

Politicising International Organisations as Geopolitical Tools: Mass Public Opinions in the USA and China

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Abstract

Multilateralism appears increasingly contested. Especially powerful countries' creation of new international organisations as geopolitical tools has been highly politicised. Does the creation of a new institution shape public support for existing institutions? The existing literature often argues that geopolitical shifts threaten the continuation of the multilateral international liberal order. In contrast, this paper argues that the geopolitically-motivated creation of new institutions is likely to increase mass public support for traditional institutions. Especially in the context of great power competition, it expects that international institutions are seen as a key tool for advancing state interests. In original survey experiments conducted in the USA and China in October 2023 (n=2104), I find some evidence supporting these expectations. U.S. respondents are more likely to support increased funding to the traditional institution, the World Bank, when they learn about the creation and leadership of China of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. These results suggest that international cooperation can continue even in light of increasing international fragmentation and contestation.

1 Introduction

The multilateral liberal international order appears increasingly shaky as its institutions are increasingly politicised. Powerful liberal democracies, such as the United

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States, that played an elementary role in expanding the liberal order, seem increasingly reluctant to continuously support multilateralism and question whether national contributions to major IOs should be maintained (Ikenberry 2017). International organizations are politicised from two main perspectives. First, politicisation pertains to the dimension of ceding national sovereignty to a supra-national organisation. Along these lines, support for international organisations seems to be decreasing, or at least questioned, as in many important countries populist parties demanding disintegration from supra-national institutions are receiving more widespread political support (Carnergie and Clark 2023; Walter 2021).

Second, politicisation of international organisations also stems from the international dimension of international organisations as geopolitical tools. Geopolitical concerns are becoming more pronounced as other countries, questioning the legitimacy of the traditional multilateral order (Dellmuth et al. 2022), are creating new institutions. The most fundamental geopolitical development emanates from the economic rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). As China has grown economically from a poor developing country to a more developed economy in the past few decades, China increasingly seeks to shape the multilateral order in its favour. Along these lines, China has transitioned from merely joining existing institutions to spearheading the creation of new institutions (Frick 2021). The creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to offer an alternative to World Bank development funding for developing countries is a case in point. Increasingly, as the relative balance of power between the world’s two largest economies is shifting (Nguyen, Sattler, and Schweinberger 2023), China seeks opportunities to shape global governance by shifting international standards and rules (Nye Jr 2021). China’s international activities are becoming more politicised and are increasingly scrutinised (Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023). Thereby, international organisations become politicised as a geopolitical tool of a specific country rather than multilateral organisation.

The case of China and the AIIB raises some more general questions which have not received sufficient attention in the literature on international organisations yet: What are the consequences of perceiving international organisations as geopolitical tools? More specifically, how does the creation of new institutions by China, like the AIIB, shape mass public support for traditional institutions, like the World Bank? Even though the latter question has not been empirically examined from a public opinion perspective yet, some important literature highlights how international organisations are geopolitical tools of countries. Whilst functional institutionalism expects geopolitics to play a secondary role as opposed to states’ functional needs, distributive institutionalism argues that state power and geopolitics are more important in determining outcomes in the context of multilateral cooperation (Pratt 2021; Krasner 1991; Zangl et al. 2016). For instance, geopolitical alignment shapes states’ withdrawals from IOs (Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019), as well as conditions of WTO entry (Davis and Wilf 2017) and the propensity of different IOs to pool resources (Clark 2021). Along these lines, some studies on public opinion have discovered that U.S. citizens care about geopolitical ties with respect to UN agency funding (Lim and Oh 2022) and conservatives support higher World Bank funding to maintain U.S. influence (Brutger and Clark 2023).

Complementing and expanding upon this literature highlighting the importance of geopolitical relations for multilateral cooperation, I argue that the creation of new institutions by a power competitor bolsters public support for established institutions because individuals seek to uphold their country's influence on the global stage. International organisations become an arena for power competition, and, in such a politicised context, are mainly seen as geopolitical tools. When institutions are viewed as geopolitical tools of the leading country, support for the IO is likely to be higher than when the organisation is merely portrayed as multilateral. Applied to the U.S.-China case, this implies that individuals from the mass public are more likely to support established U.S.-led institutions, like the World Bank, when China creates and leads a rival institution like the AIIB.

I test these expectations with original survey experiments conducted in October 2023 with citizens from the United States and the PRC ($n=2104$). I focus on these two countries because, due to China's expanding material capabilities, the U.S. and China are increasingly engaged in geopolitical competition. The experiments leverage the real-world case of the AIIB and the World Bank. Whilst the World Bank, like the AIIB, is officially a multilateral institution, it is often times argued that it predominantly represents U.S. interests (Clark and Dolan 2021). The creation of the AIIB has been highly politicised (Pratt 2021) as an organisation that was created by China and predominantly serves Chinese interests (Yang and Van Gorp 2019). Correspondingly, the treatments are information about American and/or Chinese leadership within these two multilateral organisations. The main outcome variable is support for the established institution, in this case the World Bank. Moreover, with a range of socio-economic and political individual-level information, I examine treatment effect heterogeneity.

Amongst U.S. respondents, the main finding encompasses that geopolitics increases support for the established institution. U.S. respondents' support for the World Bank is highest when they receive information about U.S. and Chinese leadership in these IOs, which is statistically significantly different from the control group mentioning that both organisations are multilateral. When both Chinese and American IO leadership are mentioned, geopolitical concerns are the most pronounced and thereby respondents are more likely to increase their support for the World Bank. When examining treatment effect heterogeneity, I find that individuals who believe that the U.S. will remain the most important future economic power, as opposed to China, are more likely to support higher World Bank funding, further supporting the notion that individuals from the mass public care about their country maintaining international influence. Overall, the results suggest that geopolitical concerns are important for increasing World Bank funding support.

Whilst geopolitical concerns also seem to play a role for responses from the Chinese sample, their effects manifest differently than amongst U.S. respondents as country leadership of both the AIIB and the World Bank decrease IO funding support. First, Chinese respondents' average support for more World Bank funding in the baseline is much higher than U.S. respondents. When mentioning any form of country leadership

in the treatments, average support for more World Bank funding decreases. When looking at marginal treatment effects, with the multilateral control group as the baseline, it appears that Chinese respondents support decreases as soon as the U.S. is mentioned. As the Chinese leadership treatment in the AIIB and the control group do not differ statistically significantly from each other, this could imply that Chinese respondents assume that their country plays an important role generally. Like amongst U.S. responses, Chinese respondents' support for the IO is also higher when China is perceived to be the leading economic power in the future.

Overall, these results suggest that geopolitics have important consequences for IO support which differ according to the specific relative power situation of the country. Whilst they increase support for more cooperation in the U.S. case, geopolitics slightly decrease support for more IO funding in the Chinese case. This shows that the power context might be crucial. Since the former U.S. administration under Donald Trump began one of the largest trade wars in modern history, U.S.-China power competition is increasingly mentioned in the domestic U.S., as well as Chinese, public discourse. As the rising power, Chinese citizens general support for increasing World Bank funding is much higher than their American counterparts. However, their high level of support becomes lower when the U.S., the other great power, is mentioned. This might be due to the recent tensions in U.S.-China relations and the desire to avoid further escalation involving specifically the U.S..

This research has important implications for assessing the effects of geopolitics on the survival of the liberal international order. Whilst geopolitics are often perceived to hinder and even harm international cooperation, this may not necessarily be the case in the realm of mass public support for international organisations, even if cooperation becomes an instrumental tool for advancing geopolitical objectives. As the results from the U.S. sample show, competing organisations and rival leadership can even increase public support for further institutional funding as individuals care about national influence and interests. Hence, at least in the U.S. context, international power dynamics might have the potential to mitigate domestic populist threats to multilateralism.

2 Politicising IOs as Geopolitical Tools

International organisations are becoming increasingly contested and politicised. Frequently, populist politicians blame IOs for domestic problems and portray them as “elitist, globalist, and foreign” (Kaya, Handlin, and Günaydin 2020). Whilst populist contestations of multilateralism are emerging around the world (Walter 2021), recent developments from the United States, the country that invested, as well as benefited, the most from institutionalised cooperation, are striking (Webb and Krasner 1989). The United States, especially under the presidency of Donald Trump, began withdrawing its support from many important international regimes, such as the Paris Agreement, UNESCO, as well as the Nuclear Agreement regarding Iran, as well as openly questioning U.S. support for organisations like NATO. These domestic developments

have unfolded as U.S. public opinion about international organisations has worsened over time (Brutger and Clark 2023; Bearce and Jolliff Scott 2019).

Although media reports frequently politicise and portray international organisations like the AIIB as a geopolitical tool, this international dimension of politicisation has received less attention in the academic literature on the backlash against multilateralism. At the same time, China was adamant in advancing and creating the AIIB as a multilateral organisation that adheres to standard international principles. Clearly, public discourse on the AIIB differs. Nonetheless, the AIIB is commonly argued to be China-led (Yang and Van Gorp 2019). This implies that the organisation predominantly represents Chinese interests and seeks to expand Chinese influence and power in global investment governance (Subacchi 2015). Although most of its allies joined the organisation, the USA did not become part of the AIIB. The creation of the AIIB is often seen as a response to U.S.-led organisations, such as the World Bank.

Moving beyond the specific case of the AIIB, what does politicising an IO as a geopolitical tool of a country imply for IO support? Rather than being created as a multilateral organisation to effectively address an international challenge, this view suggests that IOs are used by more powerful countries as international tools to achieve their political objectives. There is substantial empirical evidence supporting this view. Like Clark and Dolan (2021) and Pratt (2021) argue, country leadership within an IO is crucial and determines institutional outcomes regarding, for example, institutional proliferation and loan conditions in the context of the World Bank.

Along these lines, some emerging economies, whilst supporting LIO institutions in some instances, also question the current international orders' legitimacy (Tallberg 2021; Stephen and Zürn 2014). Key amongst these countries is the PRC, as it represents the most important rising power from an economic and political perspective (Donno and Rudra 2019). Thereby, China and the U.S. are increasingly engaged in power competition (Nguyen, Sattler, and Schweinberger 2023). As populists become increasingly powerful in some important Western democratic countries and demand withdrawing support for international organisations, this results in a political void that emerging powers like China can potentially leverage in their favour (Carnegie and Clark 2023). Overall, it appears that geopolitics and power competition make the maintenance of the liberal international order and its institutions more difficult.

This raises the more general question of whether and how the institutional landscape changes when power shifts occur. In the literature on the adaptation of the international order, there are three main theoretical perspectives (Zangl et al. 2016). First, functional institutionalism expects that institutions are created due to states' common interests in solving a given problem (Zangl et al. 2016). This perspective assumes that institutionalised cooperation makes states' better off even if some aspects of institutional design are contested (Keohane 1984). Second, historical institutionalism argues that, once created, international organisations are difficult to change and the overall order is slow to adapt to power changes due to lock-in effects (Fioretos 2011). Even if both perspectives do not deny that geopolitical concerns exist, these two logics of functional efficiency and path-dependency do not expect the institutional order to be

predominantly shaped by geopolitical relations and power politics.

In contrast, distributive institutionalism emphasises that geopolitical changes play a key role in shaping the institutional order. More powerful countries' interests are argued to be better reflected within international institutions than less powerful countries interests as bargaining power determines outcomes (Krasner 1991; Pratt 2021). International conflict, at least in the long-term, is more likely to occur when institutional arrangements do not accurately reflect international power distributions (Carr 2016; Allison 2017). Thereby, when a new power emerges, from a normative perspective, this change should not be ignored. Either the rising power will seek changes within traditional institutions or/and engage in creating new institutions on top of existing ones (Stephen and Zürn 2014)¹. The latter appears to be the case of China's creation of the AIIB as another multilateral development bank in addition to the World Bank (Pratt 2021).

There are a couple of empirical studies that highlight the importance of geopolitical relations between countries for multilateral cooperation outcomes, especially within multilateral economic organisations. Some existing literature has focussed on the influence of geopolitical alignment between states. For example, Clark (2021) shows that important stakeholders' geopolitical alignment makes pooling resources between IOs more likely. Similarly, Davis and Pratt (2021) reveal that, both during the formation and enlargement stages of IGOs, geopolitical discrimination occurs, so that states with a higher (lower) degree of foreign policy similarity increases (decreases) the probability of states IO accession. Focussing on exits from IOs, Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019) find that preference divergence between states and contagion by a lead state are important for explaining why countries leave IOs.

Power shifts, a key dimension of geopolitics, moreover shape IO creation, especially when this results in overlapping IOs within the same issue area. Pratt (2021) argues and demonstrates empirically that new institutions in the same issue area are more likely to be created when existing institutions do not adapt to national power shifts. As emphasised from a historical institutionalist perspective, institutions are "sticky", so that power misalignment occurs. Under-represented states are likely to respond to such misalignments by demanding institutional changes which will grant them more control within the organisation. When such bargaining processes fail, states are likely to create new overlapping IOs. The case of the creation of the AIIB in addition to the World Bank within the issue area of development banking appears illustrative in this context.

Whilst studies at the aggregate level of analysis have thereby repeatedly highlighted geopolitical factors in the context of multilateral economic cooperation, geopolitical concerns have received less attention from an individual public opinion perspective. Generally, public opinion research on IOs has explored the importance of a variety of factors encompassing material and non-material concerns. For example, individual skill level predicts to what extent individuals support globalisation more generally

¹The creation of informal IGOs can be also important in the context of power shifts (Vabulas and Snidal 2020)

and thereby how they perceive IOs (Bearce and Jolliff Scott 2019). In a larger book project, Dellmuth et al. (2022) explore systematically how views from elites and the mass public differ with regards to the legitimacy of international organisations. They identify and find evidence for four complementary sources of legitimacy perceptions: socio-economic status, socio-tropic considerations, ideological orientations, and trust. These factors are important for understanding the “baseline” level of support, i.e. an individuals’ support for a multilateral organisation.

Whilst building upon these seminal contributions, this paper shifts the emphasis on how attitudes change when the IO is geopolitical rather than multilateral. In this context, country creation and leadership within an IO is crucial. The current literature does not sufficiently account for the importance of geopolitical concerns for public IO support by not examining whether the creation of new IOs by a rival power shape public IO support. Thereby, the literature is somewhat lagging behind the new empirical reality in which new organisations are increasingly created by rival powers. Especially in a context of power competition, international interactions and organisations can be more widely seen as an arena for political influence (Brutger and Clark 2023) and great power competition. As Lim and Oh (2022) argue, competitive cooperation is possible when a rival country participates within the same organisation. Along these lines, the U.S. recently decided to rejoin and increase UNESCO funding to counter Chinese influence (Charlton and Lee 2023). Likewise, Brutger and Clark (2023) show that U.S. citizens with a conservative ideology seek to maintain their country’s influence by supporting increases of U.S. funding for the World Bank.

Why should citizens views for IO support be examined? I argue that public opinion needs to be taken into consideration due to the high levels of politicisation of various dimensions of cooperation ranging from trade cooperation to international organisations. As both in the U.S. and China, power competition is increasingly highlighted in public discourse, it becomes important to gain a better understanding of the consequences of emphasising geopolitics and power competition. Whilst multilateralism is commonly regarded as a topic rather distant and abstract for members of the mass public, I argue that this may be different for the specific U.S.-China context in which the debate is not about multilateralism per se but about which country will become more powerful. On a more general level, public opinion shapes decision-making in various ways in different political systems. In a democracy like the U.S., the key channel is via electoral accountability as politicians seek re-election and therefore pursue policies that align more with median voter preferences. In China, although there are no elections and thereby politician selection cannot occur, public opinion can constrain foreign policy by politicians’ responsiveness to the public (Li 2022). Despite representing a non-democracy, politicians of the Chinese Communist Party seek to remain in power which is much more difficult without some degree of public support (Distelhorst and Hou 2017).

On these grounds, for the U.S.-China context, I argue that the creation of another “new” organisation may increase public support for the “old” international organisation, even in a context of public wariness of international organisations. Thus, the perception of an IO as a geopolitical tool can actually increase international organisa-

tion support. This is likely to be the case especially in the context of China’s creation and leadership within the AIIB, which was created in 2016 as an alternative institution to the World Bank to finance infrastructure projects in developing countries. The organisation has been highly scrutinised as concerns about the organisation as a geopolitical tool of China have been raised. Recent research has shown that countries which would have previously turned to the World Bank have become more likely to turn to the AIIB (Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023). The World Bank is often argued to be U.S.-led (Clark and Dolan 2021) and China’s creation of the AIIB has frequently been justified in terms of addressing the limited representation of China within the World Bank and the IMF (Pratt 2021).

Based on this discussion of these theoretical perspectives and the case of the AIIB and the World Bank and U.S.-China power competition, I expect the following:

- H1: Another country’s creation and leadership of an IO is likely to shape public support of a similar IO.
- H1a: Another country’s creation and leadership of an IO is likely to increase public support for an IO led by the own country.

3 Research design

I test these hypotheses with survey experiments in the United States and China. I focus on these two countries for the following reasons. First, they represent the largest economic powers in the world. Second, as China has grown tremendously in economic terms in the past few decades, they are engaged in political competition. Thereby, China has moved from joining U.S.-created organisations to creating its own organisations. The case of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, that has been created as an alternative to the American-led World Bank, is an ideal real-world case to test my expectations about geopolitics and public support for international organisations.

Given that I am interested in this specific case of American and Chinese IO creation and leadership, the treatments are based on real-world information about both organisations. I thereby exploit that in the current empirical reality, there are different perspectives about both organisations, with some views emphasising the competitiveness angle more than the multilateral nature (Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023), and vice versa (Yang and Van Gorp 2019), of both organisations. The control group encompasses the multilateral perspective on both organisations. In order to represent a more balanced account to the respondents highlighting both competition and cooperation between both organisations, the text reads as follows:

- Control: “The newly created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the World Bank are two multilateral development banks that aim to improve economic and social outcomes in developing countries. On the one hand, both banks compete with each other as the creation of the AIIB has led to a decrease of infrastructure projects funded by the World Bank. On the other hand, both

institutions also cooperate with each other. For example, the World Bank and AIIB signed a Cooperation Framework.”

All respondents receive the above text, however, with some systematic variation regarding the leadership of each organisation. For instance, T1/T2 reads as follows:

- T1: “The newly created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the World Bank are two multilateral development banks that aim to improve economic and social outcomes in developing countries. *The AIIB was created in 2016, under the leadership of the People’s Republic of China./The World Bank was created in 1944, under the leadership of the United States of America.* On the one hand, both banks compete with each other as the creation of the AIIB has led to a decrease of infrastructure projects funded by the World Bank. On the other hand, both institutions also cooperate with each other. For example, the World Bank and AIIB signed a Cooperation Framework.”

T3 represents a combination of T1 and T2, so that respondents are informed about the leadership roles of both countries for both organisations. The table below represents an overview of the different treatment groups.

| | USA | China |
|----|-------------------|-------------------|
| T0 | WB Multilateral | WB Multilateral |
| | AIIB Multilateral | AIIB Multilateral |
| T1 | WB Multilateral | WB Multilateral |
| | AIIB China-led | AIIB China-led |
| T2 | WB US-led | WB US-led |
| | AIIB Multilateral | AIIB Multilateral |
| T3 | WB US-led | WB US-led |
| | AIIB China-led | AIIB China-led |

For the main outcome variable, I follow Brutger and Clark (2023) by asking “Do you believe the United States’ funding for the World Bank should increase, decrease, or stay the same?”. Respondents can answer this question by either selecting “Decrease”, “Increase” or “Stay the same”. After asking this, to understand respondents’ funding choice better, I also ask a couple of other questions about the World Bank. On a scale from 0 to 100, I ask respondents to what extent they agree with regard to the following statements on (1) the transparency of decision-making within the organisation (input legitimacy), (2) the organisations ability to effectively improve prosperity in developing countries (output legitimacy) and (3) the organisation as a geopolitical tool of the leading country.

Before conducting the experiment, I ask a range of socio-economic and political variables, including age, gender, region as well as partisanship, the most important future economic power and isolationism. The samples were collected online with the

survey framework Qualtrics in collaboration with the survey company Dynata. Dynata ensured that the samples were representative for two key dimensions age and gender. The samples were collected in October 2023.

4 Results

Overall, another country’s creation and leadership of a new organisation shapes IO support. It appears that geopolitics play an important role in increasing IO support responses amongst U.S. citizens. For Chinese citizens, however, the opposite is the case as information about country leadership decreases public support for the IO in China even if the effect is rather small.

Figure 1 shows the average responses according to the four treatment groups. The outcome variable is support for increasing national funding to the World Bank. The outcome variable is coded as 1 for “increase”, 0 for “stay the same” and -1 for “decrease”. First, this figure shows that this sample of U.S. citizens is generally not highly supportive of increasing World Bank funding. Most citizens (448) opted for the option for World Bank funding to stay the same. Interestingly, the information treatments pertaining to the creation and leadership of the U.S. or China do not entail a statistically significantly different response from the control group, cf. Figure 2. Only when the leadership and creation of both IOs by both countries is mentioned, respondents support increasing funding. This supports the notion that geopolitical concerns, which are inherently about the interaction of two countries, are important for increasing IO support. Power competition between the U.S. and China appears key in explaining increased funding support for the “old” organisation.

The results from China suggest that Chinese citizens IO support follows a different logic, cf. Figure 3. First, Chinese citizens average support for increasing IO funding is much higher than amongst U.S. citizens. The majority of respondents (501) support increasing World Bank funding, which represents nearly 50 percentage points more compared to U.S. responses. Second, keeping in mind that IO support is comparatively high, it is interesting that creation and leadership of the other country actually entails support for decreasing IO funding². Instead of increasing public support for more IO funding, Chinese citizens public support diminishes, especially when informed about the creation and leadership of the U.S. of the World Bank. Moreover, even though this effect does not differ statistically significantly from the control group, cf. Figure 4, the respondents are more hesitant to increase IO funding when both countries IO activities are mentioned.

How could these differences be explained? Amongst citizens from both countries, another country’s IO activity plays a role in shaping institutional support. This supports H1. However, H1a is much more supported by the findings from the U.S. sample

²In the survey, I also ask for Chinese citizens’ support for increased funding for the AIIB. Interestingly, the results are largely similar with World Bank funding support, cf. Appendix Figure 16.

Mean support for funding WB across experimental groups – U.S. citizens

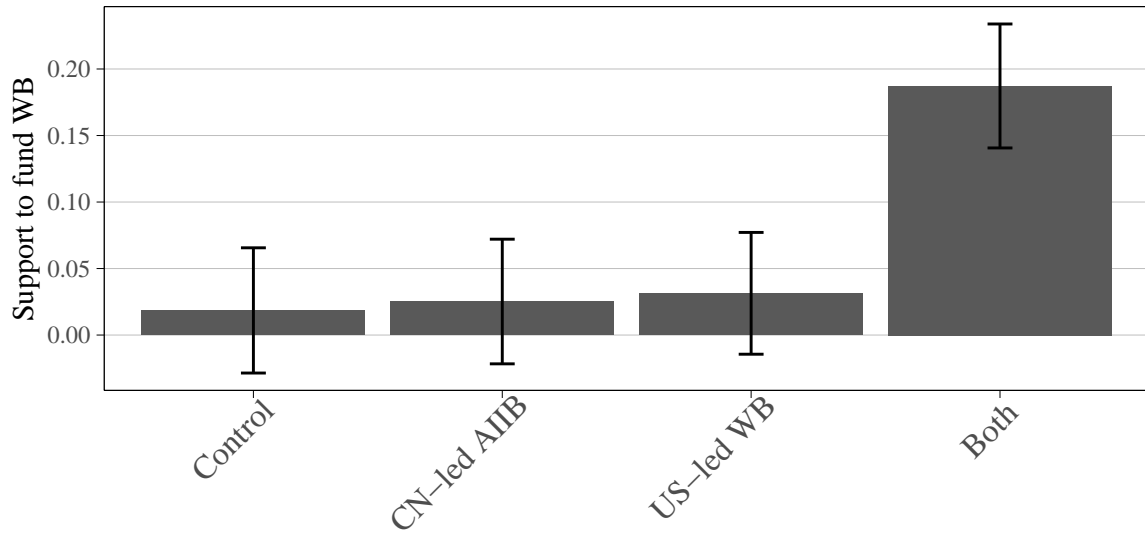


Figure 1: U.S. citizens support to fund the World Bank (WB). Response to question “Do you believe the United States’ funding for the World Bank should increase, decrease, or stay the same?” coded on a three-point scale: 1 for “increase”, 0 for “stay the same” and -1 for “decrease”

Marginal effects compared to control group – U.S. citizens

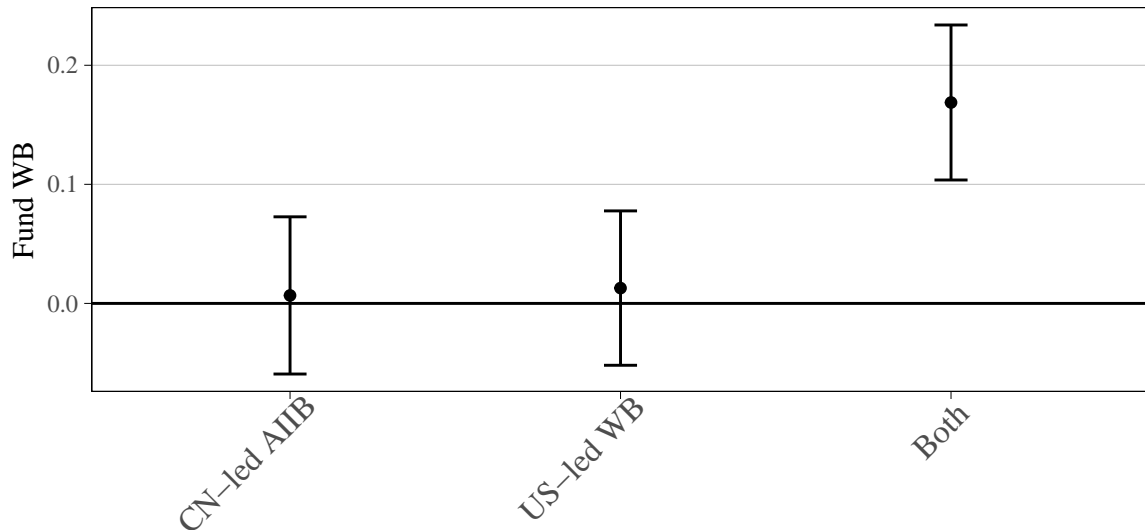


Figure 2: U.S. citizens support to fund the World Bank (WB). Response to question “Do you believe the United States’ funding for the World Bank should increase, decrease, or stay the same?” coded on a three-point scale: 1 for “increase”, 0 for “stay the same” and -1 for “decrease”. The control is the multilateral baseline (not shown.)

Mean support for funding WB across experimental groups – Chinese citizens

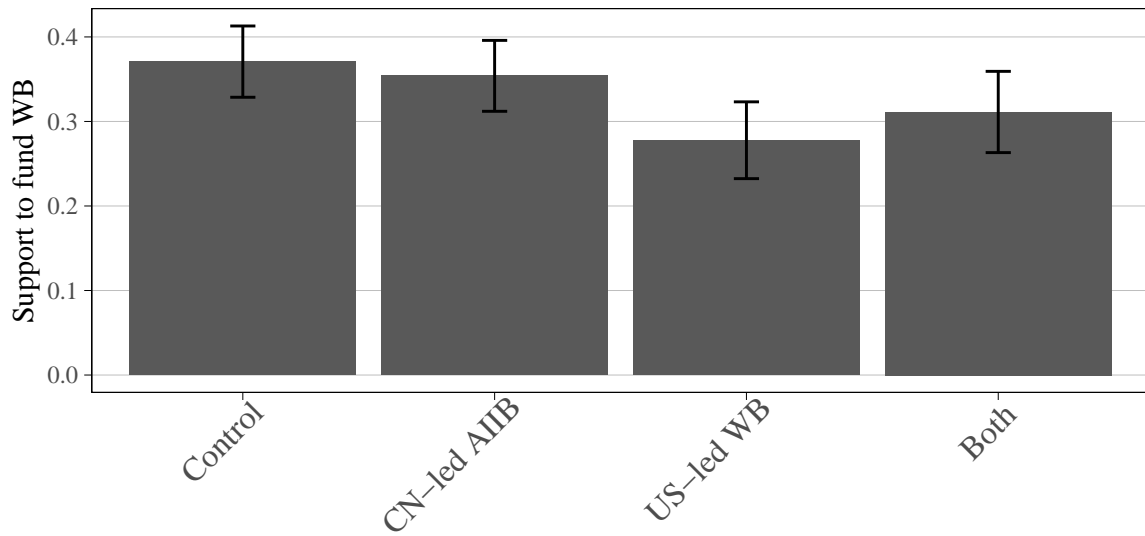


Figure 3: Chinese citizens support to fund the World Bank (WB). Response to question “Do you believe China’s funding for the World Bank should increase, decrease, or stay the same?” coded on a three-point scale: 1 for “increase”, 0 for “stay the same” and -1 for “decrease”

Marginal effects compared to control group – Chinese citizens

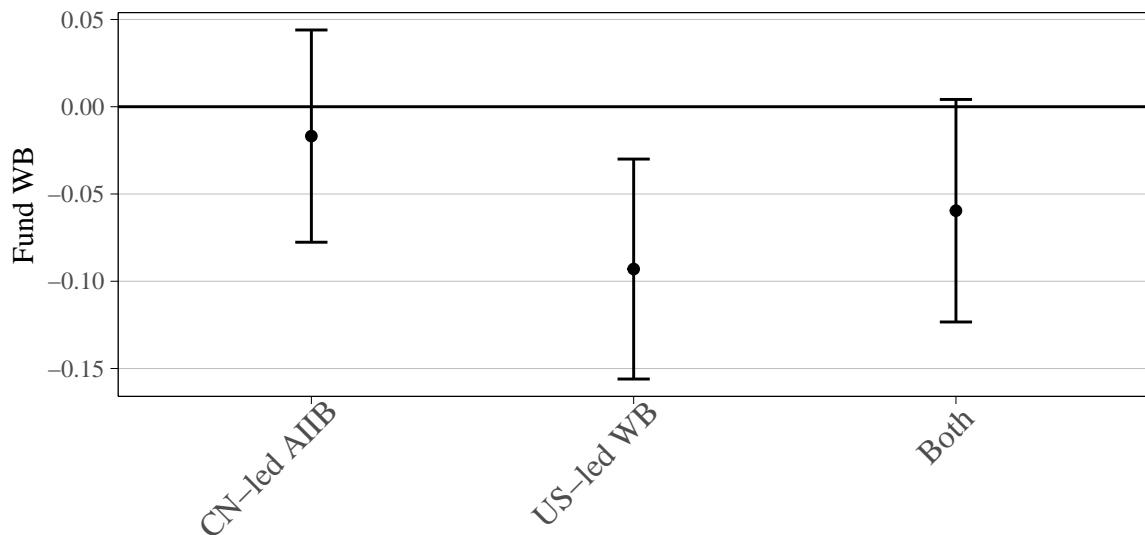


Figure 4: Chinese citizens support to fund the World Bank (WB). Response to question “Do you believe China’s funding for the World Bank should increase, decrease, or stay the same?” coded on a three-point scale: 1 for “increase”, 0 for “stay the same” and -1 for “decrease”. The control is the multilateral baseline (not shown.)

than the sample from China. At this point, it seems that increased IO support for geopolitical reasons may only pertain to the U.S. case. Given that U.S. power is often argued to be in relative decline to Chinese power, U.S. citizens are more likely to use IOs as an arena for geopolitical competition than their Chinese counterparts. In China, at the moment, due to the trade war and other tensions with the U.S., calls for “De-americanisation” are becoming more active. The Chinese approach seems to support be directed towards avoiding further direct confrontation with the U.S. so that China can continuously rise economically.

These impressions are supported by looking at the responses to the other outcome variables in Figures 6 and 5. This set of figures is based on the interaction between the treatments and the question of to what extent the World Bank is perceived as a geopolitical tool by the leading country. The outcome variable is the same as in the figures discussed above. Amongst U.S. responses, support for increased World Bank funding is consistently higher when geopolitical concerns predominate. The opposite is the case for Chinese responses in the treatment group in which both the U.S. and China’s IO activities are mentioned.

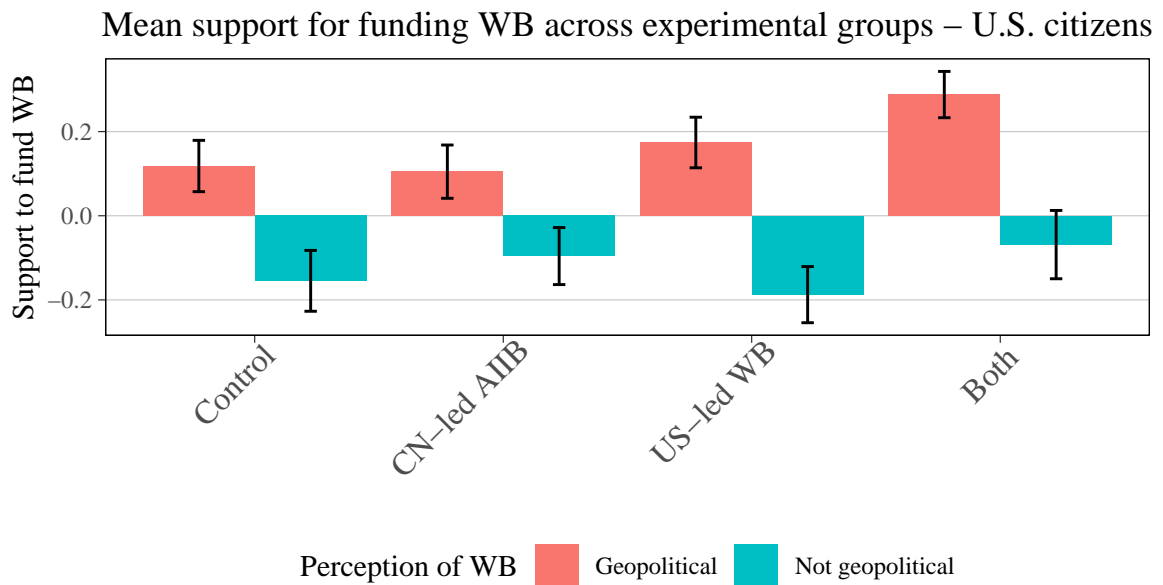


Figure 5: Marginal effects of U.S. support to fund WB compared to control group.

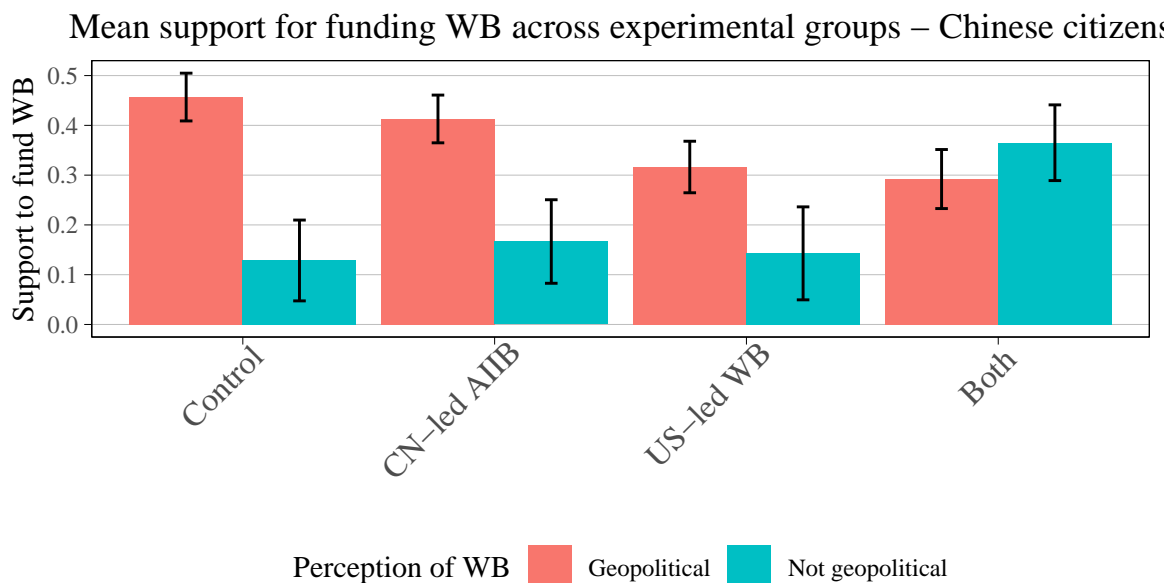


Figure 6: Marginal effects of Chinese support to fund WB compared to control group.

4.1 Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

To complement the existing literature on public support for IOs, I conduct a set of analyses exploring how the interaction effect between the treatment and the individual-level attribute shapes the response. I explore the degree of treatment effect heterogeneity for partisanship, isolationism, nationalism, education and the belief about who will be the most important economic power in the future.

In both countries, individuals with higher levels of education are more supportive of increasing World Bank funding. Across all treatments, individuals with a graduate degree are more likely to support IO funding increases, which aligns with the findings from Bearce and Jolliff Scott (2019). Interestingly, amongst U.S. citizens, the difference between individuals with low and high levels of education becomes the most pronounced in the treatment group with mentions both U.S. and Chinese IO activities. Thus, at least in the case of U.S. citizens, more educated citizens are more likely to respond to power competition and geopolitical concerns.

I also explore how partisanship shapes responses from the U.S. Respondents self-identifying as democrats are more likely to support World Bank funding increases across all treatment groups. This is somewhat at odds with the finding from Brutger and Clark (2023). Perhaps this difference can be explained by the focus of the study on more general U.S. influence, which potentially differs from this study focussing on the U.S.-China case. In this context, it is also interesting to note that the difference between democrats and republicans is the most pronounced in the control group but that these differences become statistically insignificant in the China IO leadership treatment. Along these lines, it matters less what party an individual supports when China’s IO activities are highlighted.

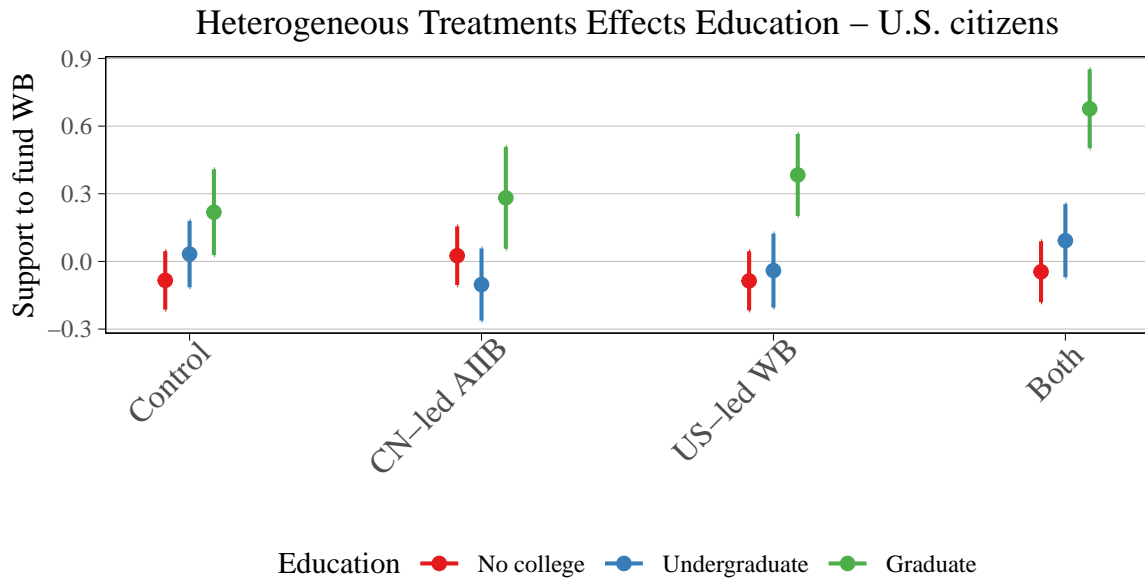


Figure 7: Heterogeneous treatment effects of education on U.S. support to fund WB.

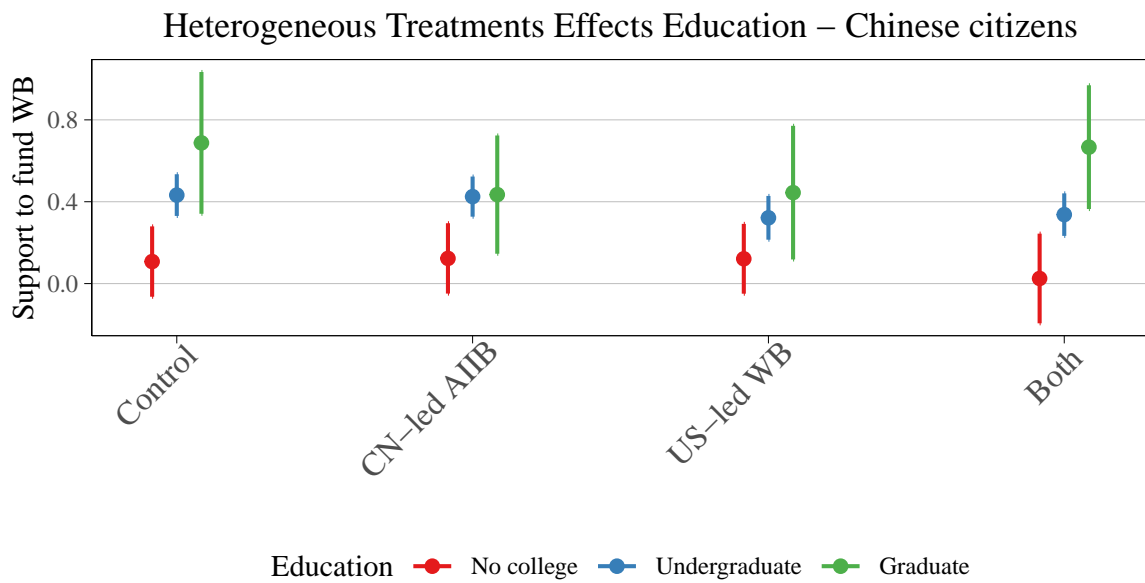


Figure 8: Heterogeneous treatment effects of education on Chinese support to fund WB.

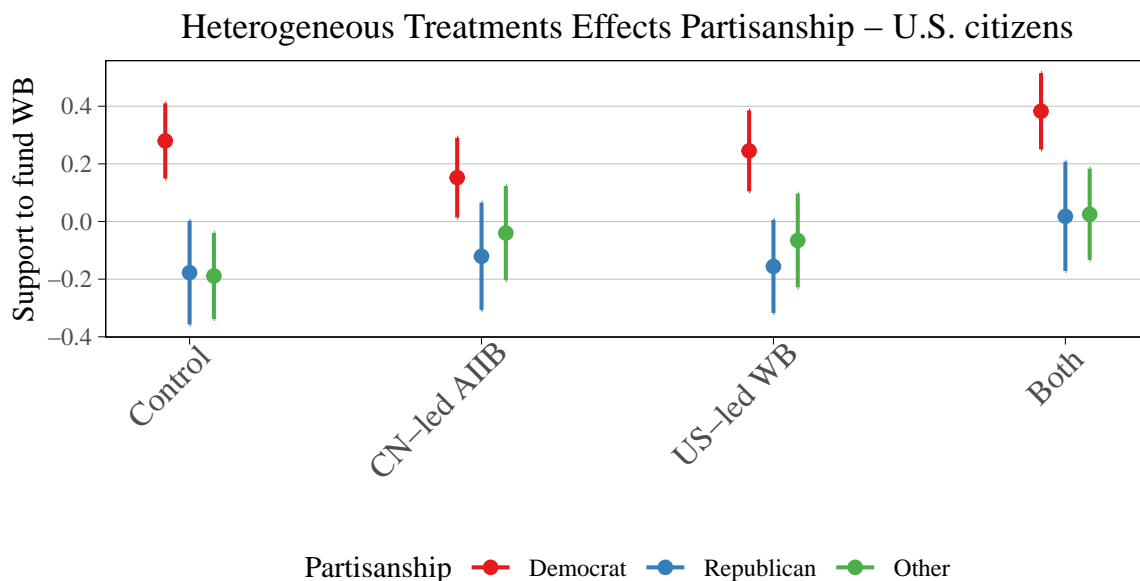


Figure 9: Heterogeneous treatment effects of partisanship on U.S. support to fund WB.

As isolationism has often been argued to be important with regard to IO support³, I examine how this individual-level attribute shapes the responses to the treatments. Interestingly, even though the differences are not statistically significantly different, more isolationist individuals are more likely to support increases in World Bank funding. Amongst U.S. respondents, the degree of treatment effect heterogeneity seems to diminish the more country IO activities are mentioned. In China, the only statistically significantly different responses are in the control and both group. It is not clear why more isolationist individual prefer World Bank funding increases. Thus, more research on this dimension is necessary.

Another related, however distinct, concept is nationalism⁴. Similar to the findings for isolationism, I find that more nationalist individuals are more supportive of increasing IO funding and that the differences disappear when China’s creation of the AIIB is mentioned. Amongst Chinese citizens, there is no statistically significant treatment effect heterogeneity across all treatment groups.

Finally, I also examine how power perceptions of China and the U.S. shape the responses. Before the experiments, I ask respondents who will be the most important economic power in the next five to ten years. Respondents have the possibility to select a country from a list of six countries. Overall, citizens from both the U.S. and

³I measure isolationism with the following survey item: “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: This country would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world.”. Respondents have the option to click Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree or Don’t know

⁴I measure nationalism with the following survey item: “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: In the U.S.7China, our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others”. Respondents have the option to click Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree or Don’t know

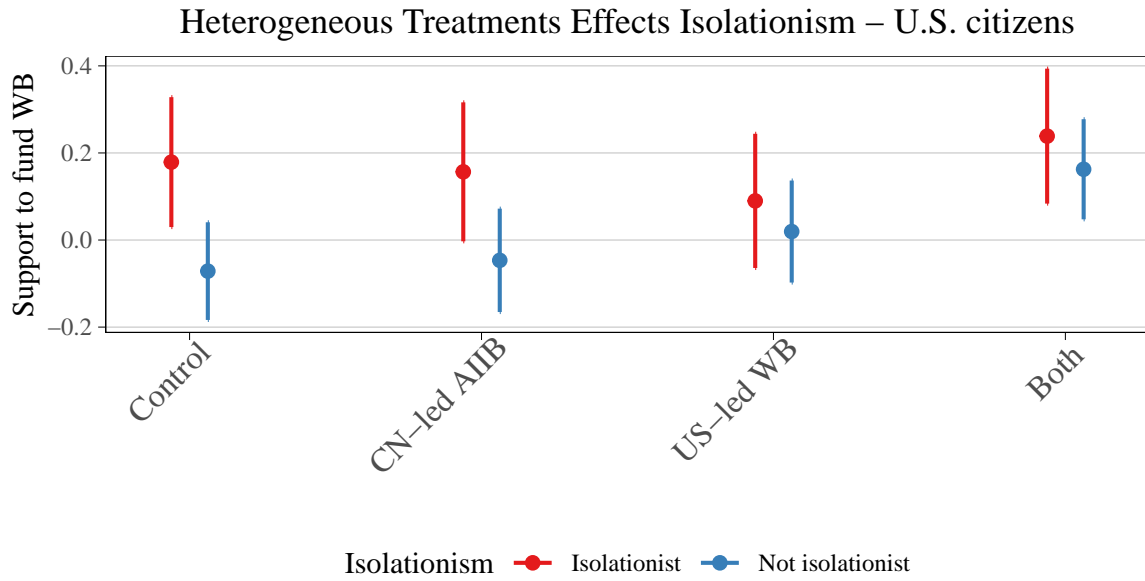


Figure 10: Heterogeneous treatment effects of isolationism on U.S. support to fund WB.

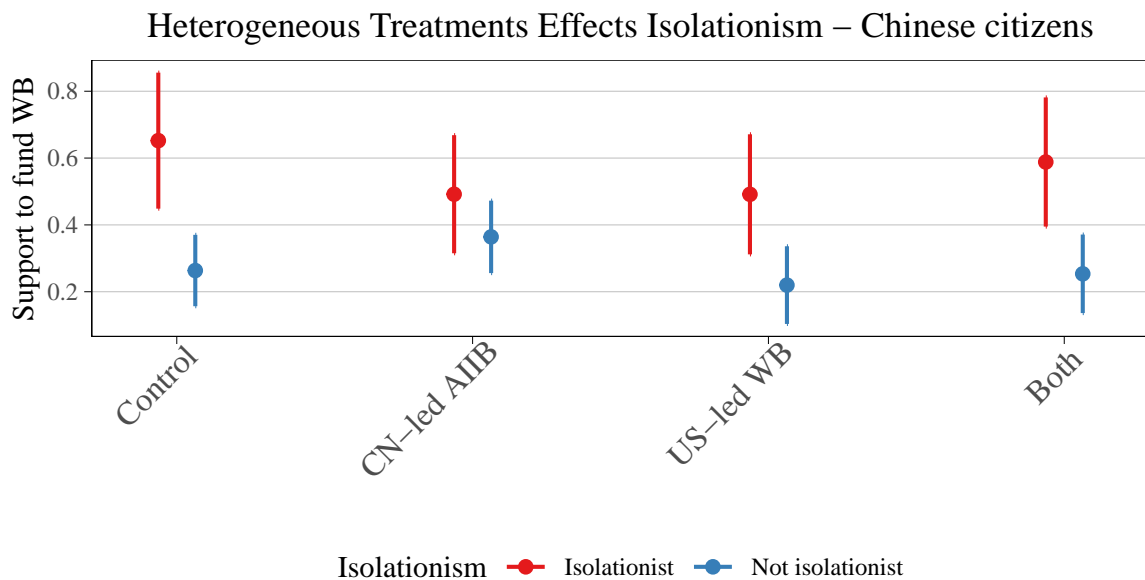


Figure 11: Heterogeneous treatment effects of isolationism on Chinese support to fund WB.

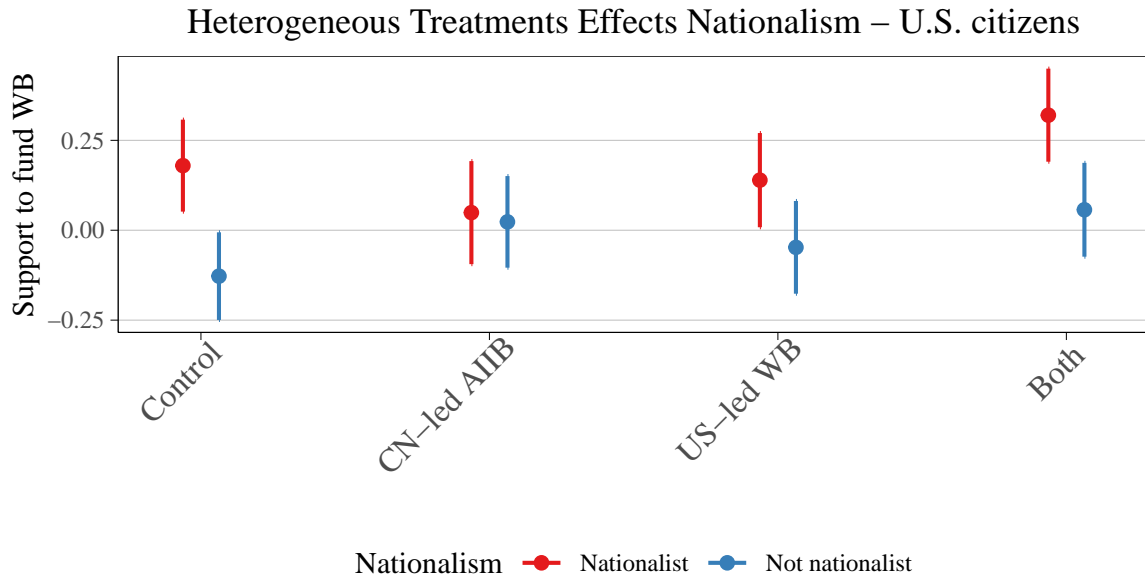


Figure 12: Heterogeneous treatment effects of nationalism on U.S. support to fund WB.

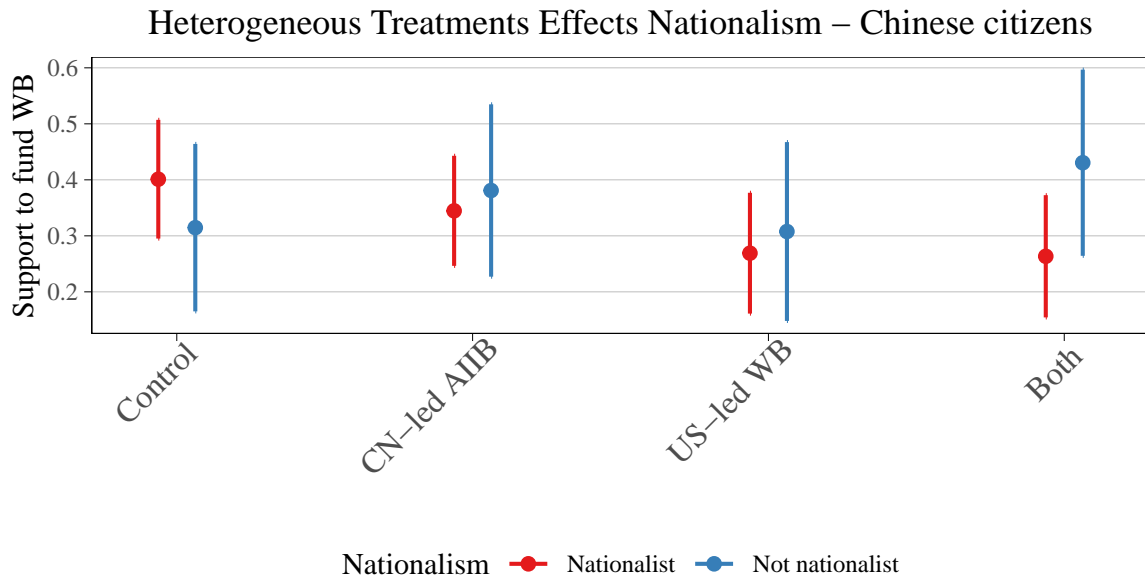


Figure 13: Heterogeneous treatment effects of nationalism on Chinese support to fund WB.

China seem to be more supportive of IO funding increases when their own country is perceived as the leading future power. Thereby, power views are important for understanding IO support.

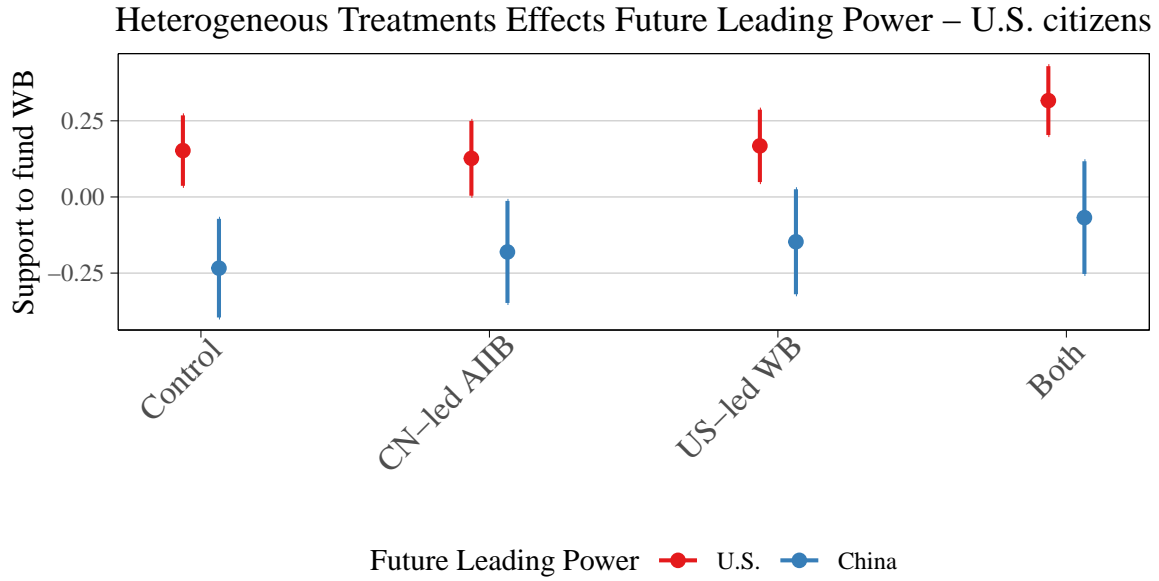


Figure 14: Heterogeneous treatment effects of expected future leading power on U.S. support to fund WB.

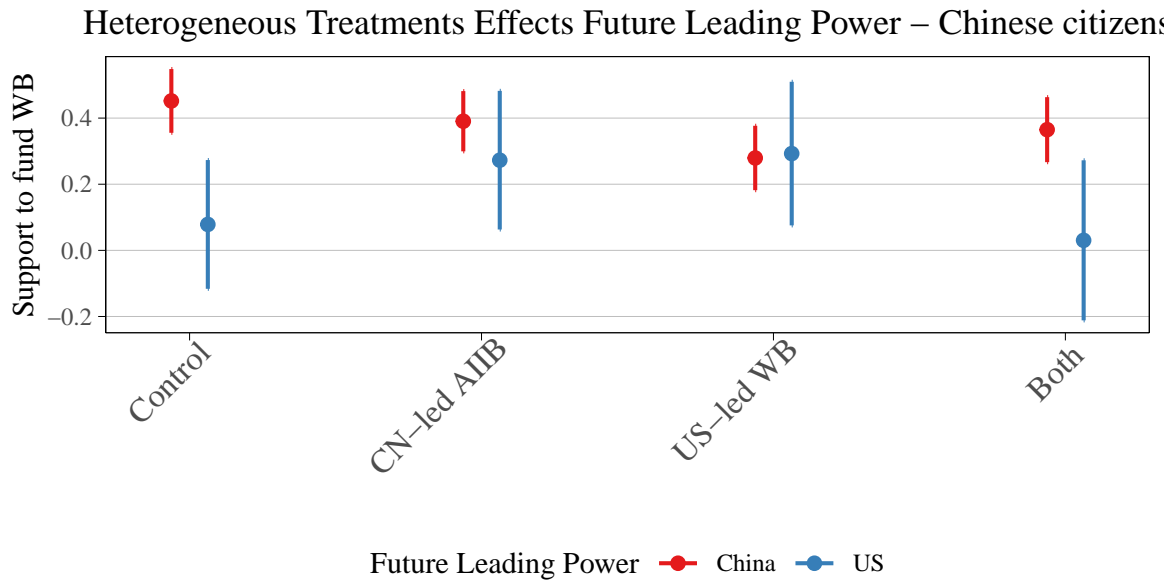


Figure 15: Heterogeneous treatment effects of expected future leading power on Chinese support to fund WB.

In sum, when exploring treatment effect heterogeneity, a range of socio-economic, as well as political variables are important for understanding support for more IO funding. Complementing the existing literature, I find that the level of education is important for explaining variation in IO funding support. Interestingly, I find that individuals who are more isolationist and nationalist are more inclined to increase IO funding. This is a striking finding given the decreasing levels of support for IOs, especially in the U.S. context. Thereby, it appears that individuals, who would usually not support

higher levels of IO funding, are more likely to support IOs when geopolitics and power concerns become more eminent.

5 Conclusion

This paper examines how geopolitics shape mass public international organisation support in the U.S. and China. Increasingly, the multilateral order is not just pressured from within, i.e. from key member states like the U.S. who created a network of international institutions, but also from beyond as rival countries, like China, questioning the legitimacy of the traditional organisations, are investing resources towards creating new international organisations. The case of the AIIB and the World Bank are a case in point, as both organisations have frequently been argued to disproportionately benefit the leading country. Whilst the geopolitical dimension features prominently in current IO politicisation, it has received less attention in IO public opinion research. This paper argues that geopolitical concerns shape IO support by enforcing the view of IOs as arenas of power competition and international influence. Thus, individuals seek to maintain or even increase national power via IO participation. With the case of the Chinese-led AIIB and the U.S.-led World-Bank in mind, it argues that power perceptions ultimately have the potential to increase public IO support.

With original survey experiments amongst citizens of the two most important powers and economies, I test these expectations about politicising IOs as geopolitical tools. Whilst I find support for my expectation about increased IO support amongst U.S. citizens, Chinese citizens' support for the IO decreases to a small degree. However, importantly, Chinese general support for the IO is much higher than American support, even the highest average effects are compared to the lowest. This suggests that Chinese citizens are less supportive of IOs as soon as they are perceived as less multilateral. Given recent U.S.-China tensions, for example in trade politics, this finding may also reflect the desire to antagonise the other power less so that international China's rise and economic development can continue.

This paper offers the following contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, it is the first study to consider the consequences of the creation of new IOs on public support for existing IOs. As China, as well as other emerging powers, are likely to increase their IO activities especially by creating new IOs, this dimension requires more attention.

Second, it uses the setting of the real-world case cooperation and competition between the AIIB and the World Bank thereby addressing a concrete set of IOs. Whilst the literature offers a lot of empirical evidence on "traditional" IOs, such as the World Bank or the UN, public perceptions about newer organisations like the AIIB have received less attention. This paper therefore prioritises examining the specific case of U.S.-China competition and the cases of the World Bank and the AIIB as an initial contribution in this direction. More research is necessary to understand how new organisations are perceived.

Thirdly, and more broadly, more research is needed that takes international sources of multilateral contestation into account. The existing literature offers a rather pessimistic view on geopolitics, rising powers and international cooperation (Pratt 2021; Tallberg 2021). Moreover, it often-times prioritises national developments, such as the

rise of populist parties, for explaining threats to IOs (Carnegie and Clark 2023). This paper suggests that, in this specific context of great power competition, in the U.S. case, even more isolationist and nationalistic individuals support IOs. Thereby, even in a context of general contestation, public support, even if purely for instrumental reasons, for multilateralism might be reinvigorated when competitive IOs are created.

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6 Appendix: To be completed

6.1 Descriptives

| Treatment Group | USA | China |
|-----------------|-----|-------|
| Control | 271 | 268 |
| CN-led AIIB | 240 | 293 |
| US-led WB | 255 | 252 |
| Both | 251 | 241 |

6.2 Support to fund AIIB

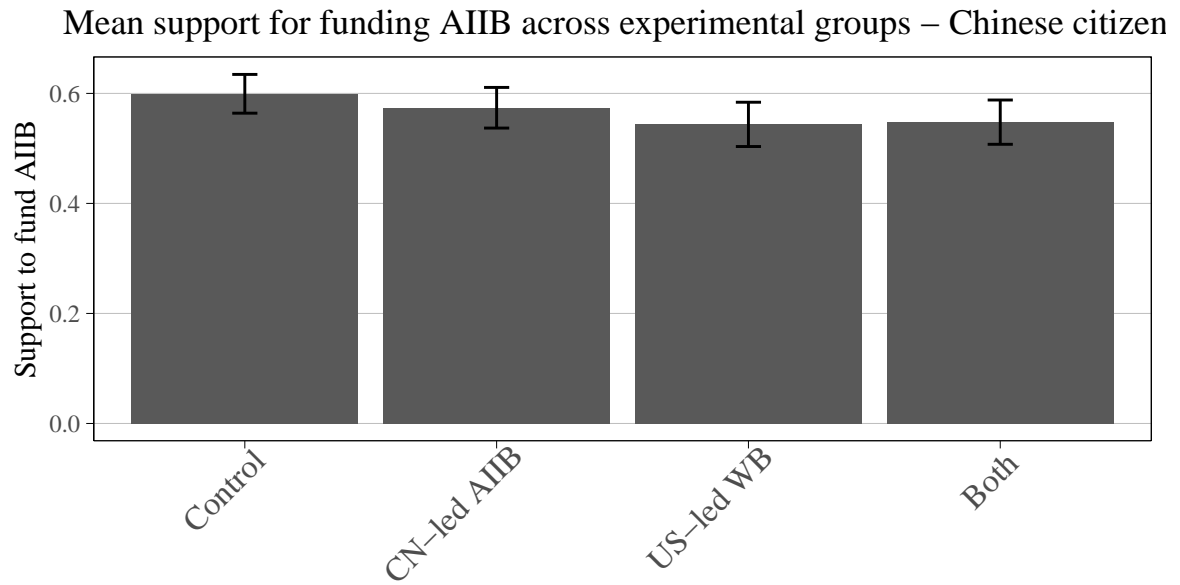


Figure 16: Support to fund AIIB across different treatment groups for Chinese citizens