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Political Elites and Attitudes Toward International Organizations in the Trump Era

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines how political elites influence public opinion on international organizations (IOs), focusing on the impact of President Donald Trump's rhetoric on attitudes toward the World Health Organization (WHO), UN, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Methods: Using data from the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES), we analyze the relationship between Trump support, political knowledge, and public evaluations of these IOs.

Results: We find a significant "Trump effect" on attitudes toward all three IOs. Trump supporters exhibited significantly lower evaluations of the WHO, UN, and NATO. Moreover, highly knowledgeable Trump supporters were even more likely than their less knowledgeable counterparts to reduce their support for these organizations in response to Trump's rhetoric.

Conclusions: Our findings suggest that highly knowledgeable Trump supporters are more attentive to his political messages and better equipped to process and absorb them, leading to much more reduced support for IOs. This highlights the role of political elites in shaping public opinion on international institutions, particularly among politically engaged individuals.

1 | Introduction

In recent years, with the rise of nationalist sentiments in Western countries, international organizations (IOs) have faced unprecedented criticism by populist leaders. Even IOs that were initially established in the post-World War II era to foster global stability, peace, and cooperation faced denouncements and threats of withdrawal or funding cuts by major member states. Recent examples include President Donald Trump's recent executive order to withdraw the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO), exit of Burundi from the UN Human Rights Committee, the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, the fiscal and reputational challenges faced by the WHO, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) search for relevance post-Cold War (Daalder and Goldgeier 2006; Graham 2014; Reddy et al. 2018).

In the United States, President Donald Trump repeatedly lashed out at various IOs, including the UN, WHO, and NATO, during his campaigns and throughout his first term. During his first term, he criticized the WHO for reacting too slowly during the COVID-19 pandemic and for being too China-centric, eventually choosing to withdraw funding from the WHO in 2020 (White House 2020d). On his first day in office during his second term, he signed an executive order to withdraw the United States from the WHO (White House 2025). He criticized the UN Human Rights Council as a "hypocritical and self-serving organization that makes a mockery of human rights" (US Mission Geneva

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2018). He also lashed out at longstanding security alliances like the NATO, of which the United States is a founding member, calling it "obsolete" (Kaufman 2017).

What are the consequences of elite denouncements of IOs on public opinion? How do political elites and their criticisms affect the general public's view of and support for IOs? This article explores the influence of populist leaders on public support of IOs. Specifically, it examines the impact of US President Donald Trump's denouncements of the UN, WHO, and NATO and their effects on American attitudes toward these three IOs during his first term, which was marked by a series of confrontations including threats of funding cuts, membership withdrawal, and direct criticism of the organizations themselves (Axios 2018; CNN Politics 2018; Fehl and Thimm 2019; Goure 2016; Kaufman 2017; McFall 2020; NATO 2017; Stokes 2018; US Department of State 2017; US Mission Geneva 2018).

During the same time period, we saw changes in public opinion toward these IOs. For instance, an Economist/YouGov poll found that favorable opinions toward the WHO decreased by 12 points among Americans by the end of May 2020, compared to April 2020, only days after Trump's criticism of the organization (Frankovic 2020). The Pew Research Center found that 64% of Americans had a favorable view of the UN in 2016, but this number decreased to 59% in 2019 despite being relatively stable in the years before the Trump presidency (Bell et al. 2020; Fagan and Huang 2019). In 2018, when Trump attacked the UN agencies most fiercely when respondents were asked if the UN is doing a good job in solving problems, only 34% said yes (Brenan 2020). YouGov conducted surveys on Americans' support for NATO in both 2017 and 2019, showing that the percentage of Americans who support NATO decreased from 47% to 44% (Sanders 2019).

Based on elite cueing and opinion leadership theory, we argue that Trump's rhetoric plays an important role in shaping his supporters' opinion on IOs (Lenz 2009, 2012; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Gabel and Sheve 2007; Alley 2023; Brutger and Clark 2023; Zaum 2013; Lee and Goidel 2022). Core Trump supporters (i.e., those who were left behind or those who felt "status threat" from increased diversity and globalization) shared a common pre-existing anti-globalization predisposition (Clark 2017; Hackworth 2019; McQuarrie 2017; Blum and Parker 2019; Knowles and Tropp 2018; Major et al. 2018; Mutz 2018). Lacking a nuanced understanding of international issues, they will likely group "international" things together and view IOs similarly to free trade and globalization. We argue that Trump supporters will be most likely to take note of Trump's negative comments about IOs, connect them with their anti-globalization predisposition, and then reduce their support for these organizations. Additionally, we argue that one's political knowledge may moderate this relationship. Trump supporters with higher levels of political knowledge are more able to acquire information on international issues and more likely to analyze and accept Trump's anti-IO rhetoric; therefore, the Trump effect should be the strongest among his supporters with high levels of political knowledge.

Using data from the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES), our empirical tests point to a significant "Trump effect" on attitudes toward all three IOs. All else equal, Trump supporters showed significantly less support for IOs, with more politically knowledgeable supporters showing a larger decline in support than less knowledgeable supporters. We argue that this is because highly knowledgeable Trump supporters were more attentive to Trump's political messages and, therefore, more likely to update their attitudes toward IOs in light of his negative rhetoric toward the organizations.

In the next section, we review previous literature on public opinion toward IOs and discuss the elite cueing and opinion leadership theory. In Section 3, we discuss Trump's rhetoric on the three IOs and use the elite cueing and opinion leadership theory to explain how Trump may influence Americans' attitudes toward these IOs, upon which we develop our hypotheses. We then introduce the data and methods we use to test our hypotheses. In Section 5, we discuss the results of our data analyses, followed by robustness checks and a discussion of the implications of our findings.

2 | Determinants of Public Opinion Toward IOs

Previous research has outlined three important mechanisms that influence attitudes toward IOs, including (1) individuals' cost–benefit calculations, (2) socio-psychological explanations, and (3) elite cues/rhetoric and opinion leadership (Hobolt and de Vries 2016; Lenz 2012). We frame our theory on the elite cue/rhetoric and opinion leadership literature but turn first to the cost–benefit and socio-psychological explanations for a brief review.

2.1 | Cost–Benefit Explanations

The rational choice framework uses self-interest to explain public opinion on foreign policy and globalization (Balistreri 1997; O'Rourke et al. 2001; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Stolper and Samuelson 1941). Individuals calculate the benefits they will receive relative to the costs in determining their preferences. When foreign policies benefit them economically, they tend to favor those policies (Hiscox 2001; Margalit 2011; Rogowski 1987).

In the same vein, the literature on public opinion toward IOs also examines how individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of IO membership (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012; Machida 2009; Herzog and Tucker 2010). When forming opinions, individuals consider whether they will personally win or lose and how membership will affect the country. For instance, in post-communist countries, the economic winners, that is, individuals who expect their financial situations to improve under a European Union membership are more likely to support the EU (Herzog and Tucker 2010).

Individuals' cost–benefit calculations are not only limited to self-economic benefits but also to social and political benefits and benefits to the broader community or country. For instance, research finds that IOs have increasingly adopted mandates that require gender equality and women's rights; as a result, women weigh these benefits into their calculation and show more support for IOs, compared to men (Bessis 2004; Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2010; True 2010). Additionally, citizens also consider the benefits of IOs to the country and their attitudes are more positive when they believe IOs will benefit their country (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012; Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Edwards 2009; Hainmueller

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and Hiscox 2006). On the other hand, if the membership of an IO involves costly policies, citizens will lower their support for the IO. For example, Hooghe (2003) found that Europeanizing high-spending policies such as health, education, or social policy, elites and the public will both show lowered support of Europeanization. Citizens also evaluate whether IOs can resolve salient problems in their country, and when they believe an IO can contribute to solutions, they tend to be more supportive of the IO (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015).

2.2 | Socio-Psychological Explanations

A second set of explanations focuses on socio-psychological explanations, such as nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan beliefs see the globe as interconnected, whereby problems in one country can affect others, and solutions often require global coordination and cooperation (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2016, 2012). Individuals with cosmopolitan views tend to have more favorable attitudes toward IOs (Bearce and Scott 2019; Schlipphak 2015). For instance, one important reason for political cosmopolitanism is the inability of individual nation-states to regulate global problems, which can result in more favorable attitudes toward IOs like the United Nations and the EU (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2005). In contrast, nationalist and ethnocentric beliefs tend to be associated with decreased support for IOs as these organizations can be seen as a threat to national culture or identity (Carey 2002; McLaren 2002). Taken together, high levels of cosmopolitan beliefs and low levels of nationalism or ethnocentrism are associated with higher levels of support for IOs among the public.

2.3 | Elite Cues and Elite Rhetoric

Researchers have explored the roles of elites and elite communication in IO legitimacy and concluded that elite communication plays an impactful role in citizens' legitimacy perceptions of IOs (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Gabel and Sheve 2007; Alley 2023; Brutger and Clark 2023; Zaum 2013; Lenz 2012). Elite cues can legitimize or delegitimize IOs, and IOs can also use various cueing strategies to create legitimacy for their organization (e.g., see, O'Brien 2000; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Uhlin and Kalm 2015; Zaum 2013; Lee and Goidel 2022). Individual citizens and voters frequently follow their favored leaders' policy positions, often without fully evaluating the underlying rationales; this phenomenon, referred to as the "follow the leader" effect, has been well-documented in political science research (Lenz 2012; Druckman et al. 2013; Nurullayev et al. 2024; Essig et al. 2021; Keser et al. 2024).

The research on elite communication and IO legitimacy is rooted in a rich body of elite cue literature, which concludes that political elites heavily influence public opinion especially on issues that the public is not well informed on (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). The cueing theory often builds on the literature of heuristics to show how individuals use information from political elites, journalists, and experts as shortcuts to help them form opinions (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991; Hobolt 2007; Lupia 1994). Based on the cueing theory, a cue is a message from an elite that an individual may hear and use to update their beliefs (or not) when forming an opinion. Cues can help the public overcome knowledge gaps and simplify the choices they need to make (Dellmuth 2016; Zaller 1992). One debate in this literature has emerged on whether the message or messenger is responsible for shaping public opinions. Using survey experiments, Guisinger and Saunders (2017) find that in some cases, all messages, even those delivered by political opposition, can shift public opinion; in other cases, only co-partisans' cues can shape public opinion.

Past research has also explored the effects of elites on IO legitimacy (Machida 2009; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015), but few studies address how elite communications shape public beliefs about IO legitimacy (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Gabel and Sheve 2007). Some of the recent studies have begun to explore public opinion on IOs with a focus on how IO characteristics shape public opinion rather than how elites influence public opinion (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Greenhill 2020). Our paper builds on this recent work by exploring how political elites in the US shape public opinion toward IOs (Alley 2023; Brutger and Clark 2023). More specifically, we examine how former President Trump affected public opinion toward three IOs: the UN, WHO, and NATO.

3 | The Trump Effect and Americans' Attitude Toward IOs

The United States is a member of dozens of IOs, each with a unique mandate, organizational structure, membership list, and decision-making rules. While many IOs have their own dedicated academic literature, we focus on three IOs in this paper: the UN, WHO, and NATO. We selected these three organizations for the following reasons: (1) all three IOs were attacked by former President Donald Trump during his first presidential term, and (2) they either hold significant global significance (UN and NATO) or played a notably visible role during the Trump's administration (WHO 2024; Hurd 2024).

Established in 1945, the United Nations is the largest international organization, created to promote global peace, security, and cooperation. The WHO, formed in 1948 as a specialized agency within the UN, coordinates global health responses and initiatives. The United States is not only a founding member but also the largest contributor to both the UN and WHO budgets (Council on Foreign Relations 2024; WHO 2024). The United States is also a founding member of NATO, a military alliance formed in 1949 to ensure the collective defense of its members. Although member nations agreed in 2006 to allocate at least 2% of their GDP to defense spending, the United States consistently contributes a significantly larger share than its counterparts (NATO 2024).

While the UN, WHO, and NATO are more likely to be known by name than many other IOs, few individuals know enough about the organizations to understand whether they individually benefit from an IO (Dellmuth 2016). Because understanding the costs and benefits of an IO to individuals or member states requires specialized knowledge that most people do not have, it is reasonable to assume that beliefs toward IOs are not well-informed or stable and can be influenced by elite cues (Sheen et al. 2023). There is a large literature showing how elite cues can shape public opinion at the domestic level; there is good

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reason to suspect elite cues may have a greater effect within the realm of international politics where the public tends to be less knowledgeable (Abramowitz 1978; Broockman and Butler 2017; Cohen 2003; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Jacoby 1988; Johnston 2006; Minozzi et al. 2015; Zaller 1992). All in all, given that the American public is not particularly knowledgeable about IOs, we argue that elite cues could have a strong effect on public opinion.

3.1 | Trump's Rhetoric Toward IOs

Former President Donald Trump repeatedly sent negative cues about IOs, including the UN, WHO, and NATO. Below we provide a brief review of his criticisms and attacks of these IOs.

Trump's attacks on the WHO began with the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. On April 7, 2020, Trump criticized the WHO for reacting too slowly, for disagreeing with the travel ban he had issued, and for being too China-centric (White House 2020d). On April 15, 2020, the Trump administration withdrew funding from the WHO because of "*its mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic*," describing the WHO's management of the virus outbreaks as "*one misstep and cover-up after another*" (White House 2020a). Later in the year, the president announced that the United States would withdraw from the WHO "*because they have failed to make the requested and greatly needed reforms*" (White House 2020c). Trump also fiercely criticized the WHO's Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and his response to COVID-19. In a letter published in May 2020, Trump alleged that the Director-General "*ignored credible reports of the virus spreading in Wuhan in early December 2019*" and "*made claims about the coronavirus that were either grossly inaccurate or misleading*" (White House 2020b).

Trump's attacks on the United Nations were strongest during the 2017 and 2018 period but continued throughout his presidency. In a December 2016 tweet, Trump commented on the UN by saying "*The United Nations has such great potential but right now it is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time. So sad!*" (Boon 2017). While his early rhetoric toward the institution framed the UN as ineffective, his attacks became more critical as his presidency progressed. In his speeches before the UN General Assembly in 2017 and 2018 he argued that the US would "*choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination*" (Fehl and Thimm 2019). Under the auspices of his presidency, the United States withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). States rarely leave UN agencies, particularly when they are powerful members within those agencies.

A statement issued by the Trump administration criticized the UN Human Rights Council as a "*hypocritical and self-serving organization that makes a mockery of human rights*" (US Mission Geneva 2018). He also decreased funding for UN peacekeeping and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (Weiss 2018). Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, two key issues the UN was involved in (Fehl and Thimm 2019).

Trump also lashed out at longstanding security alliances like the NATO, of which the United States is a founding member. While running for president in 2016, he tweeted "*it's possible that we're going to have to let NATO go. When we're paying and nobody else is really paying, a couple of other countries are, but nobody else is really paying, you feel like the jerk*" (Goure 2016). Before his inauguration, in a joint interview, he described NATO as "*obsolete*" (Kaufman 2017).

During his presidency, Trump continued to critically comment on NATO, attacking European countries for their low financial contributions. Two days before a NATO summit in July 2018, he said in one of his tweets: "*The United States is spending far more on NATO than any other Country. This is not fair, nor is it acceptable. While these countries have been increasing their contributions since I took office, they must do much more. […]*" (Axios 2018). In an interview with Fox News in 2020, he described NATO as a "*disaster*" because some countries allegedly did not contribute enough funding (McFall 2020). Lee and Goidel (2022) examine the Trump effect on Americans' attitudes toward NATO and they find that during Trump's first presidential term, Americans' attitudes toward NATO were affected, with Republicans becoming less supportive of NATO but Democrats becoming more supportive. They also employed survey experiments to test the causal mechanism of the "Trump effect" and found that Trump's reframing of NATO emphasizing financial costs was what caused the decreased support for NATO.

3.2 | How Does Trump Rhetoric Affect Public Opinion?

How do these negative comments from a national leader affect Americans' evaluations of the IOs? We argue that negative elite cues should affect public opinion on IOs among specific constituents based on their political knowledge (Alley 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Guisinger and Saunders 2017). Our argument builds on the elite cueing and opinion leadership theory, which argues that elite cues can shape public opinion. For instance, Zaller's (1992) "Receive-Accept-Sample" model suggests that individual citizens acquire information from elites or trusted sources, filter it, and accept information that comports with their preconceived values. When answering survey questions, individuals draw upon the most accessible information in their minds. Empirical evidence suggests that when contested issues are given significant media coverage, individuals notice and update their policy preferences consistent with their predispositions (Dancey and Goren 2010). According to Zaller (1992), predispositions influence people's responses to elite information by regulating the acceptance or non-acceptance of political messages.

The credibility and partisan alignment of the source providing policy cues are also crucial factors in this process. As Lupton and Webb (2022) argue, elite credibility stems from perceived knowledge and expertise, while alignment is influenced by the ideological or partisan connection between the source and the audience. Trump's rhetoric likely resonated with his supporters not only because of their pre-existing anti-globalization sentiments but also because they perceived him as both a credible and aligned source—someone who embodied their

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"America First" values and shared their experiences of cultural displacement. Recent research points out that the core Trump supporters in 2016 were either those who were "left behind" (Clark 2017; Hackworth 2019; McQuarrie 2017) or those who felt a "status threat" from increased diversity and globalization (Blum and Parker 2019; Knowles and Tropp 2018; Major et al. 2018; Mutz 2018). These two types of Trump supporters already had anti-globalization predispositions before Trump ran for the presidency.

Saunders (2022) emphasizes that public trust in elites fluctuates based on the broader political and social context. In highly polarized environments, such as the United States during Trump's presidency, individuals are more likely to dismiss information from elites associated with opposing factions while reinforcing their trust in ideologically aligned elites. Druckman et al. (2013) find that in polarized political environments, public opinion is more heavily impacted by party endorsements rather than substantive information. Trump's criticism of IOs resonated with his supporters, who were already skeptical of these institutions and associated globalization with economic insecurity and cultural change. By explicitly targeting organizations like the WHO, UN, and NATO, Trump provided his base with clear cues to link their economic anxieties and perceived status threats to broader concerns about international cooperation. However, non-Trump supporters are more likely to dismiss Trump's messages due to their differing political ideologies and predispositions (Essig et al. 2021; Nurullayev et al. 2024; Keser et al. 2024).

Interestingly, Bearce and Scott (2019) argue that citizens tend to group things together that appear as "international" or "foreign," such as free trade, foreign investment, or international migration and IOs. This heuristic processing aligns with the broader tendency to rely on elite cues to navigate complex topics. Trump's base, already predisposed to view international phenomena with suspicion, likely saw his criticisms as validating their concerns about globalization, economic trade, and migration. Therefore, Trump's rhetoric not only activated these predispositions but also reinforced the association between IOs and negative outcomes attributed to globalization.

Therefore, citizens' attitudes toward IOs can map onto their attitudes toward economic globalization, free trade, and migration. Individual citizens' criticism of IOs may come from concerns about economic globalization, especially if citizens believe their economic distress is caused by international economic relations but are not knowledgeable about the connection between IOs and the international economy.

Given that individuals typically take notice of information consistent with their predispositions and use that information to update their own opinions, we argue that Trump supporters will be most likely take note of Trump's negative comments about IOs, connect them with their anti-globalization predisposition, and then reduce their support for these organizations. From this, we develop our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Trump supporters will hold more negative attitudes toward the WHO, UN, and NATO, compared to non-supporters.*

3.3 | Political Knowledge as a Moderator

One of Zaller's intellectual contributions to public opinion research lies in the mediating role of one's cognitive engagement, or political awareness and attentiveness, in accepting political information to form issue attitudes. According to Zaller (1992), individuals with higher levels of cognitive engagement are more likely to be exposed to and comprehend ("receive") political messages concerning an issue. Additionally, individuals will only accept information consistent with their predispositions (or resist information contrary to their predispositions) if they possess the information to enable the perception of a linkage between the message and their predisposition. One's political knowledge, therefore, plays an important role in the opinion formation process: On the one hand, it increases the likelihood for one to acquire political information; on the other, it enhances one's ability to analyze and accept political messages consistent with their own political predispositions. Those with higher levels of political knowledge are better at both tasks, resulting in a higher chance for them to be influenced by information consistent with their predispositions. Because Trump's supporters are already more likely to hold predispositions against international issues, those with higher levels of political knowledge will be more likely to acquire information on international issues and more likely to analyze and accept Trump's anti-IO rhetoric.

If we compare two Trump supporters: Trump supporter A with high levels of political knowledge and Trump supporter B with low levels of political knowledge, we expect supporter A to hold more negative attitudes toward IOs. Even though both supporters likely have anti-globalization predispositions, supporter A is more likely to have heard and internalized Trump's criticisms of IOs. Even more crucially, supporter A's political knowledge will help them analyze the messages and absorb the information consistent with their pre-existing predisposition. When asked a survey question relating to the WHO, UN, or NATO, supporter A will more likely sample the accepted information to answer the question. In contrast, supporter B, with low levels of political knowledge, will be less attentive to political speeches, resulting in less exposure to Trump's criticisms. Even when B catches the messages, they are less able to analyze and absorb the information to update their opinion. Based on these arguments, we posit our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *The negative attitudes of Trump supporters toward the WHO, UN, and NATO will be more pronounced among those with higher levels of political knowledge.*

4 | Data and Methods

To empirically test our hypotheses, we utilize data from the 2020 ANES survey and adopt the design of Essig et al. (2021) who explore shifts in trade attitudes under President Trump.[1] Our analysis focuses on three dependent variables, each representing attitudes toward a specific international organization: the WHO, the UN, and NATO. We gauge these attitudes using feeling thermometer scores on a scale from 0 to 100, where higher scores indicate a more favorable view of the organization. These variables are treated as continuous and analyzed through multiple regression, examining the influence of support for

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Donald Trump, political knowledge, and their interaction on respondents' attitudes. We include detailed descriptive statistics of all variables in the Supporting Information.

Attitudes toward the WHO, UN, and NATO: We employ three separate questions on Americans' attitudes toward the WHO, the UN, and NATO as measures for our dependent variable. Respondents rated their feelings toward the WHO, UN, and NATO on a 0-–100 scale, with 0 signifying strong dislike and 100 indicating strong favorability.

Trump Support: This variable is measured using a feeling thermometer score for Donald Trump. Respondents rated Trump on a scale from 0 to 100, with a higher score indicating more favorable opinions toward him.

Political knowledge: We construct a composite score based on responses to eight political knowledge questions. These questions cover knowledge of the Senate term length, the smallest federal spending item, party control of the House and Senate, and the ability to identify key political figures like Mike Pence, Nancy Pelosi, Angela Merkel, and Vladimir Putin. This composite score, with an alpha reliability of 0.67, serves as an indicator of "political attentiveness." We hypothesize that this variable may moderate the relationship between Trump support and attitudes toward the IOs.

Trump Support × Political Knowledge: We include an interaction term between these two variables in our regression model to capture the conditional relationship we hypothesize.

Partisanship: Party identification plays an important role in shaping public opinion and thus is included as a control variable. We measure this variable through the survey question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent or what?" Including partisanship as a control variable allows us to disentangle the "Trump effect" from broader partisan influences on attitudes toward IOs.

Nationalism and Ethnocentrism: Previous research suggests that citizens with cosmopolitan views are more likely to have positive attitudes toward regional organizations (Schlipphak 2015). National identity and perceived cultural threats have been shown to influence opinions about IOs (Carey 2002; McLaren 2002). There is a growing body of literature arguing that individuals' feelings about out-groups based on ethnocentrism and nationalism impact their views of internationalization (Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Margalit 2012; Mayda and Rodrik 2005; Mutz and Kim 2017; O'Rourke et al. 2001). To measure nationalism, we follow Essig et al. (2021) and use seven questions related to nationalist sentiment, combining them by using principal component factor analysis and this measure ranges from −3.471 to 3.297. [2] Likewise, we follow Essig et al. (2021) and measure ethnocentrism by using feeling thermometers for three minority groups: Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, each ranging from 0 to 100. We create a factor score for ethnocentrism using principal component factor analysis.

Demographic controls: We also control for various demographic variables, including age, income, union membership, education, and gender. These demographic controls help ensure that our analysis accounts for various factors that might influence public attitudes toward the WHO, UN, and NATO.

5 | Results

Our analyses reveal notable patterns in public attitudes toward the WHO, UN, and NATO. We employed two models for each dependent variable: a baseline model without the interaction term and a second model incorporating the interaction between Trump support and political knowledge.

Baseline models in Table 1 report the results of our baseline models. The coefficients for Trump support are negative and statistically significant across all three IOs, indicating that higher support for Trump is associated with lower favorability towards these organizations. This supports Hypothesis 1, which posits that Trump supporters tend to have more negative attitudes towards the WHO, UN, and NATO than non-supporters. The coefficients for political knowledge, however, vary in their directions. The mixed results regarding political knowledge may seem surprising at first glance. While higher political knowledge is associated with more favorable attitudes towards the WHO, it corresponds with less favorable attitudes towards the UN and NATO. These varying effects indicate that political knowledge alone does not uniformly influence support for IOs.

Our argument, however, is that we cannot fully understand the impact of Trump support and political knowledge on attitudes toward IOs by examining these factors in isolation. The influence of political knowledge on attitudes toward IOs is likely conditioned by the level of support for Trump. In other words, the interaction between Trump support and political knowledge is necessary for determining how individuals perceive these organizations. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, Table 2 presents the results of interaction models to explore how these variables interplay to shape public opinion towards the WHO, UN, and NATO.

In the interaction models, all interaction terms for support for Trump and political knowledge are negative and significant, indicating that as both support for Trump *and* political knowledge increase, support for all IOs decreases, which is also consistent with Hypothesis 2. Because interaction terms between two continuous variables can be challenging to interpret directly from their coefficients, we use figures to better illustrate the conditional effect of political knowledge on Trump's effects on opinions toward IOs. In Figure 1, we set one of our continuous variables, Trump support, to its highest and lowest values (0 and 100), and then graph the predicted levels of support for the three IOs at different levels of political knowledge.

Figure 1 shows that Trump supporters and non-supporters have no significant difference in their opinions of NATO and the UN at low levels of political knowledge and have very little difference of opinions for the WHO at the lowest level of political knowledge. Trump supporters and non-supporters begin to diverge in their opinions of IOs as political knowledge increases, and the effect is most noticeable at the highest level of political knowledge. Notably, among Trump supporters, political knowledge has an

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TABLE 1 | Baseline models of Trump support, political knowledge, and support for international organizations (IOs).

	Baseline model: World Health Organization (WHO)		Baseline model: UN		Baseline model: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)	
	Coefficient (b)	Standard error	Coefficient (b)	Standard error	Coefficient (b)	Standard error
Support for Trump	−0.370***	(0.017)	−0.223***	(0.016)	−0.172***	(0.016)
Political knowledge	−2.105***	(0.278)	−1.261***	(0.274)	1.057***	(0.265)
Education	−0.511	(0.455)	−0.181	(0.450)	0.305	(0.433)
Nationalism	−0.917**	(0.352)	−0.292	(0.349)	0.872***	(0.335)
Ethnocentrism	2.638***	(0.281)	2.940***	(0.279)	2.783***	(0.267)
Age	0.112***	(0.029)	0.055+	(0.028)	0.172***	(0.027)
Financial income	0.055	(0.070)	−0.021	(0.069)	0.121+	(0.066)
Party ID	3.447***	(0.761)	3.632***	(0.754)	1.499*	(0.723)
Union membership	0.162	(0.890)	−0.837	(1.238)	−0.745	(1.162)
Gender	0.702	(0.890)	3.107***	(0.885)	−0.416	(0.836)
Constant	74.259***	(4.114)	63.713***	(4.085)	49.490***	(3.937)
N	2599		2668		2417	

TABLE 2 | Interaction models of Trump support, political knowledge and support for IOs.

	Interaction model: WHO		Interaction model: UN		Interaction model: NATO	
	Coefficient (b)	Standard error	Coefficient (b)	Standard error	Coefficient (b)	Standard error
Support for Trump	−0.036	(0.036)	0.153***	(0.035)	0.054	(0.036)
Political knowledge	0.360	(0.361)	1.515***	(0.352)	2.718***	(0.355)
Support for Trump × Political Knowledge	−0.062***	(0.006)	−0.071***	(0.006)	−0.041***	(0.006)
Education	−0.635	(0.446)	−0.334	(0.484)	0.238	(0.428)
Nationalism	−0.594+	(0.346)	0.102	(0.341)	1.096**	(0.333)
Ethnocentrism	2.712***	(0.276)	3.057***	(0.272)	2.799***	(0.265)
Age	0.104***	(0.028)	0.044	(0.028)	0.164***	(0.027)
Financial income	0.037	(0.069)	−0.043	(0.068)	0.109+	(0.065)
Party ID	3.253***	(0.746)	3.351***	(0.734)	1.427*	(0.716)
Union membership	0.445	(1.216)	−0.488	(1.205)	−0.453	(1.151)
Gender	0.591	(0.872)	3.010***	(0.861)	−0.433	(0.828)
Constant	61.453***	(4.214)	49.736***	(4.140)	40.341***	(4.114)
N	2599		2668		2417	

especially negative impact on opinions about the WHO and UN, suggesting that they were especially attuned to elite cues as their political knowledge increased for those two IOs.

To summarize, our analysis of support for the WHO, UN, and NATO has yielded robust findings that support both of our hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 posited that Trump supporters would exhibit more negative attitudes toward IOs than Trump non-supporters. Our baseline models affirm this hypothesis across all three IOs: for the WHO, UN, and NATO, Trump support manifested as a significant predictor of negative attitudes, a trend that remained consistent even after controlling for political knowledge and other sociodemographic variables. Hypothesis 2 suggested that the negative opinions on IOs held by Trump supporters would intensify with increased levels of political knowledge. The interaction effects observed in our models

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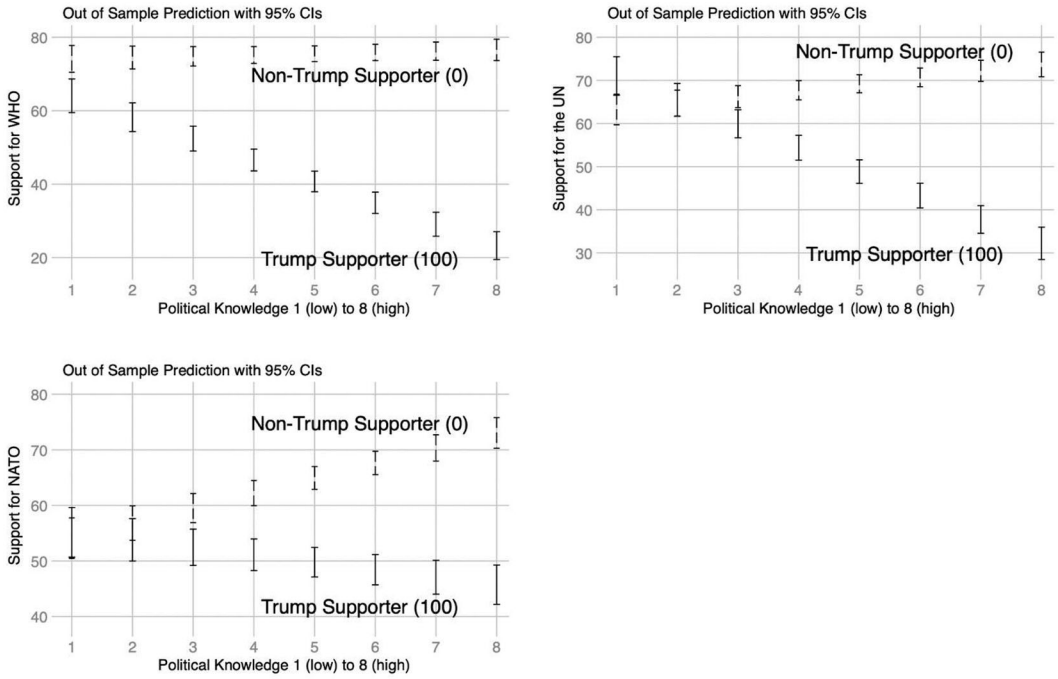

FIGURE 1 | Trump support, political knowledge and support for international organizations (IOs).

support this hypothesis. For the WHO, UN, and NATO, we discovered that Trump supporters with high levels of political knowledge exhibited the most negative opinions toward all three organizations. These findings suggest that political knowledge does not operate in isolation but interacts with elite cues to shape public opinion in a more nuanced manner.

6 | Robustness Check

We have conducted several robustness checks, including an instrumental variable model to account for reverse causality (endogeneity), three alternative measures of political knowledge, a host of additional control variables (ideology, race, religion, trust in elected officials, and right-wing media consumption), and a subsample analysis on non-Trump supporters to see whether our findings are simply capturing partisan difference in IO attitudes. We also used education to replace political knowledge as the measurement for cognitive engagement. In all the robustness checks, our results remain consistent with those in the main paper. The results of these robustness checks are included in the Supporting Information.

7 | Conclusion

Multiple public opinion polls show decreases in public support for IOs during President Donald Trump's first term of presidency (Frankovic 2020; Bell et al. 2020; Fagan and Huang 2019; Brenan 2020; Sanders 2019). In this paper, we argue that it is not coincidental but rather the result of the public taking cues from elites such as Donald Trump, and updating their opinions about IOs. By using the 2020 ANES data, we find that Trump supporters show significantly less support for the WHO, UN, and NATO, even after we control for partisanship, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and demographic factors. Our findings also suggest that the Trump effect on attitudes toward IOs is conditional upon one's political knowledge, with the Trump effect being larger among those who are highly politically knowledgeable. We argue that this is because highly knowledgeable individuals are more likely to acquire political information and more capable of absorbing the messages consistent with their own political predisposition. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of political knowledge are less interested in acquiring political information on complex issues such as IOs and they are less capable of analyzing the information and updating their beliefs. Non-Trump supporters with higher levels of political knowledge also showed increased support for certain IOs, suggesting that their attitudes may have become more positive as discussions about the benefits of IOs unfolded in non-right-wing media.

Our study fills in the gap of researching the role of political elites on public opinion on IOs in the context of the United States. IOs serve as an important pillar of the current global legal order, and the United States has played an essential role in establishing these organizations. The attacks of these IOs by a US president not only pose legitimacy crises to these IOs but also may sway how Americans view these organizations. Our study suggests that Trump indeed has had a unique impact on how Americans think of the WHO, UN, and NATO. However, the Trump effect varies across different groups of Americans, shaping attitudes in distinct ways. For example, Trump supporters have significantly lowered their support for all three IOs. What is more, it is the highly knowledgeable Trump supporters that experience the most reduction in their support level for the WHO and UN.

Some readers may find this finding counterintuitive, as individuals with high levels of political knowledge should be more politically sophisticated and better informed. Our results show that more knowledgeable Trump supporters are more likely to

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be influenced by Trump's views on international issues likely because of three different reasons: (1) they are sophisticated enough to hold stable political predispositions that are similar to Trump's views, (2) they are more interested in acquiring political messages from Trump on complex international issues, and (3) they are more capable of analyzing these messages and accepting information consistent with their existing predispositions. All these characteristics made highly educated Trump supporters the most dedicated and strongest base for Donald Trump.

An important takeaway from our research is that the effect of political elites on public opinion is an exceptionally powerful one. As the public in a democracy changes their opinion on an important political issue, it may cause large policy changes, especially if these issues are determined by referendums. Brexit is a great example of the British changing their views on the European Union and then, together, voting to leave the regional international organization, which caused disastrous repercussions for the EU. The "Trump effect" on public opinion toward IOs may be here to stay for many years, or it may be reversed, all depending on the public discourse and how future political elites discuss IOs in the United States.

Beyond public opinion, Trump's rhetoric has significant implications for US foreign policy. Contrary to claims of pure isolationism, Trump's approach to foreign policy reflects a transactional strategy that prioritizes perceived gains over long-standing norms of cooperation. His rhetoric signals a redefining of America's role within the global order, focusing sometimes on the withdrawal of the US from international agreements but other times on the renegotiation and recalibration of terms. For instance, Trump's criticisms of NATO centered less on its existence than its costs and benefits to the United States. Whether this trajectory continues depends on future leaders and their ability to either build on or pivot away from the norms that Trump will continue to build during his second presidency.

The fact that Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential election and the emergence of many Trump-like Republican politicians seem to suggest that the United States is entering an era of isolationist and transactional foreign policy. Therefore, it is important for future scholars to study the Trump effect on IOs during Trump's second presidential term. Furthermore, the long-term impact of Trump's foreign policy and Trump-like Republican politicians is also an important future research topic.

Our study is not without limitations. First and foremost, we did not directly test the effects of elite discourse/rhetoric on public opinion of IOs due to the limitations of our data. Ideally, one should have used experimental designs to gauge the causal mechanism between Trump's attacks on IOs and the change in citizens' attitudes toward these IOs. Additionally, if panel data were available, one could have used panel data to assess the change of Americans' opinion toward IOs and its causes. However, panel data on attitudes toward IOs are not readily available. For instance, even though the ANES includes a panel component, it did not ask questions about WHO, UN, and NATO in the years before 2020. Therefore, we cannot assess whether shifts in Trump evaluations coincide with shifts in attitudes toward these organizations. Nonetheless, our study provides valuable confirmation of the link between political elites and shifts in public opinion on IOs, laying a crucial foundation for future research on this topic.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] Unfortunately, the ANES survey does not ask individuals about the evaluations of the WHO, UN, or NATO in the 2016 survey, which leaves the 2020 ANES survey as the only available dataset to test our argument.

[2] The questions we used to measure nationalism include a set of four national identity questions where respondents are asked how important each of the following items they think is for being truly American: (1) have been born in the United States, (2) have American ancestry, (3) be able to speak English, (4) follow American customs; additionally, we include two additional questions on: (5) how important is being American to R's identity, (6) whether the world would be better if it was more like the United States, (7) has R displayed American flag on their house or in their yard in the past year. We generate a new principal component factor variable nationalism.

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