

Populism and International Organizations: A Survey Experiment in South Korea

Mi Hwa Hong

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science & International Relations

Kookmin University

February 25, 2026

Prepared for the Institute of Political Science, National Sun Yat-sen Univeristy (NSYSU)

- This presentation is based on my recent research with Professor Moohyung Cho and Professor Jeheung Ryu of Ewha Womans University in Korea.

⌂ PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS

WITHDRAWING THE UNITED STATES FROM AND ENDING FUNDING TO CERTAIN UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATIONS AND REVIEWING UNITED STATES SUPPORT TO ALL INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The White House

February 4, 2025

Introduction

H

hop7781

4 February, 2025

I believe most people in the US believe the United Nations was a utopian idea, that has become a worthless, expensive waste of space! If we had a nationwide ballot most people would vote to save the money and cancel the UN!

Reply ·  11  · Share

...

I

independentthinker2024

4 February, 2025

It's out of touch and obsolete

Reply ·  2  · Share

...

T

tonyab1984

4 February, 2025

It's more than any of that. It's anti-American. There IS NO rational reason for our continued participation. Let it go. If the UN ever DOES do anything positive, we can always endorse it.

Reply ·  1  · Share

...

N

nongravis

4 February, 2025

Democrats will fight tooth and nail to keep our money flowing to our enemies. What they don't realize is they're not just resisting Trump, they're fighting against everyone who voted for Trump, and ultimately against the interests of everyone in America who isn't a crook on the take.

Reply ·  8  · Share

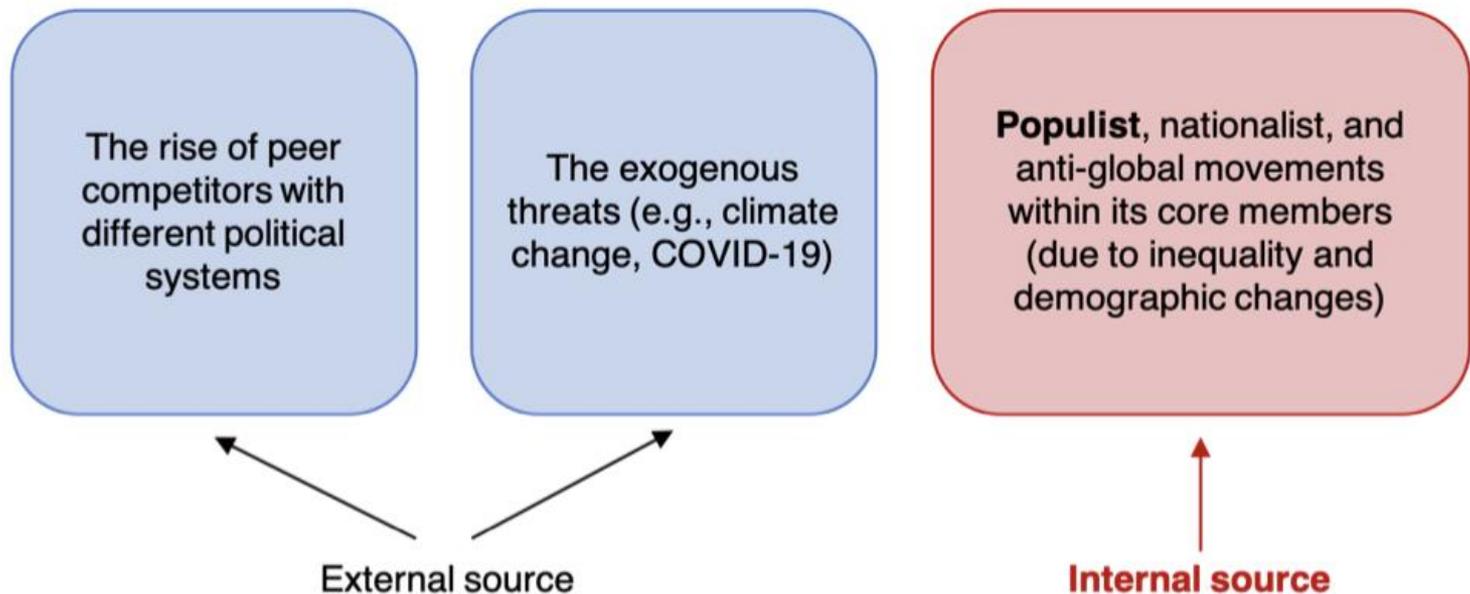
...

Research questions

- ▶ **Does elites' populist rhetoric affect public attitudes towards international organizations?**
 - ▶ If so, through which theoretical mechanisms does it shape people's perceptions of international institutions?
- ▶ **Which domestic audiences are most receptive to this discourse?**
 - ▶ Does populist discourse merely reinforce an echo chamber among loyal supporters, or does it generate a spillover effect beyond them?

Introduction

- Challenges to the liberal international order (Lake, Martin, & Risse 2021)



Legitimacy as an engagement pull

- ▶ Legitimacy is critical throughout the lifecycle of an international institution.
 - ▶ Membership and call for its involvement
 - ▶ Implementation and compliance
 - ▶ Resilience
- ▶ The effectiveness of international organizations largely depends on the perception and belief in their legitimacy—specifically regarding their representation, procedures, and performance—among elites and ordinary citizens in member states.

Why populists delegitimize IOs

- ▶ Populist challenge to IOs in recent years
 - ▶ Criticize the operations, institutional design, and normative orientation of IOs
 - ▶ Refuse to cooperate with international entities or take actions to make IOs dysfunctional
 - ▶ Exit and withdraw IO membership
- ▶ **Populism**
 - ▶ A thin-centered ideology that views society as divided into two opposing groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Mudde 2004)
 - ▶ A claim that politics should reflect the general will of the people.
 - Two core elements: The **emphasis on the people** and **anti-elitism**

Why populists delegitimize IOs

- ▶ How the two features of populism constitute populist rhetoric to delegitimize IOs

① **Emphasis on the people**

- ▶ No representation, no accountability
- ▶ An infringement on national sovereignty
- ▶ Disconnected from the local context
- ▶ Transnational norms over state-based interests

② **Anti-elitism**

- ▶ Western liberal elites in international structure
- ▶ Too technocratic and complex
- ▶ Expertise

How populist cues shape public attitudes toward IOs

- ▶ If populist discourse that aims to undermine IOs is common, how does it impact public attitudes towards these institutions?
- ▶ **Cueing theory** (Brader & Tucker 2012; Lupia & McCubbins 1998)
 - ▶ Citizens do not have well-developed political attitude, and thus, they are more **susceptible to messages from authorities**.
 - ▶ This assumption is particularly salient in the realm of foreign policy.
 - ▶ Nevertheless, the effects of these elite messages vary depending on
 - ▶ The characteristics of the messenger
 - ▶ The tone of the message
 - ▶ The features of the audience

How populist cues shape public attitudes toward IOs

- ▶ The characteristics of the messenger
 - ▶ Ordinary citizens' receptivity to such messages largely depends on whose messages they perceive to be credible.
 - ▶ In-groups: Parties or politicians with whom they feel affiliated with
 - ▶ Thus, partisan identity serves as a heuristic.
 - ▶ Elites without a vested interest in IOs (e.g., national governments & CSOs)
- ▶ The tone, content, and context of the message
 - ▶ A negative bias in human cognition
 - ▶ A politicized or polarized issue
 - ▶ IOs with broad or narrow mandates
 - ▶ The Features of the audience
- ▶ The Features of the audience
 - ▶ Political affiliation
 - ▶ Winners or losers of economic globalization
 - ▶ Education

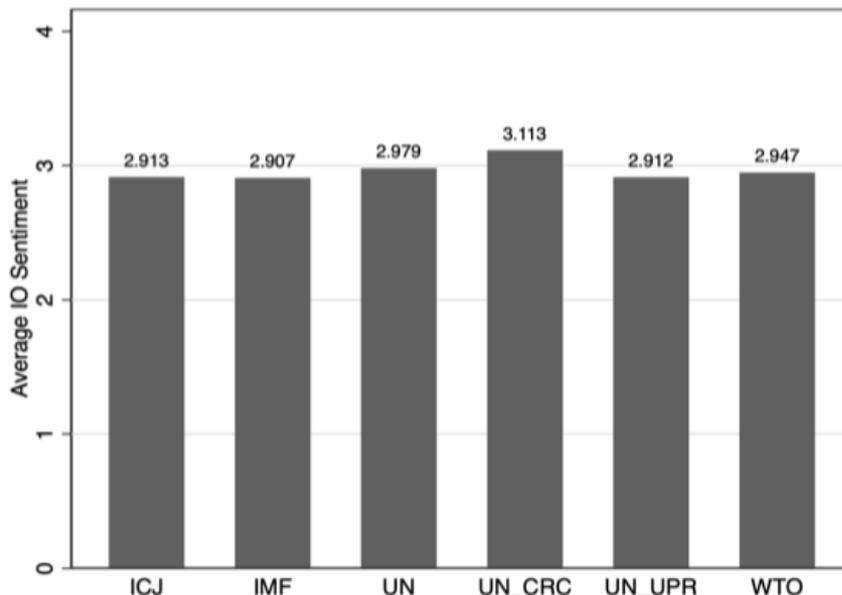
Hypotheses

- ▶ **H1 (Negative Attitudes):** Individuals exposed to populist delegitimation cues from political leaders are more likely to have **negative perceptions towards IOs.**
- H1a:** Individuals exposed to populist delegitimation cues from political leaders are less likely to view IOs as **effective.**
- H1b:** Individuals exposed to populist delegitimation cues from political leaders are less likely to believe that their government should **comply** with IOs or implement their recommendations domestically.
- H1c:** Individuals exposed to populist delegitimation cues from political leaders are more likely to perceive IOs' recommendations as **infringements on national sovereignty.**

- ▶ **H2 (Political Orientations):** The impact of populist delegitimation cues targeting international human rights organizations on citizens' attitudes towards such IOs is **stronger among conservatives** than among liberals.

Experimental Design

- ▶ **Online survey experiment:** 900 Korean adults, May 8-13, 2024
- ▶ **Stage 1:** Respondents are
 - ▶ Provided with general information on the roles and mandates of major IOs (IMF, WTO, ICJ, UN Universal Periodic Review, UN CRC)
 - ▶ Are asked to select their general opinions about these five organizations using a four-point scale



- ▶ They generally hold a positive view of all five IOs, with an average score of three points.

- ▶ **Stage 2** (Experimental stage)
 - ▶ Control and treatment groups were equally exposed to a news article that neutrally reported the South Korean government's participation in its national review under the UN Universal Periodic Review.
 - ▶ Later, control group received no information.
 - ▶ Treatment group read an excerpt from an actual news article.
 - ▶ The minutes of the Standing Commission Meeting, which discussed agenda items to an independent report from the National Human Rights Commission of Korea for the Korea's review by the UN Committee Against Torture

Experimental Vignette

Commentary by South Korean Expert 000 on the recommendations of international human rights organizations

“An international human rights organization has made a recommendation that the majority of South Koreans reject—specifically, the recognition of transsexualism without requiring genital removal surgery. Furthermore, the involvement of the Committee Against Torture in issues such as wage levels for migrant domestic workers has been deemed inappropriate, as underpayment does not constitute torture. These recommendations are seen as overreaching and lack public support.

On another issue, the death penalty remains a contentious topic, with strong public support for its application in cases involving serial killers, multiple murderers, and perpetrators of heinous acts of terrorism. Additionally, the presence of North Korea as an adversarial state and its ongoing development of nuclear weapons have heightened national security concerns. As a result, there is significant opposition to the recommendation to abolish South Korea’s National Security Law. Ultimately, the decision to accept or reject the recommendations of international human rights organizations rests with South Korea.”

Experimental Design

► **Stage 2** (Experimental stage)

- Respondents in the control and treatment groups are asked to answer three questions.

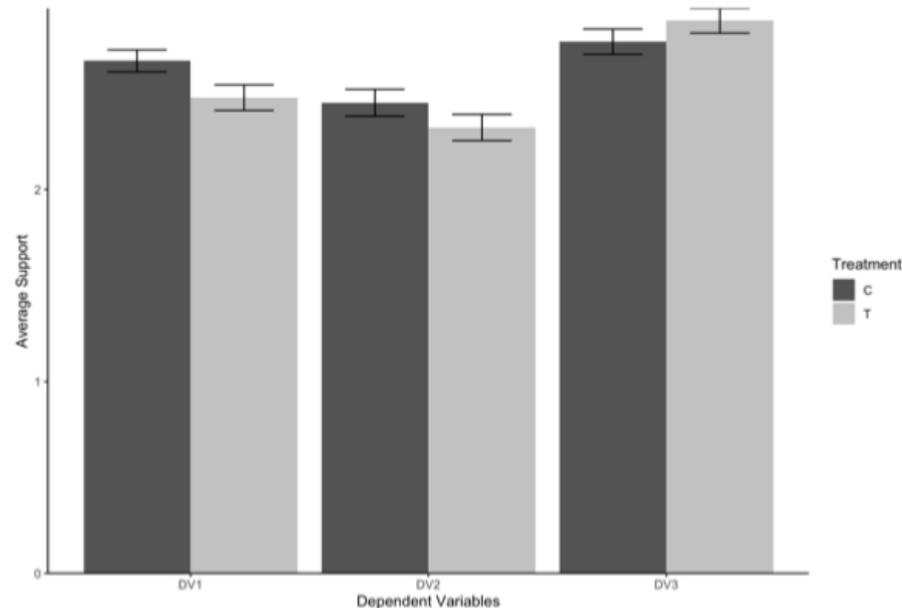
Questions	Statements	Hypotheses
DV1	International human rights organizations contribute positively to the improvement of the human rights situations in South Korea.	H1a (effectiveness) Negative
DV2	The Korean government should accept advisory opinions of international human rights organizations.	H1b (compliance) Negative
DV3	It is a violation of sovereignty if an international organization makes recommendations about our domestic situations that people may not agree with.	H1c (sovereignty infringement) Positive

Variables

- ▶ **Dependent variables:** Respondents' answers to the three questions
 - ▶ Originally measured using a four-point scale, converting this scale as a binary variable
 - ▶ 1 (**AGREE**): "somewhat agree", "strongly agree"
 - ▶ 0 (**DISAGREE**): "strongly oppose" and "somewhat oppose"
- ▶ **Independent variable:** Treatment (exposure to populist cue)
- ▶ **Control variables**
 - ▶ Demographic variables: Gender, age, education, and income level
 - ▶ Respondents' political orientation: 0 (liberal) to 10 (conservative)
 - ▶ Respondents' general sentiment toward IOs

Results: Descriptive evidence

- ▶ Difference in means between control and treatment groups



- ▶ Compared to control groups, treatment groups are:
 - ▶ Less likely to acknowledge the positive contributions of human rights IOs to human rights conditions in Korea
 - ▶ Less willing to comply the recommendations by human rights IOs
 - ▶ More likely to think that the recommendations violate the sovereignty

Logistic Regression Results: Testing H1

DV:	Model 1 Effectiveness	Model 2 Compliance	Model 3 Sovereignty Infringement
Populist cue	-0.709*** (0.143)	-0.530*** (0.139)	0.218 (0.147)
Observations	900	900	900

- ▶ **H1a** and **H1b** are supported, but **H1c** is not.
- ▶ Among control variables, respondents' political orientation and IO sentiments are statistically significant.

Logistic Regression Results: Testing H2

DV:	Model 1 Effectiveness	Model 2 Compliance	Model 3 Sovereignty Infringement
Panel A: Politically Liberal Respondents (N = 301)			
Populist cue	-0.662** (0.254)	-0.190 (0.239)	-0.189 (0.253)
Panel B: Politically Neutral Respondents (N = 338)			
Populist cue	-0.750** (0.238)	-0.788*** (0.229)	0.389 (0.246)
Panel C: Politically Conservative Respondents (N = 261)			
Populist cue	-0.685** (0.265)	-0.696* (0.280)	0.482 (0.291)

Conclusion

- ▶ The impact of populist cues on public perceptions of IOs
 - ▶ Those exposed to populist cues expressed negative attitudes towards IOs by viewing them as ineffective.
 - ▶ They showed less support for the government's implementations of and compliance with recommendations from IOs.
 - ▶ But little evidence that they see such recommendations as a potential infringement on national sovereignty
 - ▶ The effects emerge across people with varying ideological stances.
 - ▶ Most pronounced among political moderates and also evident among liberals who typically advocate for the merits of IOs
 - ▶ Due to populism as a "thin-centered ideology"?
 - ▶ Unlike recent studies showing populism's polarizing effect, populist rhetoric may not polarize the citizenry but make the general populace more skeptical of IOs.

- ▶ Questions for future research
 - ▶ Whether the effects are
 - ▶ Fleeting or persistent over time
 - ▶ Conditional on external events (e.g., military conflicts, economic crises, scandals involving IOs)
 - ▶ Whether populist rhetoric influences popular support for concrete government actions related to IOs
 - (ex) Treaty ratification/withdrawal, changes in financial contributions
 - ▶ Whether similar patterns hold in non-Western democracies or less developed countries

Thank you!