

Foreign Leaders’ Impact on Attitudes Toward the WTO: Counter-Backlash or Polarization?*

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Abstract

How would the citizens of trading partner countries react if foreign leaders attacked the trade relationships their country has with the partner country by emphasizing the illegitimacy of the WTO? While elite influence on mass public opinion regarding international economic organizations has been studied, only a handful of studies have examined elite influence beyond domestic boundaries, and whether such elite rhetoric effects are moderated by the domestic political environments of partner countries. Using a survey experiment and computational text analysis of 8.3M news comments from South Korea, I show that foreign leaders’ attacks on the WTO to undermine trade relations increase hostility toward those leaders and boost the WTO’s perceived legitimacy among partner countries’ audiences. However, when domestic leaders push back, these effects are only seen among incumbent supporters, while opposition supporters view the WTO as less legitimate. These findings demonstrate how foreign leaders’ politicized rhetoric on the WTO can somewhat counterintuitively *attenuate* globalization backlash, *but* only when the domestic political environment is less polarized.

1 International Impact of Anti-IO Attacks by Prominent Leaders

Several organizations promoting international economic cooperation, including the World Trade Organization (WTO), have faced a legitimacy crisis in recent years. Rising anti-globalization sentiments, reflected in the breakdown of multilateral trade frameworks and public opposition to trade, are fueled—or at least mirrored—by anti-WTO rhetoric from global leaders (Bearce and Jolliff Scott, 2019; Walter, 2021). Donald Trump, citing unfair treatment of the U.S., has bypassed or criticized several key conditions for WTO negotiations (The Economist, 2018). Narendra Modi has voiced dissatisfaction with the WTO’s handling of India’s food security concerns (Politico,

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2024), and Jair Bolsonaro has argued that the WTO disproportionately favors developed nations at the expense of countries like Brazil (Reuters, 2022). While repealing unfavorable WTO decisions is not new (e.g., Guzman and Simmons, 2002), the surge in attacks on economic integration and key organizations like the WTO by global political elites signals a deeper challenge: the erosion of multilateral economic IOs' legitimacy. (Bowen and Broz, 2022; Carnegie, Clark and Zucker, 2024; Morse and Keohane, 2014; De Vries, Hobolt and Walter, 2021).

Most research on public opinion about IOs has focused on how elite rhetoric shapes their own domestic audience's views on participation or funding of IOs (e.g., Brutger and Li, 2022; Brutger, Clark and Zvobgo, 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2021; Schweinberger, 2022). However, much anti-IO rhetoric from political elites, particularly on international trade, centers on claims that multilateral regimes fail to sufficiently advance national interests, especially compared to the benefits enjoyed by trade partners (De Orellana and Michelsen, 2019; Lake, Martin and Risse, 2021; Mutz, 2021). For example, Trump criticized the WTO, claiming: "WTO is BROKEN when the world's RICHEST countries [China] claim to be developing countries to avoid WTO rules and get special treatment... NO more!" (PBS, 2019). When elites challenge international trade rulings, their rhetoric may influence not only domestic opinions but also public sentiment in partner countries, who are often seen as benefiting from these agreements. As foreign elite rhetoric on international trade is frequently covered in mass media (for example, see Figure 1), its international impact on how economic regimes are perceived is likely.

My findings, based on a survey experiment with a representative sample of South Koreans and text analysis of YouTube comments on trade-related news videos, reveal the impact of foreign leaders criticizing WTO decisions on partner country audiences. Anti-WTO rhetoric from foreign leaders increases hostility toward those leaders while boosting perceptions of the WTO's legitimacy in partner countries, with stronger effects in the survey experiment than in observational analysis. However, these effects weaken or even reverse when domestic leaders counter the foreign leader's rhetoric, with support for the WTO rising mainly among incumbents' co-partisans. Build-

ing on previous research on how partisan filters shape public opinion on international trade and its organizations (e.g., Brutger and Clark, 2023; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017), I argue that foreign criticism of the WTO can somewhat counter-intuitively boost support for the institution among partner country citizens, but this effect hinges on domestic polarization. When foreign elites criticize the WTO, partner country audiences may react negatively to the foreign leader, enhancing the WTO's legitimacy, but if domestic leaders politicize the issue, opposition party supporters may become less likely to see the WTO as legitimate.

These findings suggest that anti-WTO rhetoric from one country's leader influences public opinion on both the foreign leader and the WTO's legitimacy in the receiving country, with these effects shaped by the domestic political discourse surrounding trade regimes. Perceptions of the WTO's legitimacy may be driven by more than just individuals' understanding of international organizations (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2018; Brutger and Li, 2022; Hahm et al., 2019) or policy outcomes from these regimes (Casler and Clark, 2021; Snyder and Borghard, 2011). In an era of heightened politicization and disputes over the WTO's decisions, attitudes toward the WTO may reflect both resentment toward foreign leaders who challenge the trade framework and alignment with partisan positions.

2 Elite Influence on Audience Perceptions of IO Legitimacy

It was once thought that foreign affairs, especially broad and abstract entities like IOs, were largely removed from the daily lives of ordinary citizens (Dellmuth, 2016; Holsti, 1992). However, in today's political climate, where IOs are often politicized for domestic electoral gain or international bargaining by political leaders (e.g., Lake, Martin and Risse, 2021; Mansfield, Milner and Rudra, 2021), these organizations have become more prominent in public discourse. This shift has made IOs a more relevant subject of study regarding mass public opinion and how citizens perceive their trustworthiness and legitimacy (De Vries, Hobolt and Walter, 2021; Hobolt and Wratil, 2017).

Elite rhetoric aimed at delegitimizing international organizations has become a common tactic for populist and extreme politicians and even a tool for moderate leaders to capture public attention (Binder and Heupel, 2015; Maier, Adam and Maier, 2012; Morse and Keohane, 2014; Tallberg and Zürn, 2019). Facing public discontent with the establishment and the rise of more extreme electoral rhetoric (Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019; Mansfield, Milner and Rudra, 2021; Walter, 2021), political figures have increasingly voiced dissatisfaction with the international order, including economic regimes like the WTO (Goldstein and Gulotty, 2021; Lake, Martin and Risse, 2021).

With the rise in global leaders attacking international organizations, research has increasingly focused on how this rhetoric shapes public support for joining IOs or their decisions. Elite cues have been shown to significantly influence public attitudes on foreign policies such as foreign aid (Heinrich, Kobayashi and Bryant, 2016), trade liberalization (Dür and Schlipphak, 2021), and European integration (Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Steenbergen, Edwards and De Vries, 2007), especially in ideologically polarized environments (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2020; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017). The design of IOs or their policy outcomes can also interact with elite messaging and individuals' predispositions toward dominance or fairness (Brutger and Li, 2022; Brutger and Clark, 2023).

However, perceptions of IO legitimacy differ from strategic or cost-benefit calculations regarding membership or effectiveness in addressing global issues. Most studies on elite influence over public attitudes toward IOs focus on whether individuals support joining, withdrawing from, or funding an IO based on their country's interests (Brutger and Li, 2022; Dür and Schlipphak, 2021; Heinrich, Kobayashi and Bryant, 2016; Strezhnev, Simmons and Kim, 2019; Brutger and Clark, 2023). However, such measures may conflate strategic evaluations with legitimacy beliefs, which relate more to the moral authority and rightful exercise of IO power. As Tallberg and Zürn (2019) explains, IO legitimacy concerns "audiences' beliefs that an IO's authority is appropriately exercised" (see also Buchanan and Keohane, 2006), meaning citizens' trust or acceptance of IOs, distinct from support for funding or membership.

Furthermore, less is known about how elite messaging that delegitimizes IOs affects international audiences, beyond the domestic ones. In the context of the WTO, recent attacks by national leaders have often highlighted alleged unfair trade practices by another member country, claiming that the WTO system disproportionately benefits that partner. These criticisms are usually accompanied by opposition to the WTO's rulings or decision-making processes. As a result, audiences in the targeted country may react negatively, not only increasing hostility toward foreign leaders but also shaping perceptions of the WTO's legitimacy beyond the foreign leaders' domestic sphere.

Research on transnational opinion formation shows that elite messaging can have international spillover or backfire effects. For instance, experimental studies that randomize sources of American leadership (e.g., Obama vs. Bush) (Dragojlovic, 2011, 2013; Schatz and Levine, 2010), policy attributes (e.g., cooperative vs. isolationist) (Agadjanian and Horiuchi, 2020), speech tone (e.g., extreme vs. mild) (Agadjanian and Horiuchi, 2020), or leader traits (e.g., trustworthy vs. untrustworthy) (Balmas, 2018) have found significant shifts in how international audiences view U.S. leaders. These studies primarily focus on leadership support, with less attention to how elite rhetoric influences perceptions of IOs and their legitimacy. They also often overlook how polarized political environments in partner countries can shape responses to such messaging.

3 Hypothesis Testing in the South Korean Context

Previous research on public opinion and elite rhetoric shows that leaders' framing of international organizations can greatly influence public perception. I use South Korea as a case to test whether foreign leaders' attacks on the WTO influence Koreans' perceptions of both the leaders and the WTO's legitimacy. On an international level, exposure to foreign leaders' negative claims may actually bolster the WTO's credibility, as such attacks may be viewed as unjust and framed as unfairly blaming the partner country for benefiting from the system. A striking example comes from a news comment during Trump's criticism of the SK-US free trade agreement: "Why is Trump criticizing the WTO and making such a fuss? It's not even our [Koreans'] fault, but we're the ones getting blamed while he's the one making mistakes."

On the other hand, when domestic leaders defend the organization, public opinion can become polarized along partisan lines. Supporters of the incumbent party in the trading partner country may react positively toward the WTO, as seen in the reactions of President Moon’s supporters in South Korea during Abe’s criticism of the WTO’s favorable ruling for South Korea: “Unbelievable, Abe. Listen to President Moon and respect the rules.” However, the opposition may view the situation differently, perceiving the WTO’s decision as aligned with a party they do not support: “Now the WTO is even defending this messed-up leader [President Moon]? The international trade system seems to oddly favor liberals.” Building on this, I propose two hypotheses:

- H1 When foreign leaders criticize the WTO’s decisions or system and the domestic leader does not respond, it *decreases* favorability toward the foreign leader while *increasing* the perceived legitimacy of the WTO among the public in partner countries.
- H2 When foreign leaders attack the WTO and the domestic leader pushes back, the effects outlined in *H1* will be significantly stronger among *supporters of the incumbent party* in partner countries than non-supporters.

Then, was international trade, including the WTO, a significant political issue for the Korean public? Specifically, were foreign leaders’ statements on trade prominent enough in political discourse to impact public opinion, and what trade-related tensions have emerged in recent years? Panel A of Figure 1 clearly shows that international trade has been a prominent issue in the Korean media landscape, almost comparable to unemployment and far exceeding coverage of popular sports. The dotted line in Panel A also highlights that speeches by foreign leaders are frequently referenced in trade discussions, further supporting the validity of my findings. (For more details on the descriptive media analysis, see Supplementary Materials, Section A.)

Between 2016 and 2020, Trump’s criticisms of the WTO and global trade regimes, alongside rising tensions between South Korea and Japan, shaped trade discussions. Panel B of Figure 1 illustrates how often foreign elites addressed trade relations with South Korea, frequently referencing WTO decisions. The orange line spikes when Trump criticizes the WTO for overlooking the U.S. trade deficit with South Korea and imposes safeguards on washing machines and

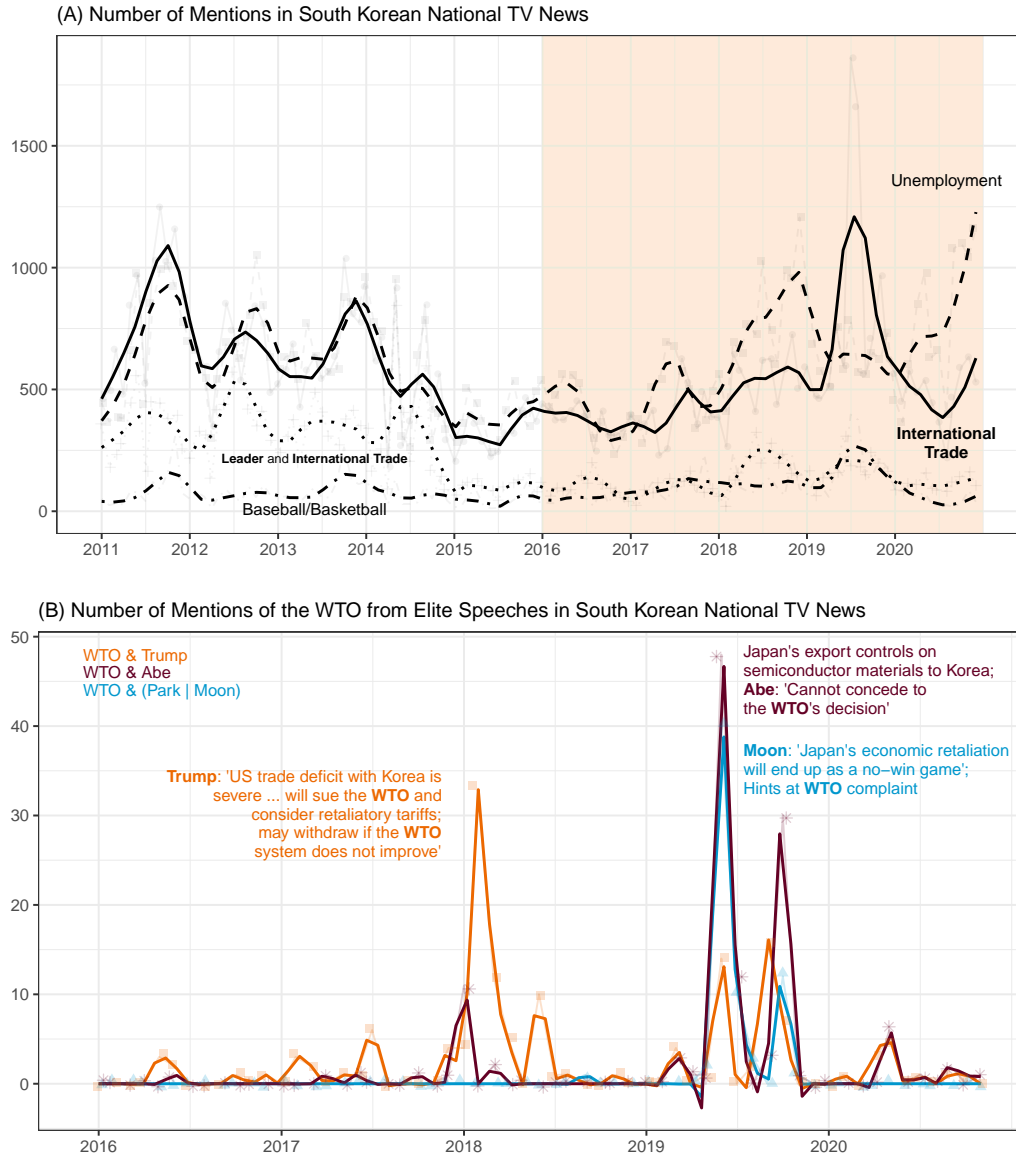


Figure 1: The longitudinal analysis compares news coverage on international trade with other topics across major South Korean national TV news channels (KBS, SBS, and MBC). The figure shows the monthly count of news videos by topic from 2011 to 2020 (Panel A) and the co-appearance of the WTO with U.S., Japanese, and Korean leaders from 2016 to 2020 (Panel B). The transcripts from KBS, SBS, and MBC provide a consistent measure over time, as all three are daily news broadcasts airing every weekday. For example, a score of 35 in the figure means the WTO co-appeared with one of the three leaders approximately 1.75 times per day in a one-hour prime-time news broadcast. To track references to foreign leaders' speeches or statements in Korean trade-related news, I used keywords like President, Leader, Prime Minister, Representative, or Chancellor, while excluding instances where these words were associated with Korean presidents, representatives, or parties within a 10-word range.

solar cells/modules from South Korea. These safeguards, designed to protect domestic industries from surging imports, severely impacted South Korean companies like Samsung and LG. Although South Korea's Trade Negotiation Office argued that the safeguards violated WTO rules, President Moon's government and other political parties offered no significant public response.

The dark red line tracks mentions of Abe and the WTO, rising during disputes over Fukushima seafood import bans and Japan's semiconductor material export controls. The blue line represents mentions of Korean presidents in relation to the WTO. After the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, South Korea banned seafood imports from eight Japanese prefectures. Japan challenged this at the WTO, claiming the bans were overly restrictive. In 2018, a WTO panel ruled against South Korea, but the Korean government appealed, and in 2019, the WTO Appellate Body largely sided with South Korea. That same year, Japan imposed export restrictions on semiconductor materials, citing security concerns, prompting South Korea to launch a WTO dispute. Abe increasingly focused on Japan's national interests (Arrington, 2019), while South Korea's liberal government under President Moon was accused of using the trade tensions to fuel nationalist sentiment (Arrington, 2019; Kyodo News, 2019). South Korea's Liberal Party supported the WTO decision, while the opposition Conservative Party criticized Moon's hardline approach, arguing it needlessly stoked anti-Japanese sentiment and overlooked more moderate solutions (Park, 2020).

Figure 1 shows that foreign leaders and international trade are frequently discussed in public media, making it a prime subject for public opinion research. Focusing on South Korean respondents, I first test my hypotheses using a survey experiment that randomizes two factors: a foreign leader either criticizing or neutrally acknowledging the WTO, and a domestic leader from a trading partner country either challenging or responding neutrally. To validate these survey-based findings, I also analyze how individual news commenters in South Korea reacted to two recent instances of foreign leaders, Trump and Abe, expressing dissatisfaction with the WTO in relation to trade with Korea (The Blue Roof, 2023; World Trade Organization, 2023). I first outline the design and results of the survey experiment, followed by an analysis of within-individual changes in perceived WTO

legitimacy based on online news comments related to Korea-U.S. and Korea-Japan trade relations.

4 Findings from the Survey Experiment: Korean Responses to WTO-Related Claims by Hypothetical Foreign Leaders

To test my hypotheses in a survey experiment, I conducted an online survey in February 2024 with a demographically representative sample (age, region, gender) of 2,311 South Koreans, during a time when the Korean president was from the conservative People Power Party.¹ The survey was administered by one of the most major survey firms in South Korea, Embrain. (For details on the survey sample, see Supplementary Materials, Section B.)

(A) Foreign leaders acknowledging the WTO AND Domestic leaders remaining neutral to foreign leaders' comments	Foreign leaders attacking the WTO	
	(B) AND Domestic leaders pushing back against foreign leaders' comments	(C) AND Domestic leaders remaining neutral to foreign leaders' comments

Table 1: Experimental Conditions

Respondents ($N = 2,311$) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, as shown in Table 1. I compared Conditions A ($n = 770$) and C ($n = 770$) to test $H1$ and Conditions A and B ($n = 771$) to test $H2$. While randomizing domestic leaders' stance on foreign leadership's neutral statement toward the WTO might have been useful, it's unrealistic to expect domestic leaders to suddenly push back against the WTO without any external critique. Therefore, to maintain realism, I limited the final treatment groups to A, B, and C. As an example, the vignette below was shown to the respondents assigned to Condition B:

¹In the text analysis, the news comments were published while the president was from the liberal Minjoo Party.

A prominent foreign leader from a major trading partner recently criticized the World Trade Organization (WTO), accusing the institution of unfairly favoring South Korea. In an official statement, the foreign leader claimed that the WTO's system consistently benefits South Korea in trade agreements, resulting in an unjust trade deficit for their country. They also called for systematic reforms of the WTO to address imbalances in trade benefits and deficits across countries.

In response, South Korea's leadership strongly defended the WTO. The South Korean president dismissed the foreign leader's remarks as an unreasonable attack on the multilateral trade system and reaffirmed support for the WTO's role and decisions in international trade practices. The South Korean president emphasized the importance of maintaining strong partnerships with other countries within the WTO system.

As a treatment awareness check, I asked respondents at the end of the survey whether there was any recent foreign leader criticizing the WTO and whether the Korean president had responded to their claims, according to the vignette they have just read. Respondents exposed to the foreign leader's statement attacking the WTO (**B** and **C**) were significantly more likely to recall foreign leadership criticizing the WTO system than those who saw the foreign leader acknowledging the WTO system (**A**) ($p < .001$). Additionally, respondents who saw the South Korean president's push-back against the foreign leader's claim (**B**) were more likely to indicate that the Korean government pushed back compared to those in Conditions **A** ($p < .01$) or **C** ($p < .001$).

The main outcome variables were foreign leadership favorability and perceived legitimacy of the WTO. For foreign leadership favorability, respondents rated their feelings toward the foreign leader mentioned in the vignette on an 11-point scale (0 = least favorable, 10 = most favorable). Perceived legitimacy of the WTO was measured using an index, which included four items on a seven-point scale: "I have full confidence in the WTO," "The WTO system needs serious changes" (reverse-coded), "I feel very critical of the current WTO system" (reverse-coded), and "The WTO's rules and regulations are generally fair to all involved countries" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). To examine whether reactions to foreign leaders' statements and domestic leaders' pushback varied based on party affiliation, respondents' party preference was collected in the pre-treatment stage. They were

then classified as supportive of, opposed to, or neutral toward the incumbent party.

To compare the differences between Conditions **C** and **A** (the effect of the foreign leader’s attack on the WTO) and Conditions **B** and **C** (the effect of the domestic leader’s counterargument), all outcome measures were standardized prior to analysis, and no covariates were included in the OLS models². As hypothesized, when foreign leaders criticize the WTO while domestic leaders remaining neutral is kept constant (i.e., the differences between Conditions **C** and **A**), the public perceives the WTO as more legitimate, regardless of partisanship (Figure 2, Panel A). Favorability toward the foreign leader also decreases across all partisan groups (Figure 2, Panel B). These patterns were consistent across individuals who, before treatment, indicated varying levels of personal impact from international trade in the pre-treatment questionnaire.

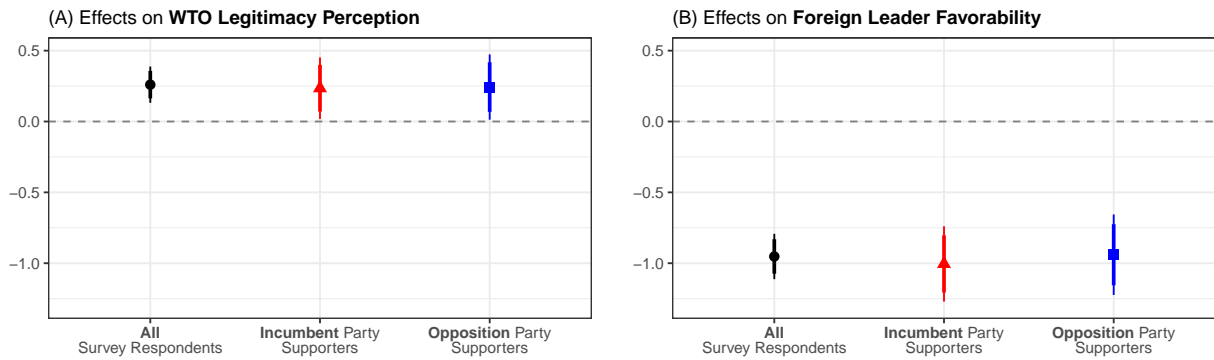


Figure 2: Effects of exposure to a hypothetical foreign leader’s anti-WTO claim on perceptions of WTO legitimacy (Panel A) and foreign leader favorability (Panel B). All measures were standardized and estimated using robust HC1 standard errors.

When domestic leaders push back against a foreign leader’s claim that the WTO is treating partner countries unfairly (i.e., the differences between Conditions **B** and **C**), a similar pattern emerges among incumbent party supporters (Figure 3). They see the WTO as more legitimate and become more hostile toward the foreign leader. However, while opposition party supporters also become more critical of the foreign leader, the change is smaller, and their view of the WTO’s legitimacy *decreases* when their opposing president pushes back. These findings suggest that while

²Adding covariates to reduce noise in the estimates was unnecessary, as the between-condition differences were already statistically significant. Including key pre-treatment covariates, such as education level, national economic perceptions, and knowledge of the WTO, did not alter the results.

foreign leaders' attacks on the WTO may unexpectedly boost its legitimacy when the issue is not politicized, this effect can reverse among opposition groups when domestic leaders counter the foreign leaders' anti-WTO claims.

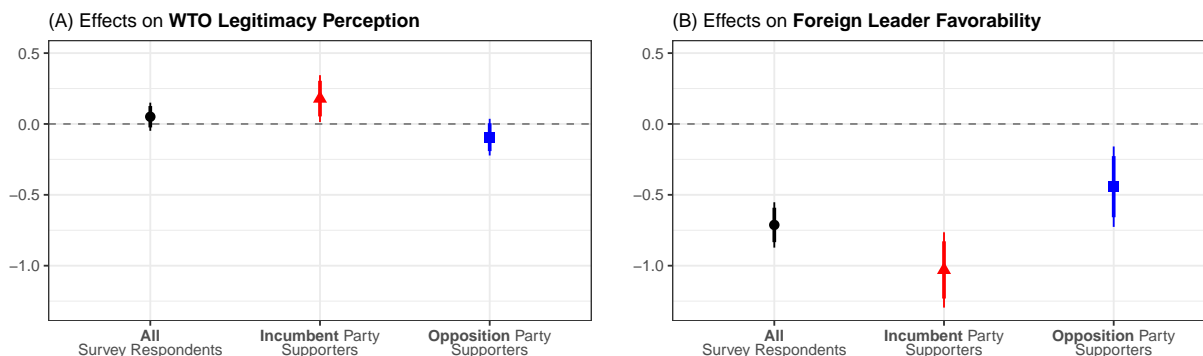


Figure 3: Effects of exposure to a domestic leader's push-back against a hypothetical foreign leader's anti-WTO claim on perceptions of WTO legitimacy (Panel A) and foreign leader favorability (Panel B). All measures were standardized and estimated using robust HC1 standard errors.

The findings from the hypothetical-scenario-based survey experiment clearly support my hypotheses. However, do these results hold in real-world situations where foreign leaders' critiques have been publicized and politicized by domestic leaders? To test this, I examine two cases: when Trump attacked the WTO system, claiming South Korea was unfairly benefiting from it (without explicit counterargument from South Korean President Moon of the liberal Minjoo Party), and when Japan criticized a WTO ruling as unfair (with strong pushback from President Moon against Prime Minister Abe).

5 Findings from the Text Analysis: Korean Responses to WTO-Related Claims by Trump and Abe

How have Koreans expressed their views on the leadership of Japan, the U.S., and the WTO's legitimacy during a time of politicized trade agreements under WTO rulings? To explore this, I analyzed news comment data, which, though imperfect, offers valuable insights into public reactions to foreign leaders' anti-WTO claims. I analyzed YouTube comments on trade-related news from South Korean media to examine the impact of these disputes with the U.S. and Japan on foreign

leader favorability and perceptions of WTO legitimacy. The data comes from online comments of YouTube news videos related to international trade³ from three national and four cable TV news broadcasts, representing both liberal and conservative perspectives ($N = 8,267,505$). I fine-tuned a GPT-4o text classification model to determine whether comments reflect (i) favorable (+1), neutral (0), or unfavorable (-1) views of Trump and Abe, and (ii) whether the WTO is seen as a legitimate (+1) or illegitimate (-1) institution for resolving trade disputes. Comments that mentioned the WTO but did not address its legitimacy were coded as neutral (0).

To build the model, I manually annotated random samples of comments, categorizing them by foreign leader favorability and WTO legitimacy ($N = 10,605$) (Table 2). Using my annotation scheme as a prompt, I asked GPT-4o to classify the same sample, achieving a high inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .89$). Afterward, I sampled 683,901 comments (8.27% of the total) for GPT-4o annotation, followed by a preprocessing step using the GPT-4o tokenizer. The data was split into training (80%), validation (10%), and test (10%) sets, and the model was fine-tuned in two stages: first with human-annotated data, then with the LLM-annotated data over four epochs. The final model achieved an F1 score of .81, suitable for classifying the full dataset. To avoid misclassifying disapproval of specific WTO decisions as a judgment on the institution's legitimacy, comments were coded as viewing the WTO as legitimate if they expressed trust in its effectiveness or fairness. Comments were classified as viewing the WTO as illegitimate if they expressed mistrust or pointed to failures in providing fair treatment across countries.

To measure partisanship based on commenting behavior, I analyzed where individuals predominantly commented before 2016. I collected news videos with election-related keywords in their titles or descriptions and identified commenters' engagement patterns before January 1, 2016, minimizing post-treatment bias by determining partisanship prior to elite-driven shocks. Commenters who primarily engaged with liberal outlets (e.g., JTBC, MBC) were classified as liberals, while those who engaged mainly with conservative outlets (e.g., TV Chosun, MBN, Channel A)

³I collected all news videos containing keywords related to international trade and American or Japanese leaders from 2016 to 2020, manually removed false positives, and retrieved all comments using the YouTube API.

Comment Text	Classification
The US has violated WTO rules before, so why are they picking on our country now? Are they ignoring how important the WTO procedures are?	+1 (Legitimate)
Japan claims that while they imposed export restrictions, it's not a violation of WTO rules. I don't agree with that, but that's what the first ruling said according to WTO regulations.	+1 (Legitimate)
How can we trust the WTO? It's just a completely corrupt international organization. Do you know how much Japan lobbies there? There are quite a few cases where they got caught. Korean government, please wake up.	-1 (Illegitimate)
If our country loses its developing country status in the WTO, we'll have to reduce agricultural subsidies and lower tariffs. This would mean cheaper prices for high-quality American agricultural products like rice, fruits, meat, and vegetables due to tariff reductions. It's great for consumers since the cost of groceries will go down, but domestic agriculture will lose its competitiveness and collapse. What can we do to solve this?	0 (Neutral)

Table 2: Classification of perceived legitimacy of the WTO from YouTube comments about international trade. Texts are translated from Korean to English.

were classified as conservatives⁴.

To track individual shifts in attitudes following elite statements that politicize views on the WTO and foreign leaders, I examine changes within individuals over the six months before and after the statements. YouTube comments, with exact timestamps and unique IDs, enable a within-individual panel analysis using fixed effects to control for individual characteristics. I estimate the time average treatment effect to account for heterogeneous responses to the treatment over time (Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021). Specifically, I assess the treatment effects on a weekly basis—one week, two weeks, and so on—up to 24 weeks before and after each statement, with a focus on visualizing these effects separately by partisan groups. This approach allows for a detailed observation of pre-treatment trends and post-treatment dynamics on a week-by-week basis, capturing how attitudes evolve in response to the statement over time. I also include interactions with inferred partisanship (based on pre-2016 behavior) to explore partisan differences in responses.

Figure 4 presents the individual changes across partisan groups six months before and after each elite statement. Note that, unlike the previous survey experiment where the Korean president

⁴This method may misclassify strong partisans who comment on both liberal and conservative outlets as independents (Han et al., 2023). A more accurate measure would involve analyzing partisan attitudes expressed in the comments, which will be explored in future analyses.

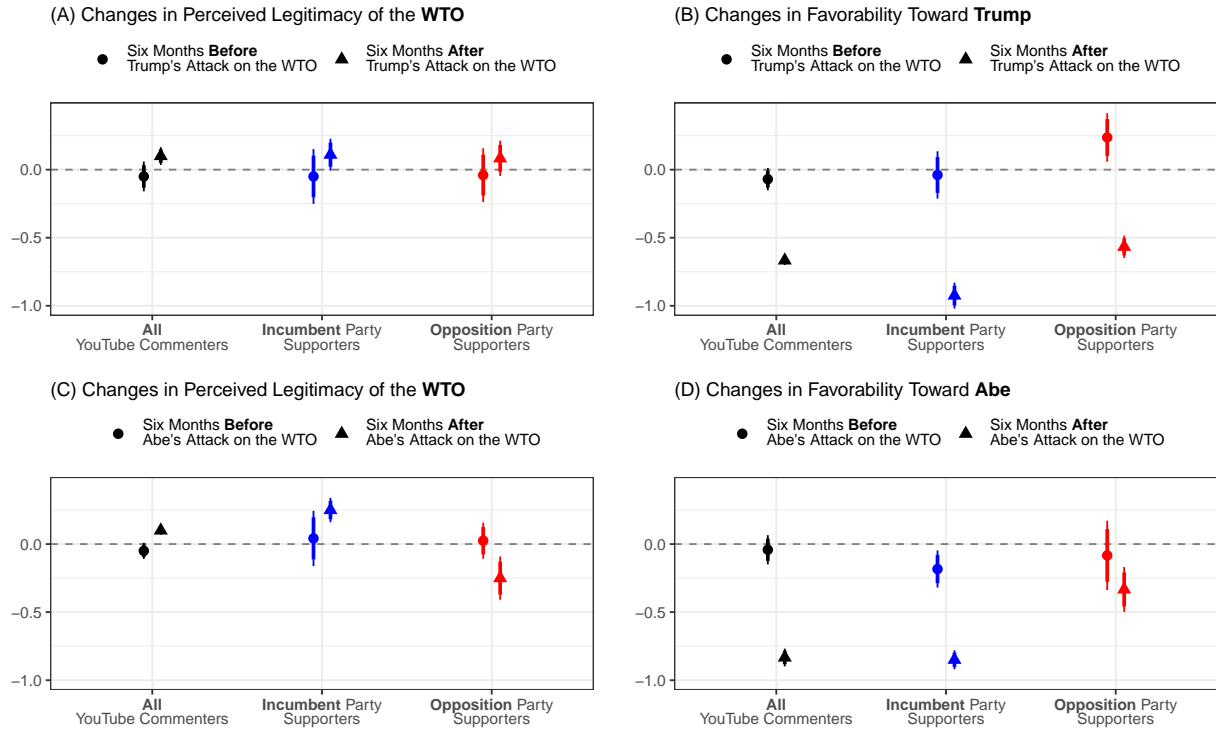


Figure 4: Changes in YouTube commenters' perceptions of WTO legitimacy (Panel A) and Trump favorability (Panel B) six months before and after Trump's criticism of the WTO's treatment of the U.S. versus South Korea. Similarly, changes in WTO legitimacy (Panel C) and Abe favorability (Panel D) are tracked six months before and after Abe's criticism of the WTO ruling in the Korea-Japan trade dispute. All measures were standardized before analysis.

was from the conservative People Power Party, the observational analysis involved a president from the liberal Minjoo Party. The results mostly align with my predictions and the findings from the earlier survey experiment, despite smaller effect sizes. After Trump criticized the WTO as unfair, Korean commenters became significantly more likely to view the WTO as a legitimate institution (Panel A of Figure 4). This pattern appeared across both partisan groups. While most research on globalization backlash emphasizes the negative impact of anti-WTO rhetoric, this result suggests an unexpected outcome: anti-WTO rhetoric may backfire, decreasing support for foreign leaders who criticize the WTO and accuse other countries of unfairly benefiting from it. These shifts in views on WTO legitimacy align with decreased favorability toward Trump (Panel B, Figure 4).

However, when Abe and Moon exchanged accusations of prioritizing their own nations' interests, reactions varied. After Abe criticized the WTO's decision to uphold South Korea's ban on

Japanese imports, Liberals were more likely to support the WTO as legitimate, while Conservatives—who aligned with elites criticizing President Moon’s anti-Japan stance—began to view the WTO as less legitimate (Panel C, Figure 4). Shifts in favorability toward Abe also reflected partisan divides. While Conservatives were less critical, Liberals’ favorability significantly dropped after his statement became public. Overall, reactions to Abe’s anti-WTO claims were polarized, likely influenced by the domestic discourse on Japan-Korea trade disputes (Panel D, Figure 4).

An interesting qualitative observation from the comments is that both Liberals and Conservatives frequently use terms like “fair” and “just” to express their support or opposition to the WTO’s ruling on Korea’s import bans. For instance, one of the most popular comments on a conservative outlet stated: “The WTO is only fair when Japan is treated fairly. The South Korean government is ruining relations with Japan by bullying them and making a scene, which is why the WTO is reacting this way. It’s an international embarrassment!” On the other hand, Liberals view Japan’s objections as unfair and self-serving. One Liberal comment read: “The Abe administration is irrational and emotional. How can they only think about their own interests? It’s unbelievable that they don’t consider the WTO’s decision might actually be fair.” While both Conservatives and Liberals value fairness in judging the WTO’s legitimacy, their interpretations of fairness differ sharply based on ideological views.

6 Conclusion

Although IOs have traditionally been a distant topic in public opinion studies, recent years have seen increased politicized attacks on these institutions, particularly on trade bodies like the WTO (Carnegie, Clark and Zucker, 2024; Lake, Martin and Risse, 2021; Mansfield, Milner and Rudra, 2021; Walter, 2021). These attacks often erode trust in such organizations, especially among domestic supporters of elites who criticize or reject WTO rulings, giving political leaders more leeway for electoral gains (e.g., Brutger, Clark and Zvobgo, 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2020, 2021; Tallberg and Zürn, 2019; Walter, 2021). However, objections to WTO decisions can have unintended consequences. When foreign leaders accuse the WTO of unfairly benefiting certain

countries, this rhetoric can actually strengthen the perceived legitimacy of the WTO among partner countries. Citizens in these countries often become more hostile toward the foreign leaders, which may explain why challenging the WTO can backfire, ultimately reinforcing its legitimacy.

Nonetheless, the potential to mitigate anti-globalization and anti-IO trends (e.g., [Dennison and Kustov, 2023](#); [Obermeier, 2021](#)) is limited when domestic political discourse is highly polarized. If domestic elites support WTO rulings, opposition parties often take advantage of the situation by criticizing incumbents, which in turn influences their supporters' views of the WTO. My individual-level survey experiment and news comment panel analyses show that incumbent party supporters are more likely to trust the WTO and oppose foreign leaders who criticize it, while opposition party supporters are less likely to view the WTO as legitimate, leading to increased polarization.

These findings suggest that international audiences may reassess their views in response to foreign leaders' claims about unfair trade agreements, but these effects are polarized by partisan divides within the domestic context (e.g., [Guisinger and Saunders, 2017](#)). While previous studies have focused on how elite rhetoric shapes domestic audiences' views on international organizations, this study highlights how these effects spill over to partner countries, especially when they are portrayed as benefiting unfairly from existing agreements. My findings also show that perceptions of fairness in trade institutions are influenced by individuals' partisan leanings and their views on national interests. Unlike previous research that treats fairness as a uniform principle in evaluating IO design (e.g., [Brutger and Rathbun, 2021](#); [Brutger and Li, 2022](#)), this study suggests that interpretations of fairness vary based on party alignment and national gains. This complicates the assumption that fairness principles are independent of ideological orientations, particularly in the context of mass opinion on IOs and their rulings.

The similarities between the survey experiment and text analysis, along with the notable differences in effect sizes, are worth highlighting. While both analyses generally produce aligned results, including in the heterogeneous treatment effects across partisan groups, the survey ex-

periment shows significantly larger effects of foreign leader influence and domestic pushback. Combining observational analysis, which may be biased by the specific foreign leaders involved but offers a more realistic effect size estimate, with the survey experiment, which provides controlled manipulation but may lack external validity, enhances the overall validity of interpreting the estimated effects for hypothesis testing (e.g., Barabas and Jerit, 2010).

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Supplementary Materials, Section A: Descriptive Media Analysis

Using BigKinds, a digital archive of South Korean TV news transcripts, I accessed transcripts containing keywords related to international trade, unemployment, or popular sports (searched in Korean, now translated into English) in either the video titles or full transcripts.

- International trade: Trade OR Trade balance OR Export OR Import OR Tariff OR Supply chain OR Supplier OR Customs office OR Economic sanctions OR Surplus OR Deficit OR Comparative advantage OR Protectionism OR Protective trade OR Free trade OR Exchange rate OR Foreign direct investment OR Overseas direct investment OR Foreign direct investment (FDI) OR World Trade Organization (WTO) OR North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) OR Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) OR General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) OR Dumping OR Free trade OR Free Trade Agreement (FTA) OR Trade agreement OR Trade association OR Bilateral treaty OR Investment agreement OR Economic cooperation OR Development organization OR International development OR Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) OR Economic community OR Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) OR Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) OR International Monetary Fund (IMF) OR International Monetary Fund (IMF) OR World Bank OR Foreign exchange OR Korean won OR International economy OR World economy OR Trade OR Export and import OR International transactions OR International trade OR Trade barriers
- Unemployment: Unemployment OR Unemployment rate OR Job OR Labor OR Labor market OR Unemployment benefits OR Temporary job OR Part-time job OR Part-time job (informal) OR Daily worker OR Unemployed person OR Jobless OR Employment OR Employment rate OR Job-seeking difficulties OR Job search OR Employment OR Employment difficulties OR Employment rate OR Dismissal OR Restructuring OR Job loss OR Career discontinuity OR Job insecurity OR Non-regular employment OR Retirement OR Job training OR Career counseling OR Internship OR Intern OR Job preparation OR Job preparation (informal) OR Employment contract OR Employment policy OR Unemployment policy OR Job-seeking policy OR Employment policy OR Job stability OR Workforce OR Vocational education OR Economically active population OR Unemployed population OR Resignation OR Job seeker OR Job preparation student OR NEET OR Job seeker OR Unskilled labor OR Labor costs OR Minimum wage OR Wage OR Salary OR White-collar OR Blue-collar OR Occupation OR Job OR Youth unemployment OR Unemployed youth (informal) OR Retirement OR Honorary retirement OR Voluntary retirement (informal)
- Popular sports in South Korea: Baseball OR Basketball

The amount of coverage on international trade was compared to unemployment to assess its prominence relative to another key economic issue. Additionally, trade-related coverage was

compared to sports coverage, a highly popular but apolitical topic in South Korea.

Supplementary Materials, Section B: Survey Experiment

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Age	43.16	12.07	20	68
Gender (Men 1, Women 0)	0.50	0.47	0	1
Ideology (Liberal 1 - Conservative 7)	4.20	1.31	1	7
Education (1-5)	3.58	0.90	1	5
Income (1-6)	3.36	1.27	1	6
Employed (Employed 1, Unemployed 0)	0.62	0.53	0	1
Married (Married 1, Unmarried 0)	0.59	0.50	0	1

Table 3: Summary Statistics of the Survey Sample ($N = 2,311$)

Pre-treatment Questionnaire⁵

Age To begin, we would like to know a little more about you. How old are you?

Open-ended response

Gender What is your gender?

Male (1) Female (2) Non-binary (3)

Education What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Middle school or below (1)

High school/GED (2)

2/3-year college or professional college (enrolled or graduated) (3)

4-year college (enrolled or graduated) (4)

Graduate school (enrolled or graduated) / Professional degrees (5)

Employment Are you currently employed full-time or part-time?

Yes (1)

No (0)

Occupation What type of business or industry best describes your current main job?

Open-ended response

Marital status What is your current marital status? Are you living with a partner?

⁵All survey questions were administered in Korean and have been translated into English for clarity. Some questions retain original Korean terms to preserve contextual accuracy.

- Married (1)
- Never married (2)
- Divorced (3)
- Separated (4)
- Widowed (5)
- Partners; not married (6)

Income What was the total income of all members of your family before taxes? Please include income from all sources, such as salaries, wages, pensions, Social Security, dividends, interest, and any other income.

- Less than 2,000,000 KRW (1)
- 2,000,000 KRW - 3,000,000 KRW (2)
- 3,000,000 KRW - 4,000,000 KRW (3)
- 4,000,000 KRW - 5,000,000 KRW (4)
- 5,000,000 KRW - 6,000,000 KRW (5)
- 6,000,000 KRW - 7,000,000 KRW (6)
- More than 7,000,000 KRW (7)

Party identification Which political party do you identify with the most?

- People Power Party (1)
- Minjoo Party (2)
- Other: Please Specify (3)
- Independent/Do not identify with any political party (4)
- Don't Know (5)

Ideological strength In terms of politics, how would you describe your views?

- Extremely Liberal (1)
- Liberal (2)
- Slightly Liberal (3)
- Moderate (4)
- Slightly Conservative (5)
- Conservative (6)
- Extremely Conservative (7)
- Haven't thought much about it (8)

Perceptions of trade's impact on personal finances Are you and your family financially better off, worse off, or does it not make much difference when South Korea engages more in trade with other countries?

- My family is *much better* off if we trade with other countries (1)
- My family is *somewhat better* off if we trade with other countries (2)
- Doesn't make much of a difference to us either way (3)
- My family is *somewhat worse* off if we trade with other countries (4)
- My family is *much worse* off if we trade with other countries (5)

Perceptions of trade's impact on the local economy Is your local economy—that is, the economic

situation in your neighborhood—better off, worse off, or does it not make much difference when South Korea engages more in trade with other countries?

My local economy is *much better* off if we trade with other countries (1)

My local economy is *somewhat better* off if we trade with other countries (2)

Doesn't make much of a difference to us either way (3)

My local economy is *somewhat worse* off if we trade with other countries (4)

My local economy is *much worse* off if we trade with other countries (5)

Perceptions of trade's impact on the national economy Then, is the Korean economy better off, worse off, or does it not make much difference when South Korea engages more in trade with other countries?

The Korean economy is *much better* off if we trade with other countries (1)

The Korean economy is *somewhat better* off if we trade with other countries (2)

Doesn't make much of a difference to us either way (3)

The Korean economy is *somewhat worse* off if we trade with other countries (4)

The Korean economy is *much worse* off if we trade with other countries (5)

Knowledge About the WTO 1 Now, we will ask you a series of questions related to foreign affairs. It's okay if you get some answers wrong—your survey compensation is not based on your accuracy. However, please do not use any external sources, such as online searches, to find the answers. We're simply interested in what you know off the top of your head. For this reason, the screen will advance in thirty seconds. When you're ready, press Start. What is the primary function of 세계무역기구 [World Trade Organization]?

Issuing global currency (0)

Regulating global labor laws (0)

Setting international travel regulations (0)

Regulating trade between countries (1)

Knowledge About the WTO 2 What is the correct English acronym for 세계무역기구 [World Trade Organization]?

WTO (1)

ASEAN (0)

BRICS (0)

NATO (0)

GATT (0)

Knowledge About the WTO 3 Can 세계무역기구 [World Trade Organization] settle trade disputes between member countries?

Yes (1)

No (0)

Knowledge About the WTO 4 Is China a member of 세계무역기구 [World Trade Organization]?

Yes (1)

No (0)

Knowledge About Foreign Affairs 1 Is Ukraine a member of the European Union (EU)?

Yes (1)

No (1)

Knowledge About Foreign Affairs 2 Which country recently joined BRICS in 2023?

Argentina (1)

India (0)

South Africa (0)

Colombia (0)

Knowledge About Foreign Affairs 3 Is the United States part of the Paris Climate Agreement?

Yes (1)

No (0)

Post-treatment Questionnaire

Foreign Leadership Favorability Please rate the foreign leader mentioned in the previous text you just read on a thermometer that runs from 0 to 100 degrees. Rating above 50 means that you feel favorable and warm, and rating below 50 means that you feel unfavorable and cool.

0 - 100

WTO Legitimacy Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: I have full confidence in the WTO, The WTO system needs serious changes, I feel very critical of the current WTO system, The WTO's rules and regulations are generally fair to all involved countries (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$)

Strongly agree (1)

Somewhat agree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat disagree (4)

Strongly disagree (5)

Treatment Awareness Check 1 Based on the text you just read, what was the foreign leader's stance on the WTO?

The foreign leader discredited the WTO's decision and legitimacy (1)

The foreign leader supported the WTO's decision and legitimacy (2)

I am not sure what the foreign leader said about the WTO (3)

Treatment Check: Open-ended Response Based on your best guess, which country's leader do you think the foreign leader was? If you don't have an opinion or are unsure, please select Not Sure.

The leader was from [Open-ended]

I am not sure which country the foreign leader was.

Treatment Awareness Check 2 Then, based on the text you just read, what was the South Korean leader's stance on the WTO?

The Korean leader discredited the WTO's decision and legitimacy (1)
The Korean leader supported the WTO's decision and legitimacy (2)
I am not sure what the Korean leader said about the WTO (3)