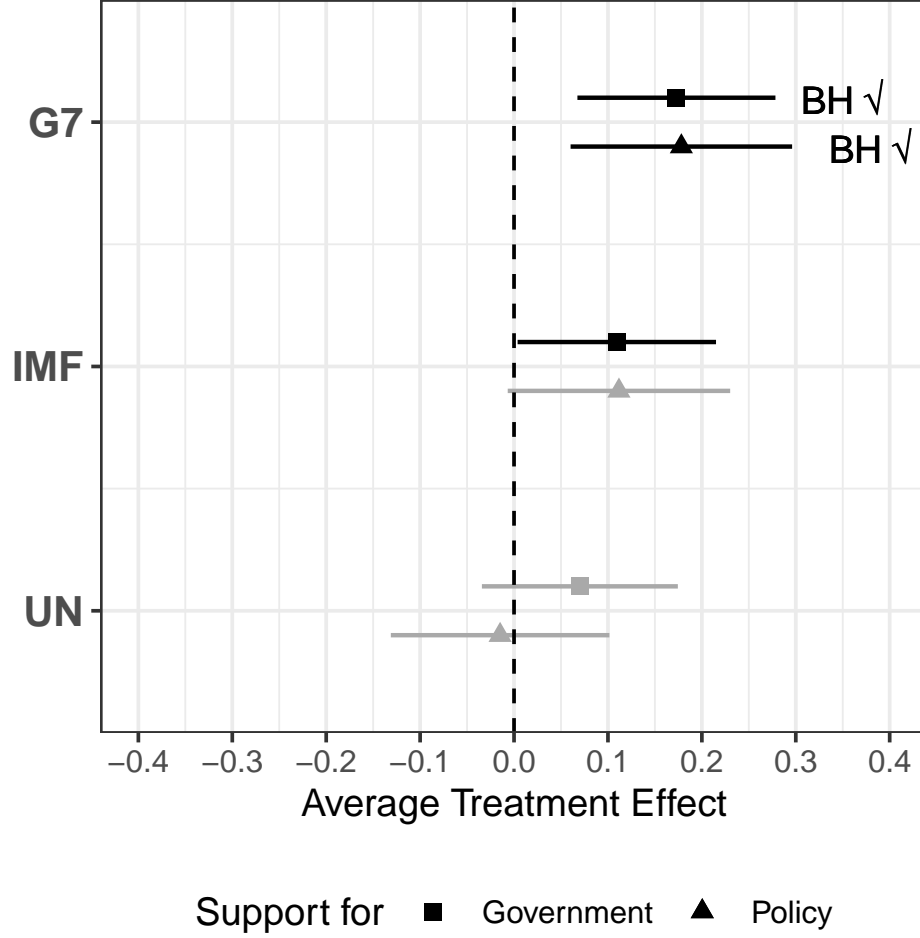
Figure 1: **Average Treatment Effect.** Treatment effect estimates of endorsements from the G7, the IMF, and the UN. The effects are estimated by difference-in-means between each treatment group and the control group while incorporating the block randomization by party identification. The outcome variables are government approval (square symbol) and support for the proposed consumption tax increase (triangle symbol). The x-axis shows the size of the treatment effect estimates, and the y-axis specifies the name of the IO for each treatment group. Horizontal lines represent the 95% confidence intervals, with black lines indicating statistical significance and gray lines indicating no significance. "BH ✓" indicates that the null hypotheses are rejected even after multiple testing correction by the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure (Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995).

endorsements increase support for both the tax proposal (H1.1) and the government (H1.2). However, we had predicted that the IMF would be the most effective endorser (H2.1), not the G7. We explore reasons for this disconnect in the next subsection. By contrast, the null effect of the UN treatment is consistent with our expectations that not all IOs sway public opinion equally. While past research show that the UN can shape views on military,

human rights, or environmental issues (Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Recchia and Chu, 2021; Greenhill, 2020), our finding implies that its influence may be limited in high-salience economic domains. Since we fail to observe any significant effects from the UN treatment, the remainder of our analysis focuses on the G7 and IMF treatments.

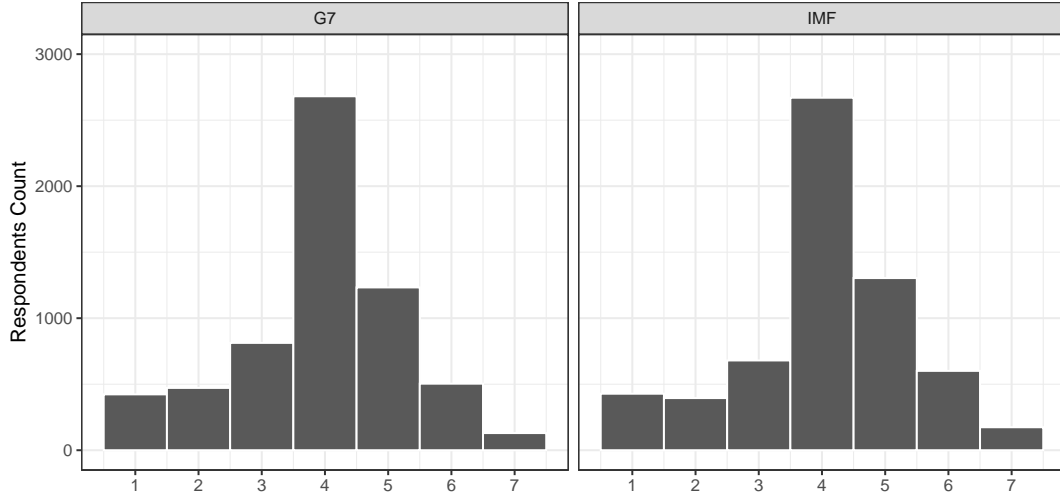## 4.2 Heterogeneous Effects by the Perceived Capacity and Interests of IOs

We turn to examining whether respondents' subjective perceptions of IOs influence variation in treatment effects. Specifically, we examine heterogeneity across the two hypothesized dimensions: perceived *capacity* (expertise) and perceived *interests* (independence from political influence).

Figure 2 presents treatment effect estimates conditional on respondents' assessments of the endorsing IO's expertise. We collapse the original 7-point scale into three categories: 1-3 as "No expertise," 4 as "Neither," and 5-7 as "Expertise." We compute the treatment effect estimates by difference-in-means with block randomization adjustments; the number of observations in each subgroup is noted in parentheses. While we expected endorsements to be more persuasive when the IO was viewed as an expert (H2.2), the estimates do not vary much across categories. In other words, contrary to our hypothesis, perceived expertise does not appear to explain variations in the impact of endorsements.
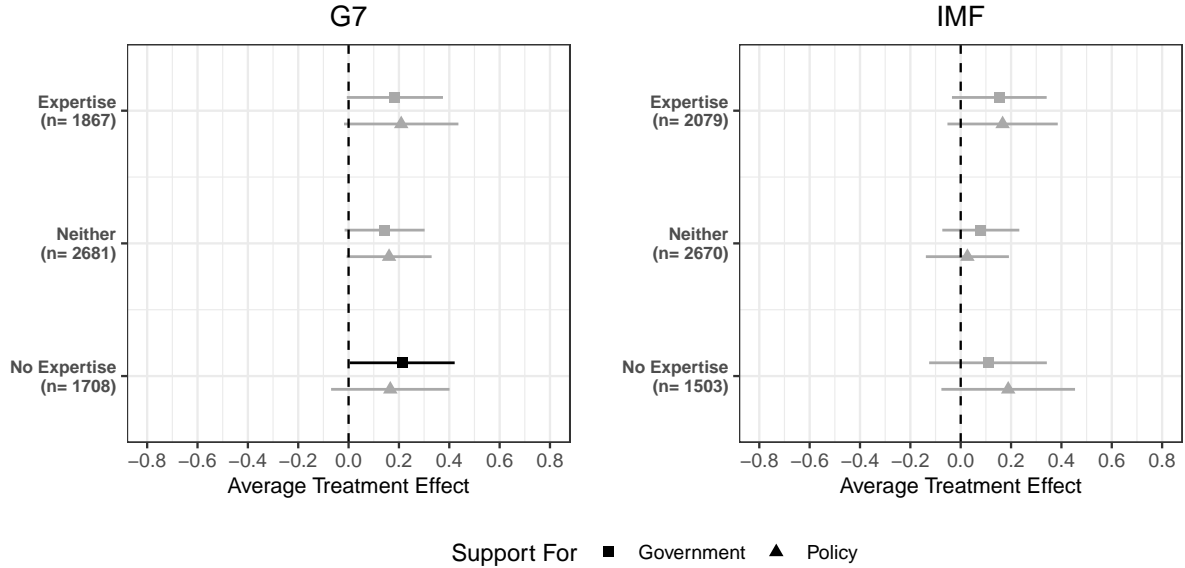
Figure 3 shows treatment effect estimates conditional on perceived political independence from member states. As before, we collapse the original 7-point scale into three categories: "Independent from States' Interests", "Neither", and "Subject to States' Interests." We do not find support for H2.3a, which predicted greater persuasion among those who view the IOs as impartial. Surprisingly, the endorsement effect—particularly for the G7—is strongest among those who believe that IO decisions are shaped by member states' interests. Among this group, the G7 treatment is both substantively large and statistically significant, while effects in the other two categories are not.

Figure 4 focuses on perceptions of IO alignment with the Japanese government specifically, rather than member states in general. Respondents rated the extent to which they believe the intentions of the Japanese government are reflected in IO decisions, and responses were again grouped into three categories: "Reflected," "Neither," and "Not reflected." Interestingly, the results run counter to H2.3b, which anticipated that independence from domestic government interests would make endorsements more persuasive. Instead, treatment effects are strongest among those who believe the IOs are aligned with the Japanese government.

In sum, we fail to confirm our original hypotheses regarding capacity or political indepen-
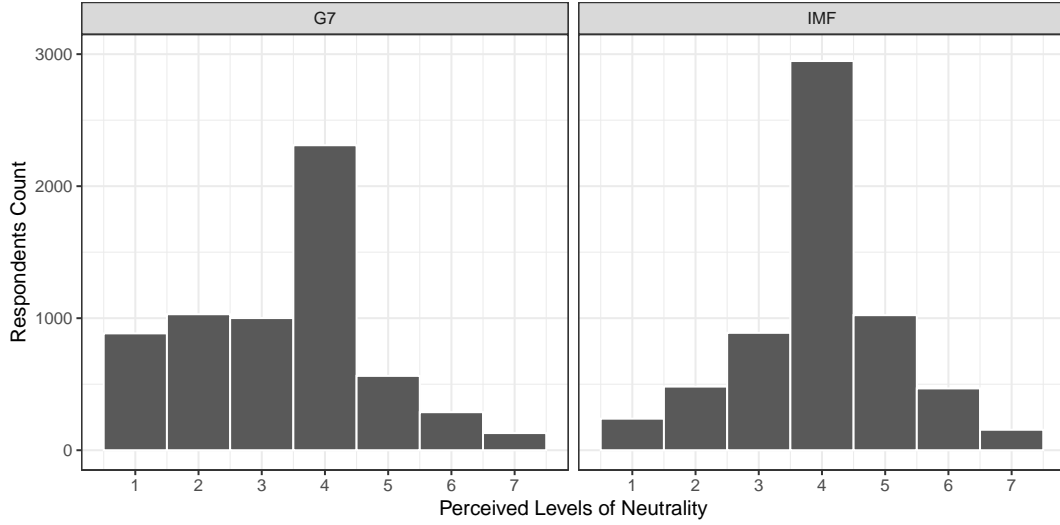
(a) **Distribution of Perceived Levels of Expertise**

(b) **Treatment Effect Estimates**

Figure 2: **Heterogeneous Treatment Effects: Perceived Expertise**. Top panels show the baseline distributions of the perceived expertise of the G7 and the IMF; bottom panels show the treatment effect estimates based on the perceived expertise of each IO. For the survey item used to measure expertise, see SI A.3. The number of observations in each subgroup is specified under the y-axis labels.

dence. We had expected IO endorsements to be more persuasive when the organizations were perceived as neutral and expert. Instead, our results point to a different mechanism: citizens are more responsive when the endorsing IO is seen as aligned with their government's goals. This finding is surprising, as we assumed such alignment might be interpreted as collusion,
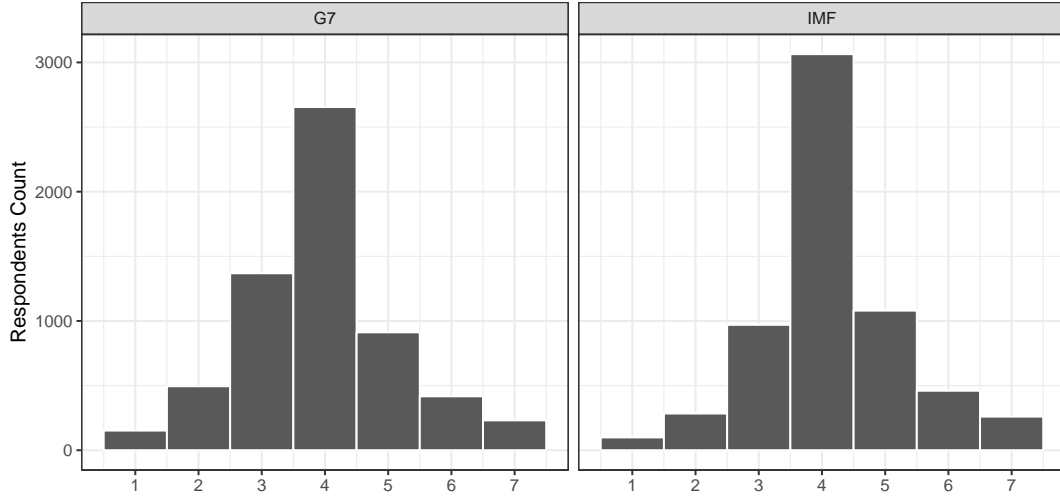
(a) **Distribution of Perceived Levels of Neutrality**
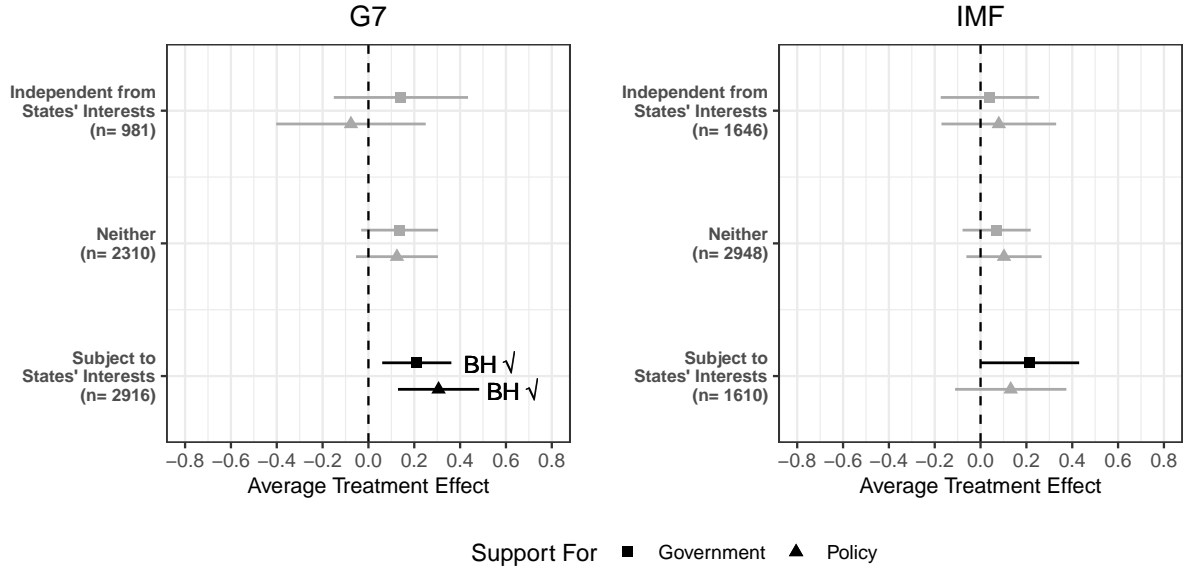
(b) **Treatment Effect Estimates**

Figure 3: **Heterogeneous Treatment Effects: Perceived Neutrality.** Except that the moderating variable is the perceived neutrality of the endorsing IOs, this figure is structured similarly to Figure 2.

potentially impairing the endorsement's credibility. We explore this puzzle further in the next section.

4.3 Heterogenous Effect by Partisanship

Why did we fail to find support for our hypotheses about IOs' policy capacity and political independence? One possibility is that impartial expertise is not sufficient for the public

(a) **Distribution of the Perceived Reflection of Japanese Government's Interests**
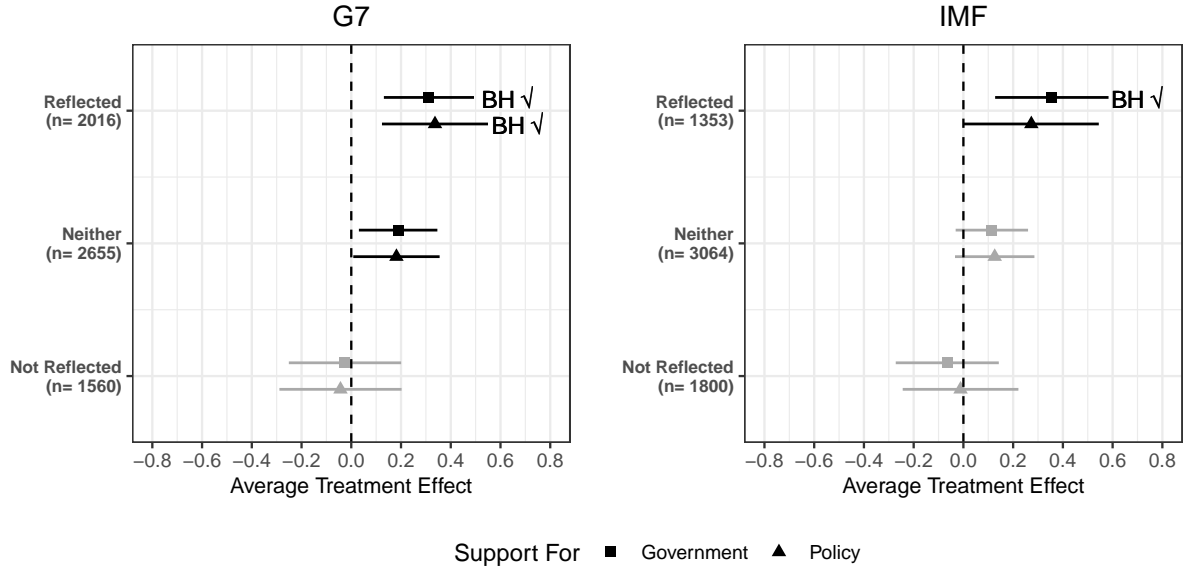
(b) **Treatment Effect Estimates**

Figure 4: **Heterogeneous Treatment Effects: Perceived Reflection of Japanese Government's Interests.** Except that the moderating variable is the perceived reflection of Japanese Government's Interests, this figure is structured similarly to Figure 2.

to trust IOs, because they are viewed as fundamentally distant or unaccountable actors. Instead, as Figure 4 suggests, endorsements may only be persuasive when the IO is perceived as sharing interests with the respondent's government—that is, when the IO is seen not merely as a neutral third party, but as a like-minded ally or in-group actor.

This logic is consistent with a large body of research on political heuristics, which shows

that citizens interpret complex political information through mental cues, especially partisanship (Zaller, 1992; Berinsky, 2019), even in foreign policy contexts (Hayes and Guardino, 2011; Bush and Jamal, 2015). Trust in foreign sources is not uncommon when those are viewed as sympathetic. For example, during the 2003 Iraq War, many U.S. Democrats turned to European and UN officials, whom they perceived as trustworthy (Murray, 2014), for information. Dragojlovic (2015) generalizes this specific case, arguing that messages from foreign governments seen as "friendly" are often more persuasive than those from domestic advocates. Similarly, numerous studies find that trade preferences can be attributed to in-group favoritism (Brutger and Rathbun, 2021; Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Mutz and Kim, 2017). Taken together, these suggest that for the public to trust IOs, they must be seen as allies, or at least as sharing common interests with one's country.

If true, then we would expect endorsement effects to also vary by domestic partisan affiliation. If respondents value neutral expertise, then IO endorsements should matter more for opposition supporters and independents (H3.1). Conversely, if shared interests dominate, then IO messages may be more effective among government partisans, who are predisposed to accept messaging that aligns with their party's position (H3.2).

Figure 5 shows treatment effect estimates conditional on party identification. Raw subgroup proportions for each party in the governing coalition and the opposition are presented in SI B.3. We find that the endorsement effects are concentrated among government (LDP and Komeito) supporters, while there are no significant effects among opposition partisans or independents. These results support H3.2 rather than H3.1, suggesting that government partisans interpreted the IO endorsement as validation of the ruling party's position, and were therefore more receptive to it. Given Japan's relatively weak levels of party identification, this result also implies that total average treatment effects may be even larger in countries with more polarized electorates or stronger partisan attachments, where in-group cues are more likely to guide opinion formation.

One possible concern is that these partisan differences simply reflect other underlying traits. Given that the LDP is, at least nominally, a pro-market, conservative party, its supporters may be more worried about public debt, less concerned about regressivity, or more optimistic about Japan's economic resilience even with a tax hike. To evaluate this possibility, we conducted OLS regressions with covariate adjustment using the Lin (2013) approach, which demeans and fully interacts covariates with the treatment variable. As detailed in SI D, the main treatment effects persist after adjusting for views on tax burdens and macroeconomic performance. We also find relatively limited heterogeneity by these covariates compared to the much stronger interaction with partisanship. This suggests that partisan affiliation itself is a key moderator of responsiveness to IO endorsements.
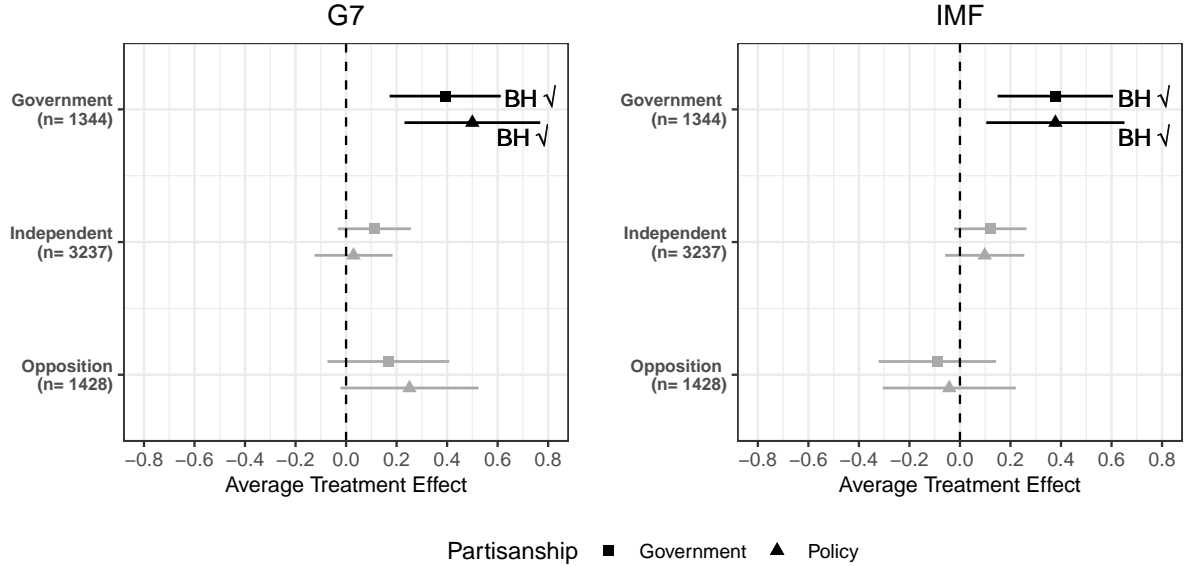
Figure 5: **Heterogenous Treatment Effects: Party Identification.** Except that the moderating variable is party identification, this figure is structured similarly to the bottom panels of Figure 2.

In summary, our experimental results indicate that perceived interest alignment is more important than perceptions of impartiality or expertise in shaping the effectiveness of IO messages. Specifically, endorsement effects are strongest among respondents who see the IOs as aligned with the Japanese government and who support the ruling coalition. This result matches broader insights from the literature on affective partisanship, extended to the international domain. Contrary to our initial expectation that IOs must be seen as impartial experts to function as credible advisors, our evidence suggests that shared national or political identity—perceived "ingroup" status—may be more important for persuasion.

4.4 Discussion

Two counter-intuitive findings from our experiment merit further discussion. First, endorsements from the G7 were more persuasive than those from the IMF, despite the latter's greater policy relevance and its prominence in the international political economy (IPE) literature. Second, endorsements were most effective when the IO was perceived to reflect the interests of the target country, rather than when it was viewed as an impartial, expert arbiter. Here, we consider the broader implications of these results and whether they are specific to the case context.

The most surprising result is the stronger effect of G7 endorsements. The IMF is the canonical institution in IPE scholarship on fiscal and monetary agreements (Simmons, 2000;

Mansfield and Milner, 2012), whereas the G7 is a narrower, informal forum where wealthy nations coordinate on global trade, security, and climate change. It is not based on a treaty or international convention, and it lacks a permanent secretariat to administer or enforce its decisions. Perhaps for this reason, the G7 has received relatively little attention in public opinion research, making its persuasive effect here especially notable.

One possible explanation is the experimental setting. Japanese citizens may have been more attuned to the G7 at the time of the survey, which followed Japan's hosting of the May 2023 G7 summit in Hiroshima. As shown in SI Figure B.2, more than 80% of respondents reported at least some familiarity with each of the three IOs in our study, indicating that the G7 was not just visible but widely recognized. To test whether the weaker effect of the IMF might reflect lower respondent knowledge, SI C.3 examines treatment effect heterogeneity by self-reported familiarity with IOs. The IMF endorsement has no significant effect even among respondents who report higher levels of familiarity with the organization. This suggests that the IMF's limited persuasive power cannot be attributed solely to a lack of public awareness. It is also not obvious why visibility or recognition would outweigh perceived expertise or impartiality——traits that other studies have shown to be more consequential for persuasiveness in Japan (McElwain, Eshima and Winkler, 2021).

An alternative explanation, which we believe is more consistent with recent international relations scholarship, is that citizens do not view IOs as neutral arbiters. Instead, what matters is whether an IO is perceived to favor one's own country. Davis (2023), for example, describes IOs as "discriminatory clubs" of like-minded states that use vague membership criteria to exert leverage across policy domains. Member states have also sought greater influence within IOs to advance competing economic and security visions (Lipscy, 2017). While most studies analyze these dynamics at the national level, our findings suggest they may resonate with mass publics as well.

This interpretation echoes findings from recent experimental research on the IMF. Mc-Dowell et al. (2024) show that support among developing countries for continued engagement with the IMF increases when respondents are informed that the institution has reformed to shift power away from wealthy countries and toward developing ones. Similarly, Pinto, Rickard and Vreeland (2025) finds that fiscal austerity measures in Spain garner more public support when they are attributed to the European Union rather than the IMF—a difference the authors attribute to greater public trust in the EU. Both studies suggest that perceptions of institutional alignment, rather than technical expertise alone, shape public reactions to IO policies.

Our results support this view. Endorsements are more persuasive when the IO is perceived as aligned with the Japanese government's interests. If all IOs are "discriminatory

clubs," citizens may simply prefer those where their country holds more sway and will discriminate in their favor. While our survey instrument did not measure institutional trust directly, we did ask respondents to rate their favorability toward each IO. As shown in Figure C.1 and discussed in SI C.1, treatment effects were concentrated among those with favorable views of the G7 or the IMF, and negligible among those with unfavorable views. This suggests that IOs are evaluated more as in-group or out-group actors than as impartial experts.

This mechanism also helps explain why treatment effects were strongest among government supporters. These respondents may have viewed endorsing IOs as reinforcing their own side's position and thus accepted the message as credible. In effect, the persuasive power of endorsements appears to operate through affective partisanship, extended to international actors. One implication is that IOs may be more effective at reinforcing support within a government's base than at persuading opposition voters or the undecided. Future studies could test this directly by examining cases where IOs criticize a sitting government's policy, or endorse a proposal made by opposition parties.

Another distinctive feature of our design is that we examine a highly salient and unpopular policy proposal: a consumption tax hike. Prior work on IO persuasion has mostly examined areas where public opinion is more malleable, such as human rights, refugee policy, or security. In our case, strong priors make persuasion more difficult. If IOs simply reinforce existing views, we would expect positive treatment effects only among respondents who already believe that fiscal reform is necessary. But Figure C.2 in SI C shows the opposite: the G7 endorsement had the largest effect among respondents *least* concerned about Japan's fiscal health. This suggests that IOs can move opinion even on contentious, high-cost issues.

That said, the generalizability of our findings remains an open question. Japan may be an especially favorable setting for IO influence. It is a net contributor to many IOs and holds a powerful voice in institutions like the G7 and IMF. Policy proposals like the consumption tax hike are framed as technocratic long-term reforms, not emergency bailouts. In this sense, IOs are playing an advisory role, not imposing conditionality under duress. By contrast, in lower-income or crisis-prone countries, IOs may be seen as enforcers of externally mandated reforms that impinge on national sovereignty. As Hübscher, Sattler and Wagner (2023) show in their study of IMF programs in Europe, voters may be more accepting of painful policies when they doubt their own government's competence or fear economic collapse. The persuasiveness of IO endorsements may therefore depend on whether citizens perceive the policy as a proactive reform or a necessary response to imminent crisis.

Nonetheless, the Japanese case offers valuable insight. Precisely because Japan is a wealthy democracy with influence in many IOs, its experience allows us to isolate the in-

formational value of IO endorsements, separate from coercion or aid dependence. In such contexts, our findings suggest that public acceptance of IO messages depends not on whether the messenger is expert or impartial, but on whether it is seen as an ally.

5   Conclusion

A central question in the international relations literature is whether international organizations can shape the behavior of nation-states. Recent work has examined IOs' ability to influence domestic politics by shifting public opinion through endorsements or criticisms. A key limitation, however, is that few studies test *why* voters trust some IOs more than others, particularly on issues where they already hold strong views.

This paper investigated which traits make IOs persuasive in the context of a contentious policy in Japan: raising the consumption tax. Using a preregistered survey experiment, we find that endorsements from the IMF and the G7 bolstered support for the tax hike, whereas those from the UN did not. More unexpectedly, the mechanism contradicted expectations from the IPE literature. Endorsements were more persuasive among respondents who viewed the IO as aligned with their government's interests, as was generally true of the G7, than among those who saw the endorser as politically impartial or expert. The effect was also concentrated among government partisans, suggesting that IOs may serve to consolidate support within governing coalitions rather than shift opinion among skeptics. In short, IOs can influence public opinion on deeply unpopular policies, but their effectiveness hinges on how citizens interpret the endorser's motives.

We advance the IO literature in two ways. First, we provide micro-level experimental evidence of a new, strategic benefit of belonging to IOs: they can bolster support for unpopular policies under certain conditions. The IPE literature has long theorized that IOs offer political cover to governments undertaking costly reforms, particularly during economic downturns (Mansfield and Milner, 2012). However, evidence that such endorsements sway public attitudes has been limited. Our study shows that, even on a highly polarizing issue like tax increases, endorsements from trusted IOs can meaningfully shift citizen support.

Second, we offer a new perspective on how perceived political bias shapes IO influence. While scholars have critiqued IOs for privileging the interests of powerful states (Lipscy, 2017; Davis, 2023), our findings suggest that such alignment may be seen by mass publics as a signal of shared national priorities. Japanese respondents were more receptive to endorsements from IOs they perceived as "on their side," such as the G7, than from more neutral or expert sources. Rather than treating bias as a vice, voters may view it as reassurance that the IO is not antagonistic to their country's position. For IOs aiming to influence domestic opinion, demonstrating responsiveness to national concerns may matter more than signaling

impartiality alone.

That said, we do not mean to imply that politicization is universally beneficial. Japan's standing as a wealthy democracy and major IO contributor may shield it from fears of external imposition, allowing international endorsements to be interpreted as benign. In contrast, when IOs impose conditionality under economic duress or in cases of clear divergence between national and international interests, similar interventions may trigger resentment rather than reassurance. Understanding how context shapes perceptions of IO legitimacy—whether as neutral arbiters or biased actors—is essential to evaluating their broader influence.

More broadly, understanding the scope conditions under which IOs shape public opinion continues to be an important task. We focused on a politically sensitive issue—raising the consumption tax—precisely because it tests whether IOs can sway opinion on high-salience policies. That endorsements had any effect suggests their impact could be stronger in lower-profile domains. However, IO visibility and public recognition may be weaker in such domains, limiting their persuasiveness. The G7 illustrates this tradeoff: while active across many issues, its salience may be largely confined to member states. Moreover, IOs differ in how they are perceived across contexts. Japan has been praised for macroeconomic reforms but criticized for the death penalty and commercial whaling by the EU; Russia faces UN sanctions for invading Ukraine; many Asian countries view the IMF negatively due to its role in the Asian Financial Crisis. Whether IOs can credibly shift between supportive and critical roles—and how such messages are filtered through domestic politics—remains an open question.

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