

Populism and the Politics of Aid Classification: Evidence from the OECD Development Assistance Committee

RESEARCH NOTE

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Populist leaders increasingly criticize global governance systems, portraying them as elitist and threatening national sovereignty. While research has explored how populism affects international organizations, less is known about how a rise in populism in donor countries affects engagement with standards in international development cooperation. This research note argues that populism affects how donors classify and present foreign aid projects. Focusing on the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), we theorize a mechanism of classification avoidance, whereby bureaucrats anticipate political scrutiny from populists and reduce the use of policy markers that signal alignment with global priorities. Using project-level data on aid activities from 1998 to 2022, we show that increases in anti-elitism in donor legislatures are associated with declines in the share of aid classified as targeting DAC priority areas, alongside stable project screening practices and some but more limited sectoral reallocation. While we do not directly observe bureaucratic decision-making, the empirical patterns are broadly more consistent with anticipatory bureaucratic adaptation than with alternative accounts of policy change. Our paper highlights how domestic political dynamics shape engagement with international standards through bureaucratic practices.

Los líderes populistas critican, cada vez en mayor medida, los sistemas de gobernanza global, presentándolos como elitistas y como una amenaza para la soberanía nacional. Aunque existen investigaciones que han estudiado cómo el populismo afecta a las organizaciones internacionales, existe menos información con respecto a cómo un aumento del populismo en los países donantes afecta al compromiso con las normas en la cooperación internacional para el desarrollo. Esta nota de investigación argumenta que el populismo influye en lo relativo a cómo los donantes clasifican y presentan los proyectos de ayuda exterior. Esgrimimos una teoría, centrándonos, para ello, en el Comité de Asistencia para el Desarrollo (CAD) de la OCDE, que desarrolla un mecanismo de evasión de clasificación, mediante el cual los burócratas se anticipan al escrutinio político por parte de los populistas y reducen el uso de indicadores en materia de política que indiquen alineación con las prioridades globales. Utilizamos datos a nivel de proyecto referentes a actividades en materia de ayuda desde 1998 hasta 2022, que nos permiten demostrar que los aumentos a nivel de antielitismo en las legislaturas de los donantes están asociados con disminuciones en la proporción de ayuda clasificada como dirigida a áreas prioritarias del CAD, junto con prácticas de selección de proyectos estables y cierta, pero más limitada, reasignación sectorial. Aunque no observamos directamente la toma de decisiones burocrática, los patrones empíricos son, en general, más consistentes con la adaptación burocrática anticipatoria que con otras explicaciones alternativas del cambio en materia de políticas. Nuestro artículo pone de relieve cómo las dinámicas políticas internas influyen sobre la interacción con las normas internacionales a través de prácticas burocráticas.

Les dirigeants populistes critiquent de plus en plus les systèmes de gouvernance mondiale, en les qualifiant d'élitistes et en affirmant qu'ils menacent la souveraineté nationale. Bien que la recherche ait exploré l'effet du populisme sur les organisations internationales, nous en savons moins concernant l'effet d'un essor du populisme dans les pays donateurs sur l'engagement avec les normes de la coopération en développement international. Cette note de recherche affirme que le populisme a un effet sur la façon dont les donateurs catégorisent et présentent les projets d'aide étrangère. En nous concentrant sur le Comité d'aide au développement (CAD) de l'OCDE, nous théorisons un mécanisme d'évitement de la catégorisation dans lequel les membres de l'administration anticipent le contrôle politique des populistes et réduisent le recours aux marqueurs politiques qui indiquent un alignement sur les priorités mondiales. À l'aide de données au niveau du projet sur les activités d'aide entre 1998 et 2022, nous montrons que l'accroissement de l'anti-élitisme dans les législatures des pays donateurs est associé à une baisse de la part de l'aide catégorisée comme ciblant des domaines de priorité du CAD, ainsi qu'à des pratiques stables de contrôle des projets et à quelques réallocations sectorielles plus limitées. Bien que nous n'observions pas directement de prises de décisions de l'administration, les schémas empiriques sont largement plus cohérents avec une adaptation adminis-

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trative par anticipation qu'avec d'autres explications du changement politique. Notre article met en lumière l'incidence des dynamiques politiques nationales sur l'engagement avec les normes internationales par le biais des pratiques de l'administration.

Introduction

Populist leaders often portray international organizations (IOs) as remote, technocratic elites that threaten national sovereignty. As anti-elitist sentiment has spread globally over the past decade, hostility toward IOs and shared international standards has become a defining feature of populist rhetoric. By framing IOs as distant actors that impose disadvantageous standards and rules on domestic constituencies, populist leaders cast international cooperation as a constraint on national autonomy (e.g., [Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017](#); [Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019](#); [Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021](#)). This discourse is particularly visible in international development, where foreign aid is often portrayed as misaligned with domestic priorities.

However, existing research shows that this antagonism rarely translates into outright disengagement with IOs: populist governments are not much more likely to leave IOs or cause withdrawal cascades ([Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019](#); [Walter 2021](#)). Although they may undermine them by providing scarcer or low-quality data ([Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker 2024](#)), they typically continue to engage with these institutions while publicly denouncing them ([Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya 2024](#)). In the context of foreign aid, studies assess whether populist governments reallocate funds toward domestic priorities, tie aid to national interests, or resist international norms of effective aid delivery ([Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson 2021](#); [Hackenesch et al. 2022](#); [Hammerschmidt, Meyer, and Pintsch 2022](#)). These accounts emphasize visible forms of disengagement. However, much of international cooperation operates through bureaucratic practices that are less visible but equally consequential.

This paper examines whether rising populism reshapes how donors engage with international development standards in practice. We focus on one such bureaucratic practice: the classification and reporting of foreign aid within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC). Since the 1960s, the DAC, as a central international forum for coordinating and monitoring foreign aid among OECD donors, has defined what counts as Official Development Assistance (ODA), published the most authoritative aid data, and promoted shared standards for effective aid ([Iannantuoni, Dietrich, and Reinsberg 2025](#); [Iannantuoni, Dietrich, and Reinsberg 2026](#)). One of its key instruments is the Policy Marker System (PMS), which encourages donors to align aid with priority areas, including gender equality, environmental sustainability, and democratic governance, and enables monitoring of member compliance through self-reported data ([Dietrich et al. 2025](#)).

Because DAC policy markers make alignment with internationally defined priorities visible through standardized classifications, they are especially likely to attract contestation from populist actors. We argue that when anti-elitist sentiment in donor countries increases, aid bureaucrats, who report on aid activities and prepare data for presentation for domestic oversight, face greater scrutiny over aid alignment with internationally defined policy priorities. In response, they adjust how they classify aid activities. Rather than fundamentally altering project portfolios, bureaucrats reduce their

use of DAC policy markers—standardized labels that indicate whether projects contribute to broader international priorities such as gender equality, environmental protection, or governance reform. We conceptualize this response as “classification avoidance.” Bureaucrats continue to design and implement similar projects but strategically avoid labeling them in ways that make alignment with global priorities visible and politically contestable.

Empirically, we analyze the implications of within-donor country changes in populist representation over time. We focus on anti-elitist sentiment as the most theoretically relevant dimension of populism when explaining opposition toward technocratic and international authority. We observe anti-elitism in the legislature because this is the domestic setting in which donor engagement with global standards is most visible and under scrutiny. Drawing on quantitative analyses of DAC donor aid commitments from 1998 to 2022, we observe that rising anti-elitism in donor legislatures is linked to reduced classification of aid activities as targeting DAC-endorsed priority areas. This pattern persists even when accounting for reporting and sectoral differences across donors in aid portfolios. To distinguish our argument of classification avoidance from other potential mechanisms, we also conduct additional analyses that test the observable implications of two competing mechanisms.

Our findings contribute to a number of research streams. We contribute to a still limited understanding of how populism in donor countries affects international development cooperation. So far, studies that examine overt forms of disengagement with development cooperation have produced mixed results: while some show that far-right, populist donors reject and reduce aid-giving overall ([Hammerschmidt, Meyer, and Pintsch 2022](#)), others do not find populism to have substantial negative effects on aid ([Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Lawson 2021](#); [Hackenesch et al. 2022](#)). [Tokhi and Zimmermann \(2025\)](#) show that, while far-right donors do not differ from others in bilateral aid spending, they reduce their earmarked commitments significantly.

Our study shifts attention from more overt forms of disengagement to more subtle bureaucratic responses to populism that operate through bureaucratic classification and reporting. While studies by [Stone \(2011\)](#) and [Clark and Dolan \(2021\)](#) show evidence for an anticipatory bureaucratic mechanism in IOs, we build on work by [Sasso and Morelli \(2021\)](#) and develop a previously overlooked channel through which anticipatory behavior in national legislatures affects international development cooperation.

More broadly, our findings suggest that the effects of populism on international cooperation may be underestimated when scholars focus exclusively on formal policy change. Changes in how activities are classified can alter the visibility, measurement, and perceived performance of international cooperation.

Finally, we contribute to the broader literature on how populist member states engage with IOs. Research documents that populist threats to withdraw from institutions and agreements 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).

Donor Populism and Bureaucratic Engagement with DAC Standards

Populism and IOs

As populism rose to prominence in the rhetoric and ideology of political leaders around the world, scholars are paying increased attention to how this affects international cooperation. Some note lower public support for IOs (Bearce and Scott 2019) and expect 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. We consider anti-elitism as the dimension that is most relevant for generating opposition to decision-making by unelected experts and IOs.

By leveraging anti-elitist rhetoric, populists can use IOs as a convenient scapegoat toward which they 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 instead of challenging specific rulings of international courts, populists question the very authority and legitimacy of these institutions in and of themselves. At the individual level, citizens with more populist attitudes are more likely to blame IOs for domestic and personal economic challenges (Handlin, Kaya, and Gunaydin 2023).

Yet, unlike nationalists who are determined to reclaim sovereignty from IOs (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019), populist actors may be more interested in using these criticisms as rhetorical tools instead of rejecting international cooperation in practice, which, if done purposefully, 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 at 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).

Populist actors balance competing objectives. 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 hand, they continue to engage with IOs when it benefits them, or, when they are able to exert control over IOs 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 2024). States interact strategically when providing information to IOs (Ge 2026). In particular, when populists interact with IOs on politicized issue areas like energy and the environment, they 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, populist leaders may be particularly concerned with appearances when it comes to their engagement in international development cooperation (Thier and Alexander 2019).² To understand how populist attitudes translate into observable behavior, we turn to the institutional setting in which aid is classified and reported.

The OECD-DAC Policy Marker System

The OECD DAC is the central international forum for coordinating and monitoring foreign aid among OECD donors. Since the early 1960s, the DAC has defined what qualifies as ODA, negotiated consensus-based norms and standards for effective aid delivery, and developed an unparalleled system for collecting and publishing high-quality data on aid flows (Iannantuoni, Dietrich, and Reinsberg 2025; Iannantuoni, Dietrich, and Reinsberg 2026).

Like many other institutions, the DAC has an organizational structure and a supportive administrative bureaucracy that makes it an independent, though constrained, actor (e.g., Abbott and Snidal 1998; Barnett and Finnemore 1999). However, in the case of the DAC, 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., Stone 2011; Dreher and Sturm 2012). Rather, the DAC is an egalitarian, consensus-based organization that relies on soft-law mechanisms. 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 developing their respective priority policy areas. The Statistical Standards and Methods Unit is the place where OECD and member states develop and update reporting guidelines on how to account for aid-giving that targets these policy areas.

The Policy Marker System (PMS) is a core DAC instrument that structures how donors classify and report aid activities. By translating development priorities into standardized categories, it shapes a shared understanding of what should be prioritized and how. Through this system donor practices become visible and comparable. At its core, the system collects self-reported data from donor agencies to evaluate how DAC members align their aid with key policy areas. Three of the earliest-established, most closely monitored priority policy areas include gender equality, the environment, and democratic and inclusive governance (DIG). These reporting practices are key to our argument insofar as they determine how aid activities are rendered visible and interpretable to political actors.

Building on Barnett and Finnemore (1999), we conceptualize the Policy Markers and their underlying classification system as an instrument of bureaucratic power. The Policy Markers structure how projects are classified from the earliest stages of project design. All DAC members are required

¹We 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 corrupt elite” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (p. 150).

²Following his re-election in 2024, US President Donald Trump has initiated drastic cuts in foreign aid, along with several other areas, notably Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)-related, seen as consistent with the idea of a liberal international order. The new Administration has been particularly critical of IOs, launching a review of all IOs to which the US is a member, to assess whether they are helping to pursue US interests. International development cooperation was particularly affected. Shortly after his election, Donald Trump recalled all OECD-DAC representatives to Washington, D.C. The DAC delegate was replaced by a representative from the State Department. The administration also rescinded leadership commitments in the DAC working groups.

to report annually whether individual activities target a DAC policy priority as a principal objective, a significant objective, or not at all. To make these determinations, donors conduct systematic screening processes—such as gender or environmental assessments—and apply “do no harm” principles to evaluate whether projects contribute to, or at a minimum do not undermine DAC policy priorities (OECD 2016, 13). Donors implement these reporting requirements through country-specific screening tools that are embedded in their domestic aid programming systems. For example, France uses its Sustainable Development Opinion Mechanism to assess whether projects qualify for different policy markers (OECD 2016, 19–20). Belgium applies a Gender Budget Scan to evaluate contributions to gender equality (OECD 2016, 21).³ These tools help determine their expected contribution to policy priorities defined by the DAC. They also make donor alignment with DAC priorities visible and interpretable.

How is the consistent application of these classifications ensured? The DAC Secretariat plays a central role in monitoring how donors implement policy markers through the annual reporting process. As part of DAC membership, DAC countries are required to report project-level aid data to the OECD’s Creditor Reporting System (CRS). This submission is followed by an extensive verification procedure, during which OECD staff review the reported classifications for consistency with DAC standards. Particular attention is given to Policy Markers, for which Secretariat experts assess whether the reported category aligns with the underlying project characteristics. In the process, experts draw on the submitted data and their own independent analysis. If OECD Secretariat staff deem the data to be incorrect, they arrange meetings with the member country to request corrections to the reported data. Through this iterative process of reporting, review, and correction, the OECD aims to ensure a consistent and correct application of the markers across member countries.

The Secretariat also shares experiences and lessons learned from marker implementation during meetings of the working groups that govern the policy markers. As our in-depth research on policy documents and exchanges with CRS reporting staff reveal, OECD staff present comparative assessments of donor performance through the Policy Markers, highlighting areas of strength and weakness and, in some cases, sharing rankings across members. Representatives from donor countries use these discussions to identify implementation gaps and consider OECD guidance on how to address them. Once back in their capitals, they are expected to organize training sessions with grant managers and program officers who are responsible for assigning the markers to the individual aid activities. Archival research and informal exchanges with CRS reporting staff suggest that these individuals tend to be relatively insulated from elected politicians. While leaders may seek to influence senior appointments, national aid bureaucrats who are involved in project design and classification are less visible and less directly targeted. Their roles are embedded in routine administrative processes rather than higher-level political decision-making.

³The DAC defines minimum criteria for when an aid activity can be classified as contributing to any of its priority policy areas, and these criteria are embedded in donors’ screening procedures. For example, a project can only be marked as having gender equality as a principal objective if it meets specific requirements. These include conducting a gender analysis, using its findings to inform project design through a “do no harm” approach, and articulating a clear objective to advance gender equality or women’s empowerment. Projects must also include gender-specific indicators, disaggregate data by sex where relevant, and commit to monitoring and reporting gender-related outcomes.

This should make them less likely to be replaced for political reasons.

All these features make the PMS a powerful bureaucratic instrument, but also one that is politically salient. By translating complex aid activities into standardized and comparable classifications, Policy Markers make donor alignment with IO priorities more visible. This visibility not only matters for international monitoring. It also matters for domestic politics insofar as classifications in terms of global standards can be mobilized in budget debates and legislative oversight.

Populism and the Domestic Politics of Aid Classification

This dual role of policy markers, which is simultaneously technical and political, creates vulnerability. The same features that enhance comparability and accountability also make donor practices more easily contestable by political actors who reject international authority. In particular, standardized classifications provide clear and accessible information on alignment with externally defined, global priorities. These dynamics should be especially salient in legislative settings, where aid budgets and project portfolios are subject to political scrutiny.

When senior aid officials testify before legislative committees, they present aid activities using standardized classifications, including policy markers, to illustrate how aid contributes to internationally defined objectives. To prepare for these hearings, aid agency staff compile budget figures and organize project information. For example, budget tables may indicate the share of projects that contribute to global priorities such as gender equality or climate mitigation. Such classifications shape what legislators see and how they evaluate aid programs. To legislators who exhibit anti-elitist tendencies, they provide clear and accessible evidence of donor alignment with international standards, which can be mobilized in domestic political debates (Drezner 2017, 475–8; Destradi, Plagemann, and Tas 2022), in which they are more likely to challenge projects that incorporate externally defined priorities. We identify anti-elitist sentiment as the most theoretically relevant dimension of populism when explaining opposition toward technocratic and international authority.

This raises an important question: how do aid bureaucrats in donor capitals respond when the domestic political environment becomes more hostile to the international standards that give rise to these classifications? We argue that anti-elitist sentiment generates incentives for bureaucrats to engage in “classification avoidance.” Anticipating more scrutiny, aid bureaucrats have incentives to adjust how projects are reported and presented. We expect aid bureaucrats to be primarily mission-driven and working to preserve the continuity and effectiveness of aid programs (Dietrich 2016; Dietrich 2021; Honig 2024) rather than reprogramming aid, which would disrupt ongoing operations and undermine established development objectives.

Building on research by Sasso and Morelli (2021) which theorizes that bureaucrats strategically adjust behavior to “stick it out” under populist governments, we argue that national aid bureaucrats act preemptively as populist representation and anti-elitist sentiment in parliament increases. They do so by limiting explicit references to international standards such as DAC policy markers in project design and reporting. In doing so, they shield ongoing programs from political contestation.

Importantly, our argument does not assume that populists have well-formed preferences over gender equality, environmental sustainability, or governance indicators as such.

Rather, policy markers function as visible bureaucratic artifacts of international authority: they are standardized, comparable, and easily politicized. By reducing their use, bureaucrats contribute to the deprioritization of international cooperation in ways that resonate with populist critiques.

While our argument emphasizes anticipatory bureaucratic behavior, a mechanism that has also been shown in operation in Stone (2011) and Clark and Dolan (2021), an alternative account attributes changes in marker use to direct principal instruction. If populists are against international priorities, they can directly encourage bureaucrats to stop complying with DAC policy priorities. While this is possible, our argument rests on a different expectation. Populists are unlikely to focus on the technical details of policy implementation and therefore rarely issue specific instructions regarding DAC policy markers. Consistent with Sasso and Morelli (2021), we expect bureaucrats to be more likely to internalize risk and act preemptively around DAC policy markers than to act on detailed marker-related requests from populists.

Moreover, we expect this anticipatory behavior to operate primarily in contexts of legislative scrutiny. Policy markers become politically relevant when aid activities are reviewed in the legislature where members evaluate and vote on budgets and project portfolios. As populist representation increases, aid bureaucrats in DAC member states can anticipate greater scrutiny over whether aid aligns with internationally defined standards in subsequent budget meetings. At the individual level, this implies that bureaucrats adjust classification practices to reduce the visibility of alignment with international priorities. Aggregated to the country level, this bureaucratic avoidance should lead to a decline in the share of aid commitments classified as targeting DAC policy markers. We would expect this relationship to hold when accounting for the underlying aid activities in the sectors.

Hypothesis 1: As anti-elitist sentiment in donor legislatures increases, the classification of aid commitments as targeting DAC policy priorities decreases.

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

Research Design

Our theory of classification avoidance leads us to expect that, as anti-elitist representation in the legislature increases, aid bureaucrats will reduce their use of DAC policy markers when reporting aid activities. We test these empirical implications using project-level data on aid activities reported to the OECD between 1998, when the PMS was first introduced, and 2022. Our empirical strategy leverages within-donor variation over time to assess whether changes in domestic political environments are associated with changes in how aid is classified and reported.

Our sample includes all DAC donors beginning 2 years before the formalization of their membership. We adopt this approach because new members typically undergo an onboarding process during which they begin reporting data to the CRS several years before officially joining the organization (Bau et al. 2025).⁴

We also compare the empirical implications of our argument with those of a competing mechanism that generates distinct observable implications: a principal-driven account.

We develop and test this alternative mechanism in “Alternative Mechanisms” section.

Dependent Variables

We assess whether rising anti-elitism in DAC donor countries is associated with variation in how donors classify and represent their aid projects within the DAC framework. Our dependent variables capture the share of aid commitments that donors classify as targeting three priority policy areas identified by the DAC’s PMS: gender equality, environmental sustainability, and DIG.

Introduced in the late 1990s, the PMS standardizes how donors classify and report aid across policy areas of global relevance. While the system has expanded over time, the DAC has not invested equally in all markers. We therefore focus on the three original markers introduced in 1998 that remain active today: the Gender Equality Marker, the Environment Marker, and the DIG marker. These markers provide the longest time coverage and are among the most systematically implemented and closely monitored (Bau et al. 2025; Dietrich et al. 2025). Moreover, these markers are backed by dedicated DAC working groups, including the Network on Gender Equality (“GenderNet”), the Network on Governance (“GovNet”), and the Network on Environment and Development Cooperation (“EnviroNet”). These working groups contribute to developing classification guidelines and produce high-profile reports that compare donors in terms of their compliance with respective international standards. Regular and frequent working group meetings at the OECD headquarters in Paris bring together donor officials, who stay up-to-date with reporting standards and aid-giving practices in these three issue areas and report back to their aid agencies at home.

We construct three dependent variables measuring, for each donor-year, the share of allocable aid commitments classified as targeting each of the three policy areas. Starting from the OECD’s CRS project-level data, we isolate activities with allocable commitments from the thirty-one 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 We focus on commitments rather than disbursements for two reasons: first, research on foreign aid decision-making favors using commitments because they capture donor decision points. Second, in the specific case of the PMS, donors are asked to report on policy markers at the time of commitment. All commitments are measured in constant US dollars.

Independent Variable

Our key independent variable is anti-elitist sentiment in the legislature. A focus on anti-elitist sentiment is theoretically appropriate because this dimension of populism is most directly associated with opposition to IOs and bureaucratic authority. We measure anti-elitist sentiment in donor legislatures because aid classifications are most visible and contestable in this domestic setting. Foreign aid programming is typically discussed within legislatures, and the members

⁴States are typically DAC “observers” and report data to the OECD CRS for a few years before becoming official members. See Table A1 in the Online Appendix for the full history of DAC membership.

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

⁶See Online Appendix Section A3 for a definition of allocable commitment. In Table A2 in the Online Appendix, we show that results remain largely unchanged when we limit the sample to strictly allocable aid.

who serve on the relevant subsidiary bodies can have a direct impact on aid programming decisions—as is the case, for example, for members of Congress in the appropriations process for aid budgets in the United States (Wright 2024).

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 data, produced by the V-Dem Institute. 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) and 2.1 (most anti-elitist). As a point of reference, the measure increases from -1.10 to -0.84 after Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory, alongside a modest expansion of Republican representation in Congress. Our measure further increases from -0.83 to -0.27 with the 2018 mid-term elections, as anti-elitist positions in Congress strengthened alongside gains by the Democratic Party. 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 .⁷

In Section A5 in the Online Appendix, we re-estimate our main models using a behavioral measure of populism in the legislature. We capture parliamentarians' net sentiment toward IOs from the IOParISpeech dataset (Hunter and Walter 2025). Findings are mostly consistent with our main empirical observations.⁸

Control Variables

Our argument does not distinguish between left- and right-wing populism. We 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 (Greene and Licht 2018; Dietrich, Milner, and Slapin 2020). We compute a donor-year weighted average of the left-right orientation of parties in the legislature using the Right-Left (RILE) party-based measure from the Manifesto Project Database, 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 1-year lag.

Reduced classification as targeting DAC policy priorities may be driven by an overall decrease in reporting. Donors that observe an increase in populist representation may be less willing to comply with DAC reporting requirements altogether, therefore omitting information on whether projects were screened for compliance with DAC policy priorities. We therefore compute a measure of screening propensity to capture direct data reporting toward the policy markers. We capture screening propensity by measuring 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.

Further, decreased classification of aid commitments as targeting DAC priority policies may reflect changes in donors' aid portfolio composition. Donors may shift aid toward sectors that are less directly associated with DAC policy markers while still pursuing alternative development objectives. We therefore control for the sectoral allocation of aid, measured as the share of commitments directed to sectors related to each policy area.⁹ This ensures that our estimates are not driven by compositional shifts in aid portfolios across sectors.

We introduce donor size as a supplementary control, measured as a donor's aid commitments over its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), to account for variation in donor reporting capacity. We derive GDP data from the World Development Indicators. We condition models M1–6 regressing targeting against the policy areas, as well as models M7–9 regressing screening propensity on donor size.

Estimation

To assess whether rising anti-elitism is associated with changes in how donors classify their aid commitments, we estimate a series of linear regression models at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. We employ donor fixed effects to isolate the effect of within-donor changes in populist representation on engagement with the DAC, net of time-invariant donor characteristics. In additional models we replace time trends with year fixed effects as detailed in Section A4.2 of the Online Appendix. The findings are robust to the inclusion of year fixed effects in lieu of time trends.

Given the bounded nature of our dependent variable, we also estimate ordered beta regression models, which are well-suited for proportional outcomes (Kubinec 2023).¹⁰ For each dependent variable, we fit ordered beta regression models with weakly informative priors, a donor-specific random intercept to account for unobserved heterogeneity, and a linear time trend. We report descriptives on the fractional nature of our data and a discussion of our results in Section A7 of the Online Appendix.

Results

Main Analyses

Table 1 presents the results of six models where we regress the percentage of their allocable aid commitments that DAC donors classify as targeting the gender, environment, and governance markers on anti-elitism in their domestic legislatures and our other controls. As a reminder, all specifications are at the donor-year level with donor fixed effects and time trends. Our theoretical argument suggests that bureaucratic adjustment in policy reporting results from shifts in the domestic political environment. We expect aid bureaucrats to be anticipatory and to adapt project classification and design in response to increasing political risk. We thus expect a negative association between anti-elitism in the donor legislature and the classification of aid commitments as targeting the DAC policy priorities (Hypothesis 1). We expect this to hold even when accounting for changing aid portfolios at the sector level (Hypothesis 2).

⁷Figure A1 in the Online 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.

⁸The IOParISpeech dataset excludes some major donors (e.g., France and Japan), countries with high variance in anti-elitism (e.g., Greece, Italy, and Spain), lacks data for 2008, and US coverage ends in 2016—before a congressional turnover that substantially increased anti-elitist sentiment—resulting in a notable loss of observations.

⁹Section A3 in the Online Appendix details the construction of our sectoral measures.

¹⁰We are grateful to a reviewer for this suggestion.

Table 1. Donor populism and the targeting of DAC policy markers.

	% Commitments targeting the marker					
	Gender (1)	Environment (2)	Governance (3)	Gender (4)	Environment (5)	Governance (6)
Anti-elitism (lagged)	−9.817*** (1.871)	−1.528 (1.445)	−5.761** (1.957)	−9.790*** (1.811)	−0.744 (1.412)	−4.345* (1.804)
Right-left (lagged)	0.203** (0.075)	−0.029 (0.058)	−0.098 (0.078)	0.202** (0.072)	−0.011 (0.056)	−0.120+ (0.072)
% Screened activities	0.172*** (0.025)	0.125*** (0.018)	0.278*** (0.021)	0.175*** (0.024)	0.120*** (0.018)	0.245*** (0.020)
% Sectoral commitments				2.438*** (0.419)	0.885*** (0.165)	1.086*** (0.114)
Donor size (%)	−13.822** (4.969)	2.104 (3.834)	2.762 (5.181)	−9.920* (4.856)	0.419 (3.741)	4.709 (4.765)
Time trend	1.773*** (0.122)	0.513*** (0.094)	0.119 (0.125)	1.500*** (0.127)	0.477*** (0.091)	−0.070 (0.116)
Donor fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	521	521	521	521	521	521
R ²	0.739	0.654	0.648	0.756	0.673	0.703
Adjusted R ²	0.722	0.630	0.624	0.739	0.650	0.682

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 2 years before official membership.

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

The first set of models (Models 1–3) controls for the percentage of commitments screened for the respective marker in order to account for the possibility that populist donors may differ in data reporting behavior. The second set of models (Models 4–6) then adds sector allocation commitments. In Models 1–6, we also control for donor ideology and donor size.

Our results reveal a set of empirical patterns that align with the observable implications of classification avoidance. In Models 1–3, the coefficient for anti-elitism in donor legislature is negative across all markers. While the effect on the environment marker is not statistically significant in our main Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) specifications, we find statistical support for the environment marker in models that are estimated through ordered beta regressions, which explicitly account for the bounded nature of our proportional outcome variables (Model A20, [Table A7](#)). We interpret the patterns from both estimations as broadly in line with our expectations. The patterns and effect sizes remain similar when controlling for sectoral commitments in Models 4–6.

Across the three DAC priority policy areas, the effect appears to be stronger for the gender marker, where a one-point increase in our anti-elitism measure¹¹ is associated with a reduction in targeting by over 9 percentage points. When it comes to aid for DIG, a one-point increase in anti-elitism is associated with a reduction in targeting by nearly 6 percentage points, or closer to 4.5 percentage points 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 percent), and not statistically significant.

The null results for the Environment marker may reflect the underlying characteristics of environmental aid. Such projects often rely on specialized expertise and private-sector inputs, which make them more closely tied to domestic economic interests. As a result, they may be less susceptible

to classification avoidance if they can be framed as supporting domestic industries and their objectives. Moreover, environmental policy has become increasingly intertwined with industrial policy, particularly in sectors such as clean energy, where competition over manufacturing capacity and supply chains is central ([Nahm and Urpelainen 2022](#); [Park, Bau, and Dietrich 2026](#)). To the extent that environmental aid generates domestic economic spillovers, populist actors may be less inclined to contest externally defined standards in this area.

The patterns we observe are robust to controlling for a left- or right-wing orientation 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. 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.

The size of the donor is not uniformly associated with the targeting of DAC policy markers. Larger donors allocate a significantly smaller share of their commitments to gender-targeted activities, which may reflect broader and more diversified portfolios or a greater reliance on instruments that are less explicitly framed around gender objectives. For environmental and governance targeting, we find no robust association with donor size.

Alternative Mechanisms

To distinguish our argument of classification avoidance from other potential mechanisms, we conduct additional analyses that test the observable implications of two competing mechanisms. Our argument expects that, as anti-elitism in the legislature increases, aid bureaucrats in the donor country face incentives to disengage from classifying aid projects as targeting the DAC’s PMS, without disengaging from assessments of whether aid activities have links to aid policies.

¹¹Remember 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 2020.

Table 2. Alternative mechanisms: Project screening and sector allocation.

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

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 2 years before official membership.

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

A first alternative and principal-driven mechanism would suggest that populists might directly encourage aid bureaucrats to disengage from the DAC’s bureaucratic tools altogether. This competing account generates distinct empirical expectations: if populist actors directly discourage engagement with the DAC, we should observe a decline not only in classification behavior but also in the screening of aid activities to assess how projects contribute to policy priorities. To assess this implication, we examine screening behavior as an outcome variable. Specifically, in Models 7–9 of [Table 2](#), we re-estimate our baseline specifications using screening propensity for each of the three markers as the dependent variable.

The additional evidence obtained across Models 7–9 indicates that there is no consistent association between anti-elitism in the legislature and DAC marker screening propensity. For robustness, we re-estimate Models 7–9 using ordered beta regressions instead of OLS as a way to account for the bounded nature of our proportional data. The results for Models A25–A27 presented in [Table A8](#) in the Online Appendix support our findings. These patterns contrast with [Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker \(2024\)](#) who 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. Our patterns are consistent with anticipatory bureaucratic behavior that reduces direct engagement with IO classification tools, while leaving bureaucratic practices of project screening intact.

Another principal-driven account would suggest that populists aim for substantive policy change. In this scenario, we would expect to observe that an increase in anti-elitism in the legislature would lead to a consistent decrease in foreign aid allocated toward gender equality, environmental, and democratic governance activities. We capture sectoral allocation of aid, measured as the share of commitments directed to sectors related to each policy area.¹² In Models 10–12, we re-

estimate our baseline specifications using our measures of sectoral allocation of aid to gender-, environmental-, and inclusive governance-oriented projects as dependent variables.

We find mixed evidence for patterns that support a populist-driven change in sectoral reallocation. The results of Models 10–12 in [Table 2](#) suggest that donors with greater anti-elitist sentiment in the legislature appear to make some sectoral adjustments for the environment. However, this effect does not apply consistently across all three sectors in the main OLS models. The results from the ordered beta regressions also lend some support for a populist-driven account for sectoral reallocation (Models A28–A30), but not consistently. When we interpret these findings through the lens of our empirical strategy, it appears that classification avoidance operates alongside a principal-driven account that affects structural aid programming.

Finally, for robustness, we re-estimate the main models with a measure of populism that captures the populist rhetoric of country leaders. It could be, as is the case for some of our donor countries, that aid budget approval also requires support from the executive government. In such settings, aid bureaucrats may not anticipate the behavior of populist legislators with regard to aid, but that of executive leaders. Populist executives may express anti-elitist sentiment and disaffection with having their foreign aid-giving practices dictated by IOs. To test for this possibility, we specify an additional set of models using populism in government as the main explanatory variable that we present in the Online Appendix (see [Table A6](#)). The results are inconsistent with this explanation: while there appears to be statistical support for the governance marker there is no evidence of a systematic effect for the gender and the environment markers.¹³

Taken together, these findings suggest that principal-driven dynamics may operate alongside classification avoidance. At the same time, the absence of consistent sectoral reallocation across policy areas and the observed stability

¹²Section A3 in the Online Appendix details the construction of our sectoral measures.

¹³As further explained in Section A6 of the Online Appendix, country coverage is very limited as Belgium, Denmark, Korea, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Portugal, and the Slovak Republic are not included in the sample.

of screening behavior make an exclusively principal-driven account less consistent with the broader pattern we document. This points to an important avenue for future research. To advance our understanding of these mechanisms, it will be important to move beyond aggregate patterns to examine how bureaucrats interpret and respond to political signals in practice. In particular, individual-level and organizational characteristics, including nationality composition, career trajectories, or recruitment patterns, may shape the extent to which bureaucrats internalize or resist shifting principal preferences. Such micro-level data across aid agencies would allow us to directly observe how political pressures translate into variation in reporting behavior and classification practices and help unpack the micro-foundations of classification behavior that remain beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

This study examines how rising anti-elitism in the donor countries shapes engagement with international development standards through bureaucratic practice. We focus on the OECD DAC's PMS and propose a mechanism of classification avoidance, whereby aid bureaucrats anticipate political scrutiny and reduce the use of markers that signal alignment with internationally defined priorities.

Across DAC donors between 1998 and 2022, we document a relatively consistent empirical pattern: higher levels of anti-elitism in donor legislatures are associated with a decline in the share of aid commitments classified as targeting core DAC policy priorities, particularly gender equality and governance. At the same time, we observe relatively stable reporting behavior and more limited evidence of systematic sectoral reallocation. Taken together, these findings are more consistent with anticipatory bureaucratic adaptation than with a purely principal-driven account of policy change.

In this research note, our goal is not to provide conclusive causal identification of bureaucratic intent and decision-making. Instead, we document a set of empirical regularities that point to a previously overlooked mechanism through which domestic politics shapes international cooperation. In doing so, we shift attention from visible forms of disengagement, including IO withdrawal or budget cuts, to more subtle changes in how international engagement is classified and made legible.

Although our research studies the OECD DAC PMS, we believe that our findings may hold across other IOs that satisfy the following scope conditions. We expect the mechanism to operate in IOs that use international standardized classification systems as a tool of bureaucratic power and that make domestic policy choices legible to domestic audiences. Our mechanism also requires that these classification systems be debated in legislative processes.

More broadly, our argument suggests that the effects of populism on international cooperation may be underestimated when attention is limited to formal policy change. IOs rely on standardized reporting systems that make international cooperation visible and comparable. When these classification systems become politically contested, changes in reporting practices can alter how cooperation is measured, evaluated, and perceived.

This has implications for global governance. Because the OECD DAC PMS is a gold standard in reporting on global priority objectives, the data are used by other organizations to assess donor performance toward core development priorities. Leading IOs such as the United Nations as well as inter-

national NGOs that scrutinize donor contributions to gender equality, the environment and governance, all refer to data generated through the policy markers. As aid bureaucrats reduce their use of policy markers, they reduce the visible contribution of donor countries to shared international goals. This weakens the observable performance of international cooperation more broadly.

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Author contributions

NB, SD, and AI contributed to the research design, conceptualization, and writing of the manuscript. NB was responsible for the statistical analysis with contributions from AI. SD was responsible for project management. KF contributed to conceptualization and data curation of an early version of the paper.

Supplementary material

Supplementary information is available in the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

Data availability

The data underlying this article are available on the Harvard Dataverse, at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LQF7HD>.

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