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Filling the Void: How Strategic Information Shapes Europeans' Willingness to Offset Foreign Aid Cuts

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Abstract

To what extent are German and Austrian citizens responsive to strategic interest framing, especially in the context of recent aid withdrawals by the United States and other donors? In this study, we examine whether being reminded of the strategic importance of foreign aid for foreign policy affects European donor publics' support for foreign aid and their willingness to compensate for recent aid cuts by other foreign donors. We leverage new data from survey experiments fielded in Germany and Austria in July 2025 with 4,220 participants to test how receptive donor publics are to information about the strategic foreign policy value of aid, varying both the source of the aid cut – the United States or the United Kingdom – and who is expected to benefit – either Austria/Germany or China. We find that donor publics are responsive to information about the strategic benefits of aid and about donor competition. There are, however, only minimal differences between our different treatments. Across the two countries, respondents do not react more strongly to cuts by the US or the idea that China may benefit from the cuts.

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Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, development cooperation was primarily framed around humanitarian and poverty reduction objectives. Over the past decade, however, donor countries have been scrutinizing their aid commitments through the lens of national interest (e.g. Honeyman et al., 2025). Most notably, in January 2025, US President Donald Trump dismantled the existing US aid architecture, promising a new system that prioritizes "America First." In responses, critics have emphasized the human cost of foreign aid cuts, but also the loss of strategic influence and soft power.

Reactions to the US aid cuts by other donors have been heterogeneous. The European Union, for instance, explicitly stated its reluctance to unilaterally fill the financial voids left by American withdrawals, signaling a cautious approach to assuming the full burden of global development financing. On the other hand, the US decision to partially withdraw from the market for aid has been seen as an opportunity for some European donors. At the Hamburg Sustainability Conference in June 2025, the German finance minister, Lars Klingbeil, announced plans for a new North-South Commission that observers interpret, "a calculated German bet" that Berlin can step into the leadership void (Mundeva, 2025). Moreover, strategic rivals of the United States, including China and several Gulf countries have seized the opportunity to increase their foreign aid allocations, potentially expanding their own spheres of influence (Houreld and Dixon, 2025; Sun, 2025).

We lack, however, an understanding of the extent to which domestic publics are receptive to strategic interest framing, particularly regarding aid's role in projecting and expanding foreign policy influence relative to other donor countries. In the context of the current upheavals in the aid system, European donors are the most likely candidates to step in and fill the gap. However, any attempts by European donors to increase their aid for policy influence are constrained by public opinion. Growing political polarization in many European countries means also that different segments of the public will likely respond differently to messages about donor competition (Bayram and Thomson, 2022; Hammerschmidt et. al., 2022; Heinrich et al 2021; Strange 2023). There is evidence that citizens in non-European countries are responsive to strategic interest framing (i.e., Kohno et al., 2021; Winters et al., 2025; Wood, Hoy, and Pryke, 2021). However, to our knowledge, no research has explored whether strategic interest framing is effective in increasing support for aid amongst citizens in the countries most likely to step, and if so, under what conditions.

In this article we ask the question: To what extent are Germany and Austria responsive to strategic interest framing, particularly in light of recent aid withdrawals by the United States and other donors? To investigate this question, we fielded a pre-registered survey experiment in Germany and Austria designed to examine the receptiveness of the public to different types of information about the strategic foreign policy value of aid.[1] For example, that their own country might benefit from the withdrawal of aid by another donor, or that China might benefit. While Germany is a large donor that has expressed interest in filling the gap left by the US, Austria is a smaller donor that has proposed cuts of its own aid budget. This allows us to test the impact of the strategic framing of foreign aid in different contexts,

[1] Pre-registration is available: https://osf.io/gbn6h/overview?view_only=3c95a501dda6422b9b933cf72af38a13

which vary in terms of opportunities for strategic influence and degrees of anti-aid populist sentiment.

We predict that when citizens are informed that aid cuts by another donor can benefit their country by expanding its foreign policy influence, they will be more willing to support increased aid. Similarly, we further predict that informing citizens that aid cuts by another donor could have potential foreign policy benefits for China will make them even more willing to support increased aid. Finally, we anticipate the strongest responses to information about US aid cuts, rather than the aid cuts by other donors, in this case the United Kingdom.

Using a within-subject repeated-measures design, we first asked respondents how their government should respond to recent aid cuts by other donors – whether to increase, decrease, or maintain current aid levels. Here we randomized the donor enacting the cuts, contrasting drastic US reductions with moderate U.K. ones to capture both a routine aid-cut effect with a more drastic retreat from aid-giving. Respondents were then randomly assigned to different information treatments describing the implications of these cuts either for their own government's influence or for China's. After receiving this information, participants were asked again whether their country should increase, decrease or keep aid the same. Finally, participants were invited to explain why they did or did not change their mind in response to our treatments in an open-ended question.

When asked whether their governments should follow the lead of the United States and other prominent donors in cutting aid, opinions are mixed: roughly one-third of the respondents want to cut aid as well, but one-tenth prefer to increase aid. Over one-half of respondents prefer to maintain current foreign aid spending. When reminded of the strategic value of foreign aid for their government, the share of respondents who want their government to increase aid increases significantly, while fewer respondents want to cut aid. In substantive terms, the treatment increases support by 0.12 (95%-CI: 0.10-0.14) index points, or 18% of its standard deviation.[2] A similar pattern arises when we emphasize that the US aid withdrawal offers an opportunity for China to gain influence. Our coding of open-ended responses, in which we asked respondents why they did or did not change their minds, confirms that the introduction of the influence mechanism is largely responsible for changing citizens' opinions.

While these results broadly confirm our pre-registered expectations that emphasizing the strategic value of aid can boost public aid support, survey participants did not respond differently to the drastic US aid cuts than they did to the more moderate UK aid cuts. Moreover, we generally find only a minimal "China effect," with respondents in the German sample appearing to be more sensitive to claims of China's growing influence than those in the Austrian sample. In other words, respondents were sensitive to strategic information framing, but the specific content of that framing had less impact than one might expect.

[2] For a more interpretable result, we also consider just a binary outcome for respondents who prefer to increase aid. The strategic influence treatments significantly increase the probability of this outcome by 4.8-6.9 percentage points—a sizeable effect given the low baseline probability of 14.6% (Table A6). When combining respondents who want to increase or maintain aid, the treatment effects are between 4.5-5.3 percentage points, for a baseline probability of 65.9% (Table A7), suggesting that the influence framing primary affects strict support for aid.

Our study makes three main contributions. First, while extensive research has explored the determinants of public opinion about foreign aid and how aid design influences these attitudes (e.g., Bayram, 2017; Bodenstein and Faust, 2017; Heinrich et al., 2021; Paxton and Knack, 2012; Milner and Tingley, 2013 for an overview), there remains a limited understanding of how information concerning donor competition – particularly in a geopolitically charged environment – affects public support for aid. While scholarship has explored the impact of strategic narratives (see Almezaini, 2024; Bayram and Graham, 2022; Chung, Pechenkina and Skinner, 2023; Kohno et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2024; Strange, 2023; Winters et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2021;), little has been done to compare how citizens respond to donor competition narratives and none in the context of the current aid withdrawals. This gap is especially critical given the unprecedented US aid cuts under the second Trump administration, which dramatically reshaped the global aid landscape. Extending earlier works that found limited responsiveness among the German public to US aid reductions (Schneider et al., 2025), we show the causal effects of geopolitical framing on public attitudes toward aid with experimental data.

Second, we advance the burgeoning literature on donor competition. Existing studies in this area have largely treated the donor state as a unitary actor (Annen and Moers, 2017; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2016; Steinwand, 2015). We intervene by shifting attention from the unitary donor to its domestic constituencies and exploring how donor publics react to information about donor competition. In a democratic society, engaging in donor competition requires a permissive citizenry. Yet, we know relatively little about how citizens in donor countries think about strategic interest vis-a-vis other donors. Furthermore, our research contributes to the scholarship on donor competition with its experimental focus that allows for testing causal effects, identifying scope conditions, and facilitating a nuanced comparison between donors of different sizes and thus overall potential for strategic influence.

Third, we add to the literature on the US–China rivalry and great power competition. While this literature has largely focused on economic dimensions such as aid, debt, and trade (Blair et al., 2022; Dollar, 2022; Drezner, 2009; Mosley, and Rosendorff, 2023; Natsios, 2020), our research shifts the focus to the public opinion implications of this rivalry. Specifically, we depart from studies centered on public opinion in recipient countries (Kim et al., 2025; Tokdemir, 2017; Wellner et al., 2025) by investigating the attitudes of publics in resourceful third countries who, as bystanders, are nonetheless influenced by the dynamics of this contest.

The geopolitical turn and US foreign aid cuts

Following Donald Trump's second inauguration, on January 20, 2025, US foreign aid policy shifted dramatically as the administration moved to dismantle USAID. Guided by an "America First" agenda emphasizing national interests and cutting perceived waste, an executive order launched a 90-day review of all aid programs and issued a "stop-work order" freezing payments and services for thousands of ongoing programs worldwide. Plans to terminate over 90% of USAID contracts, amounting to tens of billions of dollars, and large-scale staff reductions through forced leave and firings followed. While limited waivers were eventually granted for "life-saving" humanitarian programs, the abrupt cuts

severely disrupted global development and humanitarian efforts and left a significant vacuum in international aid provision (Devex, 2025).

Although the scale of the US aid cuts is unprecedented, America's withdrawal from the global aid market is not unique. Amid mounting economic pressures and increased expenditure on military defence, several European donors have reduced foreign aid or unveiled plans to do so. On February 25, 2025, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced plans to lower aid to 0.3% of GNI by 2027, cutting assistance from £15.3 billion in 2023 to £9.2 billion, with the goal of redirecting funds to raise defence spending to 2.6% of GDP. Similar cuts have already been enacted in Belgium, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland.

When viewed through a donor competition lens, however, aid withdrawals – particularly by major donors like the US – might provide a strategic opportunity. While the European Commission declared it "cannot fill the gap" left by the US, it has explored reallocating funds to protect key EU development interests in areas such as health, migration, and fragility. Other countries, including Canada and Spain, have framed the US withdrawal as an opportunity to expand their influence within multilateral institutions. Germany similarly seems keen to carve a new leadership role for itself (Devex, 2025). For European middle powers, the US retreat presents a chance to bolster their global influence and potentially counter the growing reach of non-Western rivals such as China and Russia.

However, any attempts to use aid to increase their global political leverage are likely to be constrained by public opinion. Aid is ultimately taxpayer money and thus requires the consent of citizens and the politicians they elected. Growing political polarization in many donor countries means it is also likely that different segments of the public will respond differently to messages about donor competition. Do citizens in donor countries support larger aid budgets when there is an opportunity for increased foreign policy influence?

Donor competition and public support for foreign aid

The allocation of foreign aid has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry with a core debate oscillating between needs-based and interest-based motivations (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2009; Dreher, Lang, and Reinsberg, 2024; Heinrich, 2013; Morgenthau, 1962). While the former emphasizes humanitarian concerns and poverty reduction, a growing body of literature points to a recent and pronounced (re)turn towards national interest as a primary driver of donor aid policies (Bayram and Graham, 2022; Bermeo, 2017; Gulrajani, 2017; Janus and Röthel, 2025). This shift reflects a strategic recalibration where donor countries increasingly view aid as a tool to advance their foreign policy objectives, secure economic advantages, or bolster security interests (e.g. Government of the Netherlands, 2025; Honeyman et al., 2025).

However, the literature offers a limited understanding of how donors advance national interests through aid. While donor–recipient relations are recognized (e.g., Swedlund 2017b), few studies fully conceptualize aid allocation as a strategic interaction that extends beyond bilateral ties to include donor–donor competition for geostrategic advantage. An exception is the literature on donor competition that provides crucial insights into how donors vie for influence and leverage aid to achieve competitive advantages in the

international arena (Annen and Moers, 2017; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2015; Hameiri and Jones 2025; Kilama, 2016; Kohno et al., 2021; Steinwand, 2015; Swedlund, 2017a; Zeitz, 2021).

We build on the scholarship on donor competition but extend it to account for domestic political constraints on aid allocation. Despite its valuable contributions, a key limitation of the current donor competition literature is its tendency to treat donor states as unitary actors, akin to billiard balls interacting on a table. This simplified view overlooks critical domestic complexities that can constrain whether and how donors respond to geostrategic opportunities (see Lundsgaarde, 2012 on the domestic dimension of development policy).

Of particular importance is public opinion. While the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy is complex (Boucher, 2024; Foyle, 2017), democratic donors are susceptible to the influence of domestic public opinion, which can significantly shape their foreign policy choices, including aid allocation decisions. Donors might want to use aid as a strategic instrument of statecraft but might be constrained by mass support. In an environment characterized by increased donors, understanding public receptivity to aid as a strategic instrument is essential.

This insight leads us to more squarely integrate the literature on public opinion about foreign aid in donor countries into our theoretical framework. Despite important advances on the on individual-level determinants of support for aid (e.g. Bayram, 2016, 2017; Bodenstein and Faust, 2017; Chong and Gradstein, 2008; Paxton and Knack, 2012) and on how this support changes when individuals are informed about the price of aid (Heinrich et al., 2016; Hurst et al., 2017; Kobayashi et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2021) or aid modalities (Bayram and Graham, 2022; Heinzel, Reinsberg, and Swedlund, 2025), a crucial gap remains: the extent to which publics in donor countries are receptive to the framing of foreign aid as a strategic tool in a competitive international environment.

Individuals' foreign policy attitudes are shaped both by their general beliefs and dispositions and by cues from trusted and often co-partisan policy elites (Kertzer, 2023). In this latter view, the framing of foreign policy issues plays an important role. Frames or story lines emphasize specific aspects of a policy issue and thus invite specific kinds of judgments (Berinsky and Kinder, 2006; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Iyengar, 1991). While the strategic communication of policy issues to mass publics has a long history in political science, communication, and public policy dating back to first generation propaganda studies, framing of foreign policy as an instrument of statecraft to advance national interest abroad has received renewed attention over the last few decades. For example, scholars have shown that mass public support for foreign aid (Hurst et al., 2017; Wood and Hoy, 2022) for the International Criminal Court (Zvobgo, 2019) and for military interventions (Jentleson and Britton, 1998) increases when these issues are framed as advancing national interest. Strange (2023) also finds that how aid is delivered, particularly its degree of visibility, affects its perceived value for influence, and that citizens are generally supportive of using aid for influence.

Notably, existing research has demonstrated that publics are especially receptive to national interest frames when these frames portray a policy as gaining advantage over a "strategic competitor." In one of the earlier studies, Brewer (2006) showed that when China is framed as a competitor to America, it is viewed significantly less favourably. In the context of international political economy, Mutz and Kim (2017) and Mutz (2021) found that

intergroup competition, specifically anxiety about the rise of rival trade partners, affected individuals' trade preferences. More recently, Levin and Musgrave (2023) demonstrated that Americans are more likely to support electoral interventions abroad when these are framed as countering Russian influence.

Similar dynamics have been observed by scholars in the context of foreign aid. For example, Wood et al. (2021) found that reminding Australians of China's rise as an aid donor in the Pacific increased their support for aid, though not for using aid to project influence. Conversely, Kohno et al. (2021) found that Japanese public support for canceling aid in the wake of human rights violations decreased when they received information about China as a potential alternative donor. Similarly, Bugden and Brazil (2024) demonstrated that Americans' support for foreign climate aid was motivated by geopolitical forces, especially when compared to the base levels of US governments and their European competitors, though not China. Finally, Winters et al. (2025) found that citizens in Japan and the US support foreign aid more when cued to think about international competition. However, Japanese citizens are more receptive to this type of framing. References to either an adversary or an ally reduce support for aid reallocation in Japan. In the US, however, respondents perceived that only an ally could impact national interests through aid substitution, and these concerns were insufficient to change opinions on aid reallocation. However, all of this research was conducted prior to the Trump administration's 2025 suspension of aid. The closure of USAID brought foreign aid into the global spotlight, pushing European states to consider how they might respond to these cuts. At the same time, none of the aforementioned studies draw on European samples, where such responses are actively debated. Except for Winters et al. (2025), none of the studies compare results across countries. Furthermore, Winters et al.'s study focuses on a potential increase in aid from either the US or China in response to cuts from the respondent's own country. Thus, the impact of strategic influence is inferred rather than explicitly tested. In the context of recent aid withdrawals by the United States and other donors, this leaves us with the pressing question: To what extent are Europeans responsive to strategic interest framing?

Testable hypotheses

We expect the strategic framing of foreign aid for expanding influence to meaningfully shape individuals' policy preferences. Specifically, we hypothesize that informing citizens about the strategic foreign policy benefits of aid in the context of competitive dynamics with other major donors will significantly increase their willingness to support increased aid allocations. Our premise is that donor publics possess a basic, at minimum implicit, understanding of national interest. When told that another donor's aid cut creates an opportunity for their country to gain influence by increasing aid, respondents should therefore be willing to support increasing aid. This can be motivated by two related goals. A desire to expand their country's reach in geopolitically important regions in the Global South or to limit influence of rival donors like China, which has demonstrated its willingness to spend huge amounts of development assistance to secure its interests in Global South countries (Dreher et al., 2022).

Based on this framework, we hypothesize that:

H1: When informed that aid cuts by another donor have potential foreign policy benefits for their country, respondents will be more willing to support increased aid.

H2: When informed that aid cuts by another donor have potential foreign policy benefits for China, respondents will be more willing to support increased aid.

Comparing the two scenarios, we expect respondents to react more strongly to information indicating that China, rather than their own country, could benefit from the withdrawal of aid. The Chinese development model differs from the principles pursued by the OECD. China emphasizes mutual respect for sovereignty and economic gains often overlooking good governance standards (e.g. Dreher et al., 2022). China also tends to skirt around Western-led institutions such as the Donor Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD (e.g. Shi and Swedlund, 2025). Donor publics are therefore likely to view China as gaining an unfair advantage in expanding its global reach by not playing by the rules, leading them to believe their country will fall behind China. This sense of competitive threat will in turn lead them to support increased aid when withdrawals are framed as benefiting China rather than their own country. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Respondents are more likely to support increased aid when informed about the foreign policy benefits of an aid cut for China than for their own country.

We also consider state capacity. States with greater capacity such as Germany have the resources to use aid to project influence and realize strategic returns. By contrast, smaller countries, such as Austria may be willing to use aid as a strategic instrument but lack the resources. Therefore, when foreign aid is framed as a tool for advancing national interest, publics of more powerful states should be more likely to support increased aid than those of less powerful states.

H4: German respondents are more likely to support increased aid when informed about the foreign policy benefits of an aid cut compared to Austrian respondents.

Finally, we anticipate that informing respondents about the foreign policy opportunities arising from the US aid cuts under the second Trump administration will elicit a stronger willingness to support increased domestic aid compared to similar information regarding UK aid cuts. Given its large and unprecedented scale, the US withdrawal signifies a greater and more attractive strategic opening for other donors to enhance their own policy influence. Publics' sense of opportunity for strategic gains should thus be amplified when US rather than UK aid cuts are highlighted. Accordingly:

H5: Respondents are more likely to support increased aid when informed about the foreign policy benefits of an aid cut by the United States than by the United Kingdom.

To capture individual heterogeneity in treatment effects,[3] we also consider individuals' prior foreign aid attitudes, prior knowledge of aid cuts, and populist attitudes.

Data and methods

[3] We preregistered unidirectional hypotheses, leaving the precise mechanisms unspecified.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted original survey experiments in Germany and Austria. These cases allow us to examine how strategic framing of aid operates across different contexts that vary in opportunities for projecting influence and domestic anti-aid sentiment. Germany is a critical case because it has become the largest official development assistance (ODA) donor after USAID suspended its operations. While the German public has traditionally been supportive of foreign aid, the rise of right-wing populism, along with a struggling economy and fiscal stress over the past few years have fuelled scepticism toward foreign aid (e.g. Schneider et al., 2024). On the other hand, Austria is a much smaller donor. This size difference implies that the potential for strategic influence remains limited. Moreover, right-wing populist sentiment is stronger in Austria as the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) is currently the largest faction in the parliament. For these reasons, we would expect Austria to be a harder case for finding support for our hypotheses.

We recruited participants via the public opinion company Bilendi. Bilendi provides access to a nationally representative sample for Germany and other countries. Subjects self-select in the respondent pool, and Bilendi selects which individuals from their pool are asked to answer the survey. In total, we recruited 4,220 respondents (2,107 in Germany and 2,113 in Austria) who completed the survey. The samples in Germany and Austria are representative according to the following background characteristics: age, gender, education, and federal state. We ran the survey in both Germany and Austria around the same time in mid-July 2025.

As detailed in our pre-analysis plan, we have four different experimental conditions based on the interaction of two design variables. First, we manipulate information about the donor that enacted the aid cuts. The US is a drastic example, given that an entire aid agency was dismantled. By contrast, the UK is a typical example of aid cuts. We capture the identity of the withdrawing donor using binary indicators (*UScuts* or *UKcuts*). Second, we manipulate information about which donor is said to gain an opportunity for increased geopolitical influence. This can be the respondent's country or China. We capture the identity of that donor using binary indicators (*RCopp* or *CHNopp*).

The outcome variable is based on questions of the following type: "How should the German government respond to the decrease of foreign aid by the United States?" We adjusted the wording accordingly when deploying the survey in Austria and when probing the response to aid cuts by the United Kingdom instead. The three answer options offered were that the government should either increase, decrease, or keep its current aid spending the same. For analysis purposes, we consider two dependent variables. First, we use an ordinal index encoded as (1) reduce, (2) maintain, and (3) increase, such that positive coefficient estimates in regression output indicate greater propensity for aid support. Second, to obtain interpretable effect sizes in terms of probabilities, we create a binary indicator for when a respondent prefers an aid increase only. In robustness tests, we use an indicator that combines preferences for increasing aid and maintaining aid.[4]

[4] As outlined in our pre-registration, we also considered a change variable capturing any 'upward' movement in aid support from the pre-treatment response. For example, if a respondent wanted to keep aid or reduce it, but then wants to increase it after treatment, this is an increase in support. Similarly, if a respondent wanted to reduce aid, but now wants to keep it at the same level, this is an increase in support, too. However, a change specification is inconsistent with our design choice of including individual-level fixed effects. We therefore revert to measuring the outcome in levels.

Figure 1 summarizes our experimental design. The text in italic represents the exact treatment as presented to the respondent. We independently randomized two features, yielding four distinct groups. First, we randomized the identity of the foreign donor that enacted the aid cuts, distinguishing the drastic US aid cuts from the tamer UK aid cuts. This allows us to measure a potential 'US effect' in addition to the effect of foreign aid cuts in general.[5] We then assigned respondents in each treatment group randomly to different information treatments describing what the aid cuts by other donors imply for the policy influence of either their own government, or China as a strategic competitor to the West. For each of these treatment groups, we asked respondents twice for their opinion about whether their government should increase, decrease, or keep aid the same in response to the aid cuts of the foreign donor—once before the information treatment and once thereafter.

Our setup is a within-subject repeated measurements design, which is uncommon in experimental studies on foreign aid, but which has several advantages in this case. First, repeated-measures designs enhance the sensitivity of an experiment to detect a true difference between treatment conditions. Hence, this design allows us to identify smaller treatment effects at a given level of statistical power (Bloom, 1995). The enhanced precision in treatment effect estimates is due to the repeated measurement of the outcome for the same individual, as compared to between-subject designs where key outcomes are observed only once (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston, 2021). Second, in the presence of unit-level heterogeneous treatment effects, the repeated-measurement design addresses potentially unobserved confounders. In contrast, between-subject designs are liable to bias because individual-level attributes cannot be randomly assigned (Bowers et al., 2011). Our use of a pre–post design thus recovers valid treatment estimates in specific sub-populations (Pinto et al., 2025).

To estimate our effect of interest, we rearrange the data in long format, such that we record a pre-treatment outcome and a post-treatment outcome for each respondent. As our models include fixed effects at the respondent level, we do not need to include control variables. Following our pre-registration, we estimate linear-probability models given their ease of interpretation, although we also estimate logistic regression models in robustness tests. While our models typically include all treatment conditions, we also present models for specific subsets of respondents, simplifying the estimated models. We will first pool all respondents from both survey countries before considering potential effect heterogeneity across survey countries.

Figure 1: Logical flow of the experiment and treatment groups

[5] Because our wording refers to the "US government under Trump", we identify a US effect of which Trump is one possible (but possibly the dominant) effect.

Notes: Dark blue boxes contain the key outcome of interest. White boxes indicate the information prompts provided to participants. The text in italic represents the exact wording, as presented to the respondent. Square brackets in treatment statements indicate the text that may vary depending on the subsample.

For the exploratory analysis, we derive several moderators from the survey. First, to capture positive beliefs about aid impact, we draw on the following question: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: Foreign aid to low-income countries has a positive impact." Answer categories are on a five-point Likert-type scale, and we construct a binary indicator for any agreement to this statement. Second, to capture beliefs about the foreign policy value of foreign aid to donors, we probe (dis)agreement to the following statement: "Foreign aid largely benefits recipients in low-income countries. It has little value for German citizens." As the item uses the same five-point scale, we again create a binary indicator for whether a respondent agrees or strongly agrees with this statement. Third, we measure general knowledge about the current developments in the aid sector by asking

respondents whether they have heard about the US (or UK) aid cuts, and in Austria asked respondents if they had heard about the (proposed) cuts of their own government. We adjusted the question to fit the policy context of the survey country.

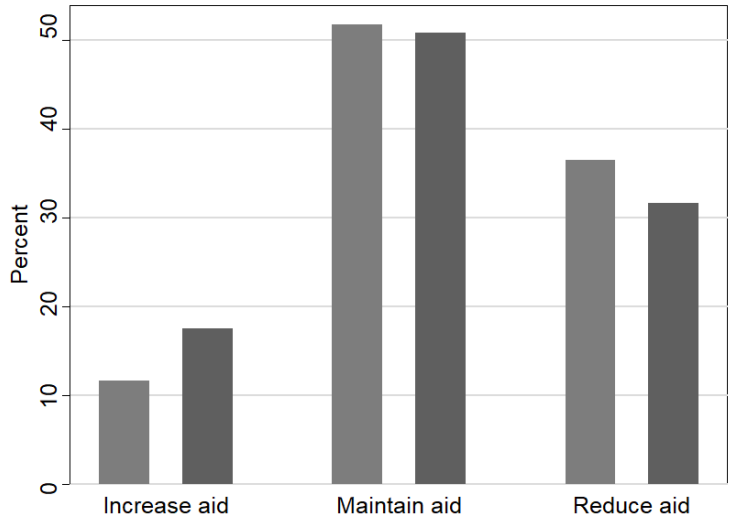
Fourth, we measure populist attitudes with a standard battery of six items, drawn from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). Previous research used factor analysis to derive these six items as a reliable measure of populism, capturing anti-elite attitudes and scepticism toward representative democracy (Akkerman et al., 2014). We also measure the party vote choice of a respondent in the most recent legislative election. Finally, each respondent was asked an open-ended question asking them either why they changed their mind or did not change their mind. The intention here was to provide a check on our proposed mechanism. We present variable definitions and descriptive statistics for all the variables in the appendix (Table A1).

Results

We begin with descriptive analysis of the survey data. For our baseline results, we examine how respondents respond to information about aid cuts by a foreign donor before the treatment and after the treatment (Figure 2). With only the pre-treatment information about these aid cuts (*UScuts* / *UKcuts*), as reflected in the first bar of each pair, most respondents do not believe that their own country should change their foreign aid commitments (52%). About just over one-third wants to reduce aid—following the lead of the foreign donor (36%). Just over ten percent want to increase aid, to compensate for the shortfall (12%).

As we show in the appendix, the response patterns are similar across both survey countries (Figure A1). For Germany, we find over half of the respondents want to maintain aid (54%), a significant portion wants to cut aid (34%), and a small minority wants to increase aid (12%). An earlier study with 1,055 Germans in February/March 2025 found similar results, with most Germans wanting to maintain current aid levels (43%), and relative minorities wishing to cut aid (24%) and to increase it (20%) (Schneider et. al., 2025). While these patterns are qualitatively similar, they also reveal that support for aid has further waned among the German public, as aid cuts have become more commonplace. As in Germany, only a minority of Austrians (11%) want to increase aid, while a somewhat greater share (39%) wants to cut it. A plurality (50%) wishes to maintain aid at its current level.

Figure 2: Preference for government response to aid cut before and after treatment across both survey countries



Notes: The graph shows the distribution over the outcome categories before the intervention (light gray) and after the intervention (dark gray), in percent of the total responses at each outcome stage. We confirm in t-tests that the differences are statistically significant ($p<0.05$).

In the next stage of the survey, respondents were treated with different statements emphasizing the foreign policy value of aid. Half of the respondents read that aid withdrawals could increase the influence of their *own* government if it stepped into the void, whereas the other half read that aid withdrawals could lead to China gaining more influence. Respondents were then asked again to indicate their preferred response for their government, which is summarized in the second bar in each category of the outcome variable. Pooling across information treatments, we find that about half of the respondents still prefer unaltered aid commitments (51%). However, a larger share of respondents now wants their government to increase aid (18%), whereas a relatively smaller share prefers aid cuts (31%). This is suggestive evidence that emphasizing the strategic value of foreign aid for geopolitical influence has a marginally positive effect on aid support (Figure 2). The response patterns appear to be similar in both survey countries. Mirroring our earlier findings, Germans tend to be somewhat less willing to follow the foreign donor in its aid cuts compared to Austrians. More importantly, the share of respondents that want to increase aid increases in both survey countries after the reminder about the strategic value of foreign aid (Figure A2).

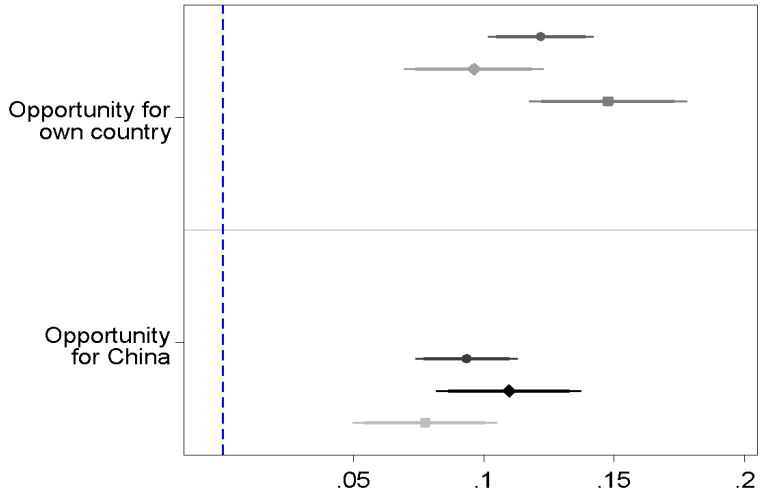
In the appendix, we also show the cross-tabulation of cases considering both the initial response to the aid cuts by the foreign donor and the subsequent response with the additional reminder about the strategic value of foreign aid (Table A2). The case distribution also indicates a much higher number of respondents who change their opinion toward increasing aid even though they wanted to maintain aid (N=321) or decrease aid (N=43), rather than the opposite scenario in which respondents want to reduce aid even though they initially supported to maintain current levels (N=77) or an aid increase (N=12). These patterns suggest that people are able to re-consider their support for aid, if informed about its geostrategic value.

We now turn to assessing our hypotheses using regression analysis. Specifically, we build a panel dataset in which we record the two responses of each survey participant in separate rows, explicitly considering the different information environment when the outcome is

measured a second time. Our key interest is in whether the strategic treatments affect the change in aid support compared to the baseline in which respondents only learn about the aid cuts of the foreign donor. Fixed effects on individual respondents obviates the need for further control variables. We illustrate the treatment effects graphically but refer to the supplemental appendix for the corresponding regression tables.

Figure 3 shows the results from three simple regressions that include the opportunity treatments in separate models. The first model pools respondents from both survey countries, the second model only includes German participants, and the third model Austrians only. The (linearized) outcome variable encodes the three response levels: cut aid (1), maintain aid (2), and increase aid (3). In the pooled sample, we find a significantly positive effect of emphasizing the opportunity for their own government to wield more influence through aid, compared to the before-treatment measure. In substantive terms, the treatment increases support by 0.12 (95%-CI: 0.10-0.14) index points, or 18% of its standard deviation.[6] The treatment effect is positive in both survey countries, although the treatment is stronger among Austrians than among Germans. Overall, we find support for our first hypothesis that if we remind people of the strategic value of aid for their own government, they increase their support for aid.

Figure 3: Change in aid support after aid cuts by foreign donor and emphasizing the strategic value of foreign aid



Notes: Coefficient estimates from separate regressions of the linearized response on information about the opportunity for your own country (*RCopp*) and respectively opportunity for China (*CHNopp*). Circles correspond to the pooled sample over both survey countries, diamonds to Germany, and squares to Austria.

Turning to the 'China effect,' we find similarly positive treatment effects. Respondents want their own governments to increase aid more than under the baseline scenario when reminded that the US aid cuts might increase the geopolitical influence of countries like China. The treatment, however, appears to be less effective than reminding respondents of

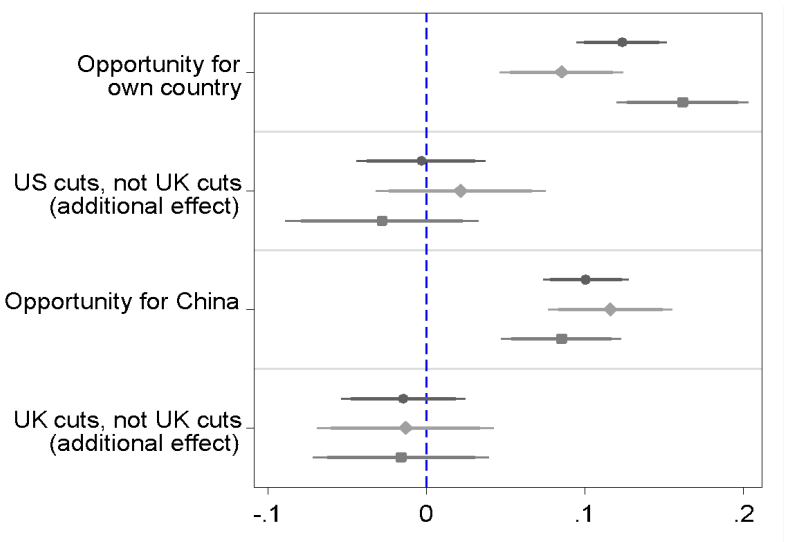
[6] For a more interpretable result, we also consider just a binary outcome for respondents who prefer to increase aid. The strategic influence treatments significantly increase the probability of this outcome by 4.8-6.9 percentage points—a sizeable effect given the low baseline probability of 14.6% (Table A6). When combining respondents who want to increase or maintain aid, the treatment effects are between 4.5-5.3 percentage points, for a baseline probability of 65.9% (Table A7), suggesting that the influence framing primary affects strict support for aid.

the benefits to their own country. The treatment is also more effective in increasing aid support among Germans than among Austrians. Overall, we therefore also confirm our second hypothesis in that reminding people of the strategic opportunity for countries like China increases their support for aid through their own government. To examine if respondents react more strongly to the China treatment compared to the strategic opportunity for their own country, we include both treatments in the same model and conduct one-sided Wald tests for coefficient differences. As shown in the appendix (Table A3), we find that the China treatment is significantly less effective among respondents than the treatment with their own country ($p<0.05$). However, this result appears to be driven by Austrian respondents. In the German sample, both influence frames exert a similar effect. Overall, we thus reject our third hypothesis.

To test our fourth hypothesis that the influence treatments is more effective in Germany – as a relatively more powerful donor – than in Austria, we turn to country-pooled regressions. Contrary to expectations, we find German respondents to be less swayed to change their mind about aid when prompted with the opportunity for influence for the German government, compared to Austrian respondents who react more positively to the prospect of greater influence for their government (Table A4). The difference of 0.05 index points is statistically significant ($p<0.05$). Conversely, there appears to be a distinctive 'China effect' among German respondents: if prompted with the prospect that China could gain influence because of US aid cuts, German respondents tend to be more supportive of aid increases than Austrian respondents (Table A5).

Finally, we disaggregate the initial treatment which varied the identity of the foreign donor that cut aid. We hypothesized that respondents would react more strongly to the influence treatment when the aid cuts were initially from the United States, not the United Kingdom. We test this hypothesis by including a multiplicative interaction term for both treatments in our regressions. Figure 4 shows the effect of the influence treatment for the baseline country being the United Kingdom, along with the additional effect that would obtain if we were to change the baseline country to the United States. The results do not suggest any difference, regardless of whether we emphasize opportunities for the home country or for China. Hence, we reject our fifth hypothesis.

Figure 4: Change in aid support after aid cuts by different foreign donors and emphasizing the strategic value of foreign aid



Notes: Coefficient estimates from joint regressions of the linearized response on all treatments shown: influence frames (*RCopp* / *CHNopp*) and identity of the cutting donor (*UScuts* / *UKcuts*). Circles correspond to the pooled sample over both survey countries, diamonds to Germany, and squares to Austria.

In the appendix, we probe the robustness of our core findings to alternative estimation strategies, including ordered logit regressions as well as linear regressions without individual-level fixed effects (see Tables A8-A12). None of these robustness tests substantively affect our conclusions. Overall, we find strong support for the notion that respondents increase their support for aid (or at least reduce their support for aid cuts) when prompted about the strategic opportunity for influence that the withdrawal of the United States (or the United Kingdom) have created.

Check on mechanism

To understand respondent choices better, we probed their motivations through open-ended questions. Depending on whether respondents changed their mind in response to the experimental treatment, respondents were asked either “What motivated you to change your opinion?” or “What motivated you to not change your opinion?” To analyze these responses, we used a two-step design annotation design using the Qwen QwQ-32B large language model (LLM) (Qwen Team 2025; Yang et. al., 2024). In the first parsing, we used the model to annotate all 4220 responses into three categories – clear responses, unclear responses, and responses that indicated an error – using a few-shot classification strategy (Brown et. al., 2020; Si et. al., 2022). The first annotation round resulted in 2463 clear responses for analysis, roughly 58% of the total sample. In the second annotation round, we annotate all clear responses into one of five categories: norm of appropriateness, norm of burden-sharing, strategic influence opportunity, prioritization of domestic interests, and other, again using the Qwen model and a few-shot classification strategy.

All prompts were developed on a random sample of items in accordance with the guidelines outlined in Mochtak (2025) and ran locally on LM Studio to prevent the sharing of personal survey data. To evaluate model performance against human coders, for both Phase 1 and 2, we drew a random sample of 200 responses – 100 from the change group and 100 from the no change group – from the entire sample. Comparing the model’s annotations with the human baseline shows that the model performs well considering the complexity of the

annotation task. Krippendorff's alpha was .760 for Phase 1 and .685 for Phase 2, which are acceptable scores for more complex annotation tasks with several categories (Marzi et al. 2024). We also performed an error analysis on the disagreements, and these were indeed difficult decisions, where it was not obvious whether the human coder or the LLM was correct. A full description of the process and the prompting used can be found in the appendix. The results of Phase 2 are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Coding of Open-Text Responses to the question, "What motivated you to change your opinion?" or "What motivated you to not change your opinion?" (N=2,463)

	Changed Opinion				**Did Not Change Opinion**	
	Count			*Total Percentage*	*Count*	*Total Percentage*
	Total Aid	Less Aid	More			
Strategic Influence	**237**	**11**	**226**	**56%**	135	7%
Domestic Issues	57	3	45	13%	**1238**	**61%**
Appropriateness	48	3	45	11%	308	15%
Burden sharing	27	10	17	6%	178	9%
Other	54	19	35	13%	181	9%

As Table 1 demonstrates, respondents who reconsider their opinion, especially those who became more favourable towards aid after learning about its strategic value often highlight motivations in line with our theoretical reasoning. Of those who changed their minds, the majority of those that provide a clear reasoning, mentioned strategic influence directly telling us things like "because it benefits Austria after all," "Germany also profits from this," and "seizing power is important in today's times." As one respondent put it, it appears these aid cuts are "perhaps a once-in-a lifetime chance to gain influence in many countries…" Respondents also explicitly mentioned the new information presented, saying things like they "had not considered the possible influence for China," or "[i]f this really is an advantage for Germany, the state should maintain it." "The word influence. I hadn't considered this at first—not in the sense like influence equals colonialism or proselytizing, but rather the subtle, positive influence one gains when voluntary cooperation comes from sympathy." We find particularly strong emotional responses when China is mentioned. Respondents told us, for example, that "China must not gain any more influence," "We will otherwise be pushed out by China," and "I hate China."

In contrast, those who did not change their mind emphasized domestic issues. By far the most respondents who did not change their mind, mentioned things like, "We should first take care of our own population; there are enough poor people here!!!," The Austrian people need help themselves," and "Germany is taken advantage of like a Christmas goose. We fill the pockets of other countries with our taxes, and there's no money left for investments at home" and "Germany will soon need development aid itself if this continues." In Austria, a number of respondents explicitly mentioned the current budget deficit, saying things like

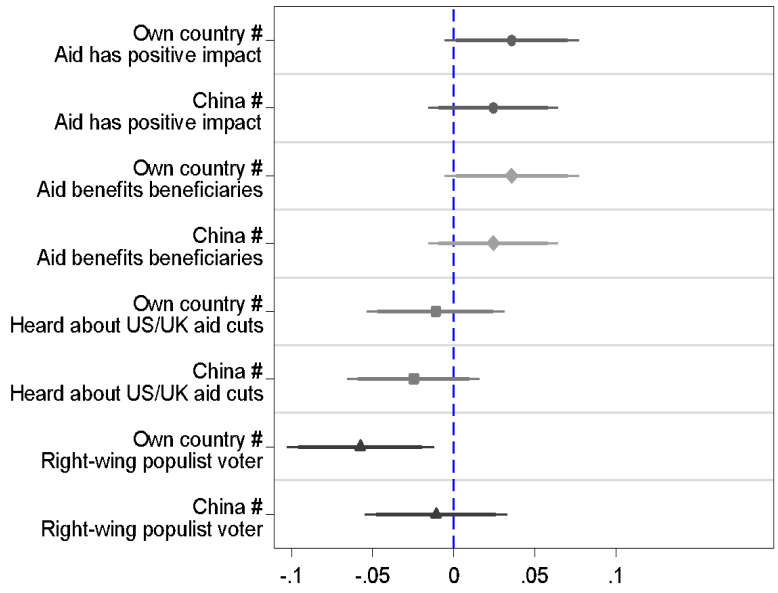
“Austria is currently too heavily indebted” and “Austria is broke; they are laying off low-wage earners to give money away to other countries. Stop immediately.”

Moreover, respondents who did not change their minds but mentioned influence arguments tend to do so in the context of rejecting our argumentation. For example, respondents in this category noted that influence would likely not be that significant, that they disliked the idea of using aid for geopolitical influence, or that they did not mind if other states, such as China, gained influence. They told us things like, “Because I am not aiming for Austria's international position to be improved,” “The argument about geopolitical influence has not convinced me. If our motivation for development cooperation is to exercise or strengthen geopolitical influence, that is highly toxic and exploitative,” and “If China increases its influence, that still has no disadvantage for Austria.” In other words, the respondents understood the underlying mechanisms of the experimental design but were simply not convinced by the argument.

Exploratory analysis

Finally, we explore heterogeneous treatment effects by interacting the treatments with different moderators. Importantly, these heterogeneous effects cannot be driven by lack of balance in respondent samples, as the within-subject repeated measurement design removes the confounding effect of any individual-level characteristics. Figure 5 summarizes the additional treatment effects of the respective sub-groups. We find a marginally statistically significant treatment effect for the influence frame among those who believe aid has positive impacts, but only when opportunities for influence for the home country are emphasized. There is no heterogenous treatment effect in the China treatment. The same patterns emerge when considering respondent beliefs about who benefits from aid. Those who believe that aid primarily benefits the recipient country are more persuaded to increase aid following the US aid cuts and given the reminder about the possibility for influence for their own government. Again, there is no effect heterogeneity in the China treatment. In addition, we do not find significant effect heterogeneity depending on whether respondents were aware of the aid cuts before the survey. That is, knowledge about aid cuts does not seem to affect the likelihood that a respondent reacted to our treatment.

Figure 5: Exploring effect heterogeneity in different sub-groups



Notes: Coefficient estimates from joint regressions of the linearized response on both influence frames (*RCopp* / *CHNopp*) interacted with different covariates. Estimates show additional treatment effects relative to respondents who receive the same treatment but for whom the moderator is zero.

In the remaining split-sample analysis, we compare voters of right-wing populist parties to the voters of all other parties. We find that emphasizing the opportunity for influence after aid cuts has a significantly smaller effect among voters of extreme-right parties, compared to voters of other parties. Their response to the influence treatment is nonetheless to be more supportive of increased aid. As for the 'China effect', extreme-right voters respond similarly as all other voters. While we do not present interaction effects with the continuous populism index, we note that the results are qualitatively similar to those using right-wing vote choice, as right-wing vote correlates strongly with the populism index. In the appendix, we also show results separately by survey country (Figure A3).

In sum, the results show that influence frames tend to be more effective among those who are more amenable to foreign aid, while they are less effective among right-wing populists whose negative views on aid may be seen as pre-determined and thus harder to change. Nonetheless, we find our treatments to be effective across all respondent groups, suggesting that emphasizing the value of aid in the wake of aid cuts by a foreign donor can move public opinion on aid.

Discussion and conclusion

This study explored the evolving dynamics of public support for foreign aid in a context of aid withdrawal from major Western donors such as the United States. Because the withdrawal of the United States reduces the cost of wielding influence for other donors, we expected that publics should be more inclined to support increased aid spending if reminded of its geostrategic importance. To test our hypotheses, we fielded survey experiments in two European countries with different capabilities for wielding geopolitical influence: Germany as a middle power may benefit significantly from the US withdrawal, whereas Austria as a small donor is less capable of doing so.

Our findings suggest that donor publics respond to information treatments regarding the strategic value of foreign aid and a donor state's ability to effectively leverage its influence. We observed that providing information to people about the potential foreign policy benefits of aid for their own nation significantly increased their willingness to support increased aid spending. In Germany, this trend was further amplified when the narrative highlighted the opportunity for strategic rivals, such as China, to expand their influence in the wake of diminished Western engagement. These results confirm our core expectation that publics are motivated to use foreign aid as a strategic instrument of statecraft for projecting global influence.

Despite the pronounced impact of the US aid cuts, our research found limited evidence of a distinct effect from the recent US aid withdrawals, with public responses to the drastic US reductions not significantly differing from those to more moderate UK aid cuts. Furthermore, while we hypothesized that a larger donor like Germany would exhibit a stronger response to the strategic framing of aid due to its greater potential for influence, our results did not consistently support this expectation. We did observe a more pronounced 'China effect' in the German sample, suggesting a heightened concern regarding China's expanding influence among the German public. Additional analyses of individual-level differences revealed important moderating effects: individuals who already hold positive views on aid's developmental impact and its benefits for recipient countries are more receptive to influence-based aid framing. Conversely, those with stronger populist beliefs and affiliations with right-wing populist parties exhibited less responsiveness to such framing, particularly in Germany.

This research makes several key contributions to the existing literature on foreign aid and public opinion. First, we join a nascent literature which seeks to understand how information concerning donor competition shapes public support for aid (Kohno et al., 2021; Winters et al., 2025; Wood, Hoy, and Pryke, 2021), but extend it by studying this issue in the context of aid suspensions by large Western donors. We confirm findings from this literature that people support aid more when reminded of its strategic value (Strange, 2023; Winters et al., 2025). While prior work has unpacked different types of competing donors, we extend this line of work by embedding it in the context of aid suspensions and by providing experimental evidence on specific scope conditions, specifically variation in the feasibility of donor influence comparing Austria and Germany. Finally, we expand the discourse on US–China rivalries (Blair et al., 2022) by shifting the focus to the public opinion implications of this competition among publics in third countries, who, as important bystanders, are nonetheless influenced by these power dynamics. In doing so, we overturn previous findings showing people's increased willingness to cut aid when informed about the rise of China (Wood, Hoy, and Pryke, 2021). In sum, we innovate by examining how the general public in two European countries, Germany and Austria, respond to the strategic framing of foreign aid amidst dramatic shifts in the global aid landscape.

The insights gained from this study are highly pertinent for policymakers navigating the complex landscape of international development. Understanding public receptivity to geopolitical justifications for foreign aid is crucial for crafting and communicating legitimate and effective aid policies that align with national interests while maintaining public buy-in. Future research could further explore the long-term stability of these shifts in public opinion, the specific messaging strategies that resonate most effectively with different segments of the public, and the comparative dynamics across a broader range of donor countries with varying political contexts. Qualitative research with focus groups could cast further light on the motivations for the public to change its opinion about aid in the wake of US aid cuts.

While our open-response questions highlighted that many citizens understand the strategic implications of US aid cuts for other donors, some respondents also emphasized other reasons for why their government should increase aid, such as upholding financial support for life-saving assistance and avoiding blame from the international community for cutting aid. While we find that strategic interesting framing does encourage increased support for aid, most respondents maintain their previously held opinions about aid. Future research may examine the reasons behind this stability in aid attitudes while probing the possible mitigating effects of counter-messages to influence frames.

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