Angry Rhetoric: Elite Cues and Support for the World Trade Organization

Ryan Brutger, Richard Clark, and Kelebogile Zvobgo

What shapes public and elite support for disengagement from international organizations (IOs)? Amid growing backlash against globalization, populist and nationalist leaders increasingly denounce IOs using angry, confrontational rhetoric. We show that the *tone* of such rhetoric — independent of its substantive content — plays a critical role in shaping attitudes toward international cooperation. Focusing on the World Trade Organization (WTO), we argue that aggressive or belligerent language about disengagement systematically reduces support for IOs by reframing them as adversarial and illegitimate. We test this argument using original survey experiments conducted with a nationally diverse sample of Americans and a sample of elite policymakers. Across both populations, exposure to angry disengagement rhetoric significantly lowers support for the WTO compared to substantively similar but unemotional critiques. Contrary to expectations, these negative effects are not confined to conservatives: angry rhetoric reduces support among *both* Democrats and Republicans, indicating broad cross-partisan resonance. By demonstrating that emotional tone is a distinct and powerful dimension of elite communication, this study advances our understanding of the domestic politics of backlash against IOs. More broadly, it highlights how anger-based rhetoric can erode the legitimacy foundations of such institutions, with important implications for the future of global governance.

Introduction

Scholars and policymakers alike lament the backlash against globalization and the decline of international cooperation. Politicians worldwide have increasingly challenged the legitimacy of international organizations (IOs), framing them as threats to national sovereignty or as serving global elites at the expense of ordinary citizens (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Voeten 2020; Carnegie and Clark 2026). This skepticism toward globalization has mobilized populist and nationalist leaders to aggressively criticize or disengage from the institutions underpinning international economic governance, trade, human rights, climate policy, and security cooperation (Walter 2021; Mansfield, Milner, and Rudra 2021; Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker 2024). Such rhetoric frequently employs aggressive or belligerent language, reflecting a broader "angry populism" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) that resonates with domestic audiences dissatisfied with economic dislocations, status loss, and perceived unfairness stemming from global economic arrangements.

In this paper, we explore angry disengagement rhetoric as one important driver of this broader backlash phenomenon, focusing specifically on the World Trade Organization (WTO) as an illustrative empirical case. The WTO, which historically served as a cornerstone of liberalized global trade, has been increasingly targeted by politicians in recent decades. These leaders portray it as emblematic of the harmful effects of globalization, especially in regions impacted by offshoring, import competition, and economic decline (Autor et al. 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018).

Prominent U.S. politicians have leveraged such grievances to justify disengaging from international trade governance. President Donald Trump, for instance, characterized the WTO in confrontational terms: "We always get f***ed by them. I don't know why we're in it. The WTO is designed by the rest of the world to screw the United States." Similarly, Senator Josh Hawley argued for a radical departure from current arrangements, advocating for a complete exit to "resist Chinese imperialism" and protect American jobs. The Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM), critical for the WTO's ability to adjudicate the rules that serve as a backbone of the trade regime, was crippled by President Donald Trump's unwillingness to confirm new appointees to its Appel-

late Body,[1] and the gridlock persisted under President Joseph Biden, and during Trump's second term.[2]

These forceful appeals are not isolated to the WTO, but are instead part of a broader trend toward angry disengagement rhetoric across multiple IOs. Leaders such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Hungary's Viktor Orbán have employed comparable aggressive rhetoric against international institutions like the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement, contributing to the erosion of public and elite support for international cooperation (Brutger and Strezhnev 2022; Zvobgo and Chaudoin 2025; Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya 2024). This context underscores the importance of understanding how the tone — not just the content — of elite rhetoric shapes perceptions of IOs and international cooperation more generally.

By examining the WTO as an important case, we probe the broader implications of angry rhetoric for public and elite attitudes toward international cooperation. Recent scholarship highlights the absence of a strong pro-WTO base in the United States as a permissive condition for the organization's decline. Lake, Martin, and Risse (2021, 244), for instance, argue, "One of the global institutions that may be most in jeopardy today is the WTO [...] no significant constituency has risen to defend the WTO, even from the internationally oriented businesses that have been its primary beneficiaries."[3] Goldstein and Gulotty (2021, 553) echo this sentiment, stating, "Today, American commitment to the [trade] regime may be at a watershed moment, facing both anti-trade-treaty populism at home and skepticism from its founders abroad." Others go as far as to say the WTO is defunct: "The WTO was a lovely promise of a more rational, predictable, and fairer global economic order. Its death should be mourned."[4] Given that a lack of robust U.S. support has facilitatedthe WTO's decline, we probe whether politicians' angry anti-trade rhetoric amplifies public and elite antagonism toward the organization.

Disengagement can come in diverse forms (e.g., cutting financial contributions, reducing par-

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[1]*Foreign Policy*, 2019, https://bit.ly/3K5dy9I.

[2]*Bloomberg*, 2022, https://bloom.bg/3KkAh2B.

[3]Though see Peters (2017) and Brutger (2024), on how and when firms lobby for free trade.

[4]*CFR*, 2018, https://bit.ly/48lcoC4.

ticipation in meetings, holding up nominations to key posts, or withdrawing),[5] but each involves scaling back cooperation with the organization.[6] Angry rhetoric is characterized by aggressively or belligerently framed arguments about such disengagement. We argue that angry rhetoric, compared to more muted language, should drive elite and public audiences to revise their WTO opinions downward. Increased angry rhetoric over time may help explain both negative attitudes toward the WTO and its waning performance.

We focus on the U.S., the global hegemon and a leading architect of the rules-based international trade system. Politicians in the U.S. have targeted the WTO as a symbol of globalization, especially in the regions hardest hit by offshoring and tariff reductions (Margalit 2011; Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2013). Economic dislocations have spurred resurgent nationalism, populism, and polarization in the U.S. and elsewhere (Autor et al. 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018), with diverse electoral consequences depending on individuals' gender and race (e.g., Baccini and Weymouth 2021; Jones, Owen, and Sung 2025). Politicians have initiated a forceful backlash against globalization (Walter 2021; Mansfield, Milner, and Rudra 2021) and related IOs (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2024a; Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Voeten 2020; Brutger and Strezhnev 2022; Zvobgo and Chaudoin 2025). Given the prevalence of angry rhetoric toward IOs in developed democracies, we anticipate broader applicability beyond the WTO, encouraging future research in this vein; we discuss scope conditions in greater detail subsequently.

We build on recent work suggesting that the tone of elite cues matters for how publics receive them. Dellmuth and Tallberg (2023) show negative elite IO messaging typically shifts public attitudes. Spilker, Nguyen, and Bernauer (2020) examine how individuals' priors interact with messaging on trade. Extending these insights, we test how varying anger levels in political rhetoric influence public and elite opinion beyond mere negative content. Our simultaneous focus on public and elite audiences challenges conventional views dismissing elite rhetoric as mere cheap talk (Jervis 1976; Fearon 1997; Schultz 1998), and complements American politics scholarship ques-

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[5]For more on IO withdrawal, see von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019; 2024b).

[6]For more on the varieties of populist disengagement see Pacciardi, Spandler, and Söderbaum (2024) and also Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya (2024), on strategic engagement.

tioning the importance of tone (Lau et al. 1999; Kalla and Broockman 2018).[7]

We argue that angry rhetoric on disengagement from the WTO amplifies latent discontent and heightens its emotional underpinnings (Mercer 2010), reducing individuals' support for the organization.[8] We expect Republicans will be most negatively influenced by such language, given their skepticism toward trade and international cooperation (Bearce and Moya 2020; Mutz 2021; Dellmuth et al. 2022) and their aversion to the fairness provisions (e.g., reciprocity, national treatment, consensus voting) underlying the trade regime (Brutger and Clark 2023). Republicans prefer that the U.S. dominates other countries (Brutger and Li 2022), which makes them especially receptive to aggressive or belligerent anti-cooperation cues. Republicans are also more receptive than Democrats to negatively valenced messaging (Jost 2017).

To test this theory, we utilize a three-pronged empirical approach. First, we conduct an analysis of major U.S. media outlets (i.e., cable news and leading newspapers) using qualitative and automated coding, illustrating how politicians have ramped up angry rhetoric about disengagement from the WTO in recent years. We then field an original survey experiment using Qualtrics with a diverse sample of Americans, finding that angry language about disengagement from the WTO, similar to that found in popular media, triggers a stronger negative reaction from the public than negative but unemotional disengagement rhetoric. Last, we partner with the Teaching, Research & International Policy (TRIP) Project to field an elite survey experiment with policymakers.[9] The results from our elite survey are even stronger than those from our public survey — the magnitude of the effect is over twice as large — suggesting that angry rhetoric about the WTO especially resonates with elite audiences. Moreover, contrary to our expectation, we find no statistically significant heterogenous effects for our treatment across partisan lines for the public and elite samples, indicating this rhetoric's broad appeal.[10]

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[7]Though negative political messages are more likely to go viral on social media (Fine and Hunt 2023).

[8]See Guisinger and Saunders (2017), on elite cues. Publics are responsive to cues on trade because they hold weak priors on the topic (Rho and Tomz 2017), though see Casler and Clark (2021) and Brutger and Li (2022).

[9]We are grateful to the TRIP team at William & Mary, as well as the Political Violence Lab at the University of California, Merced for its contributions to the 2022 TRIP surveys.

[10]In other work, conservatives and Republicans are less supportive of international cooperation and react more negatively to anti-IO appeals than Democrats (Zvobgo 2019; Bearce and Scott 2019; Brutger and Clark 2023; Zvobgo and Simmons 2025).

In sum, we identify an important role for the tone of elite cues; even small language tweaks are associated with significant differences in audience responses. Scholars therefore ought to pay close attention not just to the content of cues, but also to their emotional content.

Anger, Disengagement, and the WTO

To understand the effect of angry disengagement rhetoric on support for IOs, it is important to consider how the tone of elite rhetoric matters independent of its substance. Disengagement rhetoric about IOs is typically negative in tone, since it discusses problems with IOs and a desire to pull back from those challenges. This type of messaging is likely to have an effect on its own, since negative information has a stronger effect on people's impressions than positive information (Meffert et al. 2006; Vonk 1996), as seen in the context of international cooperation, where most people have relatively weak priors (Brutger and Strezhnev 2022; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023). However, we are particularly interested in how the shift to angry disengagement rhetoric may have a greater impact than less emotional disengagement rhetoric.

With the rise of "angry populism" there has been a renewed focus on emotions and anger in political communication (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). For example, Stapleton and Dawkins (2022) find that politicians' use of anger in their statements can increase anger amongst constituents, which also increases the public's political engagement and likelihood of voting. Importantly, anger is thought to be distinct from other forms of negativity, since it has a greater ability to grab attention and captivate audiences (Lerner and Tiedens 2006). Hansen and Hansen (1988) find what they refer to as "The Anger Superiority Effect," whereby people tend to pay closer attention to angry language. Furthermore, the messaging itself is likely to be more memorable and impactful because it sparks an emotional response in the audience, compared to more muted rhetoric.[11]

Building on this literature, we believe anger is distinct from extreme negativity, though the two can and often do coincide. Indeed, a substantial literature in political psychology distinguishes anger from other negatively valenced emotions such as fear, sadness, or concern based on its

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[11]For more on how anger affects international relations decision making and preferences, see Schnakenberg and Wayne (2024) and Wayne (2023).

distinctive cognitive and behavioral implications. Whereas fear tends to heighten uncertainty and risk aversion, anger reduces perceptions of uncertainty, increases confidence in ones judgments, and motivates approach-oriented and punitive behavior (Lerner and Tiedens 2006; Mercer 2010). Importantly, anger directs attention outward by encouraging individuals to identify blameworthy actors and to endorse corrective or retaliatory actions against them. As a result, anger is especially potent in political contexts where responsibility for perceived harm can be attributed to identifiable institutions or elites.

Angry rhetoric also has the potential to invoke outrage from those exposed to the rhetoric. Indeed, "The term outrage conjures emotional reactions grounded in anger ... moral outrage is often operationalizedsometimes exclusivelywith measures of anger" (Salerno and Peter-Hagene 2013). The connection between anger and outrage has the potential to evoke a strong response among those exposed to angry rhetoric. In addition to triggering an emotional response, recent work also finds that messages that evoke anger are more likely to go viral (Brady et al. 2017; Crockett 2017; Milkman and Berger 2012), which is likely to extend the reach and impact of angry messages. In this manner, politicians can strategically use angry rhetoric to reach broad audiences.

These properties make anger particularly consequential for attitudes toward IOs. Support for IOs rests heavily on perceptions of procedural fairness, legitimacy, and rule-based neutrality (Buchanan and Keohane 2006; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023). Angry rhetoric undermines these foundations by recasting IOs not as technocratic problem-solvers, but as adversarial political actors that intentionally undercut the national interest. When elites employ angry language, they shift audiences' interpretive lens from policy disagreement to moral transgression, moving them from dissatisfaction with outcomes to normative condemnations of the institution itself. In this way, anger facilitates institutional delegitimation rather than simply signaling dissatisfaction with specific policies.

The WTO, which serves as our empirical focus, is especially vulnerable to anger-based delegitimation for several reasons. First, the rules, procedures, and dispute settlement processes of the WTO are complex and opaque to ordinary citizens, making it difficult for non-experts to inde-

pendently evaluate whether outcomes are fair or justified. In such environments, individuals rely heavily on heuristics when forming opinions, including emotions (Mercer 2010), values (Brutger and Rathbun 2021), and elite cues (Lenz 2012). Second, WTO dispute rulings and enforcement decisions provide focal points for blame attribution, allowing political leaders to portray adverse outcomes as evidence of institutional bias rather than as the product of legitimate, negotiated rules. Third, there has been increasing use of angry rhetoric by populist politicians (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018), providing a growing supply of angry cues, which we expect to be prevalent in disengagement about the WTO. Finally, because the WTO directly constrains national trade policy, angry rhetoric about the organization readily maps onto broader narratives of sovereignty encroachment (cf. Carnegie and Clark 2026).

Together, these dynamics suggest that angry disengagement rhetoric should have a qualitatively different and more powerful effect than negative but unemotional disengagement rhetoric. By activating blame attribution, reducing perceived uncertainty, and encouraging punitive orientations toward institutions, anger amplifies the persuasive force of elite cues calling for disengagement. This logic implies that even subtle increases in the emotional intensity of elite rhetoric – holding substantive content constant – can meaningfully erode public and elite support for IOs. We therefore expect that angry disengagement rhetoric will reduce support for IOs to a greater extent than disengagement rhetoric expressed in a more muted or technocratic tone. This leads to our first preregistered hypothesis:

H1a: *Aggressive disengagement should reduce support for IOs.*[12]

We further expect that different types of people will be more (or less) likely to respond to angry rhetoric. In the political realm, we know that across the political spectrum, Democrats and Republicans rely on divergent sets of values to guide their decision making (Brutger 2021; Kertzer et al. 2014; Rathbun et al. 2016), so we expect that there may be partisan differences in response to angry rhetoric. We hypothesize that Republicans and Democrats will respond differently to

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[12]In the preregistration we used the term "aggressive" though we have switched to "angry" in our discussion of the term since it better captures our theoretical concept.

angry disengagement rhetoric about the WTO, with Republicans being more responsive to angry rhetoric than their Democratic counterparts. Since Republicans are traditionally more skeptical about international cooperation (Bearce and Moya 2020; Mutz 2021; Dellmuth et al. 2022) and they typically prefer that the U.S. dominates other countries (Brutger and Li 2022), we expect Republicans to be especially receptive to angry or belligerent anti-cooperation cues.

On the other hand, since much of the recent angry rhetoric toward international cooperation and the WTO is generated by Republicans, it is possible that Democrats may be less responsive to such rhetoric. In the most extreme case, if Democrats believe that such rhetoric reflects President Trump's criticisms of the WTO, Democrats could have a positive reaction to angry rhetoric as a form of backlash. We thus hypothesize the following:

H1b: *Aggressive disengagement should have the largest negative effect on support for IOs amongst conservatives/Republicans and a less negative (and potentially even positive) effect amongst liberals/Democrats.*

We also consider how the effects of angry rhetoric may differ between policymakers and the mass public. Given that policymakers are likely to have significantly more knowledge about foreign policy and the WTO than the mass public, we expect that policymakers' attitudes toward the WTO are more likely to be fixed than the views of ordinary people. By contrast, the mass public is unlikely to know the details of how the WTO functions, and so we expect the public's attitudes to be relatively malleable (Guisinger and Saunders 2017). While this expectation is relatively unsurprising, we predict it will extend to the effect of angry rhetoric as well, as outlined in our final preregistered hypothesis.

H1c: *Since publics have weaker priors about IOs, aggressive disengagement should have a larger negative effect on support for IOs amongst the public than amongst elites.*

While we argue that angry disengagement rhetoric exerts powerful effects on support for IOs, its influence likely varies across contexts. First, anger-based cues should be most effective where audiences hold weak or ambivalent priors about an institution, such that emotional signals mean-

ingfully shape belief formation. Where citizens or elites possess strong preexisting commitments (e.g., when an IO enjoys a well-organized domestic constituency or clear material beneficiaries) angry rhetoric may be less persuasive or even counterproductive. Second, anger is likely to be especially potent when directed at IOs characterized by complexity and opacity. When rules and procedures are difficult to evaluate independently, audiences rely more heavily on heuristic cues, including emotional framing and elite signals. Finally, the effectiveness of angry rhetoric depends on the plausibility of blame attribution. Anger-based appeals are most persuasive when elites can credibly frame the institution as responsible for salient harms (e.g., impeding sovereignty), rather than as a neutral forum mediating among competing interests. As such, anger-based delegitimation may be particularly impactful for international economic institutions such as the WTO, while operating differently in domains where institutional authority, benefits, or constituencies are more firmly entrenched.

Media Analysis

To evaluate the prevalence of angry rhetoric from politicians about the WTO and its dissemination to the public, we conducted a descriptive analysis of U.S. media coverage of the WTO. Our primary analysis runs from January 1, 1995, when the WTO was established, to April 1, 2022 and used a manual coding of the tone of politician's rhetoric within each article. We also supplemented the manual coding with an automated sentiment analysis, evaluating the presence of angry rhetoric across time. The goal of this analysis is to provide a general overview of the content of media coverage about the WTO. Since other scholars have recently identified a rise in angry political rhetoric (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018), we are interested in whether a similar trend exists when politicians discuss the WTO and disengaging from the organization.

To collect these data, we used NexisUni to search U.S. news sources, including cable news transcripts, newspapers, and online publications. We used the search terms "(world trade organization) OR WTO" to generate a corpus of documents. Over time, the volume of media coverage trended upward, with spikes in coverage occurring around the WTO Seattle protests in 1999 and

again in 2019 when the WTO's appellate body ceased to function.[13]

Our focus is on the tone rather than volume of news content, so we manually coded 982 articles from the search.[14] Coders first identified whether a document was "relevant," counting any source that mentioned the U.S. or U.S. politicians' interactions with, or views toward, the WTO as being relevant. Next, they manually coded whether the source discussed "disengagement", defined as any mention of reducing cooperation with the WTO (e.g., cutting financial contributions, reducing participation in meetings, holding up nominations to key posts, or withdrawing). Finally, coders identified whether the highest ranking Democrat and/or Republican mentioned in the article, or their staff or administration, used angry (i.e., aggressive, forceful, or belligerent) rhetoric. For example, President Trump was quoted in *The New York Times* saying, "The WTO is BROKEN when the worlds RICHEST countries claim to be developing countries to avoid WTO rules and get special treatment ... NO more!!! Today I directed the U.S. Trade Representative to take action so that countries stop CHEATING the system at the expense of the USA!"[15]

While the manual coding introduces a level of subjectivity, it also allows us to identify an article's relevance, the individual speaker, *and* the tone of their rhetoric. This approach allows us to ensure that we are coding political rhetoric, as opposed to just the tone of the article (as we do in the automated coding).[16] While the subjectivity of coding emotional tone has some limitations, the manual coding process allows us to meet our goal of assessing general trends in disengagement and angry disengagement rhetoric. The coding rules and illustrative examples of angry rhetoric from the media coding are in the appendix, §A. Since it is possible that actors aside from high-ranking politicians also use angry rhetoric, our coding represents a conservative method of identifying angry rhetoric's prevalence in the U.S. media landscape.

We begin by illustrating both the percentage of media coverage in any year that discussed disengagement from the WTO and the prevalence of angry disengagement rhetoric by politicians,

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[13]The trend is illustrated in the appendix, Figure A3.

[14]We describe the media coding, news sources, and search process in more detail in the appendix, §A.

[15]President Trump, quoted in *The New York Times*, July 26, 2019.

[16]Manual coding also helps avoid challenges with sarcasm and irony detection, which commonly challenge automated approaches to coding emotional text (Nandwani and Verma 2021).

which are shown in Figure 1. The left panel of Figure 1 demonstrates that disengagement coverage was prevalent in the WTO's early years, but it waned considerably thereafter. Disengagement coverage remained near-zero until the first Trump administration, when it increased by more than 30 percent relative to the pre-2017 period ($p < 0.001$).[17] The frequency of this coverage peaked in 2020 — about 58 percent of media coverage of the WTO discussed disengagement that year.

Notably, the use of angry disengagement rhetoric has increased in recent years, as the right panel of Figure 1 indicates. Prior to Trump's election, there was relatively little use of angry disengagement language in WTO media coverage. Even in 1999 and 2000, around the time of the Seattle protests, angry disengagement rhetoric did not comprise more than 11 percent of media coverage. However, starting in 2017, we see a dramatic rise in angry rhetoric, averaging 22 percentage points higher in the post-2016 period ($p < 0.001$). In 2018, 37 percent of relevant media coverage on the WTO included angry rhetoric. Taken together, these plots highlight a significant shift in both politicians' rhetoric toward the WTO and the prevalence of coverage discussing disengagement from the organization.

Figure 1: Politician's Rhetoric in WTO Media Coverage
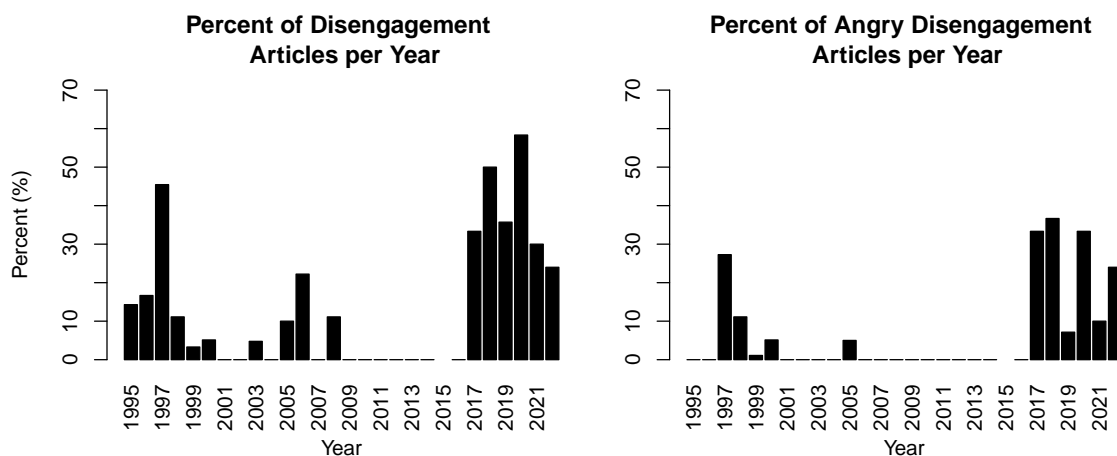
Note: Each bar represents the percentage of articles in a given year that discuss U.S. disengagement from the WTO (left panel) and with an angry tone (right panel). The percentage is calculated out of all "relevant" articles, including those that mention U.S. policy toward the WTO or any U.S. politician or administration's positions, policies, or opinion toward the WTO.

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[17]Fifteen percent of the relevant articles are from 2017–2021.

The preceding analyses of WTO media coverage allowed us to analyze the prevalence of politician's angry disengagement rhetoric toward the WTO in the media's reporting. However, given the time-consuming nature of the manual coding, the analysis relied on a sample of nearly 1,000 articles, meaning it captures a modest subset of the universe of news coverage about the WTO. We thus conduct a second descriptive analysis of media coverage using a much more comprehensive database of media coverage that we gathered using LexisNexis' API. This second analysis used the same search terms as the first and spanned January 1, 1995 through December 31, 2024. The search was limited to United States' news sources covered by the LexisNexis' API[18] and generated more than 18,000 articles and cable news transcripts.

We used the full corpus of media generated from the LexisNexis API search to code the prevalence of anger in the media coverage of the WTO. Importantly, we cannot use a dictionary-based sentiment analysis to code anger from the politicians themselves, since identifying who the anger is attributed to is beyond the scope of the method. This means that the unit of analysis is slightly different in our dictionary-based coding of media coverage. This approach allows us to code the prevalence of anger in each piece of media coverage using the NRC Emotion Lexicon (Mohammad and Turney 2013), which provides a dictionary specifically tailored for anger. While not specifically focused on political rhetoric, this supplementary analysis allows us to confirm whether media reporting on the WTO has become more angry in recent years.

The NRC Emotion Lexicon maps words to discrete emotional categories (anger, fear, disgust, sadness, joy, trust, and anticipation) based on extensive human coding rather than supervised machine learning. We focus primarily on the anger category, which captures language associated with outrage, hostility, and belligerence. For each article or transcript, we identify whether anger-coded terms appear in articles referencing the WTO. This allows us to compute the total number of WTO-related articles containing anger words in a given year. Because angry rhetoric is more likely to attract attention, be remembered, and diffuse widely (Brady et al. 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2018), increases in the absolute number of angry articles should be meaningful for public opinion.

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[18]The search excludes newswires and press releases.

The results of our second media analysis are shown in Figure 2.[19] Consistent with the first analysis, we find that anger was frequently evoked in media coverage about the WTO around the time of the 'Battle in Seattle'. After the early fights about the WTO, the prevalence of anger dropped significantly until President Trump took office. There was a notable spike in anger in WTO media coverage during President Trump's first term, though the prevalence declined afterwards. It is important to recognize that the decline in anger after Trump's first term is likely associated with both a decline in attention to the WTO (reducing the absolute number of articles on the WTO) and a decline in the proportion of articles invoking anger.

Figure 2: Anger in WTO Media Coverage

Absolute Number of Angry WTO Articles Over Time
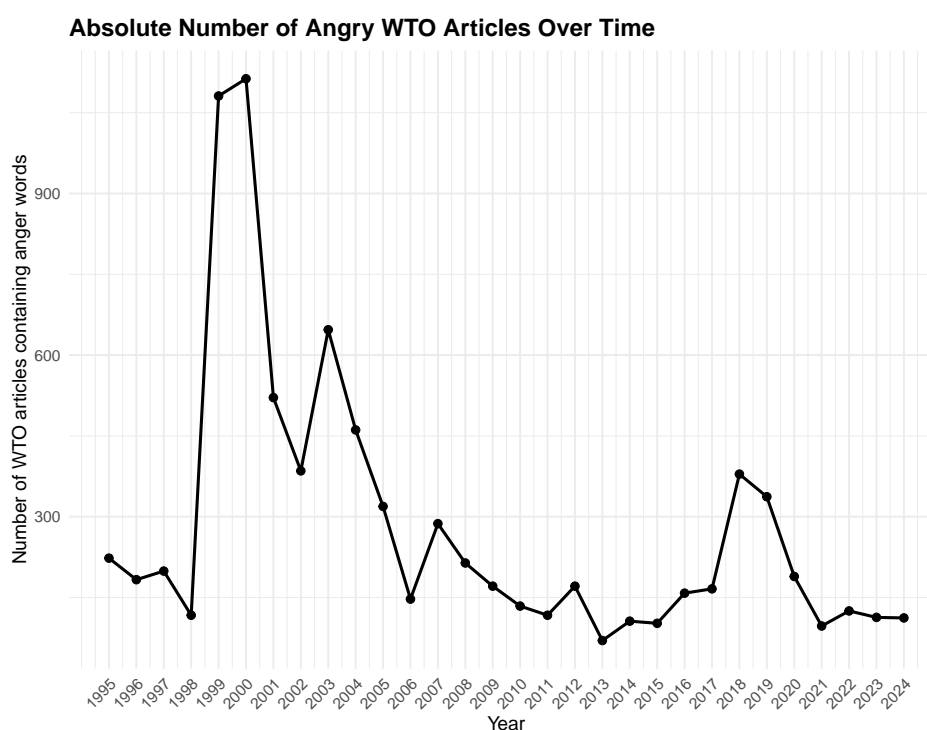
Note: Figure 2 displays the number of media reports in each year from 1995-2024. The analysis uses the NRC Emotion Lexicon (Mohammad and Turney 2013) to identify anger in each article or transcript.

Taken together, our media analysis demonstrates that anger has been an important part of media coverage and political rhetoric about the WTO. Anger was high during the early fights over the

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[19]Whereas Figure 1 draws on a manually coded subset of 982 articles, Figure 2 uses the full corpus of over 18,000 WTO-related news items collected via the LexisNexis API.

WTO, and a substantial share of news coverage about the WTO included political rhetoric invoking anger. After a significant downturn in angry political rhetoric and media coverage about the WTO, there was a resurgence of such rhetoric and media coverage during President Trump's first term, which follows recent trends in other areas of political rhetoric, especially the rise of "angry populism."'

Testing the Effect of Angry Disengagement Rhetoric

To evaluate the effect of angry disengagement rhetoric on the mass public and policymakers, we fielded two survey experiments. We administered the public survey via Qualtrics in September 2022[20] and the elite survey via the TRIP Project between November 2022 and January 2023 (Avey et al. 2022; Avey and Tierney 2022). TRIP "use[s] the Federal Yellow Book to identify individuals employed in one of several dozen offices or agencies" with responsibilities related to U.S. trade, national security, or policy development. Officials were included if they worked at the level of "'assistant/deputy director' (or equivalent) and above in several offices" (Avey et al. 2022, 3). Additional information and discussion of the samples is included in the appendix, §B.

The survey experiment was designed to assess the unique effect of angry rhetoric about WTO disengagement on attitudes toward the organization. This means that we compare disengagement rhetoric to angry disengagement rhetoric, allowing us to isolate the effect of the change in tone, even though both the control and treatment present negative messages about disengagement. Our expectations were pre-registered with AsPredicted, and we include a link to the pre-analysis plan in the appendix, §D.[21] Each respondent was first asked to provide their views on the U.S.'s role in a range of IOs, giving us a pre-treatment baseline measure of the respondent's beliefs about engaging with the WTO. Each respondent was asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "The United States should actively participate in the following organizations," and we collected the respondent's view toward the WTO, and other IOs, on a five-point scale ranging from 1

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[20]Qualtrics provides high-quality representative samples for social science research (Boas, Christenson, and Glick 2020). Research ethics are discussed in the appendix, §E.

[21]The pre-registration includes a second component of the project on the ICC, which is analyzed in a separate paper. The experiments were approved by the IRBs at [institutions and numbers redacted for review].

(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This measure allows us to follow Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston's (2021) recommendation to control for respondents' pre-treatment views and thus increase the precision of our estimates. This is particularly important given the size of our policymaker sample.[22]

The experimental portion of the survey provides each respondent with a brief factual statement about U.S. engagement with the WTO. Within the experiment, the treatment randomly varies just *two words*, which alter the level of angry rhetoric.[23] In the "angry rhetoric" treatment, respondents are informed that recent U.S. presidents have expressed "fury" and "outrage" over the WTO, whereas the control condition says that presidents expressed "concern" and "worries." This is a very "light touch" treatment, since in practice, politicians have used much more angry and belligerent language. For instance, President Trump said the following about the WTO: "We always get f***ed by them. I don't know why we're in it. The WTO is designed by the rest of the world to screw the United States."[24] We thus consider our treatment effects to be a conservative estimate of the effect of angry rhetoric. The full text of the experiment is provided below:

> Recent U.S. presidents have expressed [concern *or* fury] over the World Trade Organization (WTO) and have blocked appointments of appellate body members. This has undermined the WTO's ability to do its work. The U.S. has not meaningfully supported the WTO and continues to express [worries *or* outrage] about the organization.

Following the experimental text, each respondent is asked to agree or disagree with the statement "The United States should actively support the WTO," with response options on the same five-point scale described above. We expect that respondents exposed to angry rhetoric will be less likely to believe that the U.S. should support the WTO, and that this effect will be stronger among Republicans. See the appendix, §B for sample statistics for the two surveys.

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[22]This may anchor an individual's response to the pre-treatment measure, or induce a consistency bias, reducing treatment effect sizes. But improved precision outweighs this concern (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021) and, if such biases exist, they will bias against finding a significant treatment effect, making our results conservative. Controlling for pre-treatment attitudes also helps us mitigate possible issues with ceiling and floor effects.

[23]Our design is mindful of the benefits of abstraction and concision in survey experiments (Brutger et al. 2023, 2022).

[24]CNN, 2018, `https://bit.ly/3MPJ3pk`.

Table 1 presents the experimental results. Columns 1 and 2 show treatment effects for policymakers and the public respectively. Angry rhetoric has a negative and statistically significant effect ($p < 0.05$) on WTO support in both samples. The magnitude of the effect is about 2.5 times larger among policymakers, as evidenced when comparing the coefficients from columns 1 and 2.[25] Such effects are relatively large compared to other studies of public opinion of IOs (see, e.g., Brutger and Clark 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023).

In Columns 3 and 4 of Table 1, we interact whether a respondent identifies as a Republican with the angry rhetoric treatment. Against our expectation, we fail to detect a significant interaction effect in either sample. For the public, where we have greater statistical power to identify heterogenous effects, we find that the interaction term is a fairly precise null ($p < 0.87$). This suggests that angry rhetoric has a negative effect across the political spectrum; its effects are not limited to those who possess negative predispositions toward IOs or trade.[26]

Conclusion

U.S. policymakers often use angry rhetoric to call for disengagement from international bodies like the WTO, and the media transmits such language to elite and public audiences. This paper leverages survey experiments to show that even subtle changes in the tone of rhetoric can drive publics and policymakers to revise their support for the WTO downward. We identify a larger treatment effect among policymakers, who we also find are ex ante more supportive of IOs. In addition, and quite surprisingly to us, we find a consistent relationship across partisan lines. Our findings help to explain the WTO's rapid decline in recent years — angry language demanding that the U.S. disengage from the institution has been prevalent since Donald Trump took office in his first term and remains high. This may have weakened public and elite appetites for cooperation

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[25]This runs contrary to expectation – in our pre-analysis plan, we anticipated, if anything, that publics would react more strongly to angry rhetoric, given their relatively lower levels of education and weaker priors on international cooperation. We tested whether the effect size was signficantly different among the policymakers than the public using an interaction model, and found that the magnitude was larger, but did not reach traditional levels of significant ($p < 0.18$).

[26]In section C of the appendix we also report the treatment effects when controlling for sample demographics and find that the treatment effects are robust and more precisely estimated with demographic controls.

Table 1: Effect of Angry Rhetoric on WTO Support

	Policymakers	Public	Policymakers	Public
Angry Rhetoric	−0.302**	−0.120**	−0.248	−0.120*
	(0.138)	(0.051)	(0.169)	(0.063)
Republican			−0.466	−0.246***
			(0.311)	(0.077)
Angry Rhetoric*Republican			−0.283	0.017
			(0.396)	(0.107)
Observations	126	1,027	104	1,022

Note: $^*p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$
The dependent variable is a five-point measure of how much the respondent agrees with the statement "The United States should actively support the WTO." Values range from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Each OLS model includes a pre-treatment baseline measure of the respondent's view toward the WTO, which increases the precision of the models.

on trade. Moreover, since policymakers are themselves quite influenced by these cues, they may drive the public and other elites to converge at low levels of IO support despite pre-existing gaps (Dellmuth et al. 2022).

Beyond the implications for public opinion, our findings speak to the political dynamics shaping the durability of international institutions. Angry rhetoric is more than an expression of dissatisfaction with an IO — it reshapes how institutions are understood and evaluated by elites and publics alike. By framing IOs as adversarial, biased, or hostile to national interests, anger-based appeals undermine the legitimacy foundations upon which cooperation rests (see Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023; Carnegie and Clark 2026). Over time, repeated exposure to such rhetoric may erode support even in the absence of formal withdrawal, contributing to institutional paralysis, weakened compliance, and declining effectiveness.

These dynamics carry important lessons for both political leaders and practitioners within IOs. For elites, angry rhetoric may offer short-term political benefits by mobilizing discontent and signaling resolve, but at the cost of narrowing future cooperation and constraining policy options. For IOs, the findings underscore the challenges of maintaining legitimacy in an era of angry backlash to international cooperation. Efforts to respond to such rhetoric that focus solely on policy reform

or material incentives may be insufficient if they fail to address the rhetorical environment in which institutions are embedded.

More broadly, this study highlights the importance of tone as a distinct dimension of elite communication in international politics. Understanding how emotions, and anger in particular, shape attitudes toward global governance is essential for explaining contemporary backlash movements and anticipating the conditions under which international cooperation can endure.

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Appendices

A. Media Analysis

The first component of our media analysis was conducted using NexisUni to search leading U.S. news sources from January 1, 1995 through April 1, 2022. The search terms were "(world trade organization) OR WTO". Our NexisUni license allows us to download the first 999 search result titles, publication names, and dates. NexisUni orders their search results by relevance, so these search results represent a sample of news reports that are the most relevant results based on the search terms. We then removed any with restricted content, that were duplicates of other reports, or which were no longer available, which left us with 982 news reports in our corpus. A team of undergraduate research assistants then manually coded the 982 news reports. We began with each article being coded by two research assistants. After coding 50 articles, with over 700 potential variables (not all are used in this paper), 98 percent of the observations had an identical coding from the two research assistants. We thus proceeded with each subsequent article being coded by a single coder, with the guideline that "If you're unsure about a variable, get a second opinion. If still unsure, leave the box empty and highlight it." Any highlighted cells were then discussed in the team meeting to determine the appropriate coding.

For the media coding, we focused on news sources drawn from those with the highest circulation and viewership in the U.S., which were also available via NexisUni. The specific sources included in the search were: The New York Times, New York Times Abstracts, New York Daily News (aka "Daily News (New York)"), The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times Online, USA Today, Wall Street Journal Abstracts, Fox News Network, CNN, NBC News, ABC News, CBS News, MSNBC, and NPR.

The coding rules for the variables used in this study were as follows:

Angry_Dem: (if applicable) the rhetoric from the highest ranking Democrat (this also includes their staff/administration) mentioned in the article is angry, meaning that the politician pursues his/her aims forcefully, and possibly belligerently. ("rhetoric" includes discussion of the actors' policy toward the IO)

Angry_Rep: (if applicable) the rhetoric from the highest ranking Republican (this also includes their staff/administration) mentioned in the article is angry, meaning that the politician pursues his/her aims forcefully, and possibly belligerently. ("rhetoric" includes discussion of the actors' policy toward the IO)

Disengagement: Article mentions reducing cooperation with the organization (e.g., cutting financial contributions, withdrawing, reducing participation in meetings, holding up nominations to key posts).

Nexis Uni also reports the volume of coverage for the duration of the search period, which is shown in Figure A3. Though not a quantity of interest for this study, we do see that there has been an upward trend in the volume of coverage over time.

Figure A3: Volume of WTO Media Coverage From NexisUni: 1995-2022

Note: Figure A3 shows the volume of media coverage between January 1, 1995 through April 1, 2022. The search was limited to *all* U.S. sources and the terms were "(world trade organization) OR WTO". In 1995 there were 3,123 results from NexisUni, which includes cable news, newspaper, and online sources. In 2021 there were 9,691 results.

Examples of Angry Rhetoric in Media

- "We always get fed by them. I don't know why we're in it. The WTO is designed by the rest of the world to screw the United States." (Donald Trump, quoted in "Axios: Trump privately says he wants to withdraw from WTO" by Veronica Stracqualursi. June 29, 2018)

- "I mean we've heard this song before and this is what people said back in 2001 when we allowed [China] into WTO. They said this will liberalize China and it will be good for the United States. Well, guess what, that was 3 million jobs ago. 3 million jobs lost to China. I would just ask those folks, open your eyes, come out to Missouri, see what the effects of Chinese cheating in the WTO has been. This isn't about withdrawing from the world, Martha... We're going to build a better economic system internationally that will protect our workers, protect our jobs, and resist Chinese imperialism. It is urgent. The time is now... What we need to do is get a better system in place. We need rules that will actually be followed with China, will actually be held to account and this is why we need to leave the WTO, we need to replace it with something better." (Josh Hawley, Fox News Network, "The Story with Martha MacCallum." May 20, 2020)

- "The WTO has been a disaster for this country [...] It has been great for China and terrible for the United States" (President Trump, quoted in CNN Money, March 2, 2018).

- "The WTO is BROKEN when the worlds RICHEST countries claim to be developing countries to avoid WTO rules and get special treatment, he said. NO more!!! Today I directed the U.S. Trade Representative to take action so that countries stop CHEATING the system at the expense of the USA!" (President Trump, quoted in The New York Times, July 26, 2019)

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B. Survey Samples

Qualtrics

Qualtrics delivered just over 1,000 quality completes. They removed poor-quality responses and ensured that each respondent was a U.S. citizen and passed a basic attention check at the start of the study. The sample is representative of the U.S. population by Census benchmarks for age, gender, and region. They did not collect partial responses. The median time to completion was 6 minutes. They also implemented a speeding check – measured as one-half the median soft launch time – which terminated those who were not responding thoughtfully.

Table B2: Descriptive Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Male	1026	0.47	0.50	0	1
Age	1031	4.70	1.79	1	7
Republican	1026	0.34	0.47	0	1
WTO Support	1031	3.26	0.96	1	5

Note: Age is measured on a seven-point scale with the following categories: Under 18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+ years old.

TRIP

TRIP investigates how policymakers and practitioners in the field use and interact with IR scholarship. We added our experimental module to their Fall 2022 survey wave of policymakers. The recruitment strategy employed by TRIP follows the method outlined in detail in Avey et al. (2022, 3). The approach provides a unique sample of policymakers working in trade, national security, and development. The TRIP sample delivered just over 100 quality completes for this study.

Table B3: Descriptive Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Male	108	0.78	0.42	0.00	1.00
Republican	104	0.20	0.40	0.00	1.00
WTO Support	127	4.30	0.96	1	5

C. Treatment Effects with Controls

In this section we replicate the main analysis for the public sample with the addition of demographic controls for age, education, income, and gender. Our results are robust to the inclusion of these controls.

Table C4: Effect of Angry Rhetoric on WTO Support with Controls

	Public	Public
	(1)	(2)
Angry Rhetoric	−0.117**	−0.126**
	(0.051)	(0.063)
Angry Rhetoric*Republican		0.041
		(0.107)
Republican		−0.222***
		(0.077)
Male	−0.067	−0.054
	(0.060)	(0.060)
Income	−0.002	0.002
	(0.019)	(0.019)
Age	−0.077***	−0.067***
	(0.018)	(0.018)
Education	0.034	0.030
	(0.021)	(0.021)
Constant	2.068***	2.123***
	(0.185)	(0.186)
Observations	1,020	1,020

Note: $^{*}p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

The dependent variable is a five-point measure of how much the respondent agrees with the statement "The United States should actively support the WTO." Values range from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Each OLS model includes a pre-treatment baseline measure of the respondent's view toward the WTO, which increases the precision of the models. Age is measured on a seven-point scale with the following categories: Under 18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+ years old. Gender (Male) is measured as a binary equal to 1 if a respondent identifies as male and 0 otherwise. Education is measured on a six-point scale with the following categories: less than complete high school education, complete high school education, some university-level or vocational education, complete university-level or vocational education, some post-graduate education, complete post-graduate education. Income is measured on a six-point scale with the following categories: less than $25,000; $25,000-$49,999; $50,000-$74,999; $75,000-$99,999; $100,000-$149,999; $150,000 or more.

D. Pre-Registration

The anonymous preregistration of the experiment is available at: `https://aspredicted.org/F61_Q4L`

We note that the preregistration uses the term "aggressive rhetoric," but we have switched to the term "angry rhetoric" since it more appropriately captures the language randomized in the experiment and the theoretical concept of interest. The preregistration also includes a parallel experiment conducted on the International Criminal Court, which is being written up as a stand-alone publication.

E. Research Ethics

The human subjects research included in this paper complies the with Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research outlined by the APSA and was evaluated by the Institutional Review Board at the appropriate universities. The studies were fielded with Qualtrics and TRIP and were reviewed by the IRB at [Name Redacted] (Protocol #: [Number Redacted]) and were approved. The risks to subjects were evaluated to be minimal and the researchers took steps to ensure that any potentially identifying information was protected and then redacted prior to making the data available for analysis and replication. There were no conflicts of interest identified for the researchers. The data for replication will be made available when the manuscript is published.

For these studies respondents were initially asked to complete an electronic standard adult consent form that informed them they were being asked to participate in a voluntary study that had been approved by [Redacted University Name] institutional review board. The consent form informed respondents they would be asked a variety of questions about their background, political preferences, and thoughts on government policies, the estimated length of time, the contact information for the investigator, and that the study was deemed to be of minimal risk. Respondents could select "If you wish to participate, please click the 'I Agree' button and you will be taken to the survey." or "If you do not wish to participate in this study, please select 'I Disagree'." If the latter was selected, the survey was terminated.

With regard to Principal 10 on the impact of the research on the political processes, we do not believe there is any reason to believe that our studies would have had an impact on political processes such as elections or policy creation. Respondents were only asked their opinion on the subject of international cooperation. We therefore do not see the survey as presenting any information to respondents that would alter their political behavior or political processes.