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ARTICLE

Biased bureaucrats and the policies of international organizations

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Abstract

This article advances a novel argument about the policy output of international organizations (IOs) by highlighting the role of individual staffers. We approach them as purposive actors carrying heterogeneous ideological biases that materially shape their policy choices on the job. Pursuing this argument with an empirical focus on the International Monetary Fund (IMF), we collected individual-level information on the careers of 835 IMF "mission chiefs"—staffers with primary responsibility for a particular member state—and matched them to newly coded data on more than 15,000 IMF-mandated policy conditions over the 1980–2016 period. Leveraging the appointment of the same mission chief to different countries throughout their career, we find that individual staffers influence the number, scope, and content of IMF conditions according to their personal ideological biases. These results contribute to our understanding of the microfoundations behind IO output and have implications for the accountability and legitimacy of IOs.

Contemporary globalization is underpinned by a dense web of international organizations (IOs) that make momentous policy decisions affecting the activities of states, businesses, and civil society around the world. It is no surprise, then, that political scientists have devoted persistent attention to unpacking how these international bureaucratic structures make decisions, and they have done so using distinct lenses. One line of argument foregrounds the geopolitics that infuses many aspects of IO operations: states care deeply about what these organizations do and correspondingly engage in global bargaining and "horse-trading" to influence them (Copelovitch, 2010a; Dreher et al., 2009, 2022; Kersting & Kilby, 2016; Kilby, 2009; Schneider & Tobin, 2013; Stone, 2011). A second approach highlights bureaucratic culture—shaped by the IO's history, governance, and staff—that provides a degree of unity to what an IO does (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, 2004; Chwieroth, 2010, 2015; Cormier & Manger, 2022; Nelson, 2014, 2017; Weaver, 2008). Finally, a more recent strand of scholarship emphasizes the role of individual staffers in IO operations: they have personal traits—like knowledge or skills—that are reflected in how they perform their duties (Clark & Zucker, 2024; Forster, 2024; Heinzel, 2022; Heinzel & Liese, 2021; Honig, 2018).

This article draws on these accounts but provides a different explanation for IO output. We argue that individual IO staffers have ideological biases, which materially shape their on-the-job decisions. In this argument, staffers are not understood as the long arms of powerful states, as interchangeable cogs in a culturally homogeneous bureaucratic machinery, or as simply being more or less knowledgeable or capable than their colleagues. Instead, we approach them as potentially purposive actors in their own right. As such, they have heterogeneous ideological biases that come to the fore when they perform their duties. This means that IO policies may differ depending on the

Verification Materials: The materials required to reproduce the results, procedures, analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IPGCTN.

ideological bias of the staffer designing them. This argument is consistent with evidence on IO leaders acting as "partisan technocrats" (Copelovitch & Rickard, 2021) but broadens this approach to rank-and-file staff who are not supposed to be overtly partisan.

A widely publicized recent event provides a case in point: in 2021, the World Bank discontinued its influential Doing Business indicators amidst allegations of manipulations by staffers, including due to ideological dislike for the policies of a leftist Chilean government (Deol, 2021). In a different organizational setting and policy area, United Nations (UN) Environment Programme staff were seen as making "very political recommendations" when advocating for far-ranging reforms to Sudan's environmental policy, claiming this would contribute to peace in Darfur (Louis & Maertens, 2021, p. 112). These are suggestive anecdotes but beg questions over whether scholarship can uncover systematic evidence of such ideological biases among IO staff.

To empirically study this issue, we focus on the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—one of the world's most powerful IOs—and the policy conditions attached to its loans. We collected individual-level data on IMF "mission chiefs" (MCs)—that is, staffers with the primary authority for designing the organization's policy advice vis-à-vis the member-state they are responsible for. Our dataset covers nearly the universe of MCs between 1980 and 2016 and contains information on the biography and country deployment of 835 officials. We combined this resource with data on policy conditions attached to all IMF loans of that period. To determine the ideological orientation of conditionality, we hand-coded 15,790 of these conditions along several dimensions using their original text.

Our empirical strategy to link individual IMF staff to IMF conditions builds on the "judge fixed effect" approach (Kling, 2006). This method uses the repetitive assignment of judges and variation in judge leniency to explain sentence lengths in court cases. We import this approach to international relations and apply it to the IMF, leveraging the assignment of MCs to multiple countries throughout their career (Beaudry & Willems, 2022). While IMF conditionality for a country will, to a degree, depend on local economic conditions, the assignment of MCs across countries allows us to isolate the part of the variation that can be explained by the presence of a given MC. In empirical terms, this means that we operationalize an MC's "ideological bias" as that individual's *systematic deviation* from the conditionality we would expect the IMF to impose—on average—on borrowing countries with similar characteristics.

First, we interrogate the possibility that MC assignment is endogenous, such that MC biases could influence their placement. We show that country-specific macroeconomic and political fundamentals cannot predict the biases of incoming MCs, a finding consistent with secondary literature (Beaudry & Willems, 2022; Clark & Zucker 2024). As the endogenous assignment of MCs is thus unlikely, we make use of this institutional feature to infer whether and how MCs affect conditionality. We estimate each MC's individual proclivity for the scale, scope, and content of conditionality employing regressions that explain conditionality with MC fixed effects while controlling for borrowing-country fixed effects, time fixed effects, and macroeconomic fundamentals. The coefficients of these MC fixed effects reveal the respective bias of a given MC. We find that the biases detected during MCs' other country assignments predict the *number* of policy conditions in the IMF program they are currently in charge of. A one-standard-deviation increase in this MC-specific bias measure translates into 6% or 2.2 additional conditions assigned to the country. We also find that MC biases explain variation in the *scope* of policy areas that IMF programs target, and the *content* of conditionality.

Subsequently, we employ our new data on the ideological orientation of IMF conditionality, capturing whether a condition stipulates public spending limits, tax increases, and/or market liberalization. These data allow us to go beyond MC biases regarding the scale, scope, and content of conditionality and help us estimate the *ideological biases* of MCs. If an MC attaches more pro-market conditions (less spending, less taxes, more liberalization) to "their" IMF programs compared to what we should expect given the economic and political characteristics of borrowers, we understand their ideological bias to be more right-leaning. Conversely, if an MC favors more government involvement in the economy (more spending, more taxation, less liberalization), then we consider this evidence of more left-leaning bias. We show that programs led by MCs with right-leaning biases are more likely to demand market-liberalizing reforms and that MCs with revealed left-leaning biases in other programs are more likely to demand tax increases in the program they currently lead.

What shapes ideological biases of IMF staff? While we expect these personal biases to result from many idiosyncratic individual-level factors, we also draw on political science scholarship on the formative role of higher education on individuals' "values, interests, and perceptions" (Krcmaric et al., 2020, p. 138), including for IO staff (Chwieroth, 2007; Nelson, 2014). In line with this perspective, we find that MCs are more likely to demand public spending cuts and market liberalization when they received their training at economics departments known for strong faith in free markets and for being skeptical of government intervention.

We also consider the role of socialization processes within the IMF but do not find significant evidence that intra-IO socialization affects personal biases. This points to the impact of education being highly sticky, even in organizational environments that seek to promote high degrees of uniformity in output.

While we document these individual-level ideological biases, we do not suggest they necessarily trump the well-known geopolitical interests that are reflected in IO outputs and that lead IOs to treat geopolitically important countries more favorably than others (e.g., Copelovitch, 2010b; Stone, 2011; Vreeland, 2019). Instead, we posit that staffers' ideological biases matter most in cases that are *not* geopolitically sensitive. As a proxy for a given IMF loan's geopolitical significance, we examine whether the borrower is a close ally of the United States, the IMF's largest shareholder. We show that in these instances, the impact of MCs' ideological biases on conditionality is no longer statistically significant.

Our findings cast further doubt on prominent public images of powerful IOs as cohesive and impartial bureaucracies, instead highlighting the role of ideological biases among individual staffers in shaping their policy output under certain conditions. This opens up a new theoretical and empirical research agenda on the microfoundations of organizational outputs, whether in global governance or national bureaucracies. We reflect on these issues in the concluding section.

BUREAUCRATS IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: THEORY AND COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE

IOs are centralized bureaucracies with a degree of operational autonomy from the countries that create them (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 2004). What allows IOs this degree of freedom is their commitment to impartiality, often coded into mandates and staff guidelines.[1] This commitment has a long history. The second UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld (1961), traced the impartiality imperative to the League of Nations and specified that international civil servants should "eschew political judgments and actions" and could not "display any political allegiance to a political party or ideology." The mandated impartiality of IO bureaucrats is closely linked to their claims of technocratic neutrality, evoking an image of experts operating on principles of rationality and competence (Steffek, 2021). Advanced degrees from elite universities, which IO recruits commonly hold, signal their grasp of pertinent skills and competences, which they purportedly deploy dispassionately. As former World Bank President Alden Clausen quipped, "our ideology is economics [...]. We should not address political questions, and we don't" (cited in Swedberg, 1986, p. 377). Such language fits with IOs' persistent efforts to portray themselves as above the fray of political ideology (Louis & Maertens, 2021).

However, impartiality and neutrality have proven elusive in the practice of global governance.[2] This argument has been forcefully advanced by international political economy, organization studies, and public choice scholars, who explain that *entire bureaucracies* can be biased, whether due to capture by powerful governments (Clark & Dolan, 2021; Copelovitch, 2010b; Dreher et al., 2009; Stone, 2008; Thacker, 1999), due to distinct cultures (Chwieroth, 2007, 2013; Nelson, 2014, 2017), or due to a desire to maximize mandate and funding (Vaubel, 1986, 1996; Willett, 2002). For example, in the European Union, recent evidence shows the Commission to be ideologically biased vis-à-vis its economic policy recommendations (Cova, 2022). In the World Bank, "shifts in [its] economic research program, which reflects the Bank's policy priorities and policy ideas, significantly affect Bank loan conditions" (Cormier & Manger, 2022, p. 398). Implicit in these accounts is an assumption of homogeneity of IO staff behavior: they carry forward the ideological biases of their organization and are thus—from an analytical standpoint—interchangeable.[3]

In this article, we scrutinize the independent effect of ideological biases of *individual staffers* on IO output. This analytical move builds on the growing interest in the role of international bureaucrats, who have personal attributes that contribute to heterogeneity within IOs. In the field of peacekeeping, individual peacekeepers' social distance from the local population decreases their effectiveness (Bove & Ruggeri, 2019). At the World Bank, staffers' ability and experience shape the performance of projects they manage and the recipients they work with (Heinzel & Liese, 2021; Honig, 2018, 2020; Limodio, 2021) and the higher prevalence of women in project design increases the likelihood of designing gender-sensitive projects

[1] For example, UN Staff Rules prescribe that "while staff members' personal views and convictions, including their political and religious convictions, remain inviolable, staff members shall ensure that those views and convictions do not adversely affect their official duties [...]. They shall avoid any action [...] that may adversely reflect on their status [as international civil servants], or on the integrity, independence and impartiality required by that status." (See https://policy.un.org/browse-by-source/staff-rules; Regulation 1.2(f).)

[2] The same is true for national-level bureaucracies, as a long-established scholarship has documented; for example, see Acs (2016), Brierley et al. (2023), Huber and Shipan (2002), Hustedt and Salomonsen (2018), Lowande (2018), and Potter (2019).

[3] This is not to suggest that the literature considers ideological biases as immutable: they can change over time and intraorganizational diffusion of new priorities ensures they become *collectively* adopted by the bureaucracy (Cormier & Manger, 2022).

(Heinzel et al., 2024). At the IMF, staff differ in their optimism regarding economic performance (Beaudry & Willems, 2022) and staff exposure to emergent policy problems increases their likelihood of applying this expertise in subsequent work (Clark & Zucker 2024).

In short, individuals in IOs matter, as they have certain attributes that meaningfully shape how they perform their duties. This introduces variation and potential departure from the dominant culture of the IO: staffers are not identical but have different knowledge, skills, and abilities that make their output unique, even within the context of highly hierarchical organizations. Such individual-level variation raises the question of whether they also differ along other dimensions, like ideological biases. Copelovitch and Rickard (2021) directly tackle this issue with reference to IO leadership: they show that when the IMF is led by a right-leaning Managing Director, it demands more market liberalizing reforms. Scholarship on the European Commission points in the same direction, where CMCommissioners' ideological affiliation shapes the policies they promote (Egeberg et al., 2014). However, there is no systematic research on whether heterogeneous ideological biases of rank-and-file staff affect IO policy output, and we take on this question.

The question of ideological bias of IO staffers is particularly pertinent for those individuals who have power to design policies to be implemented in member-states, rather than those with operational roles like administering health interventions or overseeing infrastructure projects. This is because the nature of policy design in bureaucracies inevitably entails that IOs' purportedly impartial and technocratic bureaucrats must "venture beyond rational choice and the scientific method, and make a value statement that would be indefensible on objective grounds and that would necessarily reflect [their] subjective ideological bias" (Centeno, 1993, p. 311, referring to Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy). In other words, when designing policies, IO bureaucrats can choose from a range of options to achieve a certain goal, and this is where their individual ideological bias is more likely to come to the fore and tilt decisions in one way or another.

If ideological biases exist among IO staff, where do they come from? While a range of unobservable individual-level factors can be at play, past scholarship has emphasized the role of education and professional socialization. In his pioneering study of French public administration, Bourdieu (1998, p. 84) documents how graduates of the prestigious *grandes écoles* develop a common perception of policy problems and appropriate responses. This insight has found traction in analyses of global governance, with scholars compiling data on the educational background of IO staff in diverse issue areas—like peacekeeping, international financial institutions, and the EU—to infer policy preferences or ideological biases (Chwieroth, 2007; Goetze, 2017; Helgadóttir, 2016; Nelson, 2014). Similarly, international relations and public administration scholars point to powerful socialization pressures to explain how IO staffers "change their preferences in accordance with organizational norms" (Hooghe, 2005, p. 865; see also Broome & Seabrooke, 2015; Murdoch et al., 2016; Trondal et al., 2010). If educational backgrounds and professional socialization are associated with systematic behavioral patterns, this matters as it may introduce blind spots and "groupthink" into how IO staffers view policy problems or react to changing environments.

Emphasizing the possibility of ideological biases among IO staffers does not mean we understand them as all-powerful agents. Instead, they are best understood as strategic actors, who can navigate their environment to use their autonomy when conditions are favorable (Hoeffler & Hofmann, 2024). Consequently, to outline the scope conditions of our argument, we return to foundational international relations concerns with geopolitics. The everyday functioning of IOs is crucially shaped by how pertinent decisions are for powerful member-states (Copelovitch, 2010b; Pop-Eleches, 2009; Stone, 2008). When issues have high salience, states mobilize and expend political or economic capital to tip strategically important decisions in their favor (Stone, 2011). Examples include supporting allies, stymieing rivals, or trading money or votes for favors in other international fora (Dreher et al., 2009, 2022; Vreeland, 2019).

However, cases of such interference are not the rule in IO operations. Constant meddling would directly undercut an IO's independence, on which its legitimacy and neutrality claims depend (Lang & Presbitero, 2018; Stone, 2008). As Stone (2008, pp. 590, 593) explains, states engage in "conditional delegation" to IOs: "[d]uring ordinary times, [an IO] enjoys broad discretion within its zone of delegation," but this can change when core interests of its most powerful member-states are affected, prompting them to "assume temporary control of the organization." When IOs do *not* deal with geopolitically sensitive issues, their powerful members have few incentives to intervene in decision-making. Correspondingly, low-salience issues for powerful member-states are also high-autonomy issues for staffers (Stone, 2013), which creates opportunity for their biases to seep through.

EMPIRICAL SETTING AND HYPOTHESES

To identify potential ideological biases among rank-and-file IO staff and to estimate how they impact IO output, we analyze the IMF. This empirical setting is selected for substantive, theoretical, and methodological reasons. Substantively, the IMF has extensive power in designing economic reforms for its borrowers (Copelovitch, 2010a; Vreeland, 2007). As these policies have direct and profound distributional consequences for millions around the world (Dreher, 2006; Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023; Rickard & Caraway, 2018; Lang, 2021; Vreeland, 2003), it is important to understand how they are devised in the first place. In terms of advancing theory, analyses of the IMF have become battlegrounds for competing explanations of the functioning of IOs. In the Lakatosian view of scientific progress, reanalysis of cases that have already received extensive scrutiny enables theoretical innovation and expands the frontiers of scholarly debate (Lakatos, 1970). Further, scholars typically consider the IMF to have a firmly hierarchical, strictly controlled, and homogeneous bureaucracy, where "the pressure on staff members who deal with prospective borrowers to conform to the dominant [organizational] views is intense" (Nelson, 2014, p. 299). The IMF's own in-house historian describes it as a "tidy disciplinarian (both toward itself and others), physically small, nearly devoid of humor, and more interested in gaining respect than in being loved" (Boughton, 2001, p. 996), while close observers likened the rigidity of its internal decision-making to "the multilateral equivalent of the Catholic Church" (Kapur et al., 1997, p. 622). These traits, together with the high politics that its operations elicit, should minimize independent agency by staffers, compared to IOs with looser structures and diverse expertise (like the World Bank or UN organizations). Against this backdrop, the IMF is a hard case for observing staff autonomy when compared to many other IOs, and we return to questions of external validity in the conclusions. On the methodological front, our case selection is motivated by the IMF's institutional setup, where a unique staffer has the primary responsibility for a single country and where staffers are repeatedly assigned to various countries throughout their career. This setup allows us to implement the judge-IV method to rigorously explore the presence of ideological bias.

Our analysis focuses on a core IMF function: financial support to countries in need, provided they implement policy reforms, known as conditionality. When a country turns to the IMF, an MC leads a small team to negotiate and design conditionality. Their typical tenure is about 2–3 years, and most staffers hold such appointments in multiple countries throughout their career. In principle, MCs are to be ideologically unbiased and toe the organizational line: IMF guidelines specify that officials "should strive to be non-partisan and politically noninterventionist,"[4] and that conditionality should "ensure *consistency* in the application of policies relating to the use of [IMF] resources with a view to maintaining the *uniform treatment of members*."[5] Thus, conditionality is clad with the expert, dispassionate authority of highly trained IMF staff and presented as the "objectively correct" policy path (Séville, 2017).

IMF conditionality offers an optimal opportunity to ascertain individual-level biases among MCs. It is the key moment where their ideological biases may become observable: being MC endows staffers with wide-ranging power to draft what they consider an appropriate reform package, selecting certain policies over others. While loan conditions are formally approved by the IMF's Executive Board that represents member-states, redrafting there is rare and conditions are therefore likely to bear the trademark of the MC who drafted them.

To be sure, part of the variation in IMF conditionality depends on well-established factors, like the scale of macroeconomic difficulties or geopolitical considerations. But another part, per our argument, can be explained by the ideological bias of the MC who oversees the program. Some MCs may have more hawkish fiscal preferences or favor more aggressive tax policies than others. Similarly, some MCs may forcefully push for market liberalization—for example, through privatizations and labor market reforms—while others may shy away from such measures. It is these types of variation we are interested in, and they are all observable, as being MC offers the most overt opportunity for staffers to translate their biases into practice and effect real changes in the policy environments of IMF borrowers.

The initial "proof-of-concept" test for our argument is to examine whether there are systematic differences in IMF policy design when different MCs are involved:

H1. The design of IMF conditions differs systematically across mission chiefs.

From this analysis, we derive different measures of the policy preferences of MCs and then test whether these measures predict certain aspects of IMF conditionality. Using conditionality measures employed in the relevant literature (Dreher et al., 2015; Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023; Stone, 2008), we expect that

H2. The individual preferences of IMF mission chiefs affect the scale (H_{2a}), scope (H_{2b}), and content (H_{2c}) of IMF conditions.

The hypotheses thus far pertain to *indirect* ways of examining the ideological bias of MCs. We now shift gear to more directly capture the ideological

[4] https://www.imf.org/external/np/cso/eng/2003/101003.htm.

[5] https://www.imf.org/External/np/pdr/cond/2002/eng/guid/092302.pdf, emphasis added.

bias of MCs by coding the ideological orientation of conditions they design, according to whether they advance spending cuts, tax hikes, or market liberalization. Correspondingly, we expect that

H3. The individual ideological biases of IMF mission chiefs affect the ideological orientation of IMF conditions.

In line with past scholarship (Chwieroth, 2007; Nelson, 2014), we expect MCs' educational background to matter for their ideological biases in policy design.[6] But rather than starting from an assumption of educational uniformity, we posit that the ideological biases of individual MCs are related to their *alma mater*, as there are important differences in how economics is taught across universities. Krugman (2009) popularized the distinction between "saltwater" and "freshwater" schools (associated primarily with the US coasts and the US mainland, respectively): the former tend to be positively predisposed toward government intervention in the economy, while the latter consider it anathema (see Henriksen et al., 2022; Önder & Terviö, 2015). In our analysis, we explore education as one individual-level characteristic that predates staffers employment at the IMF to gain insights into how personal backgrounds may shape on-the-job decisions. However, we do not claim that this analysis identifies the causal effect of education, as we cannot separate this effect from the potential selection bias into specific educational institutions (e.g., someone critical of unfettered markets may not wish to study in the University of Chicago economics department). Consequently, we rely on educational background as a proxy for one's personal ideology. In light of this discussion, we hypothesize:

H4. The educational background of IMF mission chiefs is associated with the ideological orientation of the conditions they design.

The scope conditions of our theory suggest that the influence of an MC's ideological bias on conditionality is smaller on high-salience issues for powerful member-states, where we expect geopolitics to dominate. In lower salience cases, where major shareholders have no strong interest in intervening in decision-making, we expect bureaucrats to be able to decisively influence policy design. We formulate the ensuing hypothesis with reference to the geopolitical interests of the United States, the IMF's largest shareholder, which has been shown to skew IMF decisions to favor its allies (Dreher et al., 2009; Lang & Presbitero, 2018; Stone, 2008):

H5. The influence of IMF mission chiefs on conditions is only observable when strategic geopolitical interests of the United States are not at stake.

DATA

IMF staff

We test these hypotheses with original data on 835 IMF staffers, following their postings as MCs. For the 1980–2016 period, we tracked their assignment in 190 different countries, of which 133 had at least one IMF program. Of the 835 MCs we observe, 366 go on more than one mission and 288 go on more than two missions; some are in charge of up to 30 countries throughout their career. As an example, Figure 1 visualizes these assignments to Latin American borrowers.[7] The numbers in the boxes contain MC identifiers, and we highlight some exemplary career paths. MC315 was first assigned to Nicaragua in 2005–2007 and then to Mexico in 2009–2010, a common career path in terms of assignment length and country sequence (from smaller to larger within the same regional department).[8] MC374 was responsible for several countries at the same time or in quick succession (Costa Rica, Guyana, El Salvador, and Panama across the 1990s). And MC809 served on two prolonged missions to Dominica (1984–1988) and Jamaica (1991–1994), before being sent to Panama (1997–1998) and Guyana (1999–2000), showing that assignments sometimes lasted longer in the past.

We collect the bulk of country deployment data from Beaudry and Willems (2022), who used IMF documentation on 705 MCs. Since their coverage is not complete for our observation period, we expand this dataset with information contained in publicly available IMF loans or surveillance reports. Either the reports explicitly list the MC, or the semantic structure gives away their name, which we extract through a text-analysis algorithm. For countries with missing data, we directly contacted IMF Country Offices to obtain information on MC assignment. While we could not detect some data for the early 1980s, our dataset covers almost the universe of MCs from the mid-1980s onward: of 1467 country-year pairs with an IMF program after 1990, we cover all but 43 (97%).

In addition to MC deployment data, we also collect information on their education (highest academic

[6] As anticipated above, we also test whether professional socialization shapes MCs' observed output. Online Appendix E (p. SI-10) presents the (inconclusive) results.

[7] While our data also covers MCs responsible for countries without ongoing programs (they oversee economic surveillance), we exclude them here for reasons of clarity.

[8] In Online Appendix F (SI-12), we test whether MCs behave differently when they change regional departments. They do not.

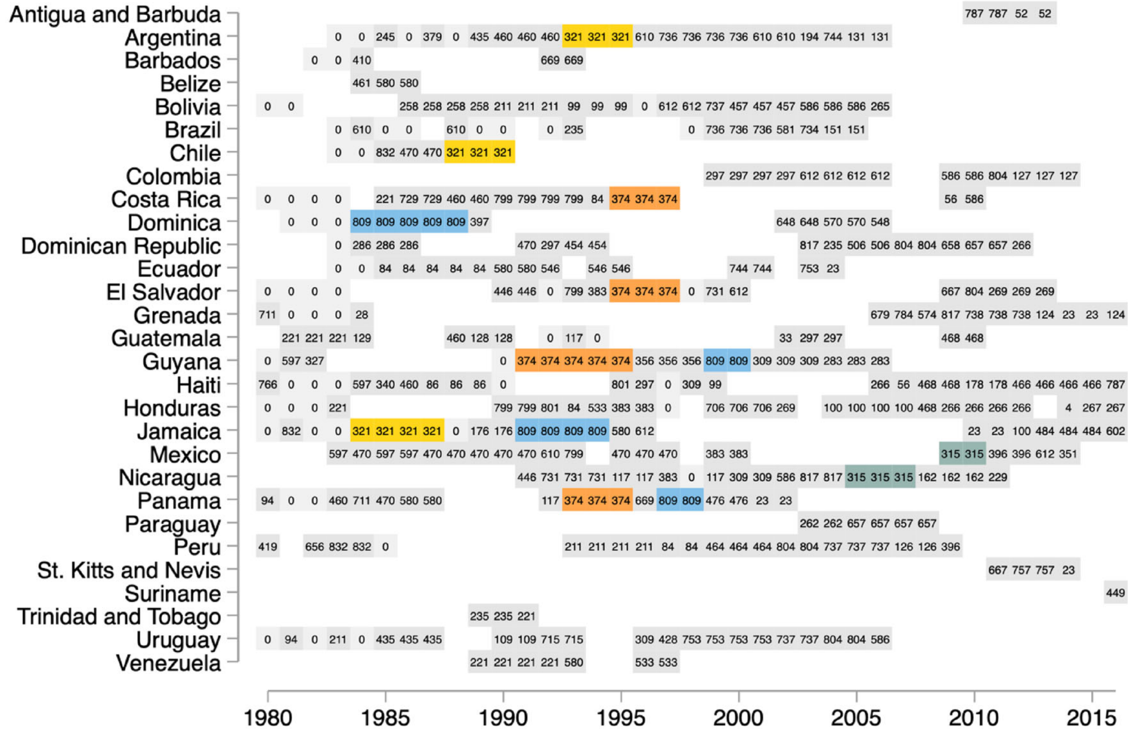

FIGURE 1 Assignment of IMF mission chiefs to loan programs. Deployment of mission chiefs to Western Hemisphere countries, 1980–2016. Numbers identify the respective MC. Four exemplary MCs are highlighted in color. Remaining IMF program years are in dark gray. IMF program years with missing MC information are light gray and marked with a 0. Empty space denotes no IMF program in that year.

degree and alma mater) from various sources. Data for 1980–2000 by Nelson (2014) includes information collected at the IMF on some MCs. We expand coverage with biographical information from official IMF sources, LinkedIn, and an extensive web search for final missing data points (see Figure A1, p. SI-2). We employ these data in analyses of how educational backgrounds shape individuals' decisions.

The individual-level data included in our analyses are all drawn from publicly available sources and do not include sensitive information.[9] As our intent is to draw attention to the broad issue of ideological biases among IO staff, rather than personalizing the findings, references to individual MCs are through a randomly assigned code, rather than by their names.

IMF policies

We use data on all individual loan conditions collected by Kentikelenis and Stubbs (2023), covering the universe of conditionality attached to all IMF loans between 1980 and 2016. Based on these data, we construct four measures of conditionality for each year of each program. First, we calculate a count of conditions per program-year to measure the *scale* of conditionality, following scholarship that quantifies the IMF-mandated burden of adjustment (Clark & Meyerrose, 2024). Second, building on work that considers the number of policy areas subject to reform as a more appropriate measure of conditionality's intrusiveness (Dreher et al., 2015; Stone, 2008), we calculate the *scope of conditionality*. This measure considers a program applying one reform, each in five policy areas to be more intrusive than a program demanding six reforms in one area. Third, we code a variable that indicates the number of conditions *per policy area*. This set of variables allows for examining which policy areas MCs are most likely to influence.

Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, we code new measures that indicate the *ideological orientation of individual policy conditions*. To construct these, we extracted the original text of 15,790 conditions and—per the codebook in Online Appendix B.2 (p. SI-5)—coded their content into three binary and nonmutually exclusive variables: (a) *Spending limits* indicate whether conditions mandate public expenditure reductions; (b) *Tax increases* capture reliance on tax policies to consolidate public finances; and (c) *Pro-market conditionality* includes conditions designed to expand the reach of private markets in the borrower's economy. For the empirical analysis, we code three variables that count the conditions

[9] LinkedIn explicitly informs users their information will be publicly available; www.linkedin.com/legal/user-agreement. Use of LinkedIn data is becoming increasingly common in prosopographic scholarship in political science; e.g., Christensen (2021), Seabrooke and Tsingou (2021), and Stausholm and Garcia-Bernardo (2024).

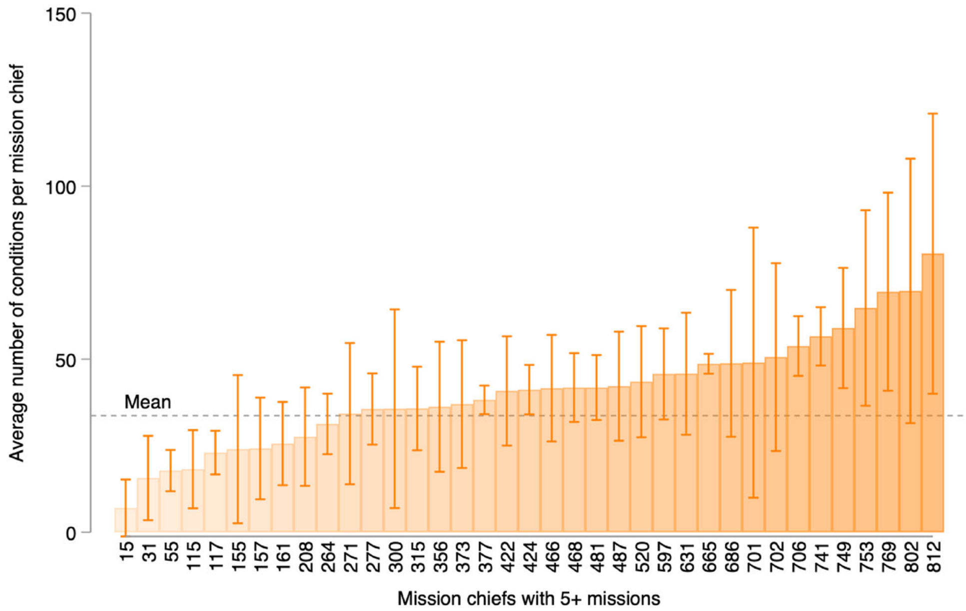

FIGURE 2 Conditions and mission chiefs. The mean number of conditions per MC across missions. For simplicity, only MCs with more than five missions are shown. The dashed line shows the mean across all MCs. 95% confidence intervals.

per category applied in a given year to an IMF borrower.[10]

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

Our empirical strategy for identifying whether there is a connection between MCs and IMF conditionality follows the "judge fixed effects" approach (Kling, 2006), which uses differences in judge leniency to explain variation in incarceration lengths (see also Cahuc et al., 2024; Frandsen et al., 2023). We apply this approach in the context of the IMF, where we test whether ideological biases of individual staffers explain some of the variation in conditionality. Our strategy is inspired by Beaudry and Willems (2022), who use repeated MC assignment to study overoptimism in IMF growth forecasts.

Just like judges are assigned to multiple cases, IMF MCs are assigned to multiple countries over the course of their career. We exploit this repeated assignment of MCs and the special institutional setup of the IMF to link each MC to conditionality in lending programs. Figure 2 provides descriptive evidence of the variation that we study, showing the average number of conditions per MC. It reveals substantial variation across MCs. When compared to the average IMF program, some MCs apply up to 20 fewer conditions while others apply up to 30 more conditions than the average.

This piece of descriptive evidence suggests that conditionality differs across MCs, but we rigorously scrutinize this in a regression-based framework. We begin by regressing a conditionality measure on MC fixed effects that indicate which MC is assigned to country i in year t:

$$IMFconditionality_{i,t} = \alpha_t + \delta_i + \sum_{k=1}^{K} \gamma_k MC^k_{i,t} + X'_{i,t}\eta + \epsilon_{i,t}. \tag{1}$$

$IMFconditionality_{i,t}$ indicates the logged number of conditions that program country i receives in year t.[11] The regression includes year fixed effects, α_t, country fixed effects, δ_i,[12] and a set of time-varying control variables $X'_{i,t}$.[13] The set of K binary variables MC^k indicates whether mission chief k is assigned to country i in year t ($MC^k = 1$) or not ($MC^k = 0$). Here, we use the full set of $K = 835$ MCs. Estimating the coefficients γ_k in this model yields the "mission chief bias" of each mission chief k. That is, the γ_k's estimate of the extent to which conditionality under mission chief k deviates from what would have been expected based on the country's mean conditionality, the yearly mean conditionality, and variables capturing the economic conditions in the country.

As a first step, we estimate these γ_k's and test whether they are jointly statistically significantly

[10] Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Online Appendix H (p. SI-16).

[11] Our results remain similar when using the absolute number of conditions, or when we avoid outliers by winsorizing the number of conditions at 99% (Online Appendix Table G2, p. SI-14).

[12] Our results remain robust when introducing region × year fixed effects (Online Appendix Table G2, p. SI-14).

[13] These include GDP (ln), population (ln), trade (% GDP), and binary indicators for debt crises, currency crises, banking crises, and debt restructurings following Laeven and Valencia (2020). Throughout the paper, we refer to these as macroeconomic controls.

different from zero. If they are, we can conclude that conditionality systematically differs across MCs (H_1), after conditioning on unobserved time-invariant country characteristics, global time trends, and country-year-specific economic fundamentals. We also estimate how the share of explained variation in conditionality changes when adding and removing MC fixed effects.

While this approach gives a first indication of whether conditionality depends on MCs, a limitation is that the MC-specific γ_k's capture variation in conditionality from all countries the MC ever was assigned to, thus including previous years of the IMF program in the country whose conditionality is to be explained. We circumvent this potential source of endogeneity by using a two-step jackknife or leave-one-out approach based on MC's previous and future appointments in countries $j \neq i$, following the logic of the jackknife-IV estimator (Angrist et al., 1999). Specifically, we first estimate Equation (2) i times, dropping each country i once:

$$IMFconditionality_{i,t} = \alpha_t + \delta_i + \sum_{k=1}^{K} \gamma_i^k MC_{j,t}^k + \epsilon_{j,t}, \forall j \neq i. \tag{2}$$

We then standardize and store the estimated $\hat{\gamma}_i^k$ in a new variable $MCbias_{i,t}^k$, such that the value of this variable for country i in year t equals the $\hat{\gamma}$ of the active mission chief k, that is, estimated from Equation (2) while excluding country i:

$$MCbias_{i,t}^k = \begin{pmatrix} \hat{\gamma}_{1,1}^1 \\ \vdots \\ \hat{\gamma}_{i,t}^k \\ \vdots \\ \hat{\gamma}_{I,T}^K \end{pmatrix}. \tag{3}$$

Intuitively, the variable *MCbias* thus indicates the MCs' average bias concerning conditionality in all their other assignments while excluding their current assignment. For example, consider MC231, who was responsible for Jamaica (1984–1986), Chile (1988–1990), and Argentina (1993–1995). For their time in Argentina, the variable *MCbias* indicates their bias estimated from their time in Jamaica and Chile. If, during their tenure, Jamaica and Chile received more conditions than the fully specified two-way fixed effects model (2) would predict, the value of *MCbias* was positive, while it would be negative if they received fewer-than-expected conditions. Respectively, for their time in Argentina, the variable *MCbias* indicates an estimate of their bias estimated only from their time in Jamaica and Chile.[14]

In the second step, we then use the variable *MCbias* (whose values are obtained from all missions of MC k outside country i) to predict conditionality in country i:

$$IMFconditionality_{i,t}^k = \alpha_t + \delta_i + \beta MCbias_{i,t}^k + \epsilon_{i,t}. \tag{4}$$

This allows us to estimate the effect of the active MC's bias in past and future missions on the number of conditions in the current mission. Following the standard approach of the judge-IV literature, we use two-way clustered standard errors at the level of MC and country.[15] As we use various measures of conditionality as outcome variables throughout the empirical analysis (number, scope, policy areas, ideological orientation), note that we estimate separate *MCbias* variables for each of these measures.

For our empirical estimates to be unbiased, the IMF should not systematically assign MCs to specific types of countries based on their ideological biases. We investigated and excluded this possibility. First, our approach extends the empirical strategy developed by IMF insiders (Beaudry & Willems, 2022), who leverage the exogenous source of variation in MC assignments in a similar context. They defend this assumption by explaining that the appointment process depends primarily on bureaucratic considerations, like the MC candidate being at an appropriate career stage. Indeed, it is unlikely that IMF decision-makers even have detailed knowledge of differences in MC candidate-specific views and preferences, as the IMF's recruitment policies are intended to yield ideologically homogeneous staff (IMF, 1999; Momani, 2005). Subsequently, we also systematically studied the assignment of MCs using our data and tested whether lagged program country characteristics predict the ideological bias of incoming MCs (see Online Appendix C, p. SI-7). We did not find any systematic associations supporting the identifying assumption that an endogenous assignment of MCs is unlikely.

RESULTS

Mission chief fixed effects

We present our results in the order we laid out the hypotheses above. As a first step, we test whether the identity of the responsible MC explains variation in IMF conditionality. To do so, we regress the logged count of IMF conditions on the set of MC fixed effects

[14] To avoid that *MCbias* stems from only one other mission, we only include MCs with three or more missions. This leaves a set of 198 MCs who lead missions into 112 countries in the baseline sample. Online Appendix Table G1 (p. SI-13) shows that results hold when (a) dropping this restriction and (b) restricting the sample to MCs who went on four missions or more.

[15] Online Appendix Table G3 (p. SI-15) shows that results are robust to clustering standard errors at different units.

TABLE 1 IMF conditionality and mission chief fixed effects.

	All conditions (ln)				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
MC 1	0.474	0.411	0.114	−1.505*	−1.887*
	(0.340)	(0.359)	(0.339)	(0.737)	(0.765)
MC 2	−1.072	−1.175	−1.637	−1.585†	−1.611**
	(1.286)	(1.355)	(1.026)	(0.850)	(0.528)
MC 3	−0.726	−0.716	−1.202†	−1.403*	−1.409**
	(0.828)	(0.877)	(0.697)	(0.653)	(0.316)
…	…	…	…	…	…
MC 833	0.135	0.248	0.667	1.148†	1.185*
	(0.514)	(0.555)	(0.555)	(0.653)	(0.571)
MC 834	0.198	0.429	0.015	2.646**	2.092**
	(0.343)	(0.429)	(0.505)	(0.649)	(0.729)
MC 835	−0.018	0.396	2.411**	3.216**	2.568**
	(0.636)	(0.416)	(0.423)	(0.586)	(0.563)
Wald *p*-value (mission chief dummies)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Observations	1,152	1,152	1,152	1152	1,110
Year FE	.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	.	.	✓	✓	✓
Region-year FE	.	.	.	✓	✓
Macroeconomic controls	.	.	.	.	✓
R^2	0.330	0.388	0.525	0.606	0.609
R^2 without mission chief dummies	0.000	0.166	0.352	0.441	0.444

Note: Results from estimating the model specified in Equation (1). The table reports Wald *F*-statistics and *p*-values for joint significance tests of the MC fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are two-way-clustered on MC and country levels.
Abbreviations: FE, fixed effects; MC, mission chiefs.
† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

and test whether the coefficients on these dummy variables are jointly different from zero. Only MCs who participate in more than two missions are included. Table 1 presents the results of a test of joint significance. As indicated by *p*-values of Wald *F*-tests of joint significance, the MC fixed effects are jointly significantly different from zero with a confidence level larger than 99.99%. What is more, with $R^2 = 0.33$ they explain a substantial share of the variation in the number of IMF conditions. The MC fixed effects remain significant when introducing year fixed effects in column 2, country fixed effects in column 3, world-region × year-fixed effects in column 4,[16] and the aforementioned set of country-year specific macroeconomic controls in column 5. The R^2 statistics show that the full specification would explain 44.4% of the variation in IMF conditionality without the MC fixed effects. Adding the information on who serves as MC increases the share of the explained variation to 60.9%.

In the first rows of the table, we also report the estimated coefficients of six exemplary (out of 835) MC dummies included in these regressions. As the labeling of MC dummies in this table follows the size of the estimated coefficients in column 5 in ascending order, the table reports the extreme values of the estimated coefficients.[17] For approximately 86% of MCs, coefficients lie between −0.4 and 0.7, implying deviations from reducing the number of expected conditions by about 50% to increasing it by about 50%.[18] Hence, the differences across MCs that were visualized descriptively in Figure 2 above also emerge in a regression-based framework with fixed effects and controls.

Mission chiefs and the scale, scope, and content of conditionality

Having shown that IMF conditionality varies across MCs, we turn to an approach designed to estimate

[16] We define world regions per IMF Regional Departments: Asia and Pacific, Europe, Middle East and Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Western Hemisphere.

[17] For this labeling, coefficients that could not be estimated because of insufficient data are treated as zeros.

[18] Note that coefficients indicate MC-specific deviations in log points and that $\ln(1 - 0.4) \approx -50\%$ and $\ln(1 + 0.7) \approx +50\%$.

TABLE 2 Jackknife estimation: Scale and scope of conditionality.

	Number of conditions (ln)		Scope of conditions	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
MC bias	0.062*	0.066*	0.218*	0.252**
	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.087)	(0.086)
Observations	1,121	1,110	1,121	1,110
Macroeconomic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region-year FE	.	✓	.	✓
R^2	0.366	0.448	0.529	0.595
Mean DV	3.471	3.472	6.144	6.145

Note: Results from estimating Equation (3). Dependent variables are indicated in the first row.
Standard errors (in parentheses) are two-way clustered on MC and country level: $^{\dagger}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.
Abbreviations: DV, dependent variables; FE, fixed effects; MC, mission chief.

whether the bias that MCs revealed in their missions in countries $j \neq i$ helps predict conditionality in their current country i. To this end, we implement the two-step jackknife/leave-one-out procedure discussed above. In the first step, we estimate coefficients on MC fixed effects as in Table 1 but drop each country once. In the second step, we use these estimated coefficients, which are stored in the variable *MC bias*—and which indicate the respective MC's deviations from the conditionality that could be expected in countries $j \neq i$ conditional on controls and fixed effects—to explain *IMFconditionality* in country i. For each measure of conditionality, the *MC bias* variable is estimated separately.

Table 2 presents the first set of results based on this approach. Models 1 and 2 demonstrate that the respective *MC bias* variable is positively and statistically significantly associated with the logged number of conditions. *MC bias* is z-standardized such that the coefficients imply the following effect size: MCs whose record of IMF conditionality in other countries is one standard deviation above the mean, on average, set 6–7% more conditions in their current IMF program than the mean MC. This amounts to about two additional policy conditions at the mean.

The same pattern is visible when turning to the scope of conditionality in models 3 and 4. Here, the outcome variable is the number of policy areas of the 12 different sectors that IMF conditionality covers. Again, the respective MC bias has predictive power of the scope of conditionality: MCs, who design programs that cover a wider range of policy areas in other countries are also likely to cover more policy areas in the country they are currently assigned to.

Having studied MCs' influence on the quantity of conditions, we turn to the content of conditions. Initially, we examine whether the policy areas IMF loans target depend on MC biases. IMF programs can demand reforms in multiple policy areas, ranging from debt management to state-owned enterprise reforms, and from fiscal policy to labor market liberalization. To estimate the effect of MC biases on different policy areas, we use data that assigns IMF conditions to mutually exclusive policy areas (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023; see also Online Appendix Table B1, p. SI-4). As we show in Online Appendix Figure B1 (p. SI-6), nearly all IMF programs include conditions on debt, finance, fiscal issues, and the external sector (trade and the exchange system). In contrast, the inclusion of conditions that target privatization or social and labor market policy is rarer. It is thus plausible to expect that MCs leave their mark in such policy areas.

Table 3 presents our estimation to test this, following the baseline jackknife analysis (of Table 2) but using only the logged number of hard conditions in the specific policy area.[19] We do not find an effect in the policy areas of debt, finance, and the external sector. These conditions are present in standardized format in most IMF programs, and their number does not significantly change with the individual MC. In contrast, even though fiscal issues—both spending cuts and tax increases—are included in more than 80% of IMF programs, we find that such conditions are responsive to MC biases. Our theoretical considerations lead us to suspect that this might be because different approaches to fiscal policy map most directly onto ideological differences, which we directly examine in the subsequent section. The same argument applies to conditions targeting privatizations, which are responsive to MC biases according to the results in column 5.

The results on conditionality concerning social policies and labor markets also reveal statistically signifi-

[19] We focus on "hard" conditions from here on because we are interested in the content of conditions that are politically binding and therefore most relevant (see discussion in Rickard & Caraway, 2014). Failure to meet "soft" conditions does not disqualify the country from receiving the next tranche of the IMF loan.

TABLE 3 Jackknife estimation: Policy areas.

	Debt (1)	Financial (2)	Fiscal (3)	External (4)	Privatization (5)	Social and labor (6)
MC bias	–0.014	–0.005	0.078**	0.037	0.061*	0.076*
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.029)	(0.025)	(0.031)	(0.030)
Observations	1,110	1110	1,110	1,110	1,110	1,110
Macroeconomic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region-year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.339	0.371	0.555	0.684	0.453	0.419
Mean DV	2.011	1.664	0.638	0.964	0.359	0.201

Note: Results from estimating Equation (4), only including conditions in the respective policy area.
Standard errors (in parentheses) are two-way clustered on MC and country level: $^{\dagger}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.
Abbreviations: DV, dependent variables; FE, fixed effects; MC, mission chief.

cant effects of MC biases in this policy area. This finding links up to scholarship on the IMF's targeting of the "politically volatile policy areas" of labor and wages (Rickard & Caraway, 2018, p. 37). Both domestic labor power (Caraway et al., 2012) and pending national elections (Rickard & Caraway, 2014) affect labor-related conditionality. But resistance to such conditionality is not only coming from borrowers. When socialist Dominique Strauss-Kahn was at the helm of the IMF, he pushed the organization toward labor-friendly conditions; an agenda shelved by his right-leaning successor, Christine Lagarde (Copelovitch & Rickard, 2021, p. 5). In pointing to the role of ideological biases among rank-and-file staff, our results reveal another source of variation in the IMF's conditionality in this politically sensitive area, where different ideological convictions by staffers come to the fore.

Mission chiefs and the ideological orientation of conditionality

Next, we rely on our newly coded data on the ideological orientation of IMF conditionality to directly test whether MCs influence it. In particular, we categorized each condition according to whether it (a) limits public spending, (b) increases taxes, or (c) expands the reach of markets. It is in these three areas that we expect MCs with different ideological biases would design different kinds of conditions: those with right-leaning bias are likely to prefer more spending limits, less taxation, and greater scope for markets, while those who are left-leaning might have directly opposing biases. We follow previous analyses and reestimate our models, using the logged number of these conditions as outcome variables.

As shown in Table 4, we do not find a significant effect of the MC's bias on the ideology measure for spending limits. We do, however, reveal significant effects for both tax increases and market-oriented conditions. These results mirror previous findings in that MCs seem to have the most leeway when conditions go beyond the standard IMF toolkit: while some type of spending limits are included in more than 75% of IMF programs, tax increases, and market-oriented conditions are used less frequently.[20] The ideological biases of the MC seem to be an important determinant of whether or not they are applied: a one standard deviation increase in the MC's ideological bias for tax increases in other missions is associated with a 12.7% increase in the number of tax-increasing conditions in the current mission. Similarly, a one standard deviation increase in the pro-market bias of MCs leads to 5.3% more market-oriented conditions in IMF programs. These results provide the most direct evidence for our hypothesis that MCs are able to influence the content of IMF conditions according to their ideological bias.[21]

What does the application of MC ideological biases look like in practice for borrowing countries? To provide some qualitative evidence of how these processes play out, we hold country variation constant and examine switches in MCs with opposing biases. Consider the case of Haiti. The country's 2006 Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility program was initially led by left-leaning MC266 and its conditionality included no market-liberalizing reforms. In 2007, right-leaning MC56 took over and immediately added five conditions related to the privatization of the country's port *Autorité Portuaire Nationale*, industrial park *Société Nationale des Parcs Industriels*, telecommunications company *TÉLÉCO*, and the state-owned bank *Banque Populaire Haitienne*. The next year, MC56 left

[20] See also Online Appendix Figure B1 (p. SI-6).
[21] These results prompt the question of whether senior MCs are more effective than junior MCs in influencing conditions. We test this in Online Appendix D (p. SI-9) but find no statistically significant evidence. Robustness tests are reported in Online Appendix G (p. SI-13).

TABLE 4 Jackknife estimation: Ideological content of conditions.

	Spending limits (1)	Tax increases (2)	Market-oriented (3)
MC bias	0.000	0.120**	0.051*
	(0.039)	(0.034)	(0.023)
Observations	1,110	1,110	1,110
Macroeconomic controls	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓
Region-year FE	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.602	0.558	0.458
Mean DV	0.904	0.322	0.252

Note: Results from estimating Equation (4), only including conditions with the respective ideological content.
Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered two-way on MC and country level: $^{\dagger}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.
Abbreviations: DV, dependent variables; FE, fixed effects; MC, mission chief.

this post and was replaced by left-leaning MC468: there was only one market-liberalizing condition stipulated in 2008 and none in 2009, when the program ended. Haiti subsequently entered successive IMF lending programs from 2010 to 2016: all were led by left-leaning MCs, and they did not include a single market-liberalizing condition.

Or, in the case of Bolivia, the country entered into an Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility program in 1998. Negotiated by MC612, a Yale-educated economist, the program did not include market-oriented conditions, consistent with this MC's approach in other countries. In 1999, Chicago-trained MC737 took over and immediately introduced stringent market liberalization conditions. These conditions primarily focused on privatizing state-owned enterprises, notably including the national smelting company *Vinto* and refineries owned by the national gas company *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos*. Later on, MC737 served as MC to Peru in 2004–2006, adding market-oriented conditions to the country's program. In fact, of the 19 years of Peru's IMF lending agreements between 1980 and 2016, only 3 years had pro-market conditions, and for 2 of these years MC737 was responsible for introducing them. These anecdotes illustrate the direct implications that a change in the ideological biases of MCs can have on a country's conditionality and also hint at the role of educational backgrounds, to which we turn next.

Ideological biases and the role of education

So far, we have estimated ideological biases of MCs by examining the conditionality preferences they revealed during other country assignments. As anticipated earlier, we posit educational background is linked to these biases. Most IMF staffers have an economics degree, often from a US university (Chwieroth, 2013; Nelson, 2014). How economics is taught, however, differs across universities. When most MCs in our sample received their education, the "monetarist" and "neoliberal" paradigms—skeptical of government intervention in markets—dominated research and teaching in some universities, most prominently the University of Chicago and other so-called "freshwater" universities close to the North American Great Lakes (Önder & Terviö, 2015). Conversely, at many "saltwater" universities located close to the US coasts, Keynesian and New Keynesian approaches—envisaging an active role for governments in economic management—were more influential (Henriksen et al., 2022). If the education IMF economists received is related to their ideological bias, we would expect to observe systematically different conditionality in IMF programs led by MCs with degrees from saltwater versus freshwater universities.

To test this, we use data on each MC's *alma mater*. Figure 3 plots the most common universities where MCs studied.[22] In classifying universities as freshwater or saltwater, we follow Önder and Terviö (2015), who find strong and constant division between these schools of thought across universities. We then use these data for estimating the following model by ordinary least squares (OLS):[23]

$$\begin{aligned} IMFconditionality_{i,t} &= \alpha_t + \delta_i + \beta saltwater^k_{i,t} \\ &+ \gamma freshwater^k_{i,t} + \mathbf{X'_{i,t}}\mu + \epsilon_{i,t}. \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

[22] Online Appendix Figure A2 (p. SI-3) groups universities by country.
[23] We keep this model simple to provide a complement to the more complex jackknife-IV approach.

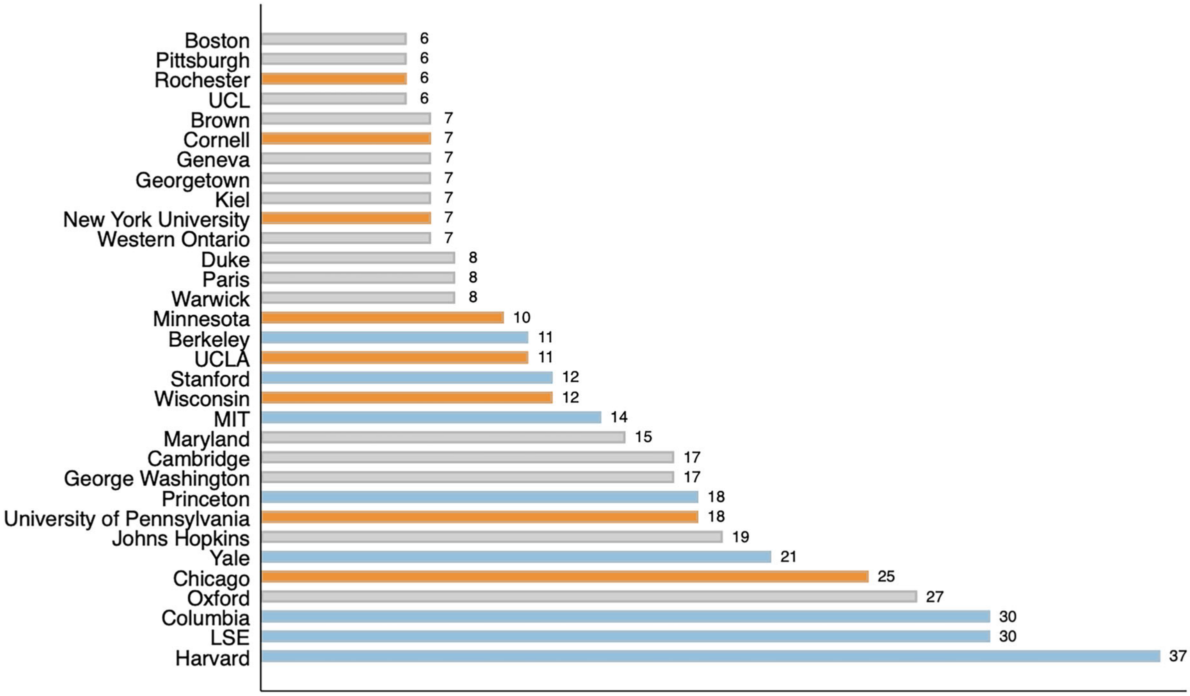

FIGURE 3 Education of mission chiefs. This figure shows the most frequent alma mater of IMF MCs. Universities classified as "freshwater" are plotted in orange; "saltwater" schools are plotted in blue. Coding is based on Önder and Terviö (2015, p. 1500), who classified the global top 20 economics departments.

The binary variables $Saltwater^k$ and $Freshwater^k$ indicate whether MC k of country i in year t graduated from a saltwater or freshwater university. The reference category is MCs who graduated from other universities ($Saltwater^k = Freshwater^k = 0$).

We find significant differences between MCs with different educational backgrounds. Table 5 shows that MCs who graduated from saltwater universities deviate from the standard approach of IMF conditionality: "their" programs include significantly fewer spending limits and pro-market conditions. In contrast, MCs

TABLE 5 Freshwater schools versus saltwater schools.

	Spending limits		Tax increases		Market-oriented	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Freshwater universities	−0.065		0.040		−0.006	
	(0.066)		(0.051)		(0.059)	
Saltwater universities	−0.141*		−0.028		−0.107*	
	(0.062)		(0.056)		(0.051)	
Chicago		−0.051		0.092		−0.046
		(0.080)		(0.097)		(0.079)
Harvard		−0.287**		−0.069		−0.165†
		(0.107)		(0.115)		(0.096)
Observations	1,121	1,121	1,121	1,121	1,121	1,121
Macroeconomic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.554	0.555	0.450	0.450	0.384	0.383

Note: Results from estimating Equation (5). "Freshwater university," "Saltwater university," "Chicago," and "Harvard" are dummies indicating that the MC graduated from the respective university (type).
Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered two-way on MC and country level: $^{\dagger}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.
Abbreviations: FE, fixed effects; MC, mission chief.

educated at market-liberal freshwater universities—which promote an approach to economics resembling the one of the IMF is notorious for—design IMF programs that are not systematically different from the average IMF program. The results are similar when considering only the prototypical university of the respective type of school, that is, the freshwater University of Chicago and saltwater Harvard University.

These results are in line with the view that the ideological bias of staff manifests in the policy conditions that IMF program countries face. They also show that heterogeneity in the ideological bias among IMF staff can be linked to the educational background of individual staffers. This is a surprising finding: the IMF—like other IOs—expends great efforts to mold its staff into adhering to its general-application rulebook. Internal socialization processes seeking to ensure staffers have a similar way of interpreting the world (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Hooghe, 2005; Trondal et al., 2010) have prompted scholars to attribute ideological biases to the organization as a whole (e.g., Nelson, 2014, 2017). To explore this further, in Online Appendix Section A.5, we look for evidence of intra-IMF socialization by testing whether biases of MCs change during their careers. We find some descriptive evidence for this conjecture, but regression results are not statistically significant at conventional levels. This points to the persistence of previously held knowledge and beliefs, that is, evidently not eliminated even after multiple years within a highly hierarchical environment with strong official views that are meant to be universally applied.

The interplay of geopolitical and ideological biases

While we have presented evidence that MCs introduce *ideological* biases into IMF output, the literature on IOs emphasizes *geopolitical* interests introduced by powerful member governments (e.g., Copelovitch, 2010b; Dreher et al., 2009, 2015; Stone, 2008, 2011). According to these arguments, powerful member-states meddle in IO operations only in cases of strategic importance, letting the IO bureaucracy decide more independently for less salient cases, thereby bolstering the perceived legitimacy and independence of IO output. As anticipated earlier, we expect that these less geopolitically salient cases provide the ideal opportunity for staff biases to come to the fore. We test this argument with respect to the most powerful IMF member-state: the United States. The US government has been shown to intervene in IMF decision-making to aid countries that can further its geopolitical agenda. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the impact of MCs' ideological biases is weak or insignificant when IMF programs are designed for US allies and stronger when other countries are concerned.

To test these hypotheses, we estimate our baseline specification for separate samples. In Table 6, we split the sample by a widely used measure of alignment with the United States: United Nations General Assembly voting similarity. Columns 2 and 3 show that the baseline effect is not statistically significant for US allies, while it is stronger and statistically significant for countries not closely allied with the United States. The result holds when only excluding the 25% closest US allies, suggesting that the effect disappears only for those countries where US interest is keenest. These results imply that ideological biases of MCs would not matter for IMF programs in countries such as Argentina and Turkey, both of which are major economies and close US allies that have received highly politicized IMF programs in the past decades.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we avoid treating IO bureaucracies as homogeneous actors and instead point to the analytical promise and payoff of focusing on the microfoundations of IO operations. We show that IO staffers have heterogeneous ideological biases, which shape the policies they design. Empirically, we document that IMF staffers vary systematically in the scale, scope, and content of conditionality they attach to loans. For example, right-leaning staffers are more likely

TABLE 6 US allies and the role of mission chiefs.

	All conditions (ln)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
MC bias	0.076**	0.064	0.115***	0.111**
	(0.028)	(0.040)	(0.036)	(0.032)
Observations	1,121	536	565	849
Sample	All	US ally top 50%	US ally bottom 50%	US ally bottom 75%

Note: Results from estimating Equation (4) in different subsamples. Column 1 shows the baseline results, and columns 2–4 subset the sample by United Nations General Assembly voting similarity with the United States. Standard errors clustered two-way on MC and country levels.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

to demand that IMF borrowers liberalize markets. However, highlighting individual-level determinants of IMF output does not mean staffers are all powerful: their ideological biases only shape policy output in programs of limited salience to powerful member-states. Overall, by showing how staffers' ideological biases shape IO outputs, we can observe how supposedly dispassionate rule-abiding bureaucrats deviate from their mandate of impartiality, with potentially momentous political-economic consequences for the IO's membership.

How generalizable are our findings across the universe of IOs? Our empirical setup leverages the fact that the IMF has a single staffer responsible for operations in a borrowing country, who is given extensive freedom to design conditionality. Anticipating these findings, Honig (2018, p. 22) argued that "an organization may allow more scope for bias and prejudice" when it permits more autonomy to its field staff. Obvious extensions relate to the World Bank and other development banks in their "development policy financing" operations, which entail designing comprehensive macroeconomic policies for recipients. But our findings are also relevant beyond the powerful group of IOs engaged in conditional lending. Staffers at the European Commission and the European Central Bank consistently publish policy recommendations for member-states (Braun et al., 2024; Cova, 2022), World Health Organization staffers develop fine-grained advice on how to reform social protection systems (Harris, 2015), and UNEP staffers encourage incorporating environmental reforms into domestic policy (Louis & Maertens, 2021). These are all activities that may be shaped by the ideological biases of those responsible for developing them. But, whether, when, and how an IO staffers' ideological bias comes to the fore will depend on a host of factors, including member-state interference, governance arrangements, broader staff cultures, and the external environment. We have pointed to member-state interference as one scope condition, and future research can explore additional factors.

A limitation of our work is that many areas of IO activities are more collaborative in nature than the setting we study. Teams of IO officials cooperate to write reports, design interventions, and conduct country visits. Our results suggest that each team member likely has ideological biases, but it is unclear how these will surface in team-level interactions—another promising area for future analysis. In this context, IOs' attempts to diversify in terms of nationality and gender are relevant because they alter team dynamics (Parizek & Stephen 2021; Weaver et al., 2022; Heinzel et al., 2024). But this is not enough: diversity in ideas and ideologies of IO staff also matters because it shapes how member-states assess IO legitimacy and impartiality (Heinzel et al. 2021; Liese et al., 2021).

What might IO staffers' ideological biases mean for the performance of interventions? The growing literature on the role of individuals in the design of development interventions has powerfully shown that IO staffers shape recipient performance, as they have specialized skills and can exercise judgment to deal with problems that require local knowledge (Honig, 2018, 2019; Heinzel & Liese, 2021; Heinzel, 2022). Our empirical setting, however, is not amenable to reaching such conclusions. Unlike more clear-cut or streamlined metrics of project success (like on-time and within-budget completion or ex post performance ratings), policies can have contradictory impacts that variably unfold over time. Consider policies associated with right-leaning bias in our analysis. Market liberalizing reforms like the privatization of state-owned enterprises can yield foreign currency earnings, thus helping a government meet fiscal targets and improve its balance-of-payments position. At the same time, these policies can yield social unrest, political instability, and widened inequalities (Dreher & Gassebner, 2012; Lang, 2021; Reinsberg et al., 2021). Assessing whether an IMF intervention with such outcomes performed well or poorly is not possible without making value statements. At a more general level, however, the finding that IO staffers' ideological biases substantively shape how they treat countries suggests departures from uniform and equitable treatment. Thus, exposure to idiosyncratic ideological heterogeneity may lead to a breakdown of IO-recipient relations, which in turn may compromise IO performance.

Finally, our findings raise questions about their policy implications: Is ever-greater oversight of IO staffers the appropriate remedy to observed ideological biases? On the one hand, this may help ensure evenhandedness and fairness of treatment of countries facing similar challenges. On the other hand, as Honig (2018) has shown, removing the ability of bureaucrats to exercise their judgment can hamper responses to fast-changing problems. Too much oversight can result in major delays, rejection of relevant expertise, and overly rigid interventions—these are clearly suboptimal outcomes. Addressing these tensions requires revising how we approach accountability within global governance. For the most part, debates on how IOs can be held accountable center on *organizational* accountability (Grant & Keohane, 2005; Hale, 2008; Park, 2022). This is appropriate for approaching broad issues, like transparency over operations or member-states' ability to control the organization. But our research points to another dimension that is often overlooked: as Joseph Stiglitz (2003, p. 122)—one-time World Bank chief economist—explained, "it is often difficult in large organizations to design incentives that lead to individual accountability, even when organizational accountability exists. [...] Much bureaucratic behavior is designed to assure that there exists collective responsibility for failures, eroding individual responsibility.” This can allow staff actions to fly under the radar or even be swept under the organizational carpet to safeguard reputation and the appearance of impartiality.

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Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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