

The Effect of International Actors on Public Support for Government Spending Decisions

RESEARCH NOTE

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Does the intervention of an international organization in domestic politics render policy change more popular? While voters may ultimately care only about policy outcomes, the involvement of international actors often seems to lead to resentment. Still, citizens may have greater faith in the wisdom of international actors than in their own government. As others have argued, a well-respected international actor might provide a cue, especially for voters considering controversial policies like spending cuts. We test this argument in a novel pre-post experimental panel study conducted in Spain. We find that citizens become *less opposed* to unpopular spending cuts when informed that they are required by an international institution. The effects differ, however, across the two organizations that we test: They are stronger for the European Union than for the International Monetary Fund. Our findings lend support to studies arguing that the endorsement of specific international organizations can help push through otherwise unpopular policies.

¿La intervención de una organización internacional en la política doméstica hace aumentar la popularidad de un cambio de políticas? Si bien es cierto que los votantes, en última instancia, valoran los efectos de las políticas en consideración, también es cierto que, con frecuencia, la participación de agentes internacionales pueda generar resentimiento. Aun así, los ciudadanos suelen tener mayor fe en los agentes internacionales que en su propio Gobierno. Siguiendo el argumento de otros autores, proponemos que la participación de un actor internacional respetado puede servir como un aval para ciertos votantes, especialmente cuando evalúan políticas controvertidas como los recortes del gasto público. Para evaluar el contenido empírico de este argumento nos valemos de un novedoso método de encuesta experimental de panel pre-post implementado en España. Encontramos que el nivel de oposición de los ciudadanos a recortes de gastos impopulares *disminuye* cuando se les informa que una institución internacional es quien exige esos recortes. Sin embargo, los efectos difieren para las dos organizaciones incluidas en nuestro análisis: El efecto es mayor para la Unión Europea que para el Fondo Monetario Internacional. Nuestros resultados respaldan los estudios que argumentan que el aval de ciertas organizaciones internacionales aumenta el apoyo a políticas que serían impopulares sin la participación de esos agentes externos.

L'intervention d'une organisation internationale dans la politique nationale augmente-t-elle la popularité d'un changement politique ? Bien que les électeurs puissent finalement ne s'intéresser qu'aux résultats politiques, l'implication d'acteurs internationaux semble souvent aboutir à un certain ressentiment. Il n'en reste pas moins que les citoyens peuvent avoir davantage confiance en la sagesse d'acteurs internationaux qu'en leur propre gouvernement. Comme d'autres l'ont affirmé avant nous, un acteur international très respecté peut donner une indication, notamment pour les électeurs qui envisagent des politiques qui font polémiques, comme les coupes budgétaires. Nous évaluons cet argument dans une étude inédite de panel expérimental avant et après cette indication en Espagne. Nous observons que l'opposition des citoyens aux coupes budgétaires impopulaires *faiblit* lorsqu'ils apprennent qu'elles sont requises par une institution internationale. Néanmoins, les effets sont différents pour deux organisations intervenant dans notre test : ils sont plus importants pour l'Union européenne que pour le Fonds monétaire international. Nos conclusions viennent étayer les études affirmant que le soutien de certaines organisations internationales peut faciliter l'acceptation de politiques impopulaires.

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Introduction

Intervention by international organizations (IOs) in domestic politics has long stood out as a source of discontent, as identified by scholars and activists alike.¹ While voters might ultimately care about policy outcomes, some argue that the policy-making process also matters, and outside actors may be unwelcome in domestic politics.² Indeed, the desire for a national authority to “take back control” from the European Union (EU) led many people to vote Leave in the United Kingdom’s 2016 referendum on EU membership.³

Nevertheless, other scholars have argued that the involvement of international actors might actually enhance public confidence in policy decisions.⁴ If a government seeks to pursue controversial policies, voters—particularly those who do not trust the incumbent government—may see the approval of a respected outside actor as a reassurance that the country is following the best available path.

This research note examines a particularly unpopular and controversial policy change: budget cuts.⁵ We test whether citizens become more supportive of spending cuts when informed that they are required by an international actor.

People are often uninformed about economic policy.⁶ Even when voters hold well-formed preferences over fiscal policy, they may not know whether the conditions for enacting the policy measures have been met (Cukierman and Tommasi 1998). Voters may consequently be influenced by “signals” or “cues” from credible sources.⁷

International actors may provide one such cue. If the public puts greater faith in the wisdom of international actors than in their own government, then intervention might generate increased support for policy change (Barnett and Finnemore 2019). Of course, citizens might not blindly accept cues—the identity of the actor may matter. Scholars have shown that some IOs carry more weight with the public than others.⁸

We focus on Spain—a country that transitioned from a poor authoritarian country to a democracy with an advanced economy in a generation and has had experience with numerous IOs. We consider the effects of two of them: one that played a larger role in decades past, the International Monetary Fund (IMF); and one that has become steadily more important in Spanish life, the EU.

Estimating the effects of these international actors on the popularity of spending cuts is difficult with observational data. Policy changes and interventions by international actors occur non-randomly, often during crises. To address this

problem, we follow other studies that rely on survey experiments.⁹

We introduce to this literature a repeated-measures, within-subject design. This “pre–post” design allows for the examination of within-subject differences across treated and untreated participants, akin to a difference-in-differences approach commonly used with observational data. Respondents’ opinions about spending cuts are measured before and after the treatment in two different survey waves (conducted a few weeks apart). We then compare the *change* in opinion in the control group with the *change* in opinion for the treated groups.

The design of a survey experiment affects the minimum detectable effect—the smallest treatment effect that produces significance at a given level of statistical power and type of significance test (Bloom 1995). Repeated-measures designs, like ours, enhance the sensitivity of an experiment to detect a true difference between the treatment and control. It enables the identification of causal effects with more precision than the hitherto standard between-subjects design, where key outcomes are observed only once, post-treatment (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021).

Perhaps more importantly, the pre–post design also addresses unobserved heterogeneity. In the presence of unit-level heterogeneous treatment effects, the repeated-measure design addresses potentially unobserved confounders, which can be problematic in single-wave experiments because individual-level attributes cannot be randomly assigned (Bowers et al. 2011). In short, a pre–post design mitigates the confounding effect of unobserved individual-level factors.

Our experiment compares citizens’ support for spending cuts undertaken by national governments with and without the involvement of an international actor. We randomly assign two main treatments: IMF or EU involvement.

To anchor respondents’ perceptions of the content of the policy package under consideration, we also randomize the size of the proposed spending cuts (2 versus 8 percent) and the type of cuts (stressing whether they are general, target education specifically, or protect health expenditures). We further collect data on respondents’ support for the incumbent government and their levels of nationalism.

Because we seek to narrowly and directly focus on spending cuts, we explicitly inform respondents that taxes remain constant. This approach has strengths and weaknesses: It preserves the power of our experiment and allows for a deeper analysis of spending cuts, but it ignores questions about taxation. Leaving taxation to future research, our experiment probes a richer exploration of preferences over spending cuts.

We find that citizens become *less opposed* to governments’ spending cuts when they learn that the cuts were required by an international actor—and the EU has a larger reductive effect than the IMF. The difference across the institutions suggests that respondents mindfully considered the identity of the international actor. They did not simply offer their support because there was an external “requirement” (see Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz 1978). The EU moved the needle at a statistically significant level; the IMF did not.

We further find that the effect is stronger for (1) *smaller* spending cuts, (2) cuts that do *not* explicitly target edu-

¹Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin (2023), Bush and Prather (2022), Lake, Martin, and Risse (2021), Broz, Zhang, and Wang (2020), Bearce and Jolliff Scott (2019), Woods (2018), and Stiglitz (1994).

²For outcomes, see Madsen et al. (2022), Kaya, Handlin, and Günaydin (2020) and Dietrich and Winters (2015). For process, see McLean and Roblyer (2017). For outside actors, see Becher and Brouard (2022) and Reeves and Rogowski (2018).

³Owen and Walter (2017), Hobolt (2016), and Hobolt and de Vries (2016).

⁴Hübscher, Sattler, and Wagner (2024), Baldwin and Winters (2020), Dietrich, Mahmud, and Winters (2018), and Schlipphak and Treib (2017). See also Cruz and Schneider (2017), Böhnke and Zürcher (2013), and Levi, Sacks, and Tyler (2009).

⁵See Margalit (2019) for an excellent review of the literature.

⁶Barnes, Blumenau, and Lauderdale (2021), Guisinger (2017), and Albertson and Gadarian (2015).

⁷Dellmuth and Tallberg (2021), Guisinger and Saunders (2017), De Vries and Edwards (2009), Gabel and Scheve (2007), Kam (2005), Lupia and McCubbins (1998), and Popkin (1994).

⁸See, for example, Tallberg and Zürn (2019), Schmidtke (2019), Anderson, Bernauer, and Kachi (2019), Hurd (2019), and Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks (2019). See also Bush and Prather (2022, chapter 6).

⁹The literature is large. See, for example, Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin (2023), Hübscher, Sattler, and Wagner (2024), Alonso and Sánchez-Cuenca (2022), Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi, and Cabrera (2022), Baldwin and Winters (2020), Fernández-Albertos and Kuo (2020), Anderson, Bernauer, and Kachi (2019), Dietrich, Mahmud, and Winters (2018), Kosmidis (2018), Bechtel and Scheve (2013), and Hellwig, Ringsmuth, and Freeman (2008).

cation, (3) respondents who *oppose* the incumbent government, and (4) respondents who are *less* nationalistic.¹⁰

Broadly speaking, this research note makes four contributions. First, we add to the literature on individuals' preferences regarding cuts to government expenditures. These preferences are important because they may affect citizens' willingness to support globalization, the liberal international order, and mainstream political parties (see [Scheve and Slaughter 2018](#); [Foster and Frieden 2019](#)). We help disentangle whether people object to international authority primarily because of the substantive policies required by international actors or because of concerns over sovereignty (see [Madsen et al. 2022](#)). Our findings suggest that the backlash against globalization is driven by economic policy outcomes—not international interference in domestic politics per se.¹¹

Second, our study contributes to debates about why governments bring in outside actors when pushing through unpopular policies.¹² Our results suggest that rather than *blame* international actors as scapegoats, governments may *highlight* their endorsement. Doing so can win support for unpopular policies. Many voters see IOs as legitimate actors and trust them to suggest appropriate fiscal policies. IOs may therefore have a role to play in helping national governments address the myriad economic challenges they face today, in contrast to recent speculation about their waning relevance (e.g., *The Economist*, April 4, 2023).

Third, our work speaks to the “room to maneuver” literature.¹³ By stating that spending cuts are required by an IO, our treatments essentially inform respondents that their national government has less room to maneuver. Our results contribute evidence to debates over how citizens evaluate their national government and its policy choices in an environment where states are perceived as having less autonomy because of international factors.

Fourth, our study is one of the first to introduce the pre-post design approach to experimental studies in international relations.¹⁴ This research design has the potential to generate new insights because many empirical investigations in international relations are plagued by (1) a limited number of observations and (2) the inability to randomly assign key attributes. The pre-post survey design used here offers international relations scholars a more precise way to estimate causal relationships regarding complex questions in the context of unobserved, unit-level heterogeneity.

IOs and the Case of Spain

We focus on the impacts of the IMF and EU in the Spanish case, where scholarly attention is growing because of its

domestic and international politics.¹⁵ Still, Spain remains relatively understudied compared to English-speaking countries.

Domestically, the country has had recent experience with spending cuts, following the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) when Spain entered a deep and persistent economic recession. In May 2010, the Spanish government cut public salaries, reduced infrastructure spending, and froze pensions ([Fernández-Albertos and Kuo 2020](#)).

Internationally, Spain has experience with both the IMF and the EU. Many studies focus on IOs in isolation.¹⁶ We include both so as to test whether participants are influenced purely by the introduction of an outside “requirement” ([Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz 1978](#)), or whether the outside actor's identity matters. While both IOs are relevant in the Spanish context, the two institutions have played different roles.

In 1978, Spain entered into an agreement with the IMF ([Vreeland 2006](#), 30), an institution with a long and ostensibly unpopular history of requiring spending cuts.¹⁷ Although Spain has not entered into an IMF arrangement since 1978, it faced intense pressure to do so from other EU member states, particularly Germany, during the euro crisis.¹⁸ Despite not entering an IMF arrangement, Spain worked closely with the Fund during the crisis, as it did in previous crises.

The EU, by contrast, has played a continuous and growing role in the Spanish political economy since even before the country joined in 1986. Spain accepted an EU bailout during the GFC, which did not require spending cuts, but did require banking reforms. EU involvement in Spanish politics persists: In 2022, the Spanish government undertook further policy changes to unlock EU grants.

Within this context, we tailored our experiment to appear to participants as both potentially realistic and yet hypothetical. Participants had some familiarity with both institutions, but no direct previous exposure to the hypothetical policy proposals that might have biased their responses.

The comparison of the IMF and EU in the European context is particularly important given that the two institutions worked closely together during the GFC. Some European respondents could, understandably, conflate the two institutions. However, our IMF treatment effects are consistently smaller, and only the EU treatment effects are robustly significant at conventional levels. The results suggest that citizens separately evaluate the role each institution plays in Spain.

The Pre-Post Research Design and Data Collection

Our research design is structured to study the downstream effects of experimentally induced changes in an individual's belief. Pre-post research designs are becoming the preferred design for detecting this type of learning and updating ([Fortunato, McCrain, and Schiff 2023](#)).

As [Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston \(2021\)](#) explain, the “pre-post” approach often yields estimates similar to standard between-subject designs, but with greater preci-

¹⁰To the extent that “nationalism” and “populism” overlap (see [Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019](#)), the last finding is consistent with [Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin \(2023\)](#), who argue that non-populists are less likely to blame IOs for economic problems. See also [Bush and Prather \(2022, 63–6\)](#).

¹¹Although, see [Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya \(2023\)](#).

¹²See [Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin \(2023\)](#), [Schlippach, Meiners, and Kiratli \(2022\)](#), [Heinkelmann, Wild, and Zangl \(2020\)](#), [Sommer \(2020\)](#), [Traber, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher \(2020\)](#), [Kosmidis \(2018\)](#), [Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou, and Exadaktylos \(2014\)](#), and [Hellwig, Ringsmuth, and Freeman \(2008\)](#).

¹³See, for example, [Kosmidis \(2018\)](#) and [Hellwig, Ringsmuth, and Freeman \(2008\)](#).

¹⁴This design is common in educational studies (e.g., [Grussendorf and Rogol 2018](#)), but infrequent in political science (e.g., [Fortunato, McCrain, and Schiff 2023](#)) and rare in international relations. See, however, [Burrows et al. \(2022\)](#) for a pre-post design employed to study ethnic groups within a given country.

¹⁵For example, [Jambrina-Canseco \(2023\)](#), [Jurado and Kuo \(2023\)](#), [Liu, Kuo, and Fernández-Albertos \(2022\)](#), [Rickard \(2022\)](#), and [Fernández-Albertos and Kuo \(2016, 2020\)](#).

¹⁶Although see [Henning \(2023\)](#) and [Clark \(2022\)](#).

¹⁷See, for example, [Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin \(2023\)](#), [Woods \(2018\)](#), [Rickard and Caraway \(2014\)](#), and [Nooruddin and Simmons \(2006\)](#).

¹⁸See <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/merkel-tried-to-bounce-spa-in-into-imf-bailout-ex-pm-idUSBRE9AO04X/> (last accessed December 5, 2024). See also [Field \(2013\)](#) and [Zapatero \(2013\)](#).

sion. They replicate six experiments and find that a pre-post design reduced standard errors by 20–50 percent. Such precision is valuable because noisy estimates are often unreliable, and wide confidence intervals provide little information to researchers. Moreover, estimated effects that narrowly reject the null hypothesis might not replicate. By increasing the precision with which we estimate the average treatment effect (ATE), we provide estimates that are both reliable and informative.

Importantly, the pre-post design allows for cleaner identification of heterogeneous treatment effects. If there is unobserved heterogeneity correlated with the outcome of interest, a one-wave (or “post-only”) approach can produce biased estimates. In these cases, the standard errors might be larger or smaller using the pre-post design to correct for potential bias.

By differencing outcomes across individuals—looking at the *change* in the outcome of interest—the repeated-measures design removes unobserved heterogeneity at the individual level. The approach thus bolsters the causal interpretation of heterogeneous treatment effects, reducing type I errors. This issue is particularly important when estimating effects in sub-samples of the data—where individual attributes, observable or unobserved, cannot be randomized.

Thanks to the repeated design, we can assess what people thought about spending cuts before and after treatment—that is, before and after they learned of the involvement of an international actor. Furthermore, we are able to compare the treated group with a control group (which was told nothing about international actors) to address any over-time changes between survey waves.

Data were collected through an Internet survey, administered by the private polling company Netquest.¹⁹ In the first wave, 2,658 individuals completed the survey, and, of these, 88 percent completed the second wave. Wave 1 was conducted from May 12 to 25, 2021 and wave 2 from June 30 to July 25, 2021. We set the interval between the two waves to be long enough for any priming from the first wave to diminish before the second wave—but short enough to limit the effect of potential real-world events that could influence respondents’ opinions. We focus our analysis on the 2,335 respondents who completed both waves. Our sample targets were set to match Spain’s demographics.²⁰

In the first wave, we included questions about respondents’ political orientations. On the domestic front, we asked if they supported the current government. Answers, on a 5-point scale, ranged from total support (1) to total opposition (5). We used responses to this question to implement a cluster randomization strategy in assigning the treatment and control conditions among government supporters and opponents (for the second wave of the survey). On the international front, we asked panelists whether they agreed or disagreed that the government should only ensure the well-being of citizens and not allow the involvement of foreign governments.²¹

¹⁹The experiment was preregistered with Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) and had Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The EGAP registration ID is 20210126AA (see <https://osf.io/aj7bx>, last accessed October 22, 2024). The IRB of record was the University of Houston (IRB ID: STUDY00002682), which had a reliance agreement with Princeton University (record number 13408-01).

²⁰See [Online Appendix Table A.1](#) for reporting of balance of the salient socioeconomic characteristics across the subgroups used in the analyses presented below.

²¹We also asked other related questions, following [Mansfield and Mutz \(2009\)](#). Results reported below are robust to using various combinations of these other questions (see [Online Appendix Figure A.1](#)).

Table 1. Levels of opposition to spending cuts across the two survey waves

	<i>N</i>	Mean Wave 1	Mean Wave 2	Mean Δ (Wave 2–Wave 1)
Full sample	2,335	3.88	4.09	0.21
Control	779	3.91	4.28	0.37
IMF or EU treatment	1,556	3.87	4.00	0.13
IMF treatment	777	3.86	4.10	0.24
EU treatment	779	3.88	3.90	0.03

Our key outcome variable is citizens’ support for the government’s decision to cut spending. In both waves of the survey, we measured respondents’ support for budget cuts using their responses to the following question (asked in Spanish):

Suppose the government decides to continue to collect taxes at the current level and reduce the amount of money it spends. Would you agree or disagree with the government’s decision to cut spending?

In the second wave, respondents in the control group received no information about the involvement of an international actor. Respondents in the first treatment group were told that the cuts were required by the IMF. Respondents in the second treatment group were told that the cuts were required by the EU. Answers were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from “totally agree” (coded 1) to “strongly disagree” (coded 7). Higher values indicate greater opposition to spending cuts.

Note that in the second wave of the survey, all respondents were also informed of the size and types of the intended budget cuts to anchor their expectations. Within the treatment and control samples, we randomly generated six subgroups of respondents, each of which received one of the pieces of information described below.

- (1) A 2 percent spending cut equally targeting all categories of public spending.
- (2) A 2 percent spending cut equally targeting all categories of public spending, including education.
- (3) A 2 percent spending cut equally targeting all categories of public spending, but maintaining current health spending.
- (4) An 8 percent spending cut equally targeting all categories of public spending.
- (5) An 8 percent spending cut equally targeting all categories of public spending, including education.
- (6) An 8 percent spending cut equally targeting all categories of public spending, but maintaining current health spending.

In this way, we attempted to isolate the effect of international actors from respondents’ beliefs about the nature of the spending cuts. In the next section—“Results”—we first pool respondents across these features. We then analyze subgroups in the subsection “Specific Budget Cuts.”

Results

Table 1 presents a summary of our main results. As seen in the first row, when respondents were informed of the details of the spending cuts (in the second wave), the mean level of opposition increased from 3.88 to 4.09 (on our 7-point scale). This finding is consistent with [Bansak, Bechtel,](#)

Table 2. Post-only (wave 2) comparisons

	Mean	Std. error	95% conf. int.		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Treatment—Control	−0.28	0.09	−0.45	−0.10	−3.11	0.00
IMF—Control	−0.18	0.10	−0.38	0.02	−1.73	0.08
EU—Control	−0.37	0.10	−0.58	−0.17	−3.61	0.00

Table 3. Pre–post analysis (difference-in-differences)

	Mean	Std. error	95% conf. int.		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Δ Treatment— Δ Control	−0.24	0.10	−0.44	−0.04	−2.41	0.02
Δ IMF— Δ Control	−0.13	0.11	−0.36	0.09	−1.19	0.23
Δ EU— Δ Control	−0.35	0.12	−0.58	−0.12	−2.96	0.00

and Margalit (2021), who find that public opinion toward austerity is sensitive to the specific design features of the package. In our study, the increase in opposition is driven largely by the control group (779 observations), where opposition to spending cuts went from 3.91 to 4.28, an increase of 0.37.

For the 1,556 treated observations, the average level of opposition increased only by 0.13 of a point. This increase, in turn, is driven by the IMF treatment group, where opposition increased by 0.24 of a point.

For the EU treatment group, there is almost no change in levels of opposition between the first and second waves, despite receiving more detailed information about the size and nature of spending cuts. Compared to the control group, the EU treatment substantially reduced opposition.

Table 2 presents the differences across the control and treatment groups in the second wave only—a post-only analysis. Here, we see that being told the spending cuts were required by an IO lowered opposition to spending cuts by 0.28 of a point. The difference is statistically significant at the 1 percent level of confidence. Considering that the average level of opposition in the control group is 4.28, this difference represents a decrease in opposition by about 6.5 percent.

When we drill into the treatment observations and consider the IMF and EU treatment groups separately, we see again that the effect is mostly driven by the EU. The effect of the IMF in lowering opposition is only 0.18 and is statistically significant at the 10 percent level. For the EU, however, the effect is 0.37, which is significant at the 1 percent level and represents a decrease of about 9 percent from the control group mean.

We estimate similar effects when we take advantage of our pre–post design. Table 3 presents the difference between the changes in the treatment and, respectively, control groups. Here, we see that the difference-in-differences across the treatment and control groups is 0.24 of a point. The effect is statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Looking at the effects of the treatment groups separately, we see that the effect of the IMF is small, 0.13, and not statistically significant. The effect of the EU, by contrast, is 0.35 and is statistically significant at the 1 percent confidence level. Figure 1 presents these results graphically.

Specific Budget Cuts

We now consider how specific features of the spending cuts—explicit information about their size and nature—influenced respondents. Due to the small number of

respondents within each subgroup, we estimate the ATE for combinations of these subgroups.

We begin by pooling together the subgroups who were told that the spending cuts would equal 2 percent of total spending—the “small cut” group. We compare the ATE of both the IMF and EU’s involvement for the “small cut” group with the ATEs for the “large cut” group—who were told the cuts would equal 8 percent of total spending. Note that in the real world, a 2 percent budget cut would, of course, represent severe austerity, so the terms “small” and “large” are relative.

Providing information about the size of the cuts increases opposition among respondents who did not receive an international actor treatment (the control group). The increase in opposition holds for both small and large cuts. Although large cuts engender slightly more opposition than small cuts, the difference is not large and the confidence intervals around the point estimates overlap, as illustrated in figure 2.

While the involvement of the IMF has no statistically significant effect on opposition to either small or large spending cuts, EU involvement reduces opposition to spending cuts, on average, for both large and small cuts. However, the EU has a larger reductive effect on respondents’ opposition when spending cuts are small (2 percent), and the ATE only reaches conventional levels of statistical significance for small cuts. The pre–post EU results, displayed graphically in figure 2, are also reported in Online Appendix Table A.4.

In short, the involvement of the EU does more to reduce opposition when spending cuts are smaller, as compared to when they are extreme. This result suggests that the influence of an international actor may have limitations when the proposed spending cuts are especially painful.

Further evidence of this dynamic comes from an analysis of the inclusion of education in the description of spending cuts. Previous studies document that education cuts provoke particularly strong opposition.²² People have strong priors on the value of education, and mentioning education cuts makes respondents relatively invulnerable to cues. We therefore anticipate that the involvement of international actors may have a smaller impact on public opinion when education is explicitly mentioned as a target.

To test this, we compare the ATE for respondents who were told that the spending cuts “target all categories of public spending equally including education” to the ATE where education was not mentioned. The results are illustrated graphically in figure 3. As expected, mentioning education

²²See, for example, Barnes, Blumenau, and Lauderdale (2021).

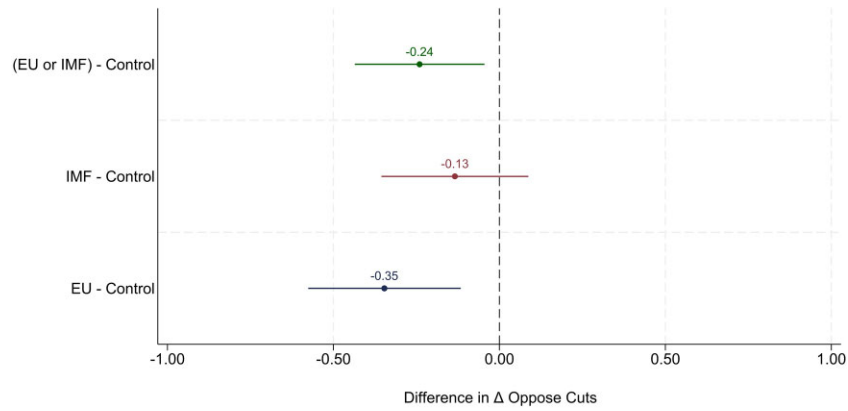


Figure 1. Average estimated treatment effects. Results from pre-post analysis. Point estimates represent the difference between the change in opposition to spending cuts for the respective treatment groups and the control group. The lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

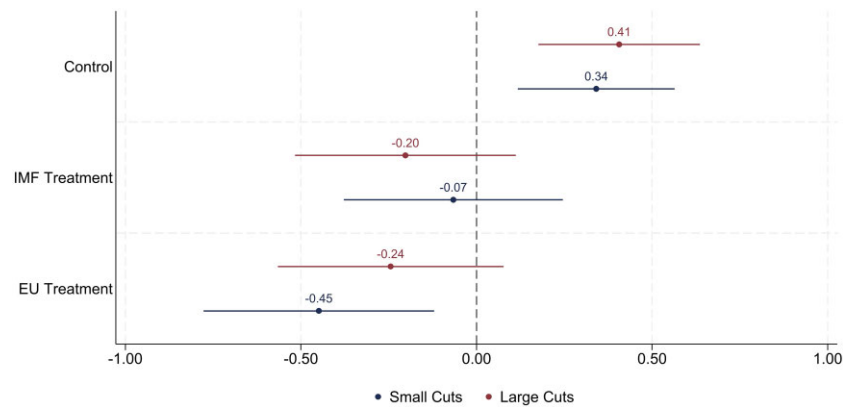


Figure 2. Average estimated treatment effects, by size of cuts. Results from pre-post analysis derived from estimates from fixed effects models on opposition to spending cuts by treatment conditions. Point estimates represent the difference between pre- and post-opposition to spending cuts in the control group (labeled “Pre-Post Control”), and the pre- and post-changes in opposition to spending cuts for the respective treatment groups relative to the control group (labeled “IMF Treatment Control” and “EU Treatment Control”). The lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. See [Online Appendix Tables A.3](#) and [A.4](#).

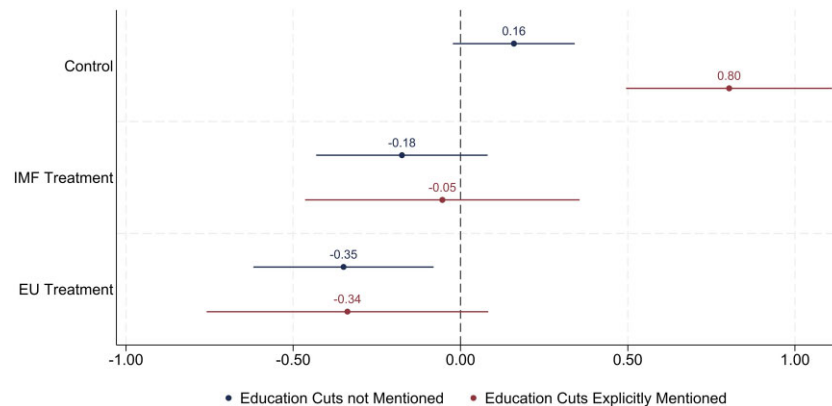


Figure 3. Average estimated treatment effects, by the content of spending cuts. Results from pre-post analysis, derived from estimates presented in [Online Appendix Table A.5](#). Point estimates, reproduced in [Online Appendix Table A.6](#), represent the pre-post difference in the control group (labeled “Control”), and the change in opposition to spending cuts for the respective treatment groups relative to the control group (labeled “EU Treatment” and “IMF Treatment,” respectively) by content of the proposed spending cuts (whether education is mentioned). The lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

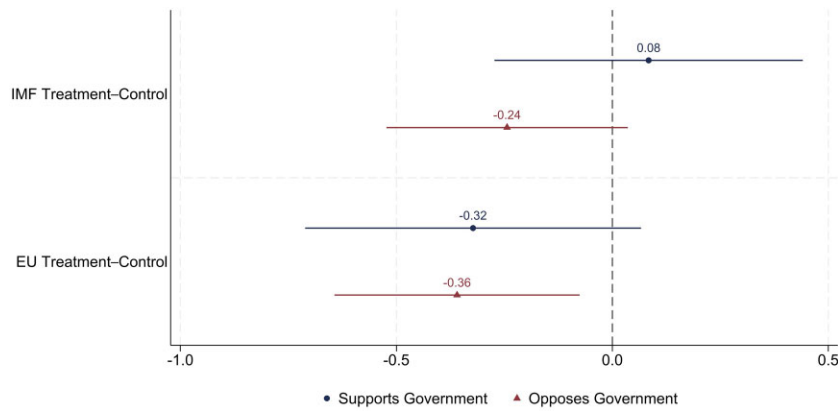


Figure 4. Average estimated treatment effects, by government support. Results from pre–post analysis are in [Online Appendix Table A.10](#). Point estimates represent the difference between the change in opposition to spending cuts for the respective treatment group and the control group. The lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

significantly increases opposition among the control group, as compared to wave 1.

When education cuts were mentioned, neither the involvement of the EU nor the IMF had a significant impact on respondents' opinions about spending cuts. The reductive effect of the EU is statistically significant only when education cuts were *not* mentioned.²³

The results from our interventions on the policy details are instructive in two ways: (1) Respondents are less supportive of policies when they learn more details. (2) The involvement of international actors is less likely to generate popular support for policy changes when spending cuts are severe—either because they are exceedingly large or because they target salient expenditures.

Political Orientation

Respondents' preferences over spending cuts may depend on their political orientation. Individuals who oppose the government may be skeptical of policy proposals put forward by it. The assurance that spending cuts are required by an outside actor may engender a particularly large reduction in these individuals' opposition to austerity. When an international actor is involved, opponents of the government may conclude that spending cuts are indeed necessary and not simply a politically motivated decision by the incumbent.

Supporters of the incumbent government may need less convincing—although our case is interesting in this regard. At the time of our experiment, the Spanish incumbent government was led by Pedro Sánchez of the center-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). Supporters of this incumbent government may be predisposed to oppose the types of spending cuts we examine in our experiment. These voters may have strong priors about the value of government spending, and government supporters may therefore be relatively invulnerable to cues from international actors.

To examine this possibility, we employ responses to a question from wave 1 that asked (in Spanish): “*What do you think of the current national government?*” We construct two groups using responses to this question. The first includes respondents who supported the government (fully or partially). The second group includes respondents who oppose

the government or are neutral toward it. We then estimate the ATEs for the two groups.²⁴ The results are presented in [figure 4](#).

The EU treatment reduces opposition to spending cuts among both supporters and opponents of the government. The estimated ATEs for both groups are negatively signed and of similar size. However, only the ATE for government *opponents* is statistically significant at the 95 percent level. Among those respondents who did not support the incumbent Socialist government, opposition to spending cuts fell by 9 percent from the sample mean when they received the EU treatment. In contrast, the EU treatment did not have a statistically significant effect on government supporters.²⁵

The effect of the IMF is not statistically significant for either group. Interestingly, however, the sign on the point estimates differs across supporters and opponents. The difference in ATE is positively signed for government supporters, indicating that opposition to spending cuts *increased* when they learned of the involvement of the IMF. While not statistically significant, this positively signed coefficient may reflect the fact that the IMF is typically viewed as a right-wing, neoliberal institution. Supporters of Spain's Socialist incumbent government may consequently react negatively to the involvement of this institution in domestic policy-making. They may believe that the government's spending decisions are more in line with their own preferences when made independently from the IMF.

In contrast, the negatively signed ATE for government opponents indicates that those respondents who do not support Spain's Socialist government became less opposed to spending cuts when they learned of the IMF's involvement. Government opponents may otherwise be against policy proposals from the government; however, upon learning of the involvement of an international actor, their opposition may decrease because they realize that the proposal is not designed by the national government alone. Still, the size of this effect is relatively small and not statistically significant.

Nationalism

An individual's level of nationalism may also influence how they react to the EU and IMF. If nationalism is rooted in an

²³The pattern is similar when we consider the health condition. See [Online Appendix Tables A.7 and A.8](#).

²⁴The estimates are reproduced in [Online Appendix Table A.9](#).

²⁵The pattern recalls the work of [Bush and Prather \(2022, chapter 6\)](#).

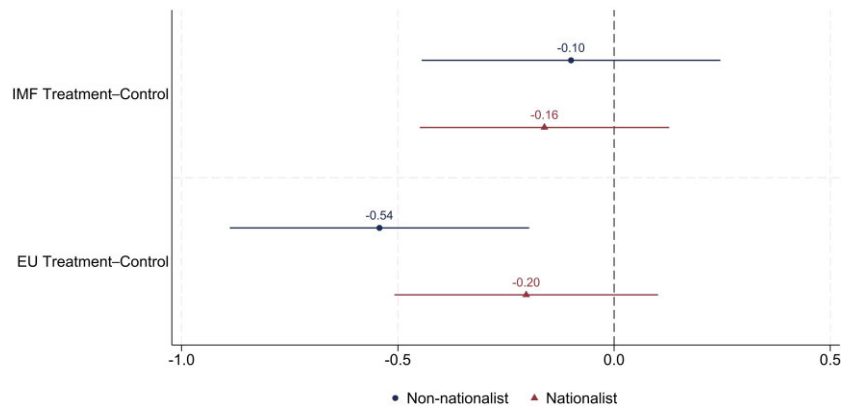


Figure 5. Average estimated treatment effects, by nationalism. Results from pre–post analysis. Point estimates, derived from model (1) in [Online Appendix Table A.11](#), represent the difference between the change in opposition to spending cuts for the respective treatment group and the control group. The lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

affection for a territorial political unit, then we would expect nationalists to object to international intervention in national decisions (Madsen et al. 2022). However, if nationalism involves identification with ethnicity or cultural values, then we expect nationalists to oppose cuts regardless of international intervention.

To test the role of nationalism, we estimate the ATEs for two subgroups of respondents. We categorize respondents as “nationalists” if they said in wave 1 that they agreed with the following statement (asked in Spanish): “*The government should only look after the welfare of its citizens and not allow the involvement of foreign governments.*” This question taps directly into our main interest: respondents’ feeling about the involvement of international actors in domestic policy-making. It also takes seriously the fact that: “Not all populists are nationalists, and not all nationalists are populists” (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019, 172). Populists are rarely internationally focused: Nationalists are almost always so.

As illustrated in [figure 5](#), the differences in ATEs between treatment and control groups are all negatively signed; this is true for both nationalists and non-nationalists alike. But only the EU treatment for non-nationalists is statistically significant. EU involvement reduces the mean level of opposition to spending cuts by 13.2 percent among non-nationalists. The estimated treatment effect for nationalists is less than half the size and fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

The results suggest that the involvement of international institutions in domestic policy-making may not necessarily fan the flames of nationalism. Instead, the involvement of an international institution appears to, if anything, *reduce* opposition to spending cuts. And this holds for both nationalists and non-nationalists alike. Although nationalists are relatively less responsive to the intervention of an international institution, they do not become any *more* opposed to austerity when there is an international intervention. This result calls into question conventional wisdom about one of the suggested causes of the emerging backlash against international institutions, namely IO intervention in domestic policy.²⁶

²⁶However, Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin (2023) find that populists react particularly negatively to the IMF, using evidence from the twenty-eight-country European Election Studies Survey (2014) and a survey experiment in Greece (2019).

Discussion

Our findings suggest that IOs can increase public support for controversial budget cuts—but there are limitations: In Spain, this effect holds only for the EU, not for the IMF. The effect also depends on the size and type of cuts, holding for those that are smaller and do not target particularly sensitive policy areas. Moreover, the effect is stronger for respondents who are opposed to the incumbent government and those who are less nationalistic.

Our set of findings builds on a vibrant literature employing survey experiments to understand the effect of IOs in domestic policy-making. In an important study, for example, Fernández-Albertos and Kuo (2020) report no evidence that the involvement of the EU affects Spaniards’ attitudes toward spending cuts. Similarly, Alonso and Sánchez-Cuenca (2022) find no effect of the European Central Bank (ECB) on respondents’ support for reducing civil servants’ wages or cutting unemployment compensation. In contrast, Hübscher, Sattler, and Wagner (2024) find that involvement of the IMF increases public support for austerity measures in Spain.

The combination of our larger sample and pre–post design may partly explain why we find a robust EU treatment effect while other studies of Spain do not. The finding of no EU effect on public opinion from Fernández-Albertos and Kuo (2020) emerges from a single-wave survey experiment in which the EU treatment is provided to 500 respondents.²⁷ Alonso and Sánchez-Cuenca (2022) find null effects in a survey experiment where the ECB treatment is given to 400 respondents. Given the relatively small sample sizes—and the single-wave research design—these surveys may have lacked power to uncover a statistically significant effect.

As for our null IMF result, in contrast to the finding of Hübscher, Sattler, and Wagner (2024), we speculate that the difference may emerge because they give respondents more detailed information about IMF financial assistance to borrowing countries. Specifically, their treatment includes two pieces of information: (1) the identity of the international actor and (2) hypothetical financial assistance. The financial information may prime respondents to be more supportive of cuts. By contrast, our treatment focuses on the identity of the actor requiring the spending cuts. We are interested in

²⁷Our treatment may also be stronger because we use the word “require,” while Fernández-Albertos and Kuo (2020) use “recommend.”

the value of national sovereignty to citizens versus concerns about policy outcomes.

By focusing on one piece of information, we isolate the impact of an international actor's engagement in domestic policy. Our approach may thus apply to a broad range of IMF interventions, including those that do not involve bailouts (see [Edwards and Senger 2015](#)). Of course, the approach of [Hübscher, Sattler, and Wagner \(2024\)](#) is useful because the IMF often does provide bailouts. Future research should vary treatments to better identify the effects of IMF loans versus policy conditions.²⁸

The different effects that we find for the EU and the IMF underscore that distinct IOs play varied roles in domestic politics. We suspect, but do not test, that a key reason for the different effects of these institutions is their credibility in the eyes of Spaniards. Government spending decisions are inherently complex, and, as a result, voters may rely on cues from sources they find credible when forming their opinions. A country's historical experience with an IO may shape how the public perceives its endorsement of policies.

The EU enjoys high levels of trust in Spain. In the 2017 European Values Study, a plurality of Spanish respondents (52 percent) expressed “quite a lot” or “a great deal of confidence” in the EU (which is almost 10 percentage points higher than for the other IO the survey asked about, the United Nations). One respondent in our survey—who was told that the cuts were required by the EU—explained that they supported the cuts precisely “because the EEC requires it.”²⁹ As [Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin \(2023, 3\)](#) assert, “the EU's regulatory, social, and political reach is more extensive and deeper than the impact of any other IO.”

The public may also take cues from the reputation that the IO has developed by working with other countries (see [Meseguer 2009](#)). Here, the IMF's record is spotty at best. The accountability of an IO may matter too. Spain's representation on the IMF Board of Governors is indirect and obscure to the public. Actions by the institution are often viewed as a form of “sovereignty intrusion” ([Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin 2023](#)). By contrast, some centers of power in the EU have directly elected representatives from member states.³⁰

IOs differ in their composition, organization, and mandate, and these differences are often reflected in the content of the policy recommendations they make. There are various reasons to explore in future work as to why the EU has a stronger effect than the IMF in Spain. The upshot of our analysis is that the EU appears to have earned a certain level of credibility in Spain, which outpaces that of the IMF. The modest conclusion of this research note is that some international actors can increase public support for controversial policies. In our analysis, the effect is stronger for the IO playing an active role in Spanish daily life. Consistent with [Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin \(2023, 3\)](#), “we cannot consider the EU just another IO.”

These results caution against aggregating the effects of different IOs together. In our case, respondents reacted dif-

ferently to an organization that has played a fading role in policy over the years (the IMF) than they did to an actor that has played a growing role in daily life (the EU). Aggregation would have led us to overestimate the IMF's influence on public opinion and underestimate the EU's. Because IOs serve differentiated—perhaps even contradictory—roles in domestic politics, public opinion toward individual IOs demands specific analysis ([Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin 2023, 3](#)). Differences may be, at least in part, a function of the credibility of the organizations in the eyes of voters.

It is important to emphasize that, because countries and voters have varied experiences with different IOs, the results from any given country may not generalize. Yet, exploring the full range of IOs in countries with different historical experiences using observational data is plagued by methodological obstacles. Experimental approaches—especially those exploiting the precision gains from a pre-post design—could be employed across a range of countries.

Finally, we stress that our findings also depend on a range of other factors such as support for the incumbent government and level of nationalism. These attributes cannot be randomly assigned: Unobserved heterogeneity can pose a problem in this context, even when taking advantage of randomized treatment assignment. To alleviate these concerns, we advocate for the use of pre-post designs when exploring the influence of international actors on public support for controversial policies.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the [International Studies Quarterly](#) data archive.

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²⁸That said, our null IMF treatment effect is not unique to this study or to Spain. In preliminary research conducted in Argentina and Mexico, we find similar null results for the IMF using a pre-post research design. [Hübscher, Sattler, and Wagner \(2024\)](#) similarly find null IMF effects in other European countries.

²⁹The EEC refers to the European Economic Community, formed by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. In 1993, the EEC was incorporated into the European Community (EC), which was absorbed into the EU's wider framework in 2009. This respondent was 58 years old. On the growing legitimization of EU authority, see [McNamara \(2015\)](#).

³⁰For representation in IOs, see [Davis \(2023\)](#), [Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi, and Cabrera \(2022\)](#), [Anderson, Bernauer, and Kachi \(2019\)](#), and [Bechtel and Scheve \(2013\)](#).

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