Populism and IO Bureaucratic Power in Development Cooperation: Evidence from the OECD DAC's Policy Marker System

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Abstract

Populist leaders increasingly criticize global governance systems, denouncing them as elitist and undermining the sovereignty of member states within international organizations (IOs). While a growing body of literature has explored the effects of populism on IOs, we know less about how populist foreign aid donors engage with established standards and governance systems in international development cooperation. We argue that populist donors do not want to be seen as subjected to IO directives when making aid allocation decisions, and are thus likely to show hostility toward the performance measurement standards established by the premier organization in this space, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Specifically, we expect them to reject compliance with the DAC Policy Marker System, which encourages aid programming targeted toward a set of specific issue areas deemed as a priority. Populist parties in donor legislatures are more likely to oppose projects whose objectives are based on Policy Marker System classifications during budget review processes, framing them as elitist and misaligned with national priorities. As a result, program managers may have an incentive to design projects that avoid conformity with DAC classifications. To test this hypothesis, we regress the proportion of aid commitments adhering to DAC classifications against the level of anti-elitist sentiment expressed by political parties. Using information on individual aid activities committed between 1998 and 2022 and reported by donors to the OECD's Creditor Reporting System, we show that anti-elitism negatively predicts policy targeting while controlling for sectoral allocation. Our findings suggest that the anti-elitist behavior of populists is directed at the IO and its governance tools, but is not aimed at substantially modifying the sectoral allocation of aid.

1 Introduction

As populist sentiment spread globally over the past decade or so, one of its hallmarks has been hostility toward international organizations (IOs). Stoking competitiveness between an in-group and an ominous out-group—typically painted as made up of distant, often international elites—populist leaders point to these foreign institutions as constraining their sovereignty and laboring to inflict disadvantageous regulations on their domestic constituencies (e.g., Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019; Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021).

Yet, this threatening stance toward international cooperation has arguably been better documented in rhetoric than practice: populist governments are not much more likely to leave IOs or cause withdrawal cascades (Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019; Walter 2021), and even though they may undermine them by providing scarcer or worse data (Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker 2024) they often continue to—more or less formally—engage with these institutions while publicly denouncing them (Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya 2024).

Our understanding remains more limited with respect to how the spread of populism has impacted international development and humanitarian assistance. When it comes to giving away free or cheap money to less economically developed countries, populist leaders find fertile grounds to argue that the needs of their own citizens should be prioritized and that no foreign entity should dictate how they are to devolve resources internationally. In this spirit, populist donors may push back on what should count as foreign aid and use aid funds to cover the costs of handling domestic refugee crises. They also may want to be seen as safeguarding domestic interests by tying more of their aid commitments to domestic procurements; they may refuse to comply with international standards for effective aid-giving; and be generally more skeptical of partaking in IO procedures meant to monitor and evaluate their performance as donors.

In this paper, we ask whether populism in donor countries has affected their engagement with the premier international body governing traditional foreign aid giving, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Since its founding in the early 1960s, the DAC has been the chief authority defining what Official Development Assistance (ODA) is, collecting and publishing the most reliable data on its flows, and promoting standards and best practices for effective aid-giving. One of its tools is the DAC Policy Marker System: a way for the organization to both indicate a set of issue areas that its members should strive to target with their aid programming, and to assess and compare their compliance with this directive. Three of the earliest-established, most closely monitored priority policy areas include aid for gender equality, for the environment, and for democratic and inclusive governance.

We argue that populist donors disengage with the DAC Policy Marker System as a way to disavow the notion that an international, elitist organization should dictate what to prioritize in their aid-giving. While

this may in part be due to different policy preferences over which issues are most important, urgent, or appropriate to devote foreign aid to, populist donors also disapprove of these directives on principle. Not least, they reject the use of the Policy Marker System as a tool in the hands of an international bureaucracy to assess and categorize their performance.

Through a series of empirical analyses of aid-giving by DAC donors since the introduction of these policy markers in 1998 to the most recent available data in 2022, we find robust evidence of an association between rising populism in donor legislatures and decreasing targeting of DAC-sanctioned priority policy areas. While this association is in part due to populist donors substantively disagreeing with the notion that the environment or democratic and inclusive governance are key issues to be addressed, we show that our results are robust to controlling for differences in aid portfolio at the sectoral level. This indicates that populists take issue with the Policy Marker System as such: in addition to diverging preferences on what policy areas should be prioritized, they pull away from a bureaucratic tool meant to direct, monitor, and compare their performance as donors.

Our findings contribute to a number of research streams. First, we contribute to a still limited understanding of how populism in donor countries affects international development cooperation. Some expect far-right, populist donors to reject and reduce aid-giving overall (Hammerschmidt, Meyer, and Pintsch 2022); while others do not find populism to have substantial negative effects on aid (Hackenesch et al. 2022; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson Jr 2021). Our results are more aligned with a growing body of work suggesting that populists continue using foreign aid but they tailor it to their own priorities rather than follow what they perceive as the neoliberal priorities of the IOs in this space. For example, Suzuki (2023) argues that populist far-right parties use the threat of aid cuts to exert pressure on recipient countries that are the source of heavy migration flows toward the donor; and Tokhi and Zimmermann (2024) show that, while far-right donors do not differ from others in bilateral aid spending, they reduce their earmarked commitments significantly—a sign that they seek to limit the influence of IOs and their liberal mandates on their aid giving.

We also contribute to the broader literature on how populist member states engage with IOs, with many studies documenting that the populist threats to withdraw from institutions and agreement altogether rarely materialize. Rather, they seek to continue to reap the benefits of IO membership while redefining the terms under which they engage with them (Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya 2024).

Less directly, our findings speak to the understanding of international cooperation through the lens of the life cycle of IOs. Steinwand 2022 highlights that a key strategy for the OECD DAC to remain relevant is to continue performing its chief functions relative to upholding the definition of ODA, and collecting and disseminating reliable data on aid flows. By not going after populist donors for their lower targeting of its priority policy areas, and rather continue engaging with them to maintain good data reporting standards,

the DAC ensures that it can carry on fulfilling its primary mandate while not risking isolating—and possibly losing—its less like-minded members.

2   Theory and Hypotheses

As populism rose to prominence in the rhetoric and ideology of political leaders around the world, scholars are also paying increased attention to how this affects international cooperation, noting lowering public support for IOs (Bearce and Scott 2019) and expecting negative consequences for the existing system of global governance (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019). While definitions and expressions of populism can vary, they typically center on anti-elitist in-group versus out-group thinking:[1] corrupt, authoritative, often international elites—i.e., the out-group—are seen as exerting illegitimate power at the detriment of the people—i.e., the in-group.

Leveraging this rhetoric, populists can use IOs as a convenient scapegoat toward which to redirect domestic grievances, describing them as elite-driven foreign entities that exert illegitimate authority over sovereign states and their citizens. For example, Voeten (2020) argues that the playbook for populist critiques of international courts: instead of challenging specific rulings of the courts, populists question the very authority and legitimacy of these institutions in and of themselves. Trickling down two individuals, those with more populist attitudes have been found to be more likely to blame IOs for domestic and personal economic challenges (Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin 2023).

Yet, unlike the nationalists actually determined to reclaim sovereignty from IOs (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019), populist leaders may be more interested in using these criticisms as rhetorical tools than in rejecting international cooperation in practice, which would require taking meaningful steps to dismantle existing international regimes. For instance, despite the aforementioned typical criticisms of international courts and their jurisdiction, populist parties to those courts rarely leave them (Voeten 2020); and even when a country does leave an IO, it does not necessarily trigger a withdrawal cascade (Walter 2021).

Populists want their cake and eat it too: on the one hand, they want to appear independent, not bound to the authority of international actors, and use country-first rhetoric to signal a commitment to state sovereignty (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019); on the other, they continue to play ball with IOs when it benefits them, or when they are able to exert control over them from within. In the case of the International Monetary Fund, populist members favor private participation—so as to avoid the domestic cost of being visibly engaged with the IO, while still reaping the benefits of membership (Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya

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[1]We build on the definition of populism by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), whereby populism is "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus the "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (p. 150).

2024). When interacting with IOs on politicized issue areas like energy and environment, populists are less likely to provide accurate scientific information to facilitate international cooperation, monitoring, and evaluation where they want to undermine it (Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker 2024).

Considering the high premium that a populist ideology puts on championing domestic needs and welfare (at least rhetorically), populist leaders may be particularly concerned with appearances when it comes to their engagement in international development and humanitarian assistance (Thier and Alexander 2019). To a populist, giving foreign aid should make sense only if it is linked at least partly to clear benefits to the donor country's foreign policy, economy, and people. When Donald Trump became President of the United States in 2016, he notably threatened large aid cuts and his administration sought to implement substantial aid-giving reforms (Rigby, Newey, and Gulland 2020).

We especially expect populists to oppose aid-giving that is dictated in modalities and objectives as well as monitored by the rules and procedures of an IO. The premier organization that has governed traditional aid-giving internationally is the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), firmly part of the architecture of global elite institutions that populists tend to criticize. Since the early 1960s, it has been the forum where traditional, mostly Western foreign aid donors have settled on a definition for what counts as Official Development Assistance (ODA); where they reach consensus-based norms and standards for effective aid-giving; and it has also been unrivaled in the scope and quality of the data it collects and publishes on foreign aid flows.

A key tool that the DAC uses both to set substantive guidelines for its members' aid-giving practice and to collect data that allows for the evaluation of said practice is its Policy Marker System. Through the interaction of member states with its Secretariat in the context of working groups and plenary meetings, the DAC decides on key policy areas that should be prioritized by donors when they develop their aid programming. For instance, three of the longest-standing priority policy areas are gender equality, environment, and democratic and inclusive governance. The DAC requires that its members build considerations about these issues into the early planning stages of aid projects; and that they report whether each aid activity targets one or more priority areas, and to which extent (i.e., either as the activity's primary goal or secondarily).

Like many other institutions, the DAC has an organizational structure and supportive administrative bureaucracy that makes it an independent—though constrained—actor (e.g., Abbott and Snidal 1998; Barnett and Finnemore 1999). However, in this case, power is not directly tied to monetary contributions in a similar fashion to the dynamics of the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank (e.g., Dreher and Sturm 2012; Stone 2011). Rather, the DAC is an egalitarian, consensus-based organization that relies on soft-law mechanisms. In particular, it has several subsidiary bodies that serve as fora for consensus-building around standards for effective aid-giving: for example, the Network on Gender Equality ("GenderNet"),

the Network on Governance ("GovNet"), and the Network on Environment and Development Cooperation ("EnviroNet") are responsible for their respective priority policy areas mentioned above; and the Statistics and Monitoring Division is the place where reporting guidelines on how to account for aid-giving targeting those policy areas are developed and donors are supported in their usage.

When donor states join the DAC, they agree to have their aid-giving practices monitored by the organization: via regular reporting of detailed information on their aid activities, including information reported as part of the Policy Marker System; via less formal interactions with DAC staff, which is especially active in supporting new donors set up efficient systems of rigorous data collection and reporting (Bau et al. 2025); and ultimately via formal review processes. Every few years on a rotating basis, each DAC donor gets its aid program fully evaluated by a team composed of representatives of the DAC Secretariat as well as peer examiners from two other member states, in a process complete with visits to the donor's aid agency headquarters and to some of its key recipients. On a more ad-hoc basis, donors undergo statistical reviews, which focus more specifically on their accounting practices for their aid-giving activities. This peer review process is largely driven by DAC procedures and staff, with little room for political influence on the part of peer examiner countries (Iannantuoni, Dietrich, and Reinsberg 2025b; Iannantuoni, Dietrich, and Reinsberg 2025a.)

The Policy Marker System plays a key role as a tool of bureaucratic power in the wider infrastructure of the DAC. It is intended to promote the alignment of its donors with DAC standards and best practices in two key ways: first, by indicating which issues should be prioritized by its members' aid programming; and second, by streamlining how members track and report their progress in targeting those areas. It thus becomes a classification tool, creating categories and sorting donors and their aid projects into them. This ultimately allows the DAC to assess and compare their member compliance, against the standards that define what it means to be a donor among the world's wealthiest countries.

Beyond the DAC, the Policy Marker System aims to influence donors' decision-making processes. Donors are required to assign policy markers ex-ante project approval. Fundamentally, these markers are variables that program officers and grant managers must check to indicate whether, and to what extent, the projects set to be approved will correspond to particular global policy objectives. However, the OECD DAC seeks to maintain, through the aforementioned working group networks, a high level of international standardization on aid-giving best practices related to different policy areas.

Between each working group meeting, OECD experts monitor the activities of member countries and, based on this, develop a set of recommendations aimed at improving donors' aid-giving behavior. Diplomats from member countries who participate in these working groups learn about these practices and, once back in their capitals, are expected to organize training sessions with grant managers and program officers who

assign the markers to the projects. When these officers mark a project as targeting a policy objective, they do so with knowledge of best practices in the field. They use the OECD classifications taught by the diplomats as a heuristic to determine whether or not a project, based on its characteristics, contributes to best practices in aid-giving within the specific domain. Therefore, targeting not only appears as a broad contribution to a policy area, but rather to compliance with OECD classification on best practices.

The OECD ensures that officers mark projects in alignment with internationally set best aid-giving practices. As part of their DAC membership, member countries are required to report their development aid activities to the OECD's Creditor Reporting System on an annual basis. In this context, OECD experts engage in a thorough six-month data verification process to ensure the quality and compliance of the submitted data with the organization's standards. Particular attention is given to policy markers, whose reporting is also monitored by the organization. The experts use the data submitted for other variables to ensure that the characteristics of the projects support the reported information. If the data is deemed incorrect, the Secretariat arranges meetings with the member country to request corrections to the reported data. In this way, the OECD ensures that the markers are applied consistently and in accordance with established standards across the various member countries.

Parliamentarians who express anti-elitist sentiments may oppose policy markers, which exert a direct influence on domestic decision-making processes related to development assistance, relying on international elitist expertise. Populists tend to be skeptical of experts in international organizations (IOs) and the knowledge they produce (Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker 2024). Existing research provides evidence that electoral politics can influence foreign aid decisions (H. V. Milner and Tingley 2015; Wright 2024). In the United States, the White House requires federal agencies to hand in their own budget proposals as part of the President's yearly budget submission to Congress. These proposals are then reviewed by congressional subcommittees composed of parliamentarians, who revise these tables and generate their own allocation recommendations. In the submitted tables, federal agencies such as USAID or the Department of State propose budgets by country or sector but also specify funding for individual projects (Wright 2024). The subcommittees seek information on these projects and may organize hearings with agency heads or subcabinet-level officials. This process is similarly observed in other parliamentary democracies, where development aid budgets are negotiated on an annual basis and where officials from governmental agencies and ministries are invited to defend their projects before parliamentary committees. The negotiations often focus on the policy objectives of these projects. OECD classifications guide the design of projects according to a "how-to-do" framework defined by OECD experts, with whom populists may disagree. It is possible that aid program managers anticipate increased anti-elitism sentiment in the legislature and design projects that rely less on DAC classifications, thus increasing the likelihood that financing increases. Populists may support projects

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in key aid sectors while simultaneously challenging the classifications proposed by the OECD.

Delegitimizing the DAC through the rejection of a classification system argued to reflect a globalist consensus on what aid policy should look like is done with an eye both to the peer audience of fellow donors and to a domestic constituency: part of a broader domestic political strategy continuously preoccupied with drawing distinctions between the international elites seen as ruling IOs and "the people." Simultaneously, this type of rejection of IO power does not require a full withdrawal from the organization.Populist governments still care to be part of the DAC as a way to maintain their status as official donors, to benefit from the learning and support apparatus offered within the organization's subsidiary bodies, and to maintain an external target to blame for potential domestic problems.

Note that, to a populist donor, what is perceived as the invasive overreach of the DAC into their aid-giving practices through the Policy Marker System is there regardless of which areas the organization deems as a priority. Populists take issue with being seen as directed by an IO in their policy-making—regardless of the actual direction. We acknowledge that populist donors may also withdraw from certain policy areas due to diverging policy preferences, but we expect that they would pull back from using the Policy Marker System as directed by the DAC even when still making aid commitments to projects in the same sectors as the DAC policy priority areas.

> **Hypothesis 1:** *As donor populism increases, the targeting of aid commitments toward the issue areas identified as priority by the DAC decreases.*

> **Hypothesis 2:** *This effect remains when accounting for changing portfolios at the sector level.*

3   Research Design

We examine whether populism in donor countries affects their compliance with the OECD DAC's international performance measurement standards against key development cooperation policy areas with data on Official Development Assistance aid activities committed between 1998, when the Policy Marker System was first introduced, and 2022. Our sample includes all DAC donors starting two years before their membership is finalized, since new donors undergo an onboarding process and start reporting data to the CRS often several years before officially joining the organization (Bau et al. 2025).[2] We exclude the European Union from our analysis as it is the only DAC member that is not a sovereign state.

To test whether, as donors experience a turn toward populism, they target less of their aid commitments toward policy areas identified as a priority by the DAC, we estimate a series of linear regression models at

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[2]States are typically DAC "observers" and report data to the OECD CRS for a few years before becoming official members. See Table A1 in the Appendix for the full history of DAC membership.

the donor-year level with time-trends and donor fixed effects. Our models regress the percentage of a donor's aid commitments that *targeted* each policy marker on the weighted average of anti-elitism across parties in parliament, controlling for relevant covariates.

3.1 Dependent Variables

We seek to assess whether growing populism in DAC donor countries explains some of the variation in the extent to which they comply with DAC aid-giving standards and allow themselves to be subjected to the organization's soft-law tools meant to direct, monitor, and evaluate their performance. Specifically, our dependent variables measure how much of their aid commitments donors mark as targeting three key issue areas denoted as "priority" by the DAC's Policy Marker System: gender equality, the environment, and democratic and inclusive governance.

As discussed, the DAC introduced the Policy Marker System in the late 1990s to monitor the performance of its members across development cooperation policy areas of global relevance. A total of 14 markers were introduced (and some later discontinued) over time,[3] but the organization has not placed the same weight and infrastructure behind each of these. In our analyses we focus on the three original markers introduced in 1998 and still active today—i.e., the Gender Equality; the Environment; and the Democratic and Inclusive Governance (DIG) markers—not only because they provide us with greater time coverage, but chiefly because they are some of the more strictly implemented and monitored by the DAC. Notably, behind each of these three markers is an official DAC working group on the respective issue areas which produce guidelines on their use and high-profile reports assessing member compliance.[4]

Thus, we use three key dependent variables to capture the percentage of a donor's allocable aid commitments in a given year targeting each of the three markers. Starting from the OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) project-level data, we isolate activities with allocable commitments from the 31 DAC member states.[5] An aid activity has "allocable" commitments when it is in principle possible that it would target one or more of the policy markers: this excludes general budget support, imputed student costs, debt relief, administrative costs, development awareness, and in-donor refugee costs.[6]

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[3]Democratic and Inclusive Governance (1998); Environment (1998); Gender Equality (1998); Poverty Reduction (1998, discontinued); Trade Development (2007, discontinued); four climate-related makers resulting from the Rio Conventions: Biodiversity, Climate Mitigation, Climate Adaptation, and Desertification (2009); Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health (2012); Disaster Risk Reduction (2017); Nutrition (2018); and Disability (2018).

[4]The DAC's Network on Gender Equality ("GenderNet") oversees the usage of the Gender Equality marker; the Network on Governance ("GovNet") oversees the Democratic and Inclusive Governance (DIG) marker; and the Network on Environment and Development Cooperation ("EnviroNet") oversees the Environment marker.

[5]The European Union is the only DAC donor that is not a state, and it is excluded from our analyses.

[6]Consistent with the approach outlined in Bau et al. (2025), we use the modality classification in the CRS data to select ODA activities labeled as sector budget support; core support to NGOs, other private bodies, PPPs, and research institutes; contributions to specific-purpose programs and funds managed by implementing partners; basket funds/pooled funding; project-type interventions; donor country personnel and other technical assistance; and scholarships/training in donor country. These correspond to cooperation modality codes A02, B01, B03, B031, B032, B033, B04, C01, D01, D02, and E01. In the main

We build our dependent variables using commitment rather than disbursement data for two reasons. First, research on foreign aid decision-making favors using commitment because they capture donor decision points. Second, in the specific case of the Policy Marker System, donors are asked to report on policy markers at the time of commitment. Donors report disbursements associated with projects whose committed amounts have already been filled in the CRS, but are not required to report on the policy markers. All the commitments are in constant US dollars.

In addition to our main analyses with the percentage of a donor's allocable commitments targeting each of the three policy markers, we conduct two additional sets of analyses. The first one seeks to address the potential alternative explanation whereby populist donors have different policy preferences—and thus make meaningful changes to the sectoral distribution of their aid, not just their marker use. The dependent variable for this set of analysis is the percentage of a donor's aid commitments going to sectors related to the same issue areas as our three policy markers.[7]

Our second set of additional analyses addresses the possibility that populist donors may disengage from the DAC Policy Marker System because they do not want to provide full and accurate date to the organization, in a mechanism similar to that shown in Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker (2024). For these tests, our dependent variables measure the percentage of a donor's aid activities (i.e., rows in the CRS data) that were screened for the respective policy marker. An aid activity was "screened" for a marker if a value is reported for it—be it zero, when the activity does not target that policy area, or one or two, when it does. Activities left "unscreened" simply have missing data for the respective marker.

3.2 Independent Variable

We expect that populism in donor countries is associated with reduced targeting of aid commitments toward the issue areas identified as a priority by the DAC Policy Marker System. The key explanatory variable in our analysis is thus an operationalization of populism: as argued, we focus on the degree of anti-elitist sentiment in the political parties represented in donor legislatures. Anti-elitism, especially when elites are painted as "foreign" or "global," is a crucial link between populism in a broader sense and populists' hostility toward international institutions and cooperation. Capturing this sentiment in donor legislature is sensible for two reasons: on the one hand, members of the legislature who serve on the relevant subsidiary bodies can

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analyses, we also include aid activities that are missing a cooperation modality code in order to retain a sizable sample; in Table A2 in the Appendix, we show that results remain largely unchanged when we exclude these activities in our sample.

[7]Using the purpose classification in the CRS data, we give the "Gender Sector" label to activities with codes 15170 ("Women's rights organizations and movements, and government institutions") and 15180 ("Ending violence against women and girls"). For our "Environment Sector" category, we select activities with purpose codes 41010 ("Environmental policy and administrative management"), 41020 ("Biosphere protection"), 41030 ("Biodiversity"), 41040 ("Site preservation"), 41081 ("Environmental education/training"), and 41082 ("Environmental research"). Lastly, we use all subsectors pertaining to aid to governments and civil society in general to capture our "Governance Sector."

have a rather direct impact on aid programming decisions—as is the case for members of Congress in the appropriation process for aid budgets in the United States (Wright 2024). On the other hand, anti-elitism in the legislature can arguably also influence the choices of the executive less directly by representing and contributing to anti-international messaging in public discourse.

We create a donor-year measure of anti-elitism in the legislature by weighting the average of anti-elitism in the political parties represented by the share of their seats. We use the party-level anti-elitism indicator from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) data, produced by the V-Dem Institute and relying chiefly on expert surveys to measure the policy positions of political parties across the world. The original indicator ranges from 0 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). Our resulting weighted average measure varies between -1.9 (least anti-elitist) to 2.1 (most anti-elitist). For some practical reference points, it increases from -1.1 to -0.84 when the 2016 victory of Donald Trump to the United States Presidency came with a few additional congressional seats held by Republicans. Our measure further increases from -0.83 to -0.27 with the 2018 mid-term elections, when the anti-elite positions in Congress strengthened while the Democratic Party picked up a number of seats. In Greece, the election of the left-wing populist party Syriza in 2015 led to a one-point increase from 0.8 to 1.8.[8]

Because the V-Party anti-elitism measure we construct relies on the assessment of experts, we may not directly capture populists' expression of an anti-globalist sentiment in the legislatures. In the appendix, we propose an additional set of analysis using an alternative measure of populism capturing parliamentarian's sentiment toward IOs (see Table A3).

Our paper theorizes the effect of anti-elitism in legislatures on donors' compliance with global development norms. In fact, foreign aid programming is usually discussed within legislatures. However and alternatively, in some countries aid budgetary processes may also require the approval of the executive government. In such a setting, aid program managers may not anticipate the behavior of populist parliamentarians with regard to aid, but that of executive leaders. Populist executive leaders may in fact express anti-elitist sentiment and express disaffection with having their foreign aid-giving practices dictated by international organizations. To test this alternative explanation, we specify an additional set of models using populism in government as the main explanatory variable that we present in the appendix (see Table A4).

3.3 Control Variables

First off, as we argue that populism and its hallmark anti-elitist sentiment in donor countries leads them to disengage from IO standards and monitoring tools, we do not make a distinction between left-wing and

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[8]Figure A1 in the Appendix shows the variance of anti-elitism in the legislature across DAC donors. Figure A2 shows how our independent variable varies over time for the top donors with the greatest variance; and Figure A3 for the bottom donors with the lowest variance.

right-wing populism. We therefore control for the left-right orientation of donor legislatures to ensure that our results are not driven by diverging policy preferences associated with either side—knowing that political parties at either end of the spectrum have been shown to view and use foreign aid differently (Dietrich, H. Milner, and Slapin 2020; Greene and Licht 2018). We compute a donor-year weighted average of the left-right orientation of parties in the legislature using the party-based measure from the Manifesto Project Database (RILE), resulting in a range between -39.2 and 39.7. Values closer to the positive bound of this index indicate a legislature with a stronger right-wing orientation, whereas values closer to the negative bound indicate a stronger left-wing orientation. As for our main explanatory variable, we include this measure in our models with a one-year lag.

Secondly, following other work on the DAC Policy Marker System (Bau et al. 2025; Dietrich, Donno, et al. 2025), we control for the extent to which donors screen for each respective policy marker. An aid activity is "screened" for a marker if the donor reports whether or not that activity targets the marker's policy area—as opposed to leaving the marker as missing data when reporting the aid project to the CRS data set. This allows us to account for the notion that populist donors may under-report or misreport data to IOs, as further discussed in Section 4.2.

Lastly, we want to account for the possibility that populist donors simply have different policy preferences than those prioritized by the DAC—also further discussed in Section 4.2. We therefore estimate a set of models that additionally control for the percentage of aid committed to sectors related to the same policy area as the respective marker.[9]

4   Results

4.1   Main Analyses

Table A2 presents the results of six models where we regress the percentage of their allocable aid commitments that DAC donor indicate as targeting the gender, environment, and governance markers on anti-elitism in their domestic legislatures and our other covariates. All specifications are at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. The first set of models (Models 1–3) controls for the percentage of commitments screened for the respective marker, to account for the possibility that populist donors may differ in data reporting behavior. The second set of models (Models 4–6) further control for the percentage of commitments

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[9]Using the purpose classification in the CRS data, we give the "Gender Sector" label to activities with codes 15170 ("Women's rights organizations and movements, and government institutions") and 15180 ("Ending violence against women and girls"). For our "Environment Sector" category, we select activities with purpose codes 41010 ("Environmental policy and administrative management"), 41020 ("Biosphere protection"), 41030 ("Biodiversity"), 41040 ("Site preservation"), 41081 ("Environmental education/training"), and 41082 ("Environmental research"). Lastly, we use all subsectors pertaining to aid to governments and civil society in general to capture our "Governance Sector."

devolved to sectors related to the respective marker's issue area, to account for the possibility that populist donors may have substantively different preferences than the DAC.

Table 1: Donor Populism and the Targeting of DAC Policy Markers

Linear regressions at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. Sample of CRS "allocable" aid activities, including observations with missing data on aid modality, for donors starting two years before official membership.

	% Commitments Targeting the Marker					
	Gender	Environment	Governance	Gender	Environment	Governance
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Anti-Elitism (lagged)	−9.203***	−1.622	−5.886**	−9.357***	−0.762	−4.562*
	(1.871)	(1.433)	(1.941)	(1.805)	(1.403)	(1.790)
Right-Left (lagged)	0.219**	−0.032	−0.101	0.213**	−0.011	−0.125+
	(0.075)	(0.058)	(0.078)	(0.072)	(0.056)	(0.071)
% Screened Commitments	0.173***	0.125***	0.278***	0.176***	0.120 ***	0.244***
	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.021)	(0.024)	(0.018)	(0.020)
% Sectoral Commitments				2.556***	0.887***	1.081***
				(0.416)	(0.164)	(0.114)
Time Trend	1.720***	0.522***	0.130	1.449***	0.479***	−0.050
	(0.121)	(0.092)	(0.123)	(0.125)	(0.090)	(0.114)
Donor Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	521	521	521	521	521	521
R^2	0.735	0.654	0.647	0.754	0.673	0.702
Adjusted R^2	0.718	0.631	0.624	0.737	0.651	0.682

$+ \ p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Remember that we expect donor populism to be negatively associated with targeting of aid commitments toward the issue areas identified as priority by the DAC; and that this would remain true even when accounting for changing portfolios at the sector level. Our results are largely consistent with these expectations.

In Models 1–3, the coefficient for anti-elitism in donor legislature is negative across all markers, although not statistically significant for the environment marker. These patterns and effect sizes remain similar when controlling for sectoral commitments in Models 4–6. The effect appear to be strongest for the gender marker, where a one-point increase in our anti-elitism measure[10] is associated with a reduction in targeting by over 9%. When it comes to aid for democratic and inclusive governance, a one-point increase in anti-elitism is associated with a reduction in targeting by nearly 6%, or closer to 4.5% if we account for changes in sectoral allocation. The coefficients are the smallest for aid to the environment (a reduction between 0.8 and 1.6%), and not statistically significant.

The null results on the analyses of the environment marker can potentially be explained with the intrinsic characteristics of aid activities in this arena. Environmental projects require both expertise and the supply of equipment owned by the private sector. Environmental support therefore requires a degree of private-sector

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[10]Remember that a one-point increase in our explanatory variable is comparable to the change that happened in Greece after the election of the left-wing populist party Syriza in 2015, with our measure going from 0.8 to 1.8. In the United States, anti-elitism increased by about 0.8 points between 2015 and 2018.

buy-in, which might be seen by populist donors as a way to help and promote domestic stakeholders. Perhaps more than aid programming targeting gender equality or inclusive governance, aid for the environment can create positive spillovers for the population of donor countries; thus populist parliamentarians are less likely to oppose international performance standards in this area.

Our results are robust to controlling for the left- or right-wing leaning of the legislature. The coefficients for this control variable are positive for the models relative to the gender marker, indicating a residual association between more right-wing legislatures and greater targeting of gender equality. This may be due to the liberal economic approach to development promoted by the OECD, which aims to empower women through entrepreneurship in a way often criticized by left-wing parties as an individualist and market-based approach to women's empowerment. The coefficients are negative and not statistically significant for the environment and governance markers, suggesting a residual association between more left-wing legislatures and greater targeting of these issues.

4.2 Additional Mechanisms

Our argument is that populist donors disengage from the DAC Policy Marker System because they care to be seen as making independent policy choices. As discussed, the literature on populism and international cooperation suggests that two other mechanisms might also be at play. First, populist donors may have substantively different policy preferences than the DAC—and thus reduce their targeting not (only) because they reject the Policy Marker System as a tool of IO governance and monitoring, but because they disagree with the DAC's policy priorities substantively. Second, populist donors may report less complete data to the DAC, in an effort to undermine its operations.

To address the former, we control for sectoral allocation in Models 4–6 presented in Table A2. We also address this mechanism directly by testing whether more populist donors allocate less of their aid to sectors related to gender equality, the environment, and governance.[11] As evidenced by the results of Models 7–9 in Table 2, donors with greater anti-elitism sentiment in the legislature do indeed allocate less aid to sectors related to the environment and governance, whereas we find no evidence of an effect on gender-related sectors. Combined with our main results discussed above, we take this as an indication that populist donors may seek to both disengage from the Policy Marker System as a tool of IO governance and monitoring, and also

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[11]The key dependent variables for these analyses measure the percentage of a donor's aid commitments going to the set of sectors relative to each of our marker's issue areas—as described in Section 3.1.

devolve less aid to issues they do not support.

Table 2: Alternative Mechanisms: Sectoral Allocation and Data Reporting
Linear regressions at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. Sample of CRS "allocable" aid activities, including observations with missing data on aid modality, for donors starting two years before official membership.

	% Sectoral Commitments			% Screened Activities		
	Gender	Environment	Governance	Gender	Environment	Governance
	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Anti-Elitism (lagged)	0.060	-0.970^*	-1.224^+	10.420^{**}	3.022	5.596
	(0.196)	(0.385)	(0.710)	(3.753)	(3.688)	(3.694)
Right-Left (lagged)	0.002	-0.023	0.022	0.049	0.347^*	0.114
	(0.008)	(0.015)	(0.028)	(0.147)	(0.147)	(0.146)
% Screened Commitments	-0.001	0.006	0.031^{***}			
	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.008)			
% Targeted Commitments				0.473^{***}	0.620^{***}	0.807^{***}
				(0.085)	(0.110)	(0.073)
Donor Size (%)				9.622	3.649	2.490
				(9.803)	(9.780)	(9.695)
Time Trend	0.106^{***}	0.048^+	0.167^{***}	0.747^{**}	1.344^{***}	1.303^{***}
	(0.013)	(0.025)	(0.045)	(0.282)	(0.236)	(0.224)
Donor Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	521	521	521	521	521	521
R^2	0.555	0.506	0.625	0.445	0.411	0.522
Adjusted R^2	0.526	0.474	0.601	0.407	0.371	0.489

$+$ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Secondly, Models 10–12 in Table 2 address the possibility that populist donors may be reluctant to provide full and accurate data about their aid-giving practices to the DAC. Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker (2024) argue that populist governments, motivated by anti-elite, pro-state sovereignty views, report less (and less accurate) scientific data to IOs; they find support for their hypotheses in environment and public health data provided to the World Bank.

Regressing the percentage of aid activities for which donors report data for each respective marker on anti-elitism in their legislature, we find little evidence that populist donors underscreen for the DAC policy markers. With an understanding of how the Policy Marker System works in practice, we think these results make sense: the choice of whether or not an aid activity should target one or more priority policy areas (what we capture with our original targeting outcomes) is supposed to be built into the planning stages of a project. At this stage, the political influence of a donor's legislature can impact programming choices through the aid appropriation process—thus it is sensible to expect an effect of political preferences and pressure on targeting decisions. Conversely, the completeness of data reporting (what we capture with these latter screening outcomes) is something that is managed ex-post, when staff in donor aid agencies interact directly with statistical staff at the DAC to send in project-level data for the CRS in a given year. At this

stage, there is presumably much more insulation from domestic political preferences in the donor country, and active help from DAC statistical advisors to check data for completeness.

5   Conclusion

Since its founding in the early 1960s, the OECD DAC has functioned as the premier IO in the area of international development cooperation by performing two key functions: first, it has served as the main forum where traditional donors agreed on a definition for what should count as "Official Development Assistance" (ODA) and it has then upheld the standards of such definition; and second, it has devised tools and processes to collect and disseminate aid data that is consistent and comparable across donors. Continuing to perform these functions for decades allowed the DAC to remain relevant in this space even when some of its other more ambitious initiatives were not as successful—for example, the target for donors to spend 0.7% of their GNP in ODA set in 1970 has remained largely aspirational. Nevertheless, persisting as the authority for what foreign aid is and for reliable data to measure it has meant that the DAC was able to survive some of its less impactful years and remain a central player in the deliberations for aid effectiveness since the mid-1990s (Steinwand 2022).

This was arguably possible, in no small part, due to the organization's willingness to be flexible with the enforcement of its standards, and hardly ever exclusionary toward donors who stray away from full compliance. On the contrary, the DAC has actively pursued cooperation with new donors—ideally to put them on the path to membership or, alternatively, as "observer" or "participant" parties. In particular, it makes its data collection tools and learning opportunities available to nonmember donors, thus ensuring the collection of at least some information on their aid-giving practices. This allows the organization to make an (albeit soft) push to spread its norms to nonmember donors and get data from them. For new donors who do join the organization, Bau et al. (2025) argue that it pays particular attention to getting them up to speed with its statistical standards and good practices—so much so that they end up performing better than old donors with respect to the completeness of their data reporting.

One of the soft-law tools for standard-setting at the DAC's disposal is its Policy Marker System, which encourages aid programming targeted toward a set of specific issue areas deemed as a priority. Consistent with the approach just described, the DAC cannot and does not strictly enforce compliance with these directives. On the other hand, we have argued that populist donors have reasons to pull back from complying with these types of tools—so as not to be seen as subject to IO rules when deciding on their aid policy.

Specifically, we hypothesize that political parties in donor legislatures with strong anti-elite ideologies are likely to oppose tools that they perceive as IO overreach, for example rejecting aid projects whose objectives

are based on the DAC Policy Marker System. In turn, given increased anti-elitist sentiment, aid program managers are incentivized to design projects that avoid conformity with DAC classifications. We test this hypothesis with data on aid commitments from DAC donor states to three key long-standing policy markers targeting the policy areas of gender equality, environment, and democratic and inclusive governance.

Our findings suggest that the anti-elitist sentiment of populist donors is associated with decreased targeting of those IO-sanctioned priority policy areas. While populist donors also appear to redirect aid commitments away from projects in sectors related to the environment and governance, this alone does not fully account for the effect on targeting within the Policy Marker System. We take this as an indication that populists disengage with IO governance and monitoring tools like the Policy Marker System in and of themselves, in addition to possibly disagreeing with the policy priorities on merit.

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APPENDIX

A1 DAC Membership

Table A1: DAC Membership

Asterisks indicate founding members. Portugal was a founding member in 1960, withdrew in 1974, and then re-joined in 1991. The European Union was a founding member as the Commission of the European Economic Community.

Old Donors		New Donors	
Member	Joined	Member	Joined
Belgium*	1960	South Korea	2010
Canada*	1960	Czech Republic	2013
European Union*	1960	Iceland	2013
France*	1960	Poland	2013
Germany*	1960	Slovak Republic	2013
Italy*	1960	Slovenia	2013
Portugal*	1960	Hungary	2016
United Kingdom*	1960	Lithuania	2022
United States*	1960	Estonia	2023
Japan	1960		
The Netherlands	1960		
Norway	1962		
Denmark	1963		
Austria	1965		
Sweden	1965		
Australia	1966		
Switzerland	1968		
New Zealand	1973		
Finland	1975		
Ireland	1985		
Spain	1991		
Luxembourg	1992		
Greece	1999		

A2   Explanatory Variable: Anti-Elitism in Donor Legislature

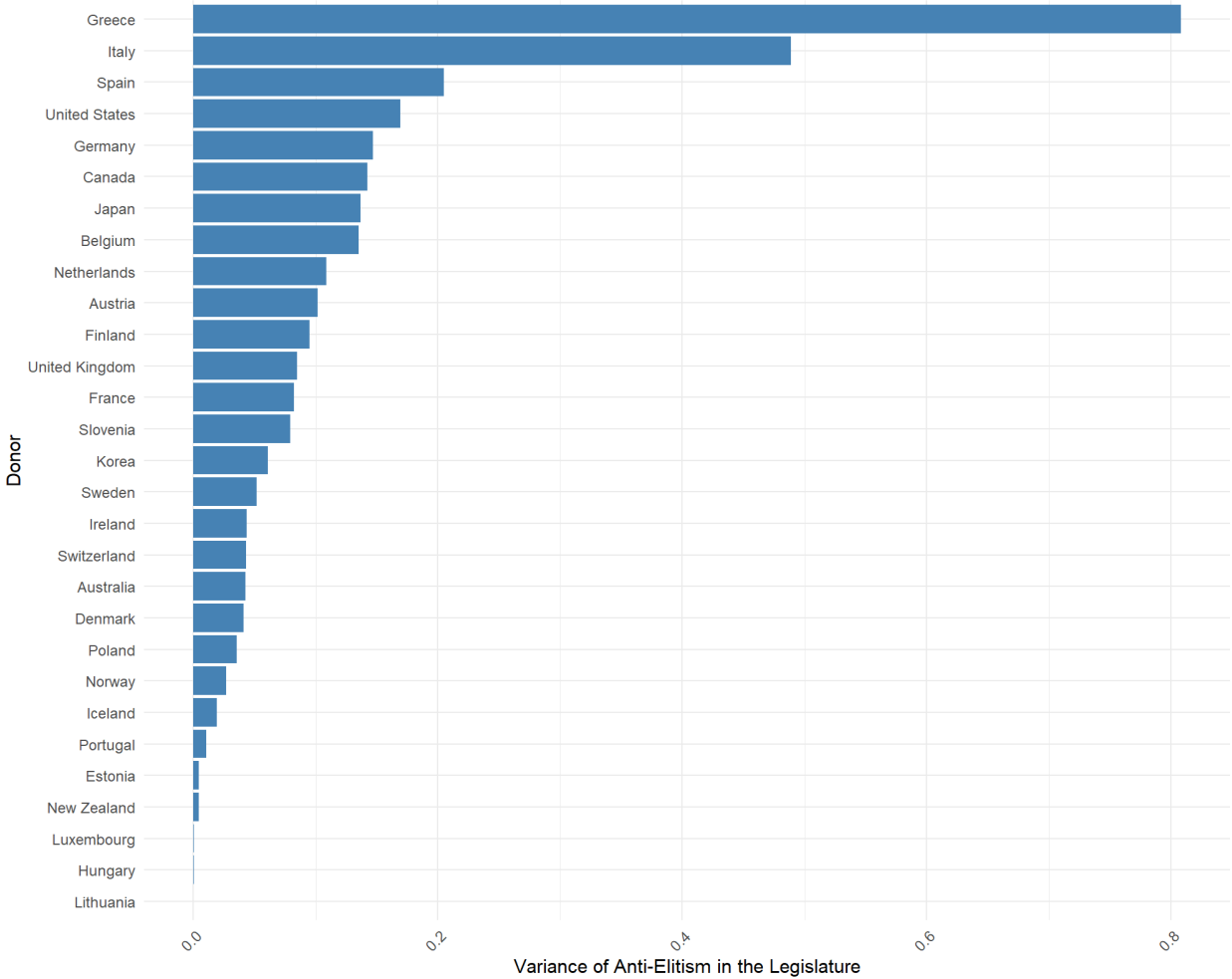**Figure A1:** Variance of Anti-Elitism in the Legislature, by Donor

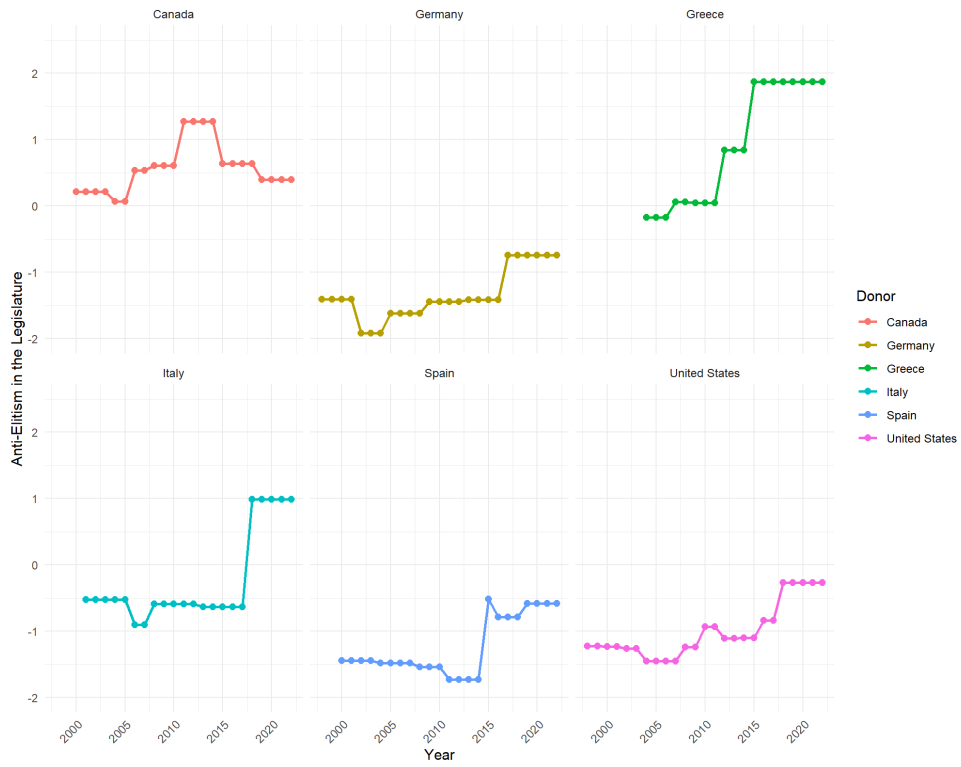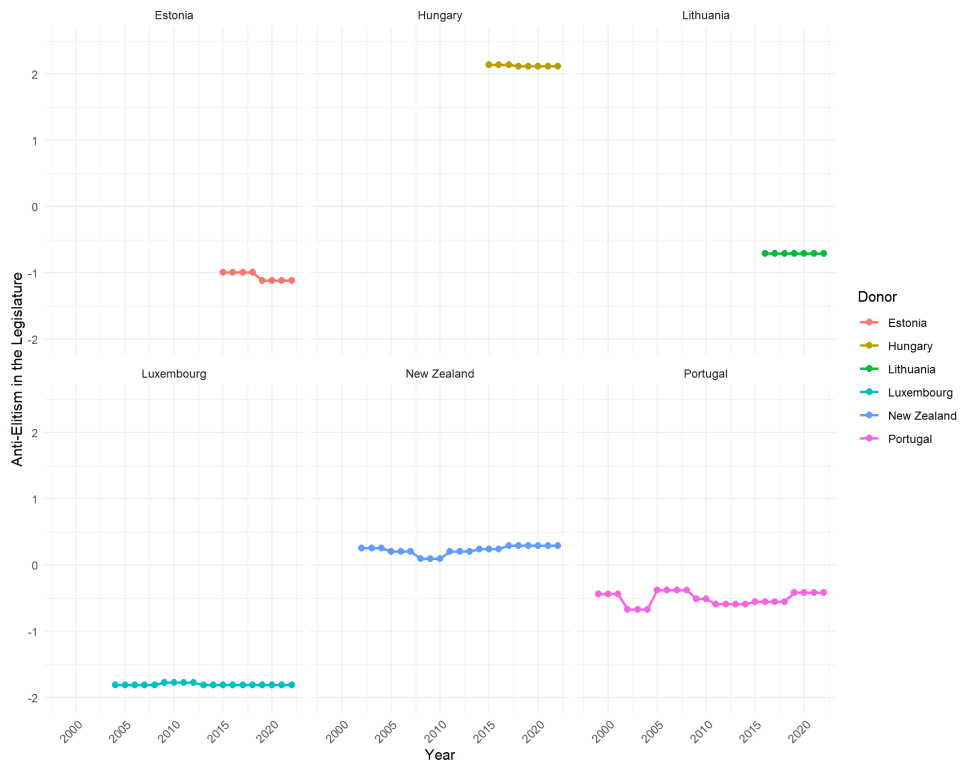**Figure A2:** Donors with Highest Variance in Anti-Elitism in the Legislature

Figure A3: Donors with Lowest Variance in Anti-Elitism in the Legislature

A3   Robustness Check: Sample Limited to Strictly Allocable Aid

Table A2: Donor Populism and the Targeting of DAC Policy Markers

Linear regressions at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. Sample limited to CRS "allocable" aid activities, excluding observations with missing data on aid modality, for donors starting two years before official membership.

	% Commitments Targeting the Marker					
	Gender	Environment	Governance	Gender	Environment	Governance
	(A1)	(A2)	(A3)	(A4)	(A5)	(A6)
Anti-Elitism (lagged)	−7.117**	−1.100	−2.201	−7.081**	−0.374	−0.201
	(2.596)	(2.013)	(2.528)	(2.556)	(2.029)	(2.465)
Right-Left (lagged)	0.157	−0.276***	−0.060	0.148	−0.252**	−0.030
	(0.105)	(0.082)	(0.102)	(0.104)	(0.082)	(0.099)
% Screened Commitments	0.259***	0.194***	0.312***	0.257***	0.189***	0.287***
	(0.032)	(0.023)	(0.025)	(0.031)	(0.023)	(0.024)
% Sectoral Commitments				2.275***	0.508*	0.620***
				(0.574)	(0.220)	(0.106)
Time Trend	1.710***	0.324*	0.180	1.394***	0.254^{+}	−0.227
	(0.171)	(0.134)	(0.166)	(0.187)	(0.136)	(0.175)
Donor Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	498	498	498	498	498	498
R^2	0.621	0.571	0.581	0.634	0.576	0.610
Adjusted R^2	0.595	0.541	0.552	0.608	0.546	0.582

$+ \ p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

A4   Alternative Measure of Populism in the Legislature

As an alternative to measuring populism based on expert surveys as we do in our main analyses, we replicate our models with a behavioral measure of populism in the legislature. We use the statement-year-level net sentiment indicator from the IOParlSpeech dataset issued in October 2024 (Hunter and Walter 2025). IOParlSpeech is an original dataset of over 600,000 statements on international organizations derived from parliamentary debates in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Canada, and New Zealand from 1990 to 2018. The indicator captures the difference between positive and negative sentiment in each parliamentarian's IO statement. Positive and negative sentiments correspond to the share of positive and negative words, respectively, in each statement. The models using the alternative measure of populism are performed with the same specifications as our six main models presented in Table 1.

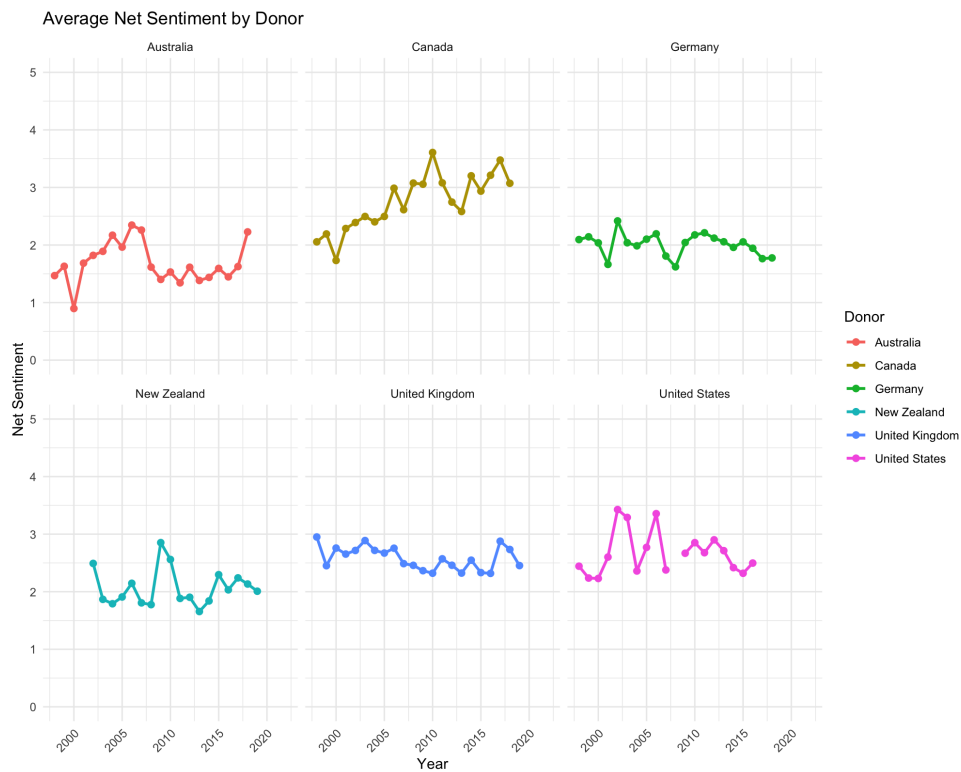**Figure A4:** Average Net Sentiment Towards IOs in Legislature

Table A3: Donor Populism and the Targeting of DAC Policy Markers

Linear regressions at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. Sample limited to CRS "allocable" aid activities, excluding observations with missing data on aid modality, for donors starting two years before official membership.

	% Commitments Targeting the Marker					
	Gender	Environment	Governance	Gender	Environment	Governance
	(A7)	(A8)	(A9)	(A10)	(A11)	(A12)
Net Sentiment (lagged)	0.753	4.035$^+$	−1.861	−1.324	4.590*	−2.659
	(3.210)	(2.143)	(3.104)	(2.987)	(2.142)	(2.865)
Right-Left (lagged)	0.236$^+$	−0.028	−0.223	0.219$^+$	−0.028	−0.210$^+$
	(0.139)	(0.091)	(0.135)	(0.128)	(0.090)	(0.124)
% Screened Commitments	0.202***	−0.001	0.260***	0.229***	0.008	0.221***
	(0.050)	(0.029)	(0.038)	(0.046)	(0.029)	(0.036)
% Sectoral Commitments				3.557***	0.633$^+$	0.969***
				(0.759)	(0.343)	(0.208)
Time Trend	1.065***	0.823***	−0.766**	0.706**	0.727***	−0.649**
	(0.251)	(0.158)	(0.235)	(0.243)	(0.165)	(0.218)
Donor Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	126	126	126	126	126	126
R^2	0.712	0.715	0.539	0.758	0.724	0.612
Adjusted R^2	0.689	0.693	0.503	0.737	0.700	0.578

$+ \ p < 0.1$; $^* \ p < 0.05$; $^{**} \ p < 0.01$; $^{***} \ p < 0.001$

Using this alternative explanatory variable, our results are null with the exception of Model A11. When parliamentary statements become more positive towards IOs, donor countries tend to target a greater proportion of their aid to the environment. The direction of coefficients is as expected for most of the models, with the exception of Model A8 and A11, where the screening of the environment marker is negatively associated with environment targeting.

We suggest that while the net sentiment measure is a straightforward way to capture parliamentarians' positions over international organizations, it also comes with its own limitations explaining its limited effect on the targeting of policy markers. IOParlSpeech does not include some of the largest donors (e.g., France or Japan), nor countries with the highest variance in anti-elitism as expressed using our V-Party measure (e.g., Greece, Italy, or Spain). In addition, the data for the USA extend only up to 2016, i.e. before a major renewal of Congress. However, this turnover leads to a significant increase in anti-populist sentiment for the country, as indicated by our V-Party derived measure. As a result, we lose a substantial number of observations that could explain a significant part of the effect we seek to explain. Additionally, there is no data point for the year 2008.

A5   Effects of Populism in the Executive

Our main set of analyses relies on a measure of populism at the level of the legislature. To account for populism in government as an alternative explanation, we compute a measure of executive leader populist rhetoric, at the donor-year level. We use the rubric grade indicator from Global Populism Database 2.0 (Hawkins et al. 2019). The indicator is based on an individual coder scoring of populist rhetoric from 0 (least populist) to 2 (most populist), using four different speeches: a campaign speech, a ribbon-cutting speech, an international speech, and a famous speech for each leader-term. The unit of analysis in the original dataset is at the leader-term level and each observation is at the coder-speech level. To obtain our measure we compute the donor-year average of executive leader populist rhetoric. Data are available for the period 2000–2020, with the exception of the following donor countries: Belgium, Denmark, Korea, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Portugal, and the Slovak Republic.

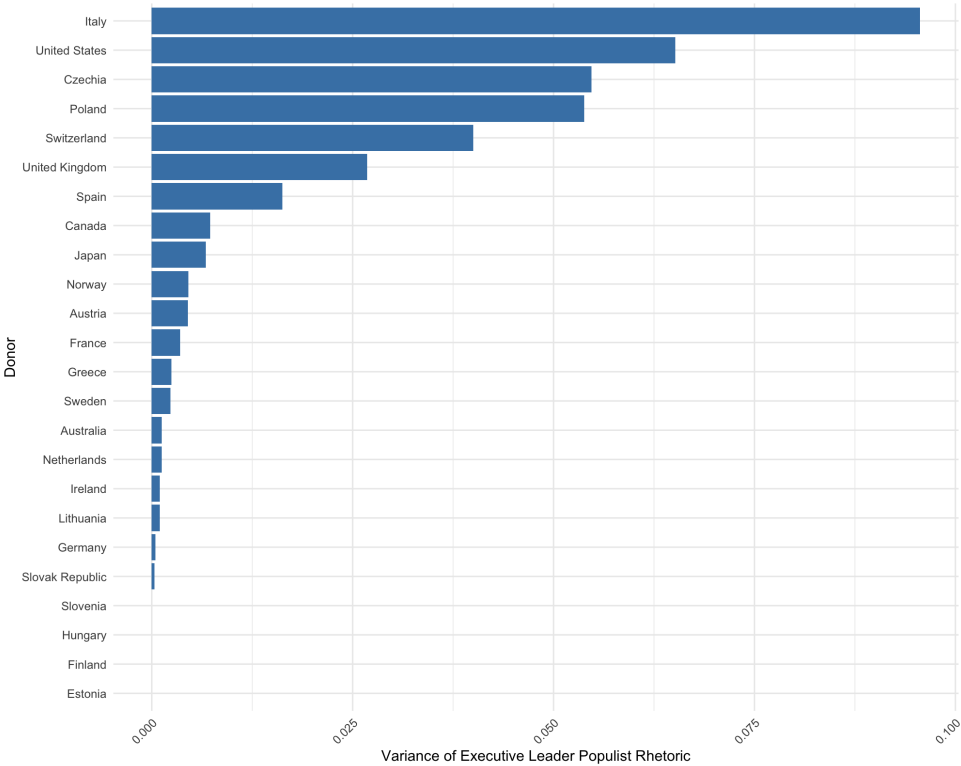**Figure A5:** Variance of Populist Rhetoric in Government

Table A4: Donor Populism and the Targeting of DAC Policy Markers

Linear regressions at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. Sample limited to CRS "allocable" aid activities, excluding observations with missing data on aid modality, for donors starting two years before official membership.

	% Commitments Targeting the Marker					
	Gender	Environment	Governance	Gender	Environment	Governance
	(A13)	(A14)	(A15)	(A16)	(A17)	(A18)
Executive Leader Populist Rhetoric (lagged)	−8.240	−0.132	−17.993**	−7.714	0.754	−15.531**
	(5.793)	(4.058)	(6.181)	(5.677)	(3.971)	(5.892)
Right-Left (lagged)	0.406***	−0.134+	−0.023	0.395***	−0.137+	−0.010
	(0.113)	(0.080)	(0.121)	(0.111)	(0.078)	(0.115)
% Screened Commitments	0.212***	0.119***	0.235***	0.210***	0.114***	0.213***
	(0.033)	(0.023)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.023)	(0.030)
% Sectoral Commitments				2.414***	0.666***	0.838***
				(0.688)	(0.178)	(0.154)
Time Trend	1.563***	0.606***	0.295	1.282***	0.536***	0.197
	(0.173)	(0.120)	(0.184)	(0.187)	(0.118)	(0.175)
Donor Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	296	296	296	296	296	296
R^2	0.737	0.724	0.691	0.749	0.738	0.722
Adjusted R^2	0.712	0.697	0.661	0.724	0.711	0.694

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Models A15 and A18 using executive leader populist rhetoric as the primary explanatory variable show a significant negative association with governance targeting. The effect of the populist rhetoric of executive leaders on the targeting of gender is negative but statistically insignificant (Models A13 and A16). Models A14 and A17 show no significant effect. The direction of the coefficients for all Models except Model A17 is consistent with the our main set of analysis presented in Table 1. The control variables across all six models presented in Table A4 exhibit similar effects and statistical significance levels as observed in our main analysis.

Appendix References

Hawkins, Kirk A., Rosario Aguilar, Bruno Castanho Silva, Erin K. Jenne, Bojana Kocijan, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2019). *Global Populism Database*. Version V2. DOI: 10.7910/DVN/LFTQEZ. URL: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LFTQEZ.

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