ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Governance WILEY

Transparency and citizen support for public agencies: The case of foreign aid

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Abstract

Can public agencies boost support for their mandate by being more transparent? We examine this important question in the context of foreign aid. Skepticism about foreign aid spending is common among citizens. This article argues that bilateral aid agencies can increase support for foreign aid by enhancing transparency. The article presents findings from three survey experiments involving a representative sample of 2058 British citizens, as well as observational data at the cross-national level. The results suggest that transparency reforms are among the most effective institutional interventions for increasing public support. They also suggest that transparency is most effective at increasing public support amongst those who are initially more skeptical of aid and the civil service. Finally, they suggest that citizens do not have strong preferences about the type of information disclosed. They reward all types of transparency.

In democratic societies, there is, "a basic right to know, to be informed about what the government is doing and why."

Joseph E. Stiglitz, Former Senior Vice President and Chief Economist at The World Bank

"Openness and transparency are key ingredients to build accountability and trust, which are necessary for the functioning of democracies and market economies. Openness is one of the key values that guide the OECD vision for a stronger, cleaner, fairer world."

Angel Gurría, Former OECD Secretary-General[1]

1 | INTRODUCTION

Aid agencies work to alleviate critical global challenges, including climate change, long-term instability, civil conflict, and health emergencies. Yet the continued provision of foreign aid depends on the approval of a highly skeptical domestic public (Diven & Constantelos, 2009; Milner & Tingley, 2013b; Otter, 2003). Foreign aid consistently ranks among the least popular policy issues in public opinion surveys (Miller et al., 2016). In the United States, more than 84% of respondents to a 2001 survey agreed that dealing with domestic problems takes precedence over providing foreign aid (PIPA, 2001, p. 9). In the United Kingdom (UK), when asked to prioritize "help for poor countries" against five other areas of government spending, only 16% ranked aid first in 2009, falling to 11% in 2010. This placed foreign aid well below concerns such as the National Health Service, education, and school quality. These findings led Henson and Lindstrom to conclude that, "poverty in developing countries is of limited salience to the UK population, with no more than a quarter of the population demonstrating appreciable and concrete commitment to poverty alleviation" (2013, 68).

A growing body of literature examines the determinants of public opinion on foreign aid, primarily in the United States. Prior research tended to investigate individual factors influencing support, including citizens' ideology (Milner & Tingley, 2013a; Thérien & Noel, 2000), causal beliefs about poverty, religiosity (Paxton & Knack, 2012), morality (van Heerde & Hudson, 2010), communitarianism (Prather, 2020), and racial stereotypes (Baker, 2015). However, more recently, scholars have begun to use survey experiments to understand how different features of aid-giving—for example, whether aid is framed as being in the national interest (Wood & Hey, 2022), or whether aid is branded or not (Dietrich et al., 2019)—affect citizen's opinions of foreign aid (see also Bayram & Graham, 2022; Kobayashi et al., 2020). Such research builds on the observation that citizens appear open to changing their opinions on aid (Hurst, Tidwell, and Hawkins, 2017), as well as prior research on charitable giving.[2]

Our research contributes to this growing field of scholarship, examining the impact of transparency reforms on public support for aid agencies. Aid agencies have often been criticized for a lack of transparency about how and where aid is allocated, and agencies are increasingly under pressure to be more transparent (Honig et al., 2022; Honig & Weaver, 2019). To date, however, we know relatively little about the effectiveness of aid transparency initiatives, with studies focusing either on ranking donors according to various measures of transparency (Publish What You Fund, 2022), or explaining why and when donor agencies comply with transparency-related initiatives (Honig & Weaver, 2019). A notable exception is Honig et al. (2022), who show that transparency reforms affect project performance when they have enforcement mechanisms. To our knowledge, no studies have examined the relationship between aid transparency and public opinion.

We argue that transparency reforms can be a powerful driver of citizen support for foreign aid. We hypothesize that *individuals will be more supportive of aid when aid agencies are*

transparent about their organizational practices and priorities. That is, we predict that when aid agencies are proactively forthcoming about where and how they spend their money and how they are governed, citizens will be more supportive of their work. To explain the impact of transparency on public opinion, we highlight two possible mechanisms: normative desirability and information updating.

First, citizens have strong preferences for transparent government and expect governments to comply with transparency norms, especially in democratic countries (Hollyer et al., 2015). Therefore, citizens should reward aid agencies for adhering to their preferences for transparent government. Second, greater transparency may lead to information disclosure that causes citizens to update their beliefs about aid. Information updating is likely to be particularly important when knowledge about a particular policy area is low, as is the case with foreign aid (Scotto et al., 2017). When knowledge is low, basic information about what an agency does could change beliefs about that agency.

To test the relationship between aid transparency and public opinion, we conducted a series of preregistered experiments with a sample of 2058 UK citizens.[3] The UK is an ideal case to test our theory for two reasons. First, the UK is one of the largest aid donors in the world in terms of aid volume. In 2021, it was the third largest bilateral donor of official development assistance (ODA)—behind only the United States and Germany (OECD, 2008). Understanding aid support in the UK is therefore important, as a significant part of the global aid architecture depends on the continued support of the British people. Second, aid in the UK is highly politicized. Debates about foreign aid are closely linked to Brexit and populist rhetoric, including anti-elitism and nativism (Bayram & Thomson, 2022; Heinrich et al., 2021a). Since 2020, there have been significant cuts to aid in the UK, with more and more of the UK's aid money being spent within the UK itself, largely on Ukrainian refugees (Landale, 2022). Conservatives are particularly divided with some seeing aid as a way to strengthen the UK's position in the world, while others touting it as a "criminal waste of money" (Price, 2019). The UK is thus a difficult case for the theory that something as mundane as increased aid transparency could increase public support for aid.

We test the relationship between transparency and public opinion on aid at the individual level in three ways. First, in a monadic experiment, we measure whether providing more information about the transparency of the UK's main foreign aid agency—Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO)—increases support for aid given through that agency. Second, we use a conjoint experiment to test whether different types of transparency increase or decrease support for an agency. Each respondent was presented with two different agencies that varied on six different characteristics of transparency and then asked to indicate the extent to which they supported foreign aid being provided by each agency. Third, another conjoint experiment compared transparency reforms with six other types of reforms, including giving foreign aid to the poorest countries, political allies of the UK, or countries that respect human rights. Respondents were then again asked to indicate the extent to which they supported foreign aid being provided through each agency.

Across the experiments, we find strong evidence that transparency increases support for the aid agency. In the monadic experiment, we find that simply providing more details on the FCDO's transparency efforts increases support for aid through the agency by close to 12%. This is a sizable swing for a minor alteration in the information presented to respondents. Moreover, we find that treatment effects are largely driven by those who least support foreign aid and trust the civil service the least. That is, transparency works best when citizens are the most skeptical about aid and the civil service.

Results from the first conjoint experiment confirm that respondents prefer more transparent agencies, but also suggest that citizens do not discriminate between different types of information. This suggests that, while citizens reward transparency, they do not have strong preferences for the type of information that is revealed. Results from the second conjoint experiment suggest that transparency reforms are among the most effective institutional interventions in boosting public support. Transparency reforms boost aid support even more than a stronger emphasis on aid being in the national interest and are on par with stronger aid conditionality on human rights.

Finally, to check the external validity of our findings, we correlate observational data from the Citizen Aid Transparency Dataset (CATD) (Reinsberg & Swedlund, 2023) with cross-national public opinion data on foreign aid from the Eurobarometer on 22 countries. The results suggest that higher levels of government transparency to citizens are indeed associated with higher levels of support for foreign aid at the cross-national level. They also suggest that the UK is a representative case for the relationship between aid transparency and support for foreign aid. We interpret these results as providing evidence that the relationship captured by our survey experiments is not likely to be unique to the UK context.

2 | HOW TRANSPARENCY CAN BOOST PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR AID

Aid transparency is now overwhelmingly viewed as a positive trait of good "donorship" (Gisselquist & Tarp, 2019; van Doeveren, 2011). In 2008, more than 80 developing countries, all OECD/DAC donors, and over 3000 civil society organizations pledged to enhance aid transparency (OECD, 2008, §24a),[4] leading to the formation of the International Aid Transparency Initiative and the related international NGO, Publish What You Fund. But does increased aid transparency improve citizens' opinions of aid agencies?

The central hypothesis that we test in this paper is: *Individuals will be more supportive of aid when aid agencies are transparent about their organizational practices and priorities*. That is, we expect that providing more information about aid agency governance (i.e., the organizational structure and institutional rules for implementing aid) and aid agency practice (i.e., organizational outputs such as aid flows and aid evaluations) will increase public opinion about aid (Reinsberg & Swedlund, 2023). We expect aid transparency to increase public support for foreign aid for at least two reasons. First, we expect citizens to reward aid agencies for transparency because it conforms to norms of good governance. We call this potential mechanism "normative desirability". Second, because transparency allows citizens to better understand what foreign aid agencies are doing, we expect that transparency may lead citizens to update their prior beliefs in favor of aid. We call this mechanism "informational updating".

First, we anticipate that agencies can reap short-term benefits in public support by adhering to transparency norms. Transparency is a strong norm of good governance widely supported by citizens around the world, particularly in democracies (Hollyer et al., 2015). According to Hood, transparency has taken on "quasi-religious significance" in theories of democratic governance (2006, 3). Citizens in democracies have come to expect that the public has a right to know what governments are doing, and citizens in democratic contexts often demand government transparency (Gaventa & Mcgee, 2013; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007).

"Transparency optimists" argue transparency fosters trust in public institutions and enhances government accountability. Transparency is believed to promote an "open culture" (Hood, 2006, p. 217) and facilitate understanding between citizens and public institutions (Nye

et al., 1997). Advocates contend that transparency benefits everyone, as only those with something to hide should oppose transparency (Florini, 1998). The growing norm of transparency is reflected in the global proliferation of access to information laws since the early 2000s (Erkkilä, 2020). Given this normative context, we expect that citizens should reward government agencies that are more compliant with transparency norms. Increased awareness of transparency efforts and reforms should increase public support for aid from these agencies.

Second, citizens should become more supportive of foreign aid as they learn more about it. Optimism about transparency is often based on the assumption that citizens do not trust governments, in part, because they are not provided with enough factual documentation about government processes and performance (Blendon et al., 1997; Bok, 1997; Cook et al., 2010). In this view, citizens will trust government agencies more if they better understand what these agencies do. Indeed, the literature on foreign aid has shown that citizens who are more knowledgeable about foreign aid also tend to be more supportive of it (Paxton & Knack, 2012).

We expect information updating to be particularly important in the case of foreign aid, as knowledge about foreign aid is so low (Scotto et al., 2017). In the 2005 Eurobarometer, 88% of EU citizens did not know about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (EC, 2005). A 2008 UK survey showed similar results, with 75% responding that they were unfamiliar with the MDGs. Moreover, citizens in donor countries consistently overestimate the portion of their national budget allocated to foreign aid (Milner & Tingley, 2010). Both American and British citizens believe foreign aid constitutes a substantial share of the government budget, ranging from 18% (Heerde-Hudson, 2014) to 28% (Klein, 2013), while it actually represents less than 1% in both countries.

Nevertheless, skeptics and critics of the aid transparency movement have long argued that transparency could expose institutional failures and lead to scandals that further undermine public trust in foreign aid agencies. Honig and Weaver (2019, 581) posit that donor staff often fear that transparency "threatens to lift the veil on internal processes that might disrupt donors' relationships with borrowers (...) and invite further interrogation from parties disaffected by aid programs". At the same time, pre-existing beliefs about government can strongly influence the effect of transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012), and, at least in some policy areas, citizens seem to care more about outcomes than how the decision was made (Myrick, 2020).

We predict that when it comes to common aid transparency reforms, these concerns are not necessarily warranted for three reasons. First, the type of information that is disclosed via aid transparency initiatives is typically not particularly threatening to the reputation of donor agencies. Aid transparency initiatives tend to focus on aggregate data regarding results achievement, descriptive attributes of projects, and their financial data. They rarely lead to new disclosure of project failures that were not already in the public record. Second, the public updates their views on foreign aid in a rather balanced manner. Existing research shows that additional negative and positive information mostly cancel each other out. If anything, public support moderately increases when citizens hear more information about the (low) costs of foreign aid (Hurst et al., 2017). Finally, contrary to public discourse on aid, internal evaluations of donor agencies tend to be rather positive on average—potentially due to rating biases (Kilby & Michaelowa, 2019). Thus, while aid officials may be concerned about increased attention to their work, in practice, more knowledge about aid agencies is unlikely to reveal information that suggests a more negative view than citizens already have. Instead, because the level of aid skepticism is already so high, and aid knowledge is so low, transparency about aid agency governance and practices should, on average, improve public opinion. If we are correct,

aid transparency should increase public opinion of aid, especially among those who are most skeptical of aid and aid bureaucracies.

3 | EMPIRICAL ANALYSES OF AID TRANSPARENCY ON PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR AID

Our empirical strategy utilizes multiple data sources to maximize internal and external validity. Below we present the results of three survey experiments with a representative sample of 2058 UK citizens. As a check of external validity, we then draw on a cross-country study of levels of transparency and public support for aid in 22 European countries.

Participants were recruited through the international omnibus of the public opinion company YouGov. We chose YouGov because of its reputation for providing balanced samples and its wide use in similar studies (Anderson et al., 2019; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2020; Heinzel & Liese, 2021). Subjects self-select into the respondent pool and YouGov selects which individuals from their pool are asked to answer the survey. We employ post-stratification weights to ensure representativeness by age, gender, UK region, voting in the last general election, voting in the Brexit referendum, education level, and house tenure.

In the first experiment, respondents were asked about their support for aid given through the UK FCDO. We use this formulation because we aim to understand whether transparency reforms increase support for aid given by the specific aid agencies that undertake these reforms rather than general opinions on foreign aid. The UK currently allocates most of its bilateral aid portfolio through the FCDO, which incorporated the Department of International Development (DFID) in 2020. In the subsequent experiments, the respondents were asked generically about "Agency 1" and "Agency 2".

Before the experimental questions, we asked respondents about their views on foreign aid and trust in government. We asked the respondents to indicate whether they: (1) trust the UK government; (2) trust the UK civil service; and (3) whether they support foreign aid in general. These questions were modeled after prominent questions on trust in public organizations contained in the World Values Surveys, with respondents giving answers on a scale from zero (strongly disagree) to three (strongly agree) for each of these questions. We randomized the question order in the survey to prevent priming effects.

3.1 | Analysis 1: Does aid transparency increase public support for aid agencies?

The first analysis used a monadic experiment. Respondents were randomly allocated to a treatment and control group. The control group saw the following text:

> The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office is the main UK aid agency. To what extent do you support aid given by this agency?

In the treatment group, we mentioned the agency's transparency on several factors included in the CATD (discussed in more detail below). Specifically, we highlighted FCDO's transparency on the people responsible for decisions in the agency, the organizational structure, and project-level information. The treatment read:

The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office is the main UK aid agency. It provides information on its website on the main ministers, under-secretaries, and directors general that manage its aid portfolio and provides a detailed organizational structure. It also uploads detailed information on its aid portfolio on the website https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/. The website includes data on individual projects that show where the money is spent, for which purposes and which contractors are used. To what extent do you support aid given by this agency?

Responses were on a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 10 (strongly support).

We run Ordinary-Least-Squares regressions to estimate the average treatment effect of transparency on support for aid through FCDO. Figure 1 displays the results and shows that mentioning FCDO's transparency in the question substantially increases the support of respondents for aid through the aid agency. The average support for aid through FCDO is approximately 4.95 (on a scale from 1 to 10). The treatment increases average support to 5.54. Hence, the monadic transparency treatment increases support by approximately 12%—a sizable swing for a minor alteration in the information presented to respondents.

In a second step, we investigate which types of respondents drive the changes in support for aid we observe. Therefore, we re-estimate models interacting the treatment with three questions probing respondents' views on foreign aid and trust in government. Table 1 displays the results from three models. Model 1 displays the main treatment effect. Model 2 presents results on the interaction of general support for aid and the treatment. Model 3
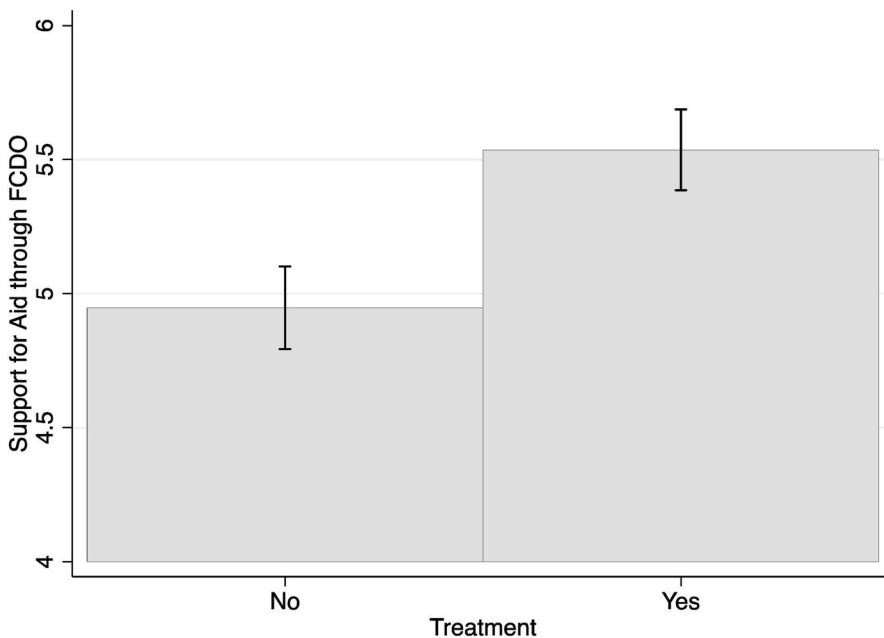

FIGURE 1 Experiment 1. Figure displays the average support for aid through FCDO in the treatment and control groups. The whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

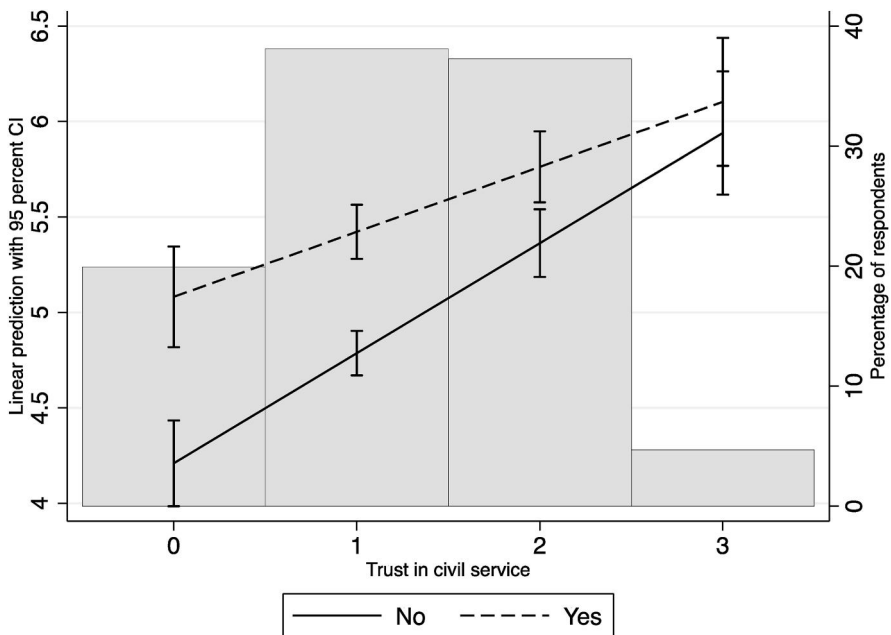**TABLE 1** Interaction between treatment and respondents' views.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment	0.589***	1.011***	0.872***	0.652*	1.272***
	(−0.110)	(0.179)	(0.164)	(0.363)	(0.443)
Support for aid spending		1.358***	1.252***	1.253***	1.338***
		(0.053)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.058)
Trust in the civil service		0.460***	0.577***	0.456***	0.528***
		(0.068)	(0.084)	(0.068)	(0.093)
Trust in government		0.023	0.019	0.027	0.051
		(0.060)	(0.060)	(0.078)	(0.081)
Interaction (aid support)		−0.214***			−0.173**
		(0.075)			(0.088)
Interaction (civil service)			−0.236**		−0.136
			(0.111)		(0.136)
Interaction (government)				−0.023	−0.056
				(0.113)	(0.121)
Observations	2058	1661	1661	1661	1661
R-squared	0.016	0.530	0.528	0.527	0.530

Significance levels: *$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$; preregistered at $p < .05$.

includes an interaction of trust in the civil service and support for aid through FCDO. Model 4 displays results on the interaction of trust in the UK government and the treatment. Finally, in Model 5 we include all three interactions simultaneously. The number of observations decreases in Models 2–5, as we excluded respondents who indicated that they don't know whether they support aid or trust the civil service or the UK government. Since the three variables remain observational, we respectively employ the other two respondent views as control variables.

The treatment effects are driven by those who least support foreign aid and those who least trust the civil service. In Model 2, the main treatment effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) and positive. The coefficient displays the treatment effect at the lowest level of support for foreign aid. The interaction is negative and statistically significant. As support for aid increases, transparency makes less and less of a difference. Model 3 illustrates a similar pattern for trust in the civil service. The treatment is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) and positive, while the interaction effect is negative and statistically significant. As trust in the civil service increases, the positive benefits of transparency for aid support diminish, as visualized in Figure 2. Model 4 shows that similar conditional effects do not appear for trust in the government. These results suggest that UK citizens seem to attribute responsibility for the provision of foreign aid to the civil service rather than to government decision-makers.

FIGURE 2 Interaction between treatment and trust in the civil service. The figure displays the support for aid through FCDO in the treatment and control groups at different levels of trust in civil service based on Model 3. The histogram displays the percentage of respondents falling in each of the four levels of trust in the civil service. The whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

3.2 | Analysis 2: Which types of information do citizens want disclosed?

The monadic experiment may suffer from two potential problems: First, the text for the treatment is substantially longer than the text for the control group. Second, it does not allow for differentiating which types of transparency matter nor how much transparency matters in comparison to other policy areas. To overcome these problems, we implemented two conjoint experiments.

Conjoint experiments originated in marketing research and allow for quantifying the relative preferences of respondents by randomly presenting different levels of attributes within profiles and asking respondents to rate these profiles (or choose between them). Conjoint experiments have recently been introduced to political science and international relations research and are uniquely suited to situations where researchers want to understand the relative importance of different factors without compromising causal inference (Bansak et al., 2017; Bechtel & Scheve, 2013; Ghassim et al., 2022; Hainmueller et al., 2014). In addition, the use of conjoint experiments can mitigate concerns over demand effects and social desirability bias (Horiuchi et al., 2022; Mummolo & Peterson, 2019).

Research on conjoint experiments suggests that showing two profiles and asking respondents to rate these profiles achieves the greatest external validity—compared to showing individual profiles or asking respondents to choose between profiles (Hainmueller & Hangartner, 2015). Therefore, we use this design. Because each respondent evaluated two profiles, standard errors are clustered at the individual respondent level.

Each respondent saw the following text:

> The UK government provides around 12 billion pounds in taxpayer money as foreign aid each year, and 60% of that money is given through aid agencies of the UK government. These agencies face a number of choices on what information they disclose. Below you see the types of information that two aid agencies plan to disclose. Please indicate to what extent you support giving foreign aid through each aid agency.

They were then presented with a table that included six features, each with two levels ("Yes" and "No"). Table 2 displays the six features as well as their levels. Levels were independently randomized. Respondents rated two profiles side-by-side on a scale from one to 10. We implemented a rating task instead of a choice task due to their increased external validity (Hainmueller et al., 2014).

Figure 3 presents the results from the conjoint experiment. We display marginal means and their 95% confidence intervals for the six features and their two levels. The figure, again, shows that transparency matters. Respondents prefer profiles with more transparency over profiles with less transparency across the board. However, the differences between the individual features are minimal.

The findings suggest that respondents do not discriminate between these features. Instead, they simply choose the profile that included more transparency. Each transparency feature increases the support for aid through the agency by around 10% of the mean. We interpret the findings to indicate that respondents see more transparency as always better than less, irrespective of the actual information that aid agencies disclose. We aim to verify this interpretation in Table 3, which displays the results from an exploratory analysis of the impact of the number of "Yes" features in each profile. The results presented in Table 3 strongly imply that this interpretation is correct. Support for aid through an agency increases substantially from two "Yes" features onwards. A profile that indicates transparency on all six features elicits nearly double the support for aid through that agency compared to a profile that displays no transparency on any of the six dimensions.

TABLE 2 Design of experiment 2.

	Agency 1	Agency 2
The agency provides information on its aid strategy, including details on key goals of its aid program and how the agency wants to achieve them.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency provides information on decision-making about where aid is allocated.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency provides information on its organizational structure (like who its leaders are and how many departments the agency has).	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency provides information on how much money it spends on the day-to-day administration of the agency (like overhead costs).	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency provides information on how many staff it has and where they work.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency provides detailed information on each project (like sector, recipient country, and contractor).	Yes/No	Yes/No
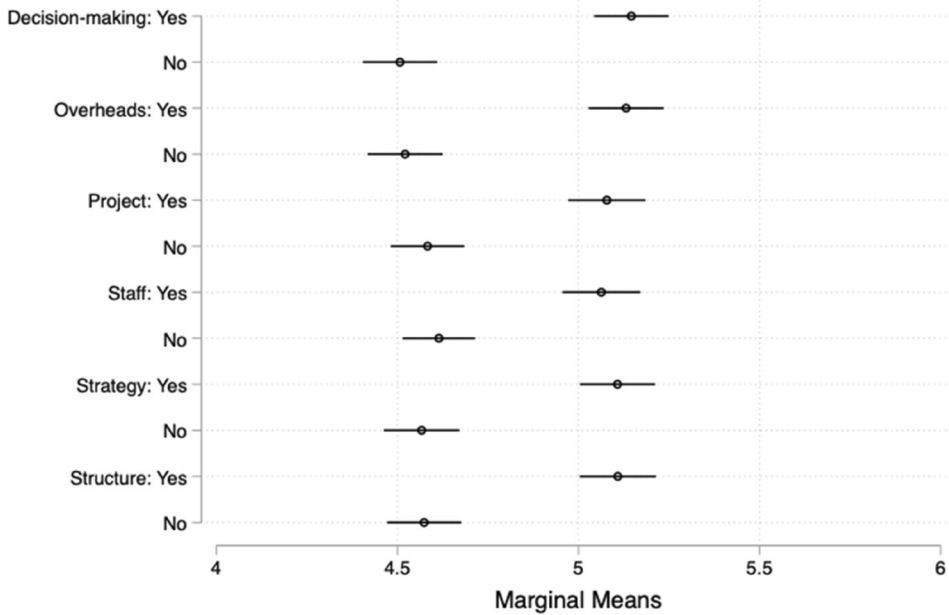
FIGURE 3 Experiment 2—Transparency on different types of information. The figure displays the marginal means of support for aid through different aid agencies for each value of the different levels of each feature in the conjoint experiment. The whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

3.3 │ Analysis 3: How much does aid transparency matter for public support?

The evidence presented so far shows that citizens prefer aid agencies that implement transparency reforms with the effect sizes suggesting that swings in respondents' opinions are sizable. However, we thus far lack a referent to understand their magnitude. Our third experiment addresses this shortcoming. Specifically, we compare the impact of transparency reforms with other reforms that aid agencies can implement to increase public support.

We compare transparency reforms with reforms aimed at changing aid allocation patterns, donor processes, and the salience of global public goods. First, the aid allocation literature has identified three main sources of aid allocation: recipient need, recipient merit, and donor politics (Bermeo, 2017; Hoeffler & Outram, 2011; McKinley & Little, 1979; Neumayer, 2005). To account for these different features, we include conjoint characteristics for recipient need (reforms focus aid more on poverty), recipient merit (reforms reward countries with strong human rights protections), and donor politics (reforms allocate more aid to political allies) (Gulrajani, 2017; Heinrich et al., 2021b; Kobayashi et al., 2021; Swedlund, 2017). Second, we consider administrative reforms that alter the process by which donors allocate and monitor development assistance. Here we focus on donor coordination (Han & Koenig-Archibugi, 2015) and anticorruption (Dietrich, 2016), as these two types of reforms address key concerns about aid effectiveness. Finally, we include aid for climate change to compare the impact of transparency reforms with aid that is more focused on financing key global public goods (Michaelowa & Michaelowa, 2011).

Each respondent read the same introductory text as in Experiment 2. Respondents were then presented with a table containing the six features discussed above and a feature

TABLE 3 Experiment 2—Number of "yes" in conjoint (exploratory).

	(1)	Observations
One "yes"	0.327	412
	(0.279)	
Two "yes"	0.880***	935
	(0.272)	
Three "yes"	1.461***	1294
	(0.271)	
Four "yes"	1.900***	977
	(0.274)	
Five "yes"	2.560***	359
	(0.290)	
Six "yes"	3.340***	75
	(0.406)	
Observations	4116	
R-squared	0.083	

Note: Table displays regression coefficients from a linear regression involving a set of indicator variables where 0 is the baseline category.

Significance levels * $p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

TABLE 4 Design of experiment 3.

	Agency 1	Agency 2
The agency expands transparency on its foreign aid management, policies and spending.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency includes anti-corruption as a guiding principle.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency focuses more on giving foreign aid to political allies of the UK.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency focuses more on giving foreign aid to the poorest countries.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency focuses more on giving foreign aid to countries that respect human rights.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency focuses more on spending foreign aid to address global problems like climate change.	Yes/No	Yes/No
The agency coordinates more with other donors (like the United Nations Development Program or the United States Agency for International Development).	Yes/No	Yes/No

highlighting transparency reform. Each item had two independently randomized levels ("Yes" and "No"), as shown in Table 4.

Figure 4 presents the results of the third experiment. The figure includes marginal means (with 95% confidence intervals) for each level of the seven features. Two results stand out: First, the coefficient for transparency is similar in magnitude to the average treatment effect we
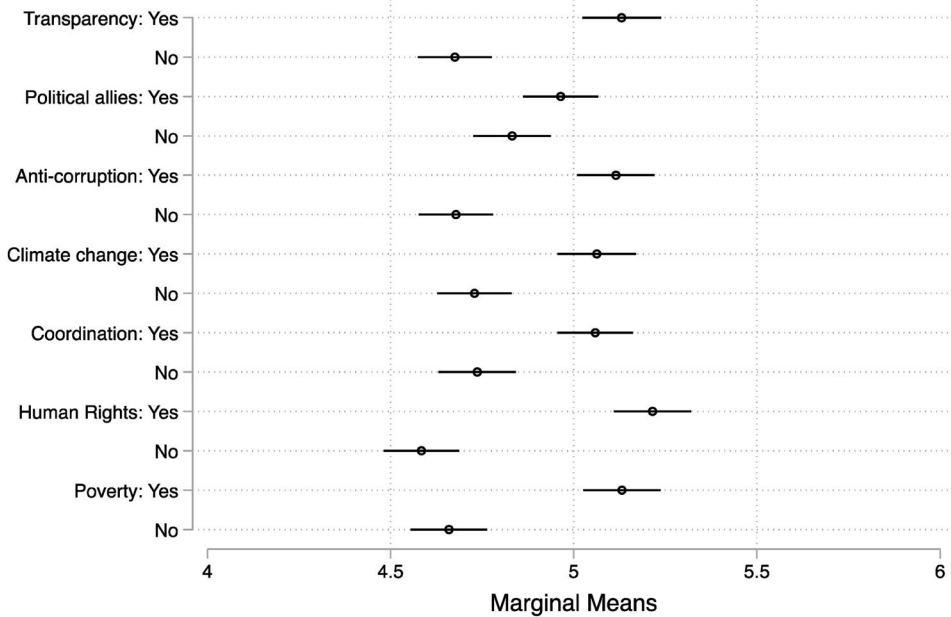
FIGURE 4 Experiment 3—transparency versus other reforms. The figure displays the marginal means of support for aid through different aid agencies for each value of the different levels of each feature in the conjoint experiment. The whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

identified in the monadic experiment (around 10% of the mean). These similarities occurred despite substantial differences in the experimental procedures and in the wording of the treatments. This is particularly important since the conjoint experiment might include a negative reaction to hearing that an agency was not transparent, while the monadic design only includes the positive reaction to hearing about agency transparency. These results increase our confidence that our substantive interpretation does not depend on the specific experimental procedure used.

Second, the coefficient for transparency reforms is among the strongest in the conjoint experiment. Respondents care as much about transparency reforms as they care about fighting corruption in recipient countries and a greater focus on poverty. Aid transparency is more important for public support than whether the aid agency focuses on climate change, co-ordinates with other donors, or allocates more aid to political allies. The only reform with a stronger effect on aid support is a greater focus on human rights. These results further substantiate the strong link between aid transparency and public support for foreign aid. They also indicate that respondents do differentiate between different types of reforms in general but just not between different transparency reforms (as shown in Experiment 2).

We conduct several robustness checks to verify the results of the three experiments. First, we conduct exploratory tests to understand whether findings differ depending on the political ideology of respondents. Specifically, we re-estimate our models separately for supporters of the Conservative and Labor parties in the last election, as well as whether people voted for Remain or Brexit in the 2016 referendum (Table A1, Figures A1–A4, Figures A8–A11). The results hold for supporters of the Conservative Party, the Labor Party and for Brexiteers. However, they fail to attain statistical significance for Remainers. Second, we re-estimate models without probability weights to understand whether the weighting affects our results (Table A2, Figures A5

and A12). Third, we include question order fixed effects to ensure that results are not driven by priming of respondents (Table A3, Figures A6 and A13). Finally, we re-estimate models controlling for observable individual-level covariates—gender, social status, region, past vote general election 2019, past vote Brexit referendum, house ownership, education level (Table A4, Figures A7 and A14). Our main coefficients of interest remain statistically significant in all these specifications.

3.4 | Analysis 4: Do our findings generalize to other countries?

Our fourth analysis is based on cross-national data on donor transparency to the public. Our experimental results strongly suggest that aid transparency shapes public opinion. Despite their considerable internal validity and our remarkably consistent findings across experimental designs, experiments may lack external validity (Findley et al., 2021). First, we focused on one country, the UK. Therefore, we need to better understand the representativeness of the UK case in the broader universe of aid donors. Second, we do not know whether the relationship between aid transparency and support for foreign aid is strong enough to explain aggregate differences between aid agencies across countries. This concern may be particularly important as many people may not be aware that aid agencies have increased their transparency, and because transparency may also lead to the disclosure of information that undermines support for aid. Third, our experimental results mainly measure the short-term effect of hearing about aid transparency on citizens' support for foreign aid. However, citizens may never hear about aid transparency reforms outside of our experimental setting due to the low salience of foreign aid policy. And these short-term effects may even be offset by the disclosure of negative information that transparency may bring.

To address these shortcomings, we examine whether higher levels of transparency are correlated with higher levels of citizen support for aid across a cross-national subset of donor countries. To measure cross-country differences in aid transparency, we use the CATD; a new dataset based on the individual coding of 212 bilateral aid agencies across 37 donors (Reinsberg & Swedlund, 2023). The data capture transparency in terms of both *aid agency governance* —that is, the organizational structure and institutional rules for implementing aid—and *aid agency practice*—that is, organizational outputs such as aid flows and aid evaluations. Within these two categories, the CATD measures whether aid agencies publish 19 distinct pieces of information on their websites. The indicators also assess how detailed the information is and how easily accessible it is.

We use the overall CATD index of aid agency transparency to perform our analysis. The index is compiled from a confirmatory factor analysis of the 19 indicators and is designed to capture whether an agency makes information about aid governance and aid outputs available to citizens through its website. To measure the relationship between transparency and public opinion, we combine the data with national-level averages of public opinion on foreign aid. Here we use data from the 2016 Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2016); the most recent edition prior to the reference year of the CATD dataset. The Eurobarometer data is the most comprehensive cross-country survey that includes questions on citizens' views on foreign aid. The relevant survey question (QC3) asks:

The European Union and its Member States provide financial assistance to developing countries. Which of the following statements best describes your opinion?

1. We should spend more money in support of developing countries
2. We should continue spending as we do
3. We should spend less money in support of developing countries

This question does not capture support for aid in the same way as our survey experiment. However, we believe that the wording is close enough to provide a useful approximation of the cross-country relationship between aid transparency and citizen support for foreign aid. To measure support for aid, we use the proportion of respondents who support increasing public spending on aid to developing countries. There is considerable variation across countries in terms of citizen support for aid budget increases, ranging from just over 10% in the Czech Republic to almost 45% in Spain.

We test the relationship between transparency and support for aid by aggregating aid agency transparency scores to the country level. Specifically, we take simple averages across the agencies in a donor country and plot these averages against the average support for aid increases. We find a positive relationship between transparency and support for aid increases (Figure 5). The data suggest that the UK is a representative case (Gerring, 2007) for the relationship between aid transparency and support for foreign aid—as it lies very close to the regression line displayed in Figure 5.

We use regression analysis to test whether the relationship of interest is statistically significant while controlling for potential alternative explanations. For example, we check whether support for aid and aid agency transparency are both driven by international norms, by including a proxy for DAC membership. We also measure the logged GNI, as a measure of donor size. Finally, we include a measure of tax revenue as a percentage of GDP, which may
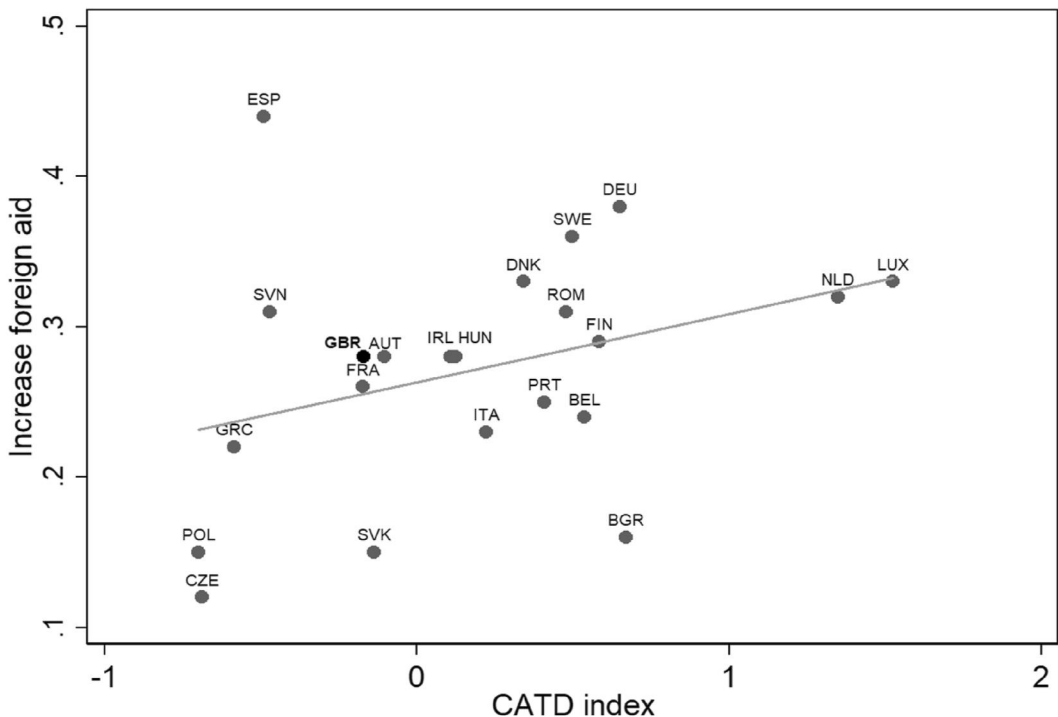

FIGURE 5 Aid agency transparency and preference for increasing foreign aid.

TABLE 5 Aid agency transparency increases public support for aid.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
CATD index	5.188*	5.382*	5.519**
	(2.792)	(2.790)	(2.236)
DAC member	6.250	3.895	
	(6.210)	(5.597)	
Log (GNI)		1.911	1.618
		(1.355)	(1.356)
Tax revenue			0.006
			(0.343)
Observations	22	22	20
R-squared	0.171	0.258	0.248

Significance levels: *$p < .1$ **$p < .05$ ***$p < .01$.

proxy for redistributive preferences in a donor society. Except for DAC membership, the data come from the World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2022).

Regression analysis reveals a significantly positive relationship between average aid agency transparency and average support for aid budget increases across donors (Table 5). The coefficient is remarkably stable across different model specifications: A one standard deviation increase in average transparency is associated with a 3.6% increase in average support for aid increases (95%-CI: 0.8%–6.4%), according to Model 8. This is a tangible association given that the average support for aid increases is about 27.1%. This result indicates that transparency has positive benefits for public support for aid. However, given the results from our experimental analyses, we are relatively confident that the relationship could be much stronger, if more people were aware of the increased transparency of aid agencies in recent years. Taken together, our experimental and observational analyses strongly suggest that aid transparency affects public support for aid agencies.

We also conduct several robustness tests in the appendix. First, we re-define the outcome of interest to measure the percentage of respondents who wish that the foreign aid of their country increases or stays the same. This definition is more inclusive than the one in our main analysis. The estimates are similar in magnitude and even more precisely estimated (Table A5). In another test, we use the sub-components of the CATD index to distinguish transparency on aid agency governance from transparency on aid agency outputs. Both sub-indices are highly correlated, which is why we do not include them simultaneously. We find a statistically significant positive association between governance-related transparency and aid support (Table A6) but a weaker (and mostly insignificant) positive relationship between outcome-related transparency and aid support (Table A7).

4 | CONCLUSION

Public support for aid is weak at best. Can aid agencies influence support for their policy mandates by becoming more transparent? In this article, we systematically examine this

question using the case of bilateral aid agencies. Our empirical analyses combine experimental and observational analysis to maximize both internal and external validity. We conducted three survey experiments with over 2058 UK citizens to test the causal effect of aid transparency reforms on public opinion on aid agencies. In addition, we corroborated these findings with correlational evidence from a cross-country study on 22 aid agencies.

Our results provide evidence that greater transparency about aid agencies' practices and governance increases support for aid. In a monadic experiment, individual support for aid from the UK FCDO increased by 12% ($p < 0.001$) when respondents learned that the UK FCDO was transparent, compared to respondents who did not receive this information. This treatment effect was driven by respondents who did not have much trust in the civil service to begin with. In a conjoint experiment, we showed that increases in aid support are similar in magnitude across different types of agency transparency interventions. Importantly, the effect of these interventions is cumulative, implying that aid agencies can increase aid support by a large margin by simultaneously implementing a series of transparency-related reforms and communicating these reforms to the public. In a second conjoint experiment, we showed that the change in aid agency support induced by aid transparency is substantial—it is comparable to the benefits in public support that aid agencies can reap by focusing more on poverty reduction and implementing anti-corruption policies.

Future work should attempt to further contextualize our findings. While our analysis only focuses on bilateral aid agencies, we have reason to believe that the results generalize to public agencies in other policy areas. Because citizens have limited knowledge about low-salience foreign policies like foreign aid, we would expect transparency to have a larger effect on public opinion compared to other policy issues. However, given the large magnitudes of our effects, we suspect that the benefits of transparency would also be found in other policy areas, such as agricultural policy, environmental policy, and even public health. Nor does it take much imagination to think that multilateral agencies would also benefit from greater transparency. Indeed, increasing transparency could be a key strategy for organizational survival in an era of increasing challenges to the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2018; Lake et al., 2021; Walter, 2021). Despite some promising signs of greater transparency, multilateral organizations still have much potential for improvement. Such improvements, however, are likely important if agencies are to persuade publics to continue delegating policy to them.

Going forward, it will be important to determine whether the effects we measure hold over time and how negative versus positive information affects the impact of transparency on public opinion. Importantly, our results are limited to a single measurement immediately after the treatment, and our transparency treatments are limited to characteristics of aid agency governance and practice, for example, where aid goes and how decisions about its disbursements are made. However, what happens when aid transparency initiatives reveal damaging facts about an aid agency? And can aid transparency initiatives change public opinion in the long run?

Nevertheless, our work sends a clear message to policymakers: Citizens value transparency. As different forms of transparency mobilize similar levels of support, our results suggest that policymakers have a great deal of flexibility in how they implement transparency-related reforms. The important thing is that they implement transparency reforms and make them visible to the public. Recent research suggests that there is a great deal of variation in how transparent aid agencies are to citizens (Reinsberg & Swedlund, 2023). This paper suggests that how transparent an agency is to citizens affects attitudes toward such agencies, particularly among those who are most skeptical of aid and the civil service in general.

This should provide an additional incentive for aid agencies to implement higher levels of transparency and to think about effective ways of communicating this transparency to citizens. The latter probably means not only putting such information on websites (which a citizen must actively seek out) but also ensuring that it is communicated in messages in public forums. In the UK, current economic conditions and shifts in political ideology have led to cuts in the budgets of public institutions that threaten their continued existence (Worley & Ainsworth, 2022). Without the prospect of budget increases in the short term, increased transparency is likely to be a very cost-effective strategy for maintaining public support for aid.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/QDQ4LU.

ENDNOTES

¹ https://www.oecd.org/corruption/opennessandtransparency-pillarsfordemocracytrustandprogress.htm

² See Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) and Bhati and Hansen (2020) for literature reviews. The scholarship on charitable giving focuses on private voluntary aid, that is, what motivates individuals to give themselves. Alternatively, the literature on public opinion and aid focuses on how individuals perceive foreign aid provided on their behalf by states or multilateral agencies.

³ Ethics approval was granted by the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Application 400220030). We did not depart from the preregistered pre-analysis plan. Anonymized preregistration documents for the three experiments can be found under the following links. (The numbering of the experiments in the pre-registration is different from the numbering of the analyses in the papers). Analysis 1, monadic experiment: https://osf.io/tzjuq/?view_only=aeaadcfa527741de9c043a1265217e0d; Analysis 2, conjoint transparency features: https://osf.io/zgwxv/?view_only=69646bec80664ccea01797aca5d394b2; Analysis 3, conjoint policy areas: https://osf.io/g8vph/?view_only=1e76d4e02b4648828d5afca2078e214e

⁴ Moon and Williamson (2010, p. 2) define aid transparency as "the comprehensive availability and accessibility of aid flow information in a timely, systematic and comparable manner that allows public participation in government accountability." To be fully transparent, Reinsberg and Swedlund (2023) argue that aid agencies need to be transparent about both their governance (i.e., how they make decisions) and their practices (i.e., where they deliver aid).

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