

The possibilities and limits of international status: Evidence from foreign aid and public opinion

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Abstract

States use symbolic gestures to increase their international status, or relative position, within the international community. But how do the status-seeking actions of one state affect the status of others? The common assumption is that improvements in one state's status lead to the relative deterioration of other states' status by comparison. We argue that this relationship is not automatic; group identity is an important heuristic and status-changing actions affect relative status most when states have characteristics in common. We develop a new empirical test of relative status to test this proposition. We field an original survey experiment and reanalyze existing survey experiments to test the effect of symbolic foreign aid transactions on states' status. We establish novel empirical patterns about the circumstances under which a state's status will update relative to other states. Our findings suggest that status-enhancing actions may be successful at augmenting status amongst peers, but ultimately unsuccessful at changing global hierarchies.

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1 Introduction

Do states’ symbolic gestures affect international status, or their relative position in the international hierarchy? Do these actions affect *other*, non-acting, states’ status? A large literature agrees that politicians and their citizens are “plainly obsessed with investing in, seizing, and defending” their states’ international status because it provides social, material, and psychological benefits (Renshon 2017, 1). Status is not only instrumentally valuable in conferring decision-making autonomy and deference (Wohlforth 1998, Tomz 2012, Pratt 2018), but also intrinsically valuable as a psychological benefit (Wolf 2011, Kelley 2017). Status is one of the motivating reasons that states engage in world-shaping actions such as acquiring nuclear weapons, initiating conflicts, or joining international organizations (Larson & Shevchenko 2010, Rathbun *et al.* 2021, Renshon 2017), sometimes at the expense of other political goals (Barnhart 2016). But even small actions in the international arena, such as hosting the Olympics, donating and receiving insubstantial amounts of foreign aid, and committing one-off acts of torture have demonstrably changed the perceived status of the acting state (Carnegie & Dolan 2020, Hafner-Burton & Montgomery 2006, Morse & Pratt 2021, Powers & Renshon 2021). Status clearly matters to states and they are willing to take costly actions to improve it. But do the actions that states take affect their relative position in the international system?

A change in one actor’s status should lead to a change in “*at least* one actor’s status” (Renshon *et al.* 2018, 375).¹ Ripple effects in the international system can occur when the identity or meaning of status-groupings change (Brooks *et al.* 2015, Gray 2013, Gray & Hicks 2014, Morse 2019) or when individual state actions provide information about other states’ prestige (Duque 2018, Kinne 2014, Renshon 2017).² Scholars commonly posit that shifts in a state’s individual status should affect its position in the international hierarchy in equal measure (Barnhart 2017). However, we argue that this is not always the case. In this

¹Emphasis added.

²While Duque (2018) discusses the idea of relational status in-depth, her definition of status as socially recognized and embedded in bilateral relations differs substantially from the conception of status as a “consensus concept” recognized across multiple publics, states, and constituencies.

paper, we focus on status’ “social and peer referent” qualities to delineate different models of how, and for whom status, changes occur in the international system (Renshon 2017, 113). We clarify the concepts of *individual* and *relative* status. While individual status, the focus of current experimental literature, looks at states’ status in isolation, relative status requires comparisons between two or more states. Acknowledging this distinction, actions that elicit individual status changes do not automatically translate to relative status changes. Status implications may reverberate to outside states or they might not. We posit that perceptions of group identity are one factor that conditions how far and to whom status changes apply. We ground this argument in the case of foreign aid, an area of international relations with an implied hierarchy and well-established group identities. Donor states are viewed with “superiority and power” (Kuusik 2006, 57), while recipient states are perceived as less developed and less powerful (Carnegie & Dolan 2020). A new group of emerging donors has also emerged of which China is by far the most prolific. This group of former aid recipients turned donors differ substantially from traditional donors in their aid practices and have found foreign aid to be a useful tool in augmenting their international status (Asmus *et al.* 2021, Dreher *et al.* 2020, Eichenauer *et al.* 2021, Jones 2018, Mattingly & Sundquist 2021).

Our work extends recent theoretical and methodological innovations in the experimental international status literature which establish a relationship between public opinion and state status (Kitagawa & Chu 2021, Morse & Pratt 2021, Powers & Renshon 2021, Viskupič 2020). We field an original survey experiment to test the relationship between individual and relative status in the realm of public opinion. In a US sample, we find that information about a small aid donation increases the individual status of the donor state. For example, aid from India increases positive perceptions of India. We also identify that information affects the status of other states that do not participate in the transaction. Continuing the example, aid from China increases positive perceptions of India, even though India is not involved in giving or receiving aid. However, Chinese aid has no impact on perceptions of the UK, a more established aid donor also not involved in the transaction. When we

compare the relative status of states, we find a similar pattern. Indian foreign aid decreases perceptions of both American and British status relative to India, suggesting that the US and UK belong to the same peer group while China and India belong to a separate group. In a complementary priming experiment, we confirm that respondents see China and India as part of a group of emerging donors. Across all states, giving or receiving aid does not change the rank of states in the international hierarchy. Our analysis highlights both the opportunities states have to alter their position in the international system relative to some states, but not others, as well as the limitations to their ability to change the international order.

To test the external validity of these findings, we apply our measures of relative status to three existing experiments on foreign aid and status (Carnegie & Dolan 2020, Dietrich *et al.* 2018, Mattingly & Sundquist 2021). In line with the established literature, we replicate previous analyses and confirm that foreign aid increases the individual status of aid donors. We also find that the relative status of aid donors compared to other states outside the transaction also increases, but only amongst states with whom the aid donors can be reasonably seen to compete. The reanalysis of these works shows the utility of our framework in extending international status studies through inter-state comparisons.

Our results have several implications for status change in the international system. First, our work brings concepts honed in the observational international status literature to the burgeoning field of experimental international status. In this paper, we demonstrate the value of including relative status measures in experiments on public opinion. By measuring status as simultaneously individual and relational, we match status concepts to appropriate empirical measurements and deepen previous conclusions about the impact of status-altering actions. Second, our approach highlights the way status-changing events reverberate across the international ecosystem. Depending on which aspects of group identity are salient, the relative status of *some* non-acting states change. Relative status changes depend on whether observers see the status-changing action as relevant to a comparison state. While future work should theorize about how individuals and states identify relevant “targets,” these

findings contribute an essential first step by establishing that peer groupings, or “status communities” impact the reverberation of status-updates in the international system. In the words of Frank (1985), status is “local.” New evidence from survey experiments suggests that publics engage in status categorization and update their beliefs about the relative position of states *across* and *within* these communities differently, at least in the case of small status-changing actions. This implies that policymakers must carefully consider who the peers of a given state are before encouraging normatively good positions, such as decreasing carbon emissions (Keohane 2010) or improving women’s rights (Bush & Zetterberg 2020). Finally, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature that shows status is not only driven by security considerations but also by economic and symbolic gestures (Brutger & Kertzer 2018, Carnegie & Dolan 2020, Hafner-Burton & Montgomery 2006, Larson & Shevchenko 2010, Morse & Pratt 2021, Powers & Renshon 2021).

2 Defining international status

There is broad agreement that status conveys a state’s position vis-a-vis a comparison group (MacDonald & Parent 2021). It can be defined as “standing, or rank, in a status community” (Renshon 2017, 4). Status can imply identity (i.e. membership in a group like major powers) and can be rank-based (i.e. position in a hierarchy), in which actors of lower standing defer to the interests of actors with higher standing (Pratt 2018). Where status is conceptualized as identity-based or as granted through membership in high-status organizations, states may be satisfied sharing the same status value as others so long as the relevant comparison is between members and nonmembers (Murray 2019, Larson & Shevchenko 2010). Where status is conceptualized as comparative standing, it has a zero-sum quality. If the status value of a group is fixed, additional members can dilute or change the value associated with it (Renshon 2017).³ The positional qualities of status separate this concept from related notions such as honor, reputation and credibility. Reputation, for example, is a belief about

³According to Rathbun *et al.* (2021), pure status-seeking is about the quest for exclusivity and may imply jockeying for higher ranks within membership communities.

an actor’s traits, such as their resolve, informed by their past behavior (Dafoe *et al.* 2014, Jervis 1989, Schelling 1960). Reputations are essential to assessing credibility (Renshon *et al.* 2018). Similarly, honor refers to beliefs about the virtue of another actor (Renshon 2017). None of these concepts imply a pecking order, an essential element of international status.

The exclusivity implied by international status is a keen driver of state actions in the domestic and international arena. Historical evidence suggests that when states perceive the level of prestige they are attributed as incongruous with their preferred level of status compared to peer states, they respond creatively and strategically to restore or reimagine their status (Larson & Shevchenko 2010). Barnhart (2017, 393) establishes that states that have previously suffered humiliation “will engage in competitive status-seeking measures against third-party states aimed at influencing the perceptions of other states.” Under this framework, state A attacking state C after suffering humiliation at the hands of B should enhance A’s status relative to B. Perceived status deficits have driven states to engage in belligerent actions against both adversaries and bystanders in the international community (Barnhart 2020, Dafoe *et al.* 2014, Murray 2019, Renshon 2016).

But do the actions that states take affect their standing in the international hierarchy? Measurement here poses a dilemma as international standing is often conflated with power (MacDonald & Parent 2021). While military and economic capacities affect material hierarchies of states (Gilpin 1983), most scholars argue that status is related to, though not comprised entirely of, these traditional power metrics. A historical focus on large-scale status actions taken by great powers poses difficulties for disentangling the causal effects of these events on international status even as these studies establish clear and compelling evidence of status competition.

Innovations in observational work using network analysis offer an alternative approach. This body of work provides strong support for the role of status in driving state actions using power-adjacent measures, specifically diplomatic networks. Duque (2018), Kinne (2014), and Renshon (2017) argue that changes in mutual recognition and centrality within networks of representation affect multiple states’ status in the international arena. These measures are

explicitly endogenous to other state characteristics—the presence or absence of embassies is deeply related to other markers of geopolitics.

A key insight from the diplomatic networks literature is the idea of status as a second-order belief about what others believe the standing of a state is in relation to a comparison group (Dafoe *et al.* 2014). Therefore, status must be granted by an external audience. In a globalized world, it comes from the general international community of elite and mass actors, who often share foreign policy preferences (Kertzer 2020). As Carnegie & Dolan (2020, 498) state, “a country cannot improve its status only by earning heads of states’ approval;” rather, it is a “consensus concept” that must be echoed by a broader international public capable of evaluating the implications of status-enhancing actions (Huberman *et al.* 2004, Frank 1985).⁴

Given the consensus nature of status, public opinion is one, though by no means the only, method through which to identify which states hold high or low international status. A wealth of survey experiments have used information treatments to examine the circumstances under which publics update their perceptions of international status. The use of torture, for example, decreases perceptions of the United States on two status dimensions: prestige and morality (Powers & Renshon 2021, Morse & Pratt 2021). Information about foreign aid improves perceptions of the donor country (Dietrich *et al.* 2018, Mattingly & Sundquist 2021). However, rejecting foreign aid increases *international* perceptions of India’s international status even if it does not change domestic status perceptions (Carnegie & Dolan 2020). Similarly, while apologies for past atrocities improve perceptions of the apologizing state amongst citizens in the state that received the apology, citizens of the apologizing state disapprove of this action (Kitagawa & Chu 2021). Public concern about international status drives policy outcomes as diverse as leader approval (Powers & Renshon 2021), support for military intervention (Viskupič 2020), and composition of trade deals (Brutger & Rathbun Forthcoming). While the experimental literature neatly isolates the causal effect of information about symbolic statecraft on the perceived status of individual states, it does

⁴Even when the public is ill-informed about foreign policy, Powers & Renshon (2021) argue that status is visible to voters because status competition is innate to social life and high-profile when it occurs between states.

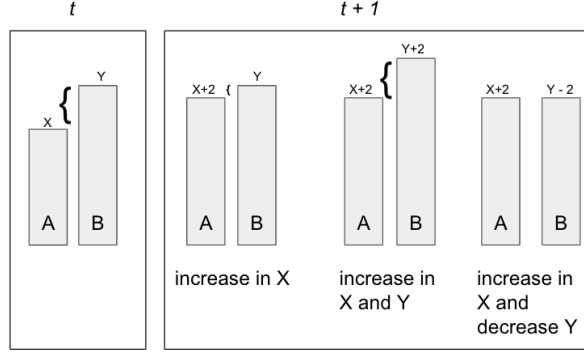


Figure 1: *Individual and relative status in the international system*

not yet extend to the causal effect on states' relative position in the international hierarchy.

We illustrate this difference in Figure 1, which displays three potential models of status change. In both models, state B has higher status than state A at time t and state A takes status changing actions at time $t+1$. In the first model of status change (left), state A's actions result in higher status. This is the effect most likely to be identified by existing experimental approaches. However, this change also increases the relative closeness of the two states; *i.e.* while state B remains higher ranked than state A, the gap between their respective statuses has decreased. In this model of change, state A successfully increases both its individual and relative status. State B's individual status does not change but its status relative to A decreases. State A is now *closer* in status to state B.

In the middle and right panels of Figure 1, state A's actions can also impact the individual status of state B. In other words, A's status-actions lead to updating about the individual status of state B. How this impacts relative status, or the closeness of the pair, depends on the direction that B's status updates. For example, in the middle panel, both state A and state B see an increase in their individual status. Therefore, while state A's individual status increases, its status relative to B stays the same. In parallel, state B's relative status is maintained as its individual status increases. Finally, in the rightmost panel, state A's actions lead to a decrease in state B's individual status. In our schematic, as A's individual status increases and B's individual status decreases, the relative closeness of the relationship between A and B actually increases. In our illustration, A and B now have the same status.

While the individual status of state A increases in all three of these examples, status implications at the system level vary substantially. Focusing just on state A would make these models observationally equivalent when they are, in fact, theoretically distinct. By focusing attention on status' relational quality, this framework expands the existing literature on the public opinion of international status.

All three models of international status change, which are illustrative rather than exhaustive, reflect network dynamics relating states A and B. State A increases its status, but how do we know which model (panel) represents the relative status implications for state B? One way to conceptualize and apply these possibilities is through the perception of groups in the international system. Perceptions of an actors' peers in the international community can potentially confine, or enhance, the ability of individual states to make changes to their individual and relative status. Specifically, we argue that states make targeted comparisons to specific reference groups. This accords with the role of group membership in defining status as identity. As Renshon (2017) notes, Egyptian President Nasser's actions in Yemen were intended to impact Egypt's status vis-a-vis its Arab peers and not the United States. Similarly, the rise of China is unlikely to affect the status aspirations of microstates like Malta. Psychologically, limitations on information processing make categorization a useful heuristic for individuals evaluating complex phenomena, like international status (Taylor 1981). This cognitive shortcut should be especially useful in evaluating subjects on which an individual has less information (Gray & Hicks 2014). Moreover, the act of grouping like-members serves to minimize the perceived differences across group members while increasing the perceived differences between groups (Tajfel & Wilkes 1963). Therefore, group identity and the identification of peers should condition how far status-actions reverberate in the international system.

Akin to the middle example of status change in Figure 1, work on international agreements demonstrates the contagion effect of movement within peer groupings. How status-actions impact the perceptions of one member may spillover to the rest of the group. When one member does something status-increasing (decreasing), the international community may

raise (lower) their impression of other group members. For example, association with more or less reputable lenders can generate “peer effects” that change investors’ perceptions of sovereign debt ratings (Brooks *et al.* 2015). Signing a trade agreement with a country with a bad reputation leads publics to perceive the signatory as more risky (Gray & Hicks 2014). Explicit inclusion in a list of countries with poorly regulated banking systems drives a state’s international reputation lower because of a “lowest-common-denominator effect;” inclusion on a blacklist is worse when the other countries on the list are in particular disrepute (Morse 2019).

Conversely, and in line with the rightmost panel in Figure 1, additional work shows that zero-sum status-competition can also take place within peer groupings, rather than general hierarchies. In this case, the actions of one member imply the lack of action on behalf of another member. When one member does something status-increasing (decreasing), the international community may lower (raise) their impression of others who do not act the same way. Renshon (2017), for example, finds that status deficits are more likely to encourage bellicose behavior amongst peer states than other groupings while Honig & Weaver (2019) shows that one international organizations’ success in a rating index spurred competition amongst peer organizations.

Most generally, “social creativity” in status competition, in which states unable to compete on traditional status metrics seek to reframe their own comparative advantages as alternative markers of status, offers countries without the economic or military capacity to compete with great powers an alternative means of international recognition (Larson & Shevchenko 2010). Scandinavian countries carved out a niche in international politics by focusing on human rights, welfare, and general dedication to humanitarianism (Murray 2019). Similarly, states strategically adopt gender quotas to increase their international reputation for democracy regardless of other reforms (or lack thereof) (Bush 2011, Bush & Zetterberg 2020). Closing embassies decreases the status of the states whose representatives are sent home, despite not altering overall balance of power in the international system (Kinne 2014, Powers & Renshon 2021). North Macedonia even financed a \$730 million renovation of its

capital to bolster its appeal to the European Union, despite domestic backlash against wasteful spending (Hopkins 2016). Keohane (2010) makes this vision more explicit by positing an “economy of esteem” as a means of addressing climate change: offering new spaces for previously uncompetitive states to distinguish themselves in the international arena could promote pro-social behavior.

We do not posit a specific theory of peer group formation. To the best of our knowledge such a theory still eludes both political scientists and psychologists. Instead, we highlight several potential mechanisms through which symbolic gestures can have network-level implications for international status. We pair these with new insights from public opinion. Importantly, we relax the assumption from the established observational literature that individual and relative status always move in tandem and open up the possibility for novel, more nuanced, findings about status as a relational and peer-referent concept.

3 Relative status and foreign aid

We continue to build our argument through the case of foreign aid. This type of small, symbolic, action may change a state’s perceived status, but not objective evaluations of their economic or military standing. For the purpose of examining status amongst multiple parties, foreign aid usefully confers information about the status of at least two parties, the donor and the recipient. This generates an explicit hierarchy between at least two states, unlike other status-altering strategies that can be pursued unilaterally (i.e. technological development or hosting the Olympics). This allows us to design information treatments that will affect both individual and relative status simultaneously (including closeness and rank).

In foreign aid, donors are attributed the characteristics of “superiority and power” (Kusik 2006, 57). This superiority manifests along several dimensions. First, if status is conferred by physical attributes, donor status indicates an economic surplus. The ability to generate state revenue that exceeds domestic needs has typically been achieved by high-income, high-status states. Second, vast literatures on foreign aid confirm that aid is given

strategically (McKinley & Little 1977, Kuziemko & Werker 2006) and often to manipulate the policy positions of its recipients (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith 2007, Dreher *et al.* 2008). Foreign aid is a social contract, akin to relational hierarchy, where donors provide necessary funds in order to offset the recipient’s required policy concessions (Lake 2009). Third, providing aid can also enhance moral superiority. Aid demonstrates a dedication to helping the world’s poor, improving international audiences’ perception of the donor (Goldsmith *et al.* 2014). While these reasons are neither mutually-exclusive nor empirically-distinguishable in the context of this paper, it’s clear that aid has status implications which donor countries care about. Information about donors has been shown to increase their individual status. For example, Dietrich *et al.* (2018) find that Bangladeshis improve their perceptions of the US when they are informed about US aid projects. Blair *et al.* (2019) find this same effect with USAID in Africa.

In contrast, recipients of foreign aid are viewed with “inferiority and powerlessness” (Kuusik 2006, 57). Receiving aid implies that a given state lacks the capacity to provide what its domestic population requires. Not accepting foreign aid boosts perceptions of the competence of potential recipient governments as well as their overall international status (Carnegie & Dolan 2020). Additionally, in the aid-for-policy-concessions framework, recipients of foreign aid are pulled by the strings of their benefactors (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith 2007). By virtue of this contract, they sacrifice policy autonomy in exchange for the aid they receive. Finally, cultural and historical factors play an important role in maintaining the lower group identity of aid recipients. Developing countries, and even formerly developing countries, are subject to paternalistic arguments from donor states that they cannot handle their own affairs and deserve a lower place in the international system (Baker 2015).⁵

But patterns of aid giving are also changing. A burgeoning literature highlights a new division between the group of “traditional” and “emerging” or “new” donors. This distinc-

⁵We note that additional aid may be status-enhancing for aid-dependent countries. Conditional on already receiving aid, more and higher-quality aid can confer status to recipient governments by signaling recipient’s strategic value, higher-quality institutions, and greater ability to procure additional funding (Bermeo 2018, Dolan 2020). However, in this project, we focus on the stylized dichotomy between being an aid recipient and being an aid donor rather than intra-aid-recipient status conferral.

tion is often signaled by membership in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD. Members of the DAC are industrialized, primarily Western donors with well-established aid programs that follow similar norms of aid-giving. Alternatively, more than thirty donors operate outside the DAC and their aid practices differ in systematic ways (Woods 2008, Dreher *et al.* 2011). The latter group is less developed and less inclined to call themselves “donors”, often preferring the moniker “providers of South-South cooperation” (Smith *et al.* 2010). Many in this group recently accepted, or continue to accept, foreign aid from the DAC. The rise of non-DAC donors and the desire for their integration with traditional aid practices became a formal part of the Paris Declaration and DAC agenda in 2005. In 2006, the World Bank held a conference on “Emerging Donors in the Development Community” (Mawdsley 2010). This attention helped solidify a distinct group identity, even if the amount of divergence from Western aid practices varies (Asmus *et al.* 2017). As Dreher *et al.* (2013) point out, it is less about the newness of non-DAC donors’ aid programs, and more about public perceptions of “toxic” or “rogue” aid among this group that make the “emerging” donor group salient (Naim 2007).

China is at the forefront of this group, and a growing literature traces changes in approval of China in response to Chinese aid giving in sub-Saharan Africa (Blair *et al.* 2019, Dreher *et al.* 2020, Jones 2018), Latin America (Eichenauer *et al.* 2021), and Southeast Asia (Custer *et al.* 2018, Mattingly & Sundquist 2021). Foreign aid has been a useful way for emerging donors to compete for international recognition.⁶ Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić illustrates this point in a recent statement that “China moved from a developing country receiving international aid to a superpower” (N1 Belgrade 2021). In a more direct example of status competition within the emerging donor group, Asmus *et al.* (2021) find that India increases its aid allocations to locations where China has recently experienced public opinion gains.

⁶Why can’t all states use foreign aid to enhance their status? Government resources are finite and there is an important tradeoff between foreign and domestic allocations. This implies a political budget constraint that impedes potential new donors, even those who have the resources, from using foreign aid as a status-enhancing strategy. For example, while India is eager to reframe itself as a donor, domestic poverty means that “the transfer of resources to other countries... would be unpopular” (Price 2004, 10)

Foreign aid thus has meaningful membership communities and implications for international status. The salience of group identities provides an opportunity to test whether status-changing information for some states affects the status of other, uninvolved states. Do changing aid relationships affect the status of states within or across different groups?

4 Experimental Design

We test our expanded framework with an online information experiment, preregistered at EGAP, administered by the online survey firm Lucid on 1176 US respondents on June 1, 2020. Lucid’s sample is nationally-representative by age, gender, ethnicity and region and we show balance across treatment and control conditions in Appendix A.3.⁷

We expect that changes in status for any actor will be most pronounced when they are unexpected. Therefore, we should be more likely to detect effects when an aid transaction provides new information about both sides of a transaction. Transactions that change who gives aid *and* who receives aid are a most-likely case to witness updating about status-changing events. However, the circumstances under which foreign aid donors become recipients and vis-a-versa are limited. It is unusual for states that do not already receive aid to credibly accept aid under most circumstances. The US, for one, doesn’t accept development aid. High-income, high-status states primarily accept aid in the wake of natural disasters or financial crises. Thus, changes in category from donor to recipient will be more rare and most likely to occur in emergency conditions. For example, foreign aid poured into Greece during the Eurozone crisis, Japan following the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and France following the fire at Notre Dame. The United States turned down foreign aid from both Canada and Cuba following Hurricane Katrina because it was worried about how that action would be perceived (Brinkley & Smith 2005). Notably, foreign aid offered in emergency situations is unlikely to change the economic or military capacity of donors or recipients in meaning-

⁷The survey was fielded on a sample of 1,532 US respondents; however, only 1176 passed standard attention checks. We demonstrate that our results are robust to additional forms of attention checks in Appendix A.4 in line with recent findings by Aronow *et al.* (2020) on Lucid’s decline in sample quality in 2020.

ful ways. These acts may be more symbolic than substantive, yet they can still impact perceptions of international status in meaningful ways.

As in Churchill’s adage, “never let a good crisis go to waste,” crisis situations are an opportunity for states to attempt status increases (Katzenstein & Seybert 2018). We work to identify status changes during COVID-19, where foreign aid was one of many status-seeking activities states pursued during the pandemic.⁸ The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on traditional Western donors in early 2020 led many of these countries to roll back their aid programs. Non-Western donors took this opportunity to offer humanitarian assistance to a diverse pool of recipients, including to traditional high-income, high-status states. For example, the US government was sharply criticized for accepting foreign assistance from the Kremlin in April 2020, with weeks of headlines such as “Putin Sends Military Plane with Coronavirus Aid to Help US” and “Russia sends Virus Aid to the US” (Rudnitsky 2020, Troianovski 2020). The acceptance of this aid was highly controversial, and political commentary highlighted that “it is an uncomfortable and humbling spot for the U.S. to find itself in – the world’s richest and most powerful country, one that plays an outsize role in global security issues and international affairs, suddenly turned supplicant.” (Shesgreen & Hjelmgaard 2020). This real-life example motivates our experimental design.⁹

Our choice of a US sample offers external validity, advantages to measurement, and a population for whom the treatment is likely to be salient. First, the US’ role as a superpower makes the opinion of its citizens important to atypical donors seeking to improve their status. States routinely target status-enhancing activities to the American mass public (Goldsmith & Horiuchi 2012).¹⁰ Second, the US is a hard test case as high attachment to US status by Americans biases against finding a decrease in status for the recipient state.¹¹

⁸Importantly, our reanalyses include studies conducted before the pandemic, demonstrating that neither the empirical distinction between individual and relational status nor the impact on third parties is dependent on crisis scenarios.

⁹Aware that the optics of aid acceptance were negative, the US State Department later clarified that the medical equipment was a purchase rather than charity. However, it remained unclear for several weeks whether a grant element was still involved if the goods were provided at below market rates.

¹⁰China, for instance, has invested in Confucius institutes, student exchanges, and other forms of public diplomacy to improve its image among Americans (Custer *et al.* 2018, Shambaugh 2015). India has also sought to “improve India’s image in American minds” (Blarel 2012, 13).

¹¹Americans consistently rate the US as a high-status country. As we ask a US audience to rate the

Importantly, if said decrease occurs, high US status at baseline leaves significant room for respondents to update status negatively. Finally, US citizens generally believe that the US spends a disproportionate amount of its own budget on foreign aid (Milner & Tingley 2013). Reversing the US’ position from that of an aid donor to an aid recipient allows us to sidestep potential issues of respondent numerical-illiteracy and provides ample space for updating status beliefs.¹²

We note that our theory is not US-centric and there are clear shortcomings to the use of a US sample, including bias against finding significant results due to American perceptions of superiority and the reinforcement of Western perspectives in the study of international relations. This initial study validates our theory in a convenient and internationally salient sample of respondents. Our reanalyses of existing survey experiments, described in Section 6, confirm the value of a relative and peer-referent status framework in non-US samples. While reanalyzing previous studies in other sample strengthens the external validity of our results, we urge future research to consider replicating our status analyses in other populations.

Respondents are randomly assigned to read a hypothetical excerpt of a news article about aid acceptance or are directed straight to the outcome measures. For respondents who learn of the US’ aid acceptance, we further randomize the donor country (UK, China and India). The treatment wording for the UK condition appears as follows:

[LONDON] – The [British] government announced that it would be sending a cargo plane full of medical supplies to the United States. The [British] aid is intended to help the US in its fight against the growing coronavirus pandemic.

For the Chinese and Indian aid conditions, we include an additional experimental treatment, randomizing information on the country’s past aid actions. We include the following sentence as a prime of China and India’s identity as emerging aid donors: “[China/India]

US and four other states, perceptions of US status are measured by a domestic rather than international audience. Public opinion data shows that countries’ own publics have consistent and positive ratings of their own favorability, while international audiences are more likely to shift their opinions over time.

¹²Status beliefs are particularly important to the US public; restoring America’s place in the world has been a theme of Obama’s 2008, Trump’s 2016, and Biden’s 2020 campaigns. Respondents in the US also believe that aid increases status (Carnegie & Dolan 2020).

*has been a long time recipient of US foreign aid, and remains a developing country.*¹³ All treatment wordings are provided in Appendix A.1.

The vignette is realistic. The acceptance of a single cargo plane with medical supplies is a small act, but the single plane that arrived from Russia on April 1st, 2020 made headlines for days. We choose language that approximated how the public was informed about this specific event, but are careful to avoid any political commentary.¹⁴ Our treatment, a diplomatic statement about a single donation, is a comparatively-weak prime.

We choose to manipulate hypothetical donor states in our treatment conditions in order to evaluate multiple donors simultaneously. While the case of Russian aid motivates our treatment, we cannot pair the Russian example with other donations. This would manipulate hypothetical and real examples across treatment conditions, which would result in a bundled treatment. While hypothetical cases might introduce additional challenges to our study if respondents don't find the example plausible, we believe this offers a conservative estimate of the treatment effect. We choose to include China as a hypothetical donor country because China has played the largest role in distributing virus-specific aid and its foreign aid activities have been framed as a threat to US interests. To explore network dynamics *within* the emerging donor status community, we also include India. Indian aid has received less attention than Chinese aid, meaning that respondents should have fewer prior beliefs. Finally, to explore status implications *across* status groupings, we include the United Kingdom as a hypothetical aid-provider. The UK and the US should plausibly be in the same peer group.

The word "status" invokes multiple connotations in the minds of the public. Having a high status in the international community might be interpreted as "being powerful," "being a good example," or "being respected" (Powers & Renshon 2021).¹⁵ Rather than bundle these connotations, we invoke a specific meaning of status that isn't conflated with power. Status is position in a hierarchy, so we focus on "what rights and respect" a high status actor can

¹³We chose not to add a former behavior prime for the United Kingdom in order to preserve external validity.

¹⁴Actual news coverage from major outlets used much stronger rhetoric than our prime, going as far as to portray the act as "turning the tables" of international standing between Russia and the US (Troianovski 2020).

¹⁵94.8% of respondents in the author's sample report that status is valuable.

expect (Dafoe *et al.* 2014). Therefore, we ask “How much respect do other countries have for the following countries?” We ask respondents to rate each country from 1 (least respected) to 100 (most respected).¹⁶ These questions prompt respondents to think about second-order opinions – not how they personally see the United States or other comparison countries, but how they think the United States and other countries are seen by others. As Fiske *et al.* (1999) note, respect is also divorced from positive affect. Dimensions of liking and respect operate reciprocally so one usually envies high-status groups, but does not necessarily like them.

Our design allows us to evaluate status at multiple levels (individual and relational) and for multiple actors. Regardless of which treatment respondents receive, they are asked about the respect of multiple countries. We focus on their evaluation of the US, the UK, India, and China.¹⁷ While the first country represents the recipient, the other three represent the manipulated donor. Therefore, each respondent rates individual (both countries in the transaction), bilateral (both countries in the transaction relative to each-other), and third-party (two non-manipulated countries) status perceptions.

Finally, our question wording allows us to measure status changes in several ways. We first analyze country’s individual status *rating* on a 1-100 scale. This measure is closest to the existing experimental status literature. To measure relational status, we also analyze the *closeness* of status ratings for country pairs by subtracting the individual value of status for one country from each other country. We also use the rating information to code each respondent’s hierarchical *ranking* among the five countries. As we theorize, it is possible for a country’s individual rating and closeness to change without affecting its rank.

¹⁶Question wording is based on Carnegie & Dolan (2020) who in turn rely on the psychology literature, where “status” is qualified as “respect, prestige.” See Pettit & Lount (2010) and Pettit *et al.* (2013).

¹⁷We randomize the ordering of of countries.

5 Results

We present several sets of results. First, we confirm that sending aid has a positive effect on perceptions of (some) donors. However, not all donors and not all recipients of aid see changes in their status as a result of information about aid. Our results on relative status illuminate some of these discrepancies. We present evidence that the relative *closeness* between two given countries may change, but that the *rank* of countries in the international system does not change in response to aid information. Finally, we show that respondents recognize China and India as part of a group of emerging donors who have recently received aid from the United States.

Turning to our main findings, the presentation of results for individual respect is shown in Figure 2. Respondents rated each country individually; this measure is most similar to previous measures of status in the public opinion literature. Group means are depicted in Figure 2.A by treatment (aid from China, India, or the UK) and control. Even though the act is symbolic, we see changes in respect for countries sending the hypothetical plane. Figure 2.B shows the average treatment effect (ATE) for the perceived respect of a given country by treatment. For example, the topmost row represents the ATE on American respect when the United Kingdom provides aid to the United States.

As expected, India’s respect increases when it gives aid (8.43, $p = 0.00$) and China’s status increases when China gives aid (6.64, $p = 0.01$). However, the UK’s respect rating does not increase with information about British aid (1.45, $p = 0.48$). It’s possible that respondents may not update their perceptions of the UK because they already believe the UK to be the type of country that provides aid. In other words, the UK’s actions are not “against type” so they do not provide novel information on which to update perceptions of status. It’s also possible that because the respect ratings of the UK are already high, respondents face a ceiling effect.

Strikingly, we also find that aid from China and India increases the individual respect of third-parties uninvolved in the transaction. The UK’s respect increases significantly when India gives aid (4.15, $p = 0.04$) and substantively, though not significantly, when China does

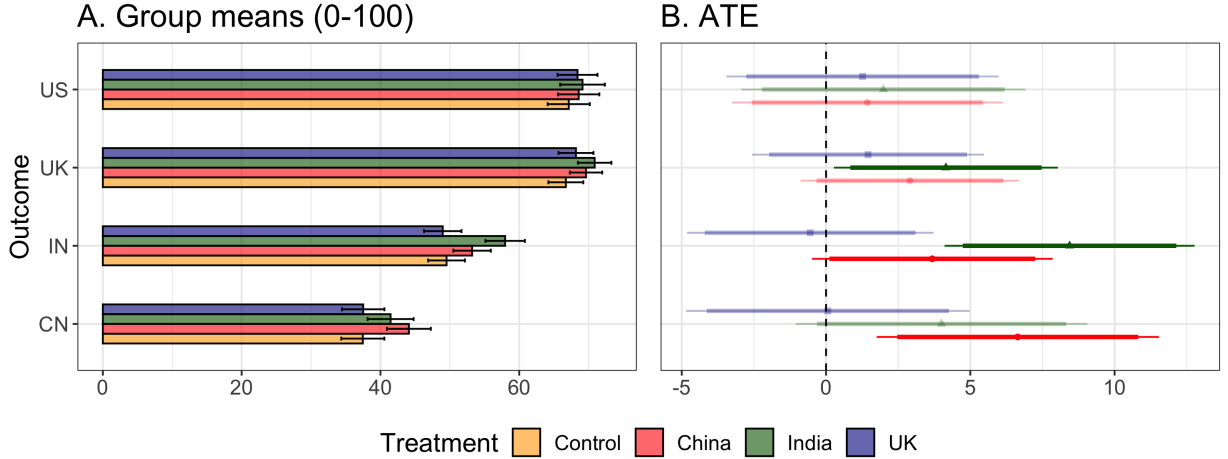


Figure 2: *Individual status*: In (A), group means of each treatment condition are calculated with 95% confidence intervals for each outcome, the individual status of four states (China, India, the UK, and the US). The treatments, aid to the US from China, India, and the UK, are compared to a control of no information for each outcome. In (B), OLS estimates on the effect of treatment on the outcomes with 95% robust standard errors are presented.

(2.90, $p = 0.14$). India's respect also increases in response to information about Chinese aid (3.68, $p = 0.09$). The same is true for China's respect, which substantively increases when India gives aid (4.00, $p = 0.12$) even as it misses standard levels of significance. Empirically, status-actions reverberate further through the international system than has been previously tested. The results further mirror the middle example of status change in Figure 1, where we demonstrated the possibility that status-improvements by one state can positively impact the perceived status of non-acting states. Information about one emerging donor impacts perceptions of the other. The upward movement of the UK may also imply that respondents update British status as a way to preserve the distinction between established and emerging donors. We investigate whether this increase is enough to offset relative status changes next.

In evaluating relational status, we turn first to our measure of closeness. We transform the dependent variable from individual to relational closeness by subtracting the individual respect of one state in each treatment pair from the other. For ease of interpretation, we always subtract the status of the lower ranked state from the higher ranked state meaning that negative values represent decreased distance, or increased closeness. For example, to calculate the respect of India relative to the US, we subtract India's value from the US's value

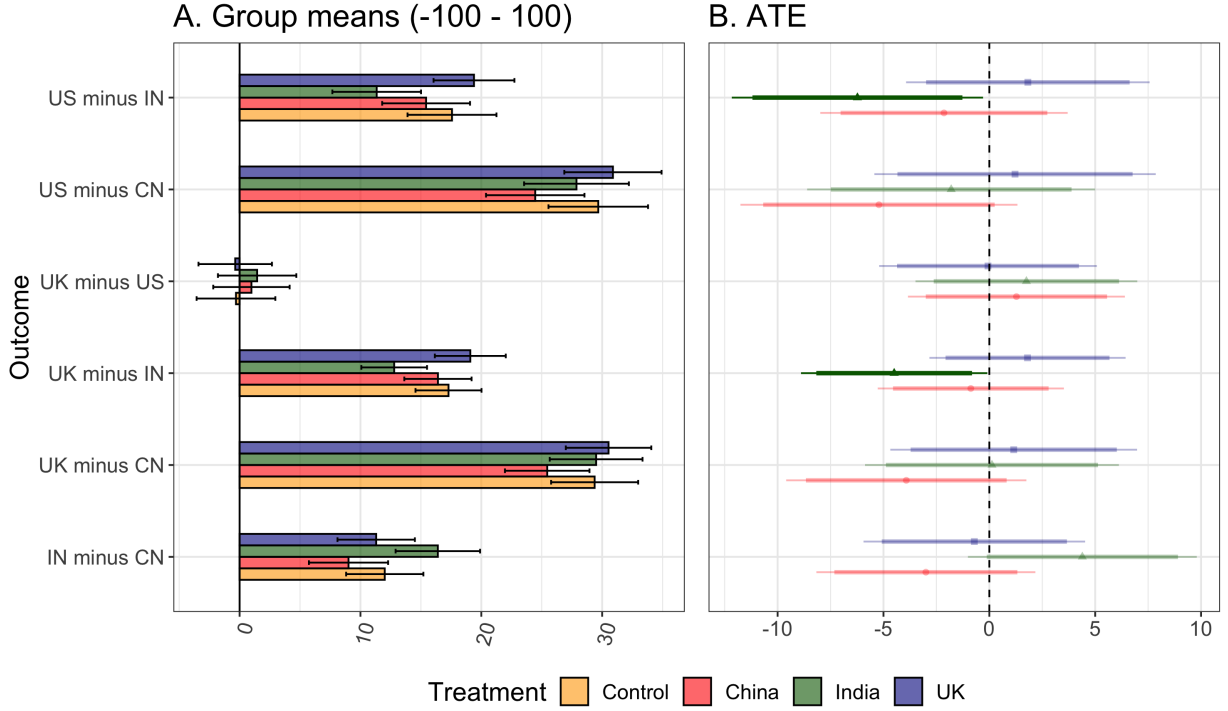


Figure 3: *Relative status (closeness)*: In (A), group means of each treatment condition are calculated with 95% confidence intervals for each outcome, the relative status of four states (China, India, the UK, and the US) compared to each other. The treatments, aid to the US from China, India, and the UK, are compared to a control of no information for each outcome. The outcomes are calculated by subtracting the status value of one country from another. In (B), OLS estimates on the effect of treatment on each outcome with 95% robust standard errors.

for each respondent. A negative treatment effect would indicate that Indian and American respect has become closer. Figure 3.A presents the mean difference of each pair relative to the control group, along with 95% confidence intervals. Figure 3.B shows the ATE of each donor treatment on the relative closeness between country pairs.

We find that the relative closeness between India and the US increases (that is, India's respect becomes closer to that of the US) when participants are given information that the US received aid from India (-6.23, $p = 0.04$). India's respect increases relative to the US by one fifth of a standard deviation, a statistically and substantially significant increase. China's respect relative to the US moves in the same direction in response to the Chinese aid treatment, but the effect misses significance (-5.21, $p = 0.12$). While these results logically

follow from each countries' individual movement (or lack therefore), the comparative decline of the US becomes important when Americans care about relative losses (Brutger & Rathbun Forthcoming, Mutz & Lee 2020). Looking just at the US would suggest that respondents don't punish the US for a status-denying act. We would miss the fact that accepting aid does indeed have consequences for the US when viewed through the lens of status competition. Perhaps because it is already an established donor, the UK aid treatment condition does not effect the relative position on the US (0.06, $p = 0.98$).

The relative respect of third-parties, or parties not involved in the aid transaction, also changes. British respect decreases relative to India when India gives aid (-4.49, $p = 0.04$). While the UK's individual respect did increase slightly, the movement is not large enough to counter the substantial increase in Indian respect when India provides aid. The relative decline of the UK in comparison to India mirrors the relative decline of the US in comparison to India. This suggests that a relative status decline impacts members of the traditional-donor group. On the other hand, Indian respect increases relative to China when India gives aid (4.39, $p = 0.11$). Recall that both China and India's status increased in the Indian aid treatment and both can be considered part of a group of emerging donors. Respondents still reward India more than China when India gives aid. Similarly, India's status relative to China decreases (-2.99, $p = 0.25$) when China gives aid, though the effect is statistically insignificant. This reaffirms the importance of studying both individual and relative respect, as positive peer effects and heightened status-competition can coexist.

To better understand how symbolic gestures affect international hierarchy, we conduct a test of relative status using our measure of rank. To do so, we transform each respondents' rating of individual status into a relative rank – the highest-rated state by an individual receives a rank of 1 while the lowest-rated state receives a rank of 4. Figure 4 then displays the ATE from ordered probit estimations of our three donor treatments (Chinese, Indian, and British aid).¹⁸

¹⁸We also conduct Wilcoxon rank sum tests and find some evidence that bilateral transactions can change international hierarchies within the transaction pair, but not for the larger international arena. Results available from the authors upon request.

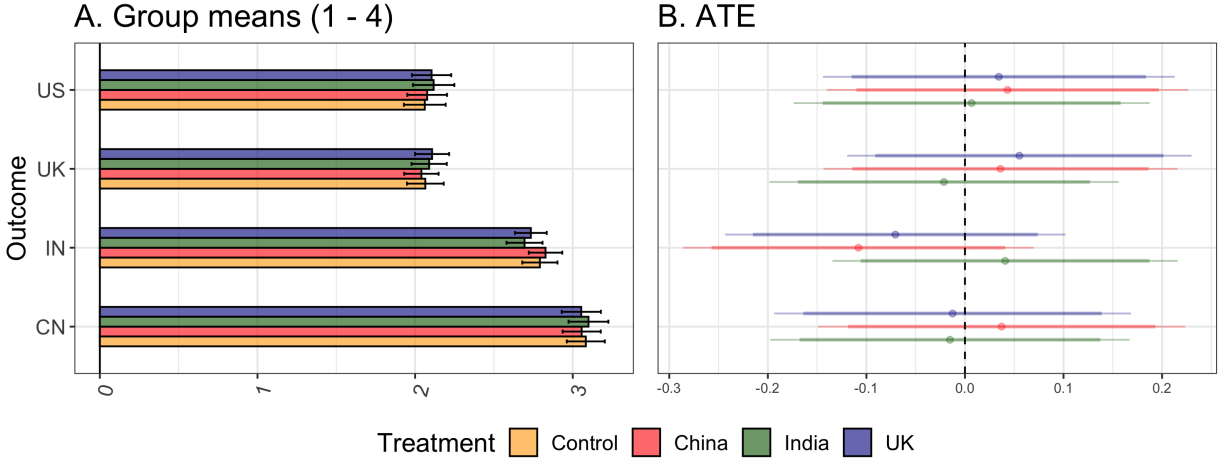


Figure 4: *Relative status (rank)*: In (A), group means of each treatment condition are calculated with 95% confidence intervals for each outcome, the rank status of four states (China, India, the UK, and the US). The treatments, aid to the US from China, India, and the UK, are compared to a control of no information for each outcome. The outcomes are calculated by transforming the rating of each country outcome into its rank among all other country ratings. In (B), ordered probit estimates on the effect of treatment on relative rank with 95% robust standard errors.

Compared to the individual and closeness measures, we see no movement in ranked respect as a result of any treatment. Donors do not significantly increase in rank. China and India might increase their rank in the expected direction when they provide aid, but neither manages to achieve significant change. The UK's rank is also static. Similarly, recipients do not decrease in rank. The US did not change its rank for any of the three treatments. This implies that changes in relative closeness were not large enough to impact relative rank. Importantly, third-party states do not see significant changes in rank in response to any treatment.

Finally, to further unpack our results, we turn to our results from an additional treatment priming the former recipient status of India and China. In Figure 5, we compare the average treatment effects of the prime within the donor treatments, that is, India/China compared to India/China plus the additional prime, for the individual status of a given country. For this analysis, we separate the presentation of our results by treatment. The top (bottom) panels of Figures 5.A and 5.B shows the effect of Chinese (Indian) aid for each of our four

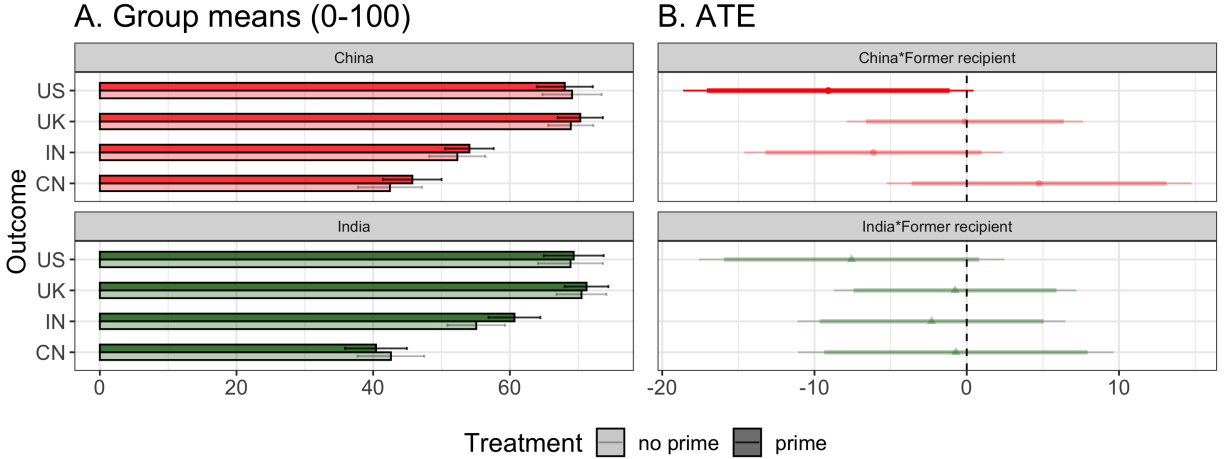


Figure 5: *Prime treatment*: In (A), group means of each treatment condition are calculated with 95% confidence intervals for each outcome, the individual status of four states (China, India, the UK, and the US). The two treatment conditions shown are aid from China (top) and India (bottom) to the US. The opaque bars represent no additional information while the solid bars represent information that China and India, respectively, are former aid recipients. In (B), OLS estimates on the effect of treatment on the outcomes with 95% robust standard errors are presented. The coefficients represent the effect of additional information that China and India are former aid recipients, relative to information only that the China and India gave aid to the US.

outcome measures. Priming respondents that India and China were former aid recipients has no impact on respondents' perceptions of Indian or Chinese respect. These null effects suggest that information that these countries are former aid recipients is likely bundled into respondents' understanding of the countries. The former recipient prime does however decrease respect for the United States when China ($p = 0.06$) and India ($p = 0.13$) provide aid for the country. As people are aware that the US traditionally gives, rather than receives, aid, priming respondents that countries donating aid to the US used to receive aid further penalizes the US's status. Overall, respondents seem to be aware of donor categorization, consider membership in these communities as part of states' identity, and update their perceptions of state status based on compliance with group reputations.

Heterogenous effects amongst respondents with different levels of nationalism and political ideology provide additional evidence that peer groupings, or lack of peer groupings, are driving which models of relative status change we observe. People who directly or indirectly

express beliefs in the superiority of a given nation are less likely to update the relative status of this nation. Although space constraints prevent us from discussing some of the nuances of our findings, we report heterogeneous effects of treatment by partisanship and nationalism in Appendix C. Conservatives are less likely than liberals to update relative status, particularly for the US relative to other nations. Similarly, high-nationalism individuals are less likely to update their perceptions of state status across almost every treatment condition and outcome. Individuals who find particular countries exceptional may be less likely to consider other countries comparable, making these respondents unlikely to respond to information about status-changing actions.

6 Reanalyzing the experimental aid and status literature

Our original survey results reaffirm the relationship between foreign aid and international status, but they also offer important caveats. States may see *relative* changes in status due to foreign aid, but these changes are confined to situations in which foreign aid provides new information about the relationship between states. In light of these findings, we return to the existing literature to demonstrate how an expanded framework can productively nuance prior conclusions. Specifically, we reanalyze three studies by Dietrich *et al.* (2018), Mattingly & Sundquist (2021) and Carnegie & Dolan (2020). All three experiments ask respondents about the status of third-party states. As an added benefit all three studies are also fielded on non-US samples.

Appendix B describes the full replication process and Table 1 outlines each paper’s findings about the implications of status-enhancing actions for *individual* status. All three studies lay important groundwork in understanding the relationship between foreign aid and international status. Our contribution is to extend their analyses to include measures of *relative* status. We reiterate that opening up different levels of analyses has novel and important implications for understanding status-seeking activity.

| Paper | Treatment | Outcome | Sample | Main results | Reanalysis results |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dietrich <i>et al.</i> (2018) | USAID branding | Does [X country] have “a lot” of influence on Bangladesh or “not much” influence on Bangladesh | 2,294 Bangladeshi citizens | USAID branding increases the perceived influence of the US in Bangladesh | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased influence of Arab states • Decreased influence of Arab states compared to USA, Indonesia, India, UK and China • No relative effects for other third-parties |
| Mattingly & Sundquist (2021) | Social media statements about Chinese donations to the Indian Red Cross and WHO | Four composite measures: perceptions of the Chinese government, perceptions of the Chinese people, attitudes about India’s policies towards China, perceptions of China’s response to COVID-19 | 4,677 Indian citizens | Twitter information about Chinese foreign aid increases positive perceptions of Chinese policies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased positive perceptions of Chinese policies/-government compared to US policies and government • Increase in Chinese rank for policies/government compared to the US |
| Carnegie & Dolan (2020) | Information that “India did not ask for outside assistance” | Please tell me the number you think best represents India’s status relative to the other countries in the world from 1 (the absolute lowest status country in the world) to 100 (the absolute highest status country in the world) | 756 Indian citizens | Rejection of foreign aid increases India’s international status among US respondents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of foreign aid does not increase India’s rank in the international system • Rejection does not change the rank of any other country in the international system |

Table 1: *Foreign aid and international status reanalyzed*

In Dietrich *et al.* (2018), information about the USAID brand is shown to improve the perceived influence of the US amongst Bangladeshi citizens. We show in our reanalysis of the experiment that the information affects not only perceptions of the US, but of other states in the international community. USAID’s brand also changes how Bangladeshi citizens perceive Arab states and Pakistan, even though neither state was primed in the experimental treatment. Arab states see their individual influence decrease as well as their influence relative to the US, India, and others. These results point to a significant contagion effect of aid branding in which the presence of foreign aid from one donor actually changes the perceived influence of other donors. While the results of our original survey experiment are more indicative of spillovers between peers, here, the results are more in line with status competition. The decline of Arab states’ individual influence mirrors the possibility we illustrate in the rightmost panel of Figure 1, whereby when one state does something status-enhancing, the international community lowers their impression of other actors who do not act in the same way. This also fits with work by Blair *et al.* (2019), although we note that this occurs amongst some aid donors but not others. For example, other OECD donors like Germany and Australia are not affected by US aid branding, perhaps because they are already in the same peer group. This suggests that salient group identities likely vary from case to case, with regional groupings adding an additional dimension. While we do not directly theorize the circumstances under which specific third-party states will experience status changes, we note that relative status movement captures an important dynamic of status change in the international system.

The importance of international ripple effects is also underscored by Mattingly & Sundquist (2021). The authors find that Chinese tweets about aid affect perceptions of China among Indian respondents. In line with theories of status competition, we find that positive perceptions of China *also* increase relative to the United States (whose actions were not manipulated in the experiment). Like the results for US status in our original survey experiment, here, the relative change occurs mechanically from the fact that perceptions of China increase in a positive direction while perceptions of the US remain unchanged. Unlike in our original

survey, information about Chinese aid might fully reverse Indian respondents’ preferences. While US policies and governance structures are preferred in the control condition, Indian respondents who read tweets about Chinese aid prefer Chinese systems, though the rank reversal is not statistically significant at conventional levels. The addition of network-based analysis of Mattingly & Sundquist (2021) not only supports their initial conclusion, but offers additional evidence of the significant effects of Chinese aid on China’s, and the US’, international reputation.

Finally, Carnegie & Dolan (2020) show that India’s refusal to accept disaster aid increases its perceived international status among US respondents. They also report in their paper that India’s rank in the international system does not change. When we reanalyze their results, we find that the refusal to accept aid does not change the rank for any other state in the international system either. While India’s aid rejection is indicative of positive peer effects – it triggers decreases in rank for recipients (i.e. India, Kenya and Haiti) and increases in rank for donors (i.e. Germany and China) – none of these movements are statistically significant. It’s possible that there is not enough power to detect spillover implications in the larger donor and recipient peer groups. It could also be the case that the other countries respondents ranked did not belong to status communities for which the treatment was relevant. Finally, it’s possible that while aid rejection may improve international status in isolation, its role is overestimated if we don’t take into account the lack of change in the international hierarchy. This squares with the results of our main study, which suggest that a systematic approach opens up not just new opportunities for relative change but also limitations to meaningful change in the world order.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Our original survey results reaffirm the relationship between foreign aid and international status, but, in line with findings from our replication studies, we offer important caveats. While new donors can improve their status through donating foreign aid, their status may

not improve relative to all other states in the international system. We offer evidence that, at least in the case of small acts, states' status-changing actions may be enhanced or limited by their peer group. Status actions reverberate through the international system and *how* they reverberate depends on states' peers. Status communities help explain why China and India see their individual status rise when the other state gives aid. These groupings also explain why India's status relative to China increases when India gives aid. In contrast, the US and the UK seemingly belong to the same community. Aid to the US from India and China decreases both the US and the UK's status relative to these states.

In line with these results, we see in our exploratory analyses of heterogeneous effects that people with higher-than-average levels of nationalism and conservatism are much less likely to update their perceptions of status based on information about aid. Our results are driven by low-nationalism and low-conservatism people. In other words, people who consider some states exceptional, or peerless, may be unwilling to update their perceptions of international status writ large. Replications of existing experimental work on international status provide additional support for our theory of peer group boundaries in international status changes. Three studies fielded before our survey in diverse populations all consistently show changes in the effect of foreign aid on relative international status in cases of peer communities, but not in unrelated states. Peer communities, and peoples' ability to recognize states as peers, constrain state status changes.

Our analyses only scratch the surface of what it means for status to be a relative and peer-referent concept. We establish that status-enhancing actions are referential, but individual and relative status implications do not always flow in the same direction. State actions impact the status of some third-party states but not others. This lends credence to previous work on status competition *within* communities (rather than *across* them) (Rathbun *et al.* 2021, Renshon 2017). We thus set forth a robust research agenda about how and *for whom* status changes. Future work can and should theorize about the bounds and fluidity of peer communities under various circumstances. We encourage researchers to pursue an agenda that centers around relative status and its capacity to change the international system.

For policymakers, our findings should also generate clear prescriptions for developing strategies to encourage states to act in pro-social ways. For example, motivating states to engage in greater commitment to human rights may be less productive if the Scandinavian countries are the standard to which states expect to be compared. For states outside of this peer group and lower in the international hierarchy, changes in a lower-ranked state's status won't affect its standing relative to Norway and those efforts may therefore seem fruitless. However, generating new types of peers may be one means of encouraging status competition. For example, in the wake of the January 6th right-wing attack on the US capitol, pundits and experts alike lamented the US' loss of status, with one official noting "It is a very sad day in America when an official from corrupt and authoritarian Venezuela expresses 'concern for the violent events' at the U.S. Capitol and 'hopes that the American people will open a new path toward stability and social justice'" (Arnson *et al.* 2021). While the US was not rendered less democratic than Venezuela by the attack, the quoted official implicitly sees the US' status decline in relation to Venezuela, a state which might not normally be included amongst the US's peer nations. Policymakers should pay attention to both existing peer groups and potential reshaping of peer groups to generate pressure for policy changes.

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A Survey experiment

The survey protocol for this survey experiment was submitted to the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Subjects Committee prior to launching the survey experiment and was granted an exemption under federal regulation 45 CFR 46.104 (2)(ii). The informed consent protocol were designed in line with the APSA Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research. We do not include any deceptive material, intervene in political processes, or collect sensitive and/or personally identifiable information.

We recruited participants via the platform Lucid, which implements an automated marketplace to connect research participants to researchers. Participants, all US-based, were paid \$1 per completed interview. Below is the text of our consent protocol. Respondents were required to give affirmative consent before proceeding to the survey experiment.

You are invited to participate in a research study that will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked to answer some questions about yourself and your preferences.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you for participating. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, to end participation at any time for any reason, or to refuse to answer any individual question without penalty or loss of compensation. The researcher will not know your name, and no identifying information will be connected to your survey answers in any way. The survey is therefore anonymous.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the survey or your rights or welfare as a research subject, contact [Author name] at [Author email]. If you would like to talk with someone other than the researchers to discuss problems or concerns, to discuss situations in the event that a member of the research team is not available, or to discuss your rights as a research participant, you may contact the [Author’s university] Human Subjects Committee, [phone number], [email]. Additional information is available at [Link to statement of research participant’s rights at Author’s university].

If you would like to participate, simply click the ‘I agree to participate’ box below, then click the →→→ button to start the survey.

A.1 Vignettes

The format of the treatment, including the description of the aid arriving in a cargo plane, is based on the real delivery of medical supplies to the United States from Russia. The vignette reflects actual foreign aid acceptance by the United States and provides a floor effect of this information on public opinion. Actual news articles from the New York Times and USAToday have much stronger language regarding the acceptance of aid by the US. The control condition receives no additional info.

[LONDON/DELHI/BEIJING] - The [British/Indian/Chinese] government announced that it would be sending a cargo plane full of medical supplies to the United States. The [British/Indian/Chinese] aid is intended to help the US in its fight against the growing coronavirus pandemic. [No additional info/[India/China] has been a long time recipient of US foreign aid, and remains a developing country.]

A.2 Distribution

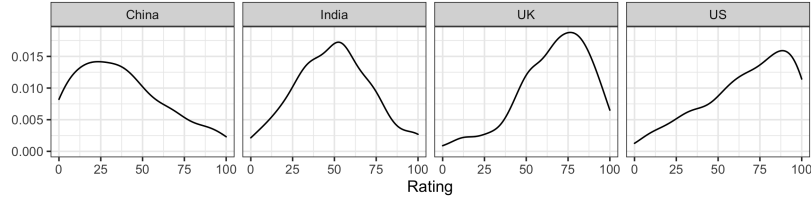


Figure 6: *Respect at Baseline*: Density plots of country ratings for respect by respondents in the control condition.

A.3 Balance tables

| | China (N=301) | | Control (N=278) | | India (N=281) | | UK (N=316) | |
|-----------------|---------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| | Mean | Std. Dev. | Mean | Std. Dev. | Mean | Std. Dev. | Mean | Std. Dev. |
| Age | 46.9 | 16.7 | 47.7 | 17.9 | 49.3 | 17.8 | 47.5 | 17.2 |
| Gender (M=1) | 1.6 | 0.5 | 1.6 | 0.5 | 1.6 | 0.5 | 1.5 | 0.5 |
| Ideology (1-7) | 4.0 | 1.7 | 4.1 | 1.6 | 4.2 | 1.8 | 4.0 | 1.8 |
| Income (1-24) | 8.3 | 7.3 | 7.9 | 6.2 | 7.9 | 6.5 | 8.5 | 6.8 |
| Education (1-8) | 4.1 | 2.0 | 4.3 | 1.9 | 4.3 | 1.9 | 4.2 | 2.0 |

Figure 7: Covariate balance table

A.4 Attention checks

Table 2 presents our main results for the subsample of participants above the first quartile of respondents in timing for the pre-treatment demographic checks. Results are also robust with the subsample of respondents between the first and third quartiles of timing.¹⁹

| | India | China | UK | US | Germany |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| China aid | 2.68 (2.37) | 5.29* (2.79) | 3.17 (2.25) | 0.17 (2.70) | 4.49* (2.25) |
| India aid | 8.39*** (2.45) | 2.70 (2.86) | 5.66* (2.32) | 3.60 (2.86) | 7.70** (2.35) |
| UK aid | 0.10 (2.46) | -0.70 (2.87) | 2.08 (2.40) | -0.20 (2.78) | 2.43 (2.44) |
| R ² | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| Num. obs. | 763 | 765 | 768 | 771 | 769 |

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

Table 2: *Attentive respondents*: Results with respondents above the first quartile timing in pre-treatment demographic checks.

¹⁹Results available from the authors upon request.

B Replication studies

B.1 Dietrich *et al.* (2018)

Dietrich *et al.* (2018) use a survey experiment to test the effect of information about USAID branding on a local development project in Bangladesh on people’s perceptions of influence. Figures 8 and 9 show the individual and relative status effects of information about USAID funding (relative to no information about funding) on the perceived influence of the US, UK, Pakistan, Indonesia, India, Germany, China, Australia, and Arab countries. We note that Dietrich *et al.* (2018) calculate influence on a binary scale which differs from our 0-100 ratings in the original survey. We caution readers about the substantive interpretations of the individual and relative differences in this reanalysis as each respondent could not adjust the ratings of the outcome countries to reflect rank. Individual influence, here as in our own study, is an average across all respondents. Relative (closeness) influence is the average difference between two outcomes across all respondents.

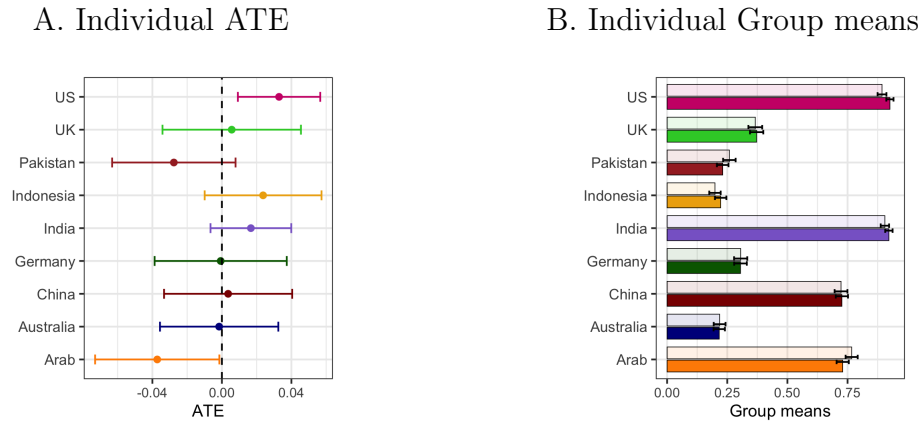


Figure 8: *Dietrich et al. (2018) Individual Status*: Panel A depicts the average treatment effect of US branding of aid projects on perceived influence (0 to 1) of a given country with 95% robust standard errors. Panel B shows the group means of each country by treatment status with 95% confidence intervals.

B.2 Mattingly and Sundquist (2021)

Mattingly & Sundquist (2021)’s primary study examines individual status gains (proxied by outcomes: *Attitudes towards [American/Chinese] people*, *Attitudes towards [American/Chinese] government*, *India should have cooperative policies with [the US/China]*, and *[the US/China] has handled COVID-19 well*). They evaluate the effect of social media statements about Chinese aid to the Indian Red Cross and the World Health Organization. These treatments are evaluated against a control of innocuous social media content. We replicate Mattingly & Sundquist (2021) and extend their data to test for relative status changes for the US and China given information treatment in an Indian population sample.

C. Relative (Closeness) ATE

D. Relative (Closeness) Group means

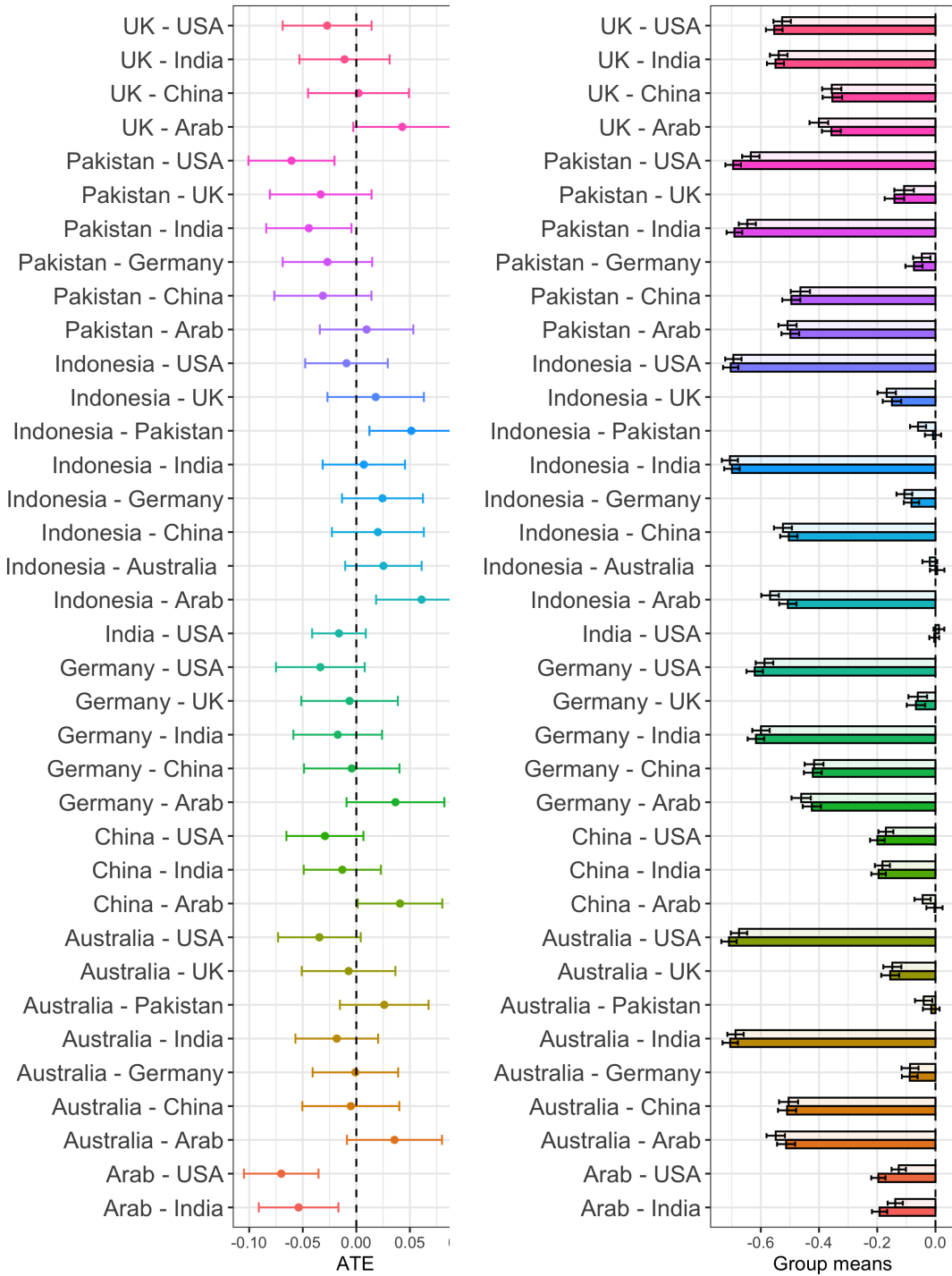


Figure 9: *Dietrich et al. (2018) Relative Status*: Panel C depicts the effect on perceived influence (0 to 1) of a given country compared to another country; outcomes calculated by subtracting the influence of country B from country A and 95% robust standard errors depicted. Panel D shows the group means of each country by treatment status with 95% confidence intervals. Opaque bars indicate control; fully-colored bars treatment.

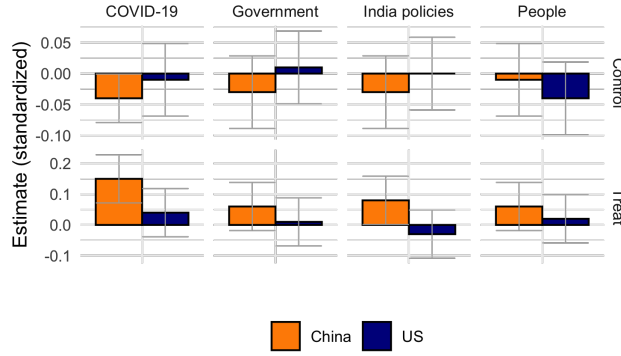


Figure 10: *Mattingly & Sundquist (2021) Replication with Relative Effects*: Columns depict outcomes, colors states for which outcomes were evaluated. Standardized average treatment effects with 95% robust standard errors depicted.

B.3 Carnegie and Dolan (2020)

We replicate Carnegie & Dolan (2020) to test for the relative (rank) difference in status changes for India and other states given information treatment in a US population sample. The authors identify rank status gains by asking respondents to rank states in the international system using the following outcome measure:

Below is a list of several countries, including India. Please rank the following countries in terms of how much international status (respect, prestige) they have among the other countries in the world. To change the order of the list, use your cursor to drag and drop the items. Please order the list so that the country with the most status is at the top of the list, the country with the second most status is next, and so on.

In Table 3, we report ordered probit findings for each state the authors ask about in their constructed international system. We find no significant change in state rank following the aid rejection treatment.²⁰

| | <i>Dependent variable: Rank of [Country]</i> | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | India | Germany | China | Kenya | Indonesia | Venezuela | Haiti |
| Aid Rejection | -0.046 (0.082) | 0.046 (0.067) | 0.087 (0.077) | -0.032 (0.085) | 0.120 (0.080) | -0.078 (0.097) | -0.096 (0.082) |
| Observations | 758 | 758 | 758 | 758 | 758 | 758 | 758 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3: *Carnegie & Dolan (2020) Replication with Systemic Ranking Effects*: Average treatment effect of India's aid rejection on rank of countries. Each model represents a different country's change in rank outcome. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

²⁰Carnegie & Dolan (2020) report ranking results for India in their paper.

C Heterogeneous effects

We expect that conservatives will be less accepting of foreign aid from new, non-western donors, and would be less willing to elevate their international status. For our measure of party ID, we transform a seven point ideological scale into a dichotomous measure. For ease of interpretation, we exclude moderates from this analysis. We find that conservatives and liberals do not differ in their perception of how Chinese aid affects US status. However, liberals are more likely to increase Germany's status when China gives aid, perhaps consistent with a theoretical framework in which liberals are more concerned with fairness in the international system (Brutger & Rathbun Forthcoming) and adjust Germany's status to better reflect its relative position to a newly-respected China.

We also investigate the role of nationalism, using a three item index. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 1) The US is a better country than most, 2) You should support your country even when it is wrong, 3) I prefer to be an American citizen. High nationalism is indicated by values above the median nationalism index score, low otherwise. We expect that more nationalistic individuals will have a stronger preference for the status quo hierarchy, even in light of new information about COVID-19 aid acceptance. We find that this is the case; our results are driven almost entirely by low-nationalism individuals.

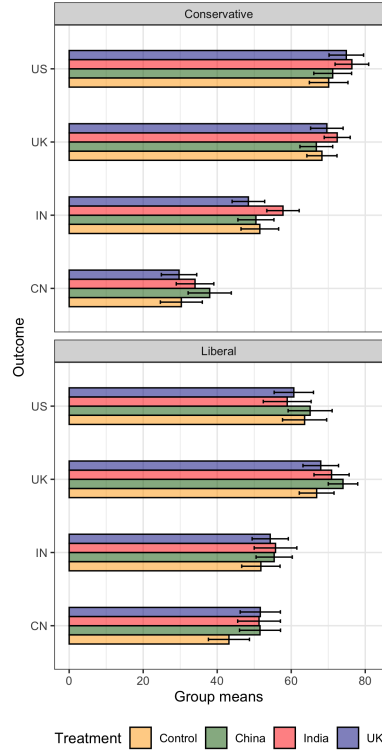


Figure 11: *Individual status by partisanship*: Group means of each country by treatment status with 95% confidence intervals. Panels represent outcomes, y-axis treatment conditions.

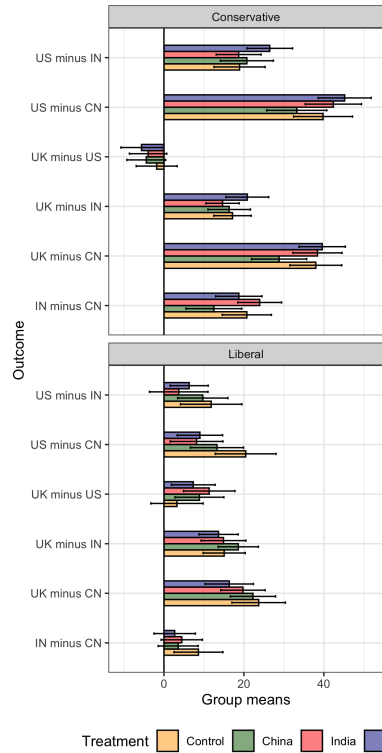


Figure 12: *Relative status by partisanship*: Group means of each country by treatment status with 95% confidence intervals. Panels represent outcomes, x-axis treatment conditions.

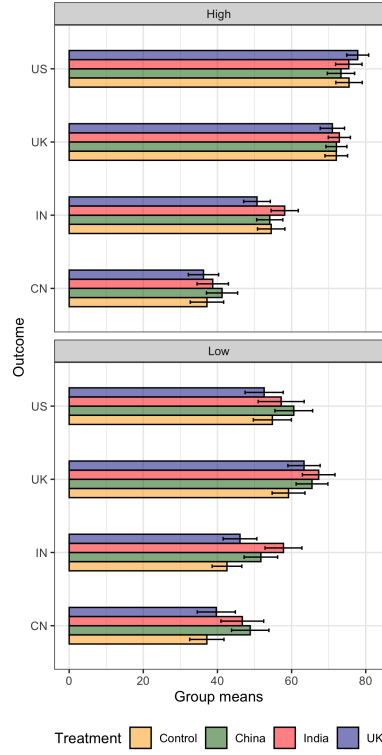


Figure 13: *Individual status by nationalism*: Group means of each country by treatment status with 95% confidence intervals. Panels represent outcomes, y-axis treatment conditions

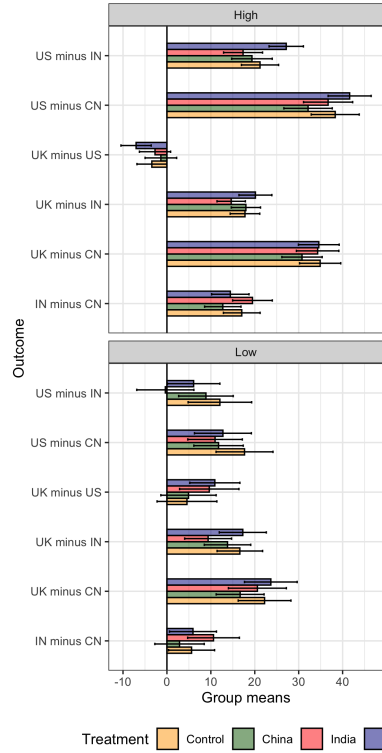


Figure 14: *Relative status by nationalism*: Group means of each country by treatment status with 95% confidence intervals. Panels represent outcomes, x-axis treatment conditions.

D Replication study

Replicating research is a vital component of the scientific process. Below, we detail a failed replication of our original survey. Reporting null results prevents the “file drawer” problem of building scientific knowledge. We explore several potential reasons for the lack of replication, including lower quality samples, the changing nature of the pandemic, and growing resentment towards China. As with all experiments with null results, we cannot conclusively say why one experiment produced significant effects and the other did not. We are confident in our original survey because the same patterns hold when reanalyzing three additional surveys by other researchers.

We fielded an exact replication of our study on June 29, 2020 on a sample of 1221 Americans quota-sampled to census margins. Participants were recruited via the online survey platform Lucid, which implements an automated marketplace to connect research participants to researchers. We report results for the 1082 respondents who passed a pre-treatment attention check.

The results mirror, but do not exactly replicate, our main study. Notably, the Indian aid treatment appears to *decrease* the status of Germany, China, and the UK in comparison to India. Unlike our original study, we do see changes in countries’ rank in response to the Indian aid treatment. India rises in rank (0.25 points on average) while the UK falls. China’s aid elicits no significant changes in individual or relative status for any countries, including China. The latter finding may be indicative of public opinion solidifying towards China after several months of media focus on China’s blame for the pandemic. The UK treatment again does not change perceptions of state status.

The replication confirms our intuition that relative status changes in ways not predicted by individual status changes: India moves closer in status to Germany as a result of slight increases in India’s status and slight decreases in Germany’s status, for example. Additionally, the effect of aid information on status changes, both individual and relative, seems to be more stark for some country pairs than others. Indian aid, for example, increases India’s status relative to the UK but not relative to the US.

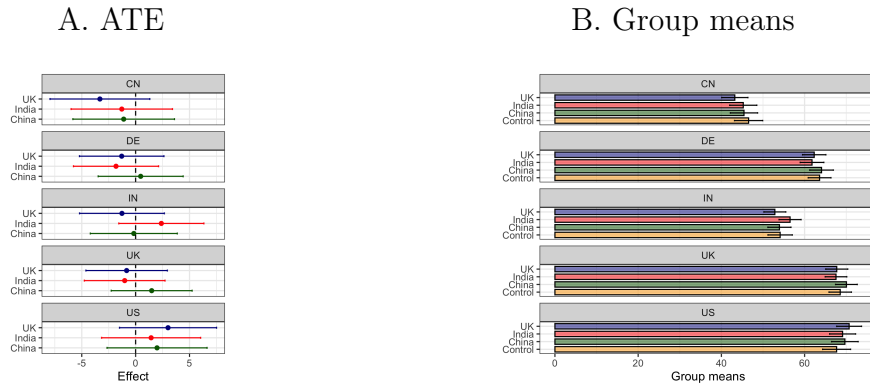
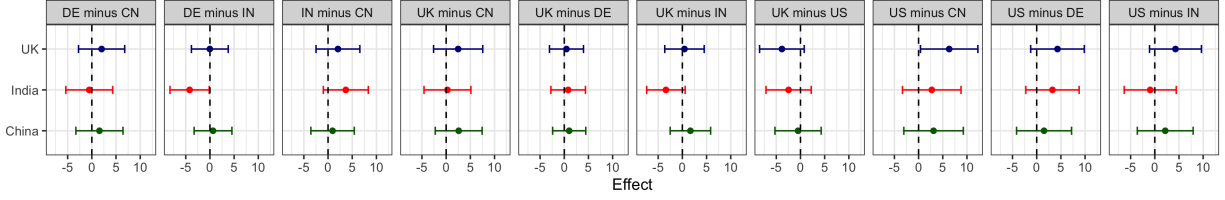


Figure 15: *Individual status*: In (A), OLS estimates on the effect of treatment on the individual status of five states (China, Germany, India, the UK, and the US) with 95% robust standard errors. The treatments (rows), aid to the US from China, India, and the UK, are compared to a control of no information for each outcome (panels). In (B), group means of each treatment condition (rows) are calculated with 95% confidence intervals for each outcome (panels) to provide a sense of magnitude.

However, while the replication reiterates the distinction between individual and relational sta-

A. ATE



B. Group means

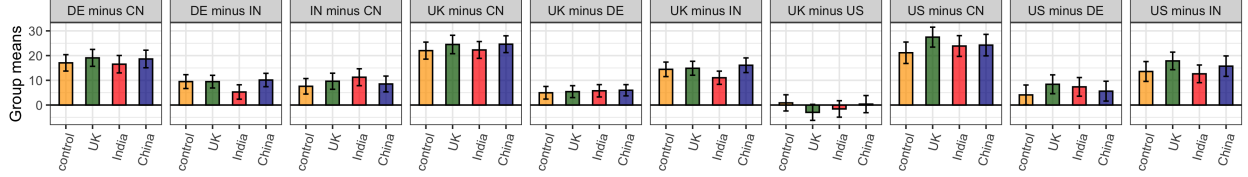


Figure 16: *Relative status (closeness)*: In (A), OLS estimates on the effect of treatment on the relative status of five states (China, Germany, India, the UK, and the US) compared to each other with 95% robust standard errors. The treatments (columns), aid to the US from China, India, and the UK, are compared to a control of no information for each outcome (panels). The outcomes are calculated by subtracting the status value of one country from another to obtain a measure of “closeness” between the two states. In (B), group means of each treatment condition (columns) are calculated with 95% confidence intervals for each outcome (panels) to provide a sense of magnitude.

tus, it is not an exact match for our main results. We do not directly test the discrepancies between the two studies but do posit several potential explanations for the differences in results. First, the quality of respondents on Lucid decreased dramatically over the course of the pandemic. Inattentiveness and differential sample composition could explain some of the differences in the two studies. Second, differences in timing between the first and second study could have led respondents to differently respond to the information prompt. The rise of the attention to the Black Lives Matter movement and decreases in COVID-19 rates could have affected the salience of the information we prompt. Finally, it’s possible that our initial study found spurious results. We think this is unlikely because our main results correspond with reanalyses of previous studies on aid and status. We emphasize that even as the results do not replicate exactly, our larger theory of relative status movement remains salient for understanding the replication study. Future research should examine the circumstances under which status-changing actions affect relative status for some states and not others.

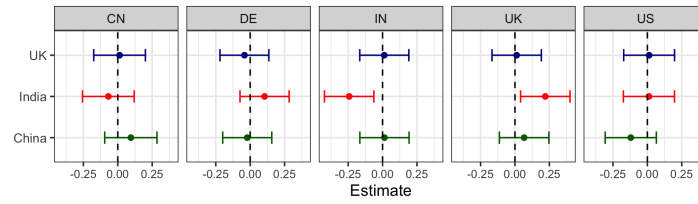


Figure 17: *Relative status (rank)*: Ordered probit estimates on the effect of treatment on relative rank with 95% robust standard errors. The outcomes are calculated by transforming the rating of each country outcome into its rank among all other country ratings