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International rankings and public opinion: Compliance, dismissal, or backlash?

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Abstract

Despite growing scholarly interest in international rankings, we know little on how the public perceives them. Do rankings bring citizens to favor compliance with international standards? Or do citizens simply dismiss the rankings? We examine these questions through the Israeli public's response to the U.S. tier ranking of efforts against human trafficking. A survey experiment finds that Israel's demotion from Tier 1 to Tier 2 leaves Israelis unfazed; a demotion to Tier 3 produces a surprising backlash effect, *reducing* Israelis' support for anti-trafficking efforts. While this should have been a likely case for demonstrating the intended impact of rankings, we show that rankings might, in fact, meet a dismissive or defiant public response. This finding suggests caution in the assessment of international rankings' domestic impact, and it carries implications for the design of rankings to reduce the risk of a backlash.

Keywords Rankings · Global performance indicators · Public opinion · Experiment · Human trafficking · Israel · United States

Recent years have seen the growing production and dissemination of international rankings or, more broadly, global performance indicators (GPIs): public and regularized grading of the performance of states (Davis et al., 2012; Kelley & Simmons, 2019; Merry, 2011). Issued by a variety of actors, these indicators aim to exert normative pressure on states to bring them to change their behavior, or to improve some aspect of their institutions or policymaking (Cooley & Snyder, 2015). Whether they

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take the form of numerical rankings or ratings, ordinal categories, or blacklists, GPIs typically possess several qualities to enhance their impact on states: they are public and easily available, appear regularly on a predictable schedule, and offer a comparison of the performance of multiple states – often globally. These qualities make it possible for GPIs to engage state reputation. By publicly and regularly revealing how states perform, and how they compare to others, GPIs may shape what others think about the quality and character of the state – and how they judge the competence and effectiveness of state elites (Kelley & Simmons, 2019). Seeking a good name for their state and for themselves, government officials may work to change the state's performance and bring it in line with the standards required for obtaining a higher ranking (note that the following text uses "rankings" interchangeably with GPIs or indicators).

Empirical research suggests that GPIs may indeed achieve their intended effect: they can influence the conduct of states by speaking to governments' concern with reputation and status (Koliev, Sommerer and Tallberg, 2021; Schueth, 2015). But we know little about the *general public's* response to GPIs: Do citizens care about their country's image, as reflected in international rankings? If their country is graded poorly, will citizens support a change of policy to align it with international standards? These questions are important, since public opinion exerts a powerful effect on domestic and foreign policy in a democracy, influencing the state's response to external pressures and challenges (Baum & Potter, 2015; Tomz et al., 2020). And public opinion may certainly shape governments' response to international rankings. On the one hand, citizens can amplify rankings' impact by demanding policy reform. In other words, rankings may activate domestic, popular pressure on governments to comply with international standards. On the other hand, a public that is indifferent to the rankings may weaken their impact – giving the government a license to ignore or even denigrate them. Currently, however, we know little about the public's response to international rankings.

This study performs one of the first assessments of the impact of international rankings on domestic public opinion. We hypothesize that the public will respond to rankings favorably by supporting a change of national policy to comply with international standards. This hypothesis derives from a large literature that suggests the public's attentiveness to international norms and interest in complying with them (Carpenter & Montgomery, 2020; Dill & Schubiger, 2021). On the other hand, publics might simply disregard international rankings that embarrass their country, similar to the dismissal that often greets other forms of shaming (Ausderan, 2014). In such case, rankings will *not* affect citizens' policy preferences. Generally speaking, the response to shaming may go beyond dismissal. Several studies suggest that citizens, offended and angered by the humiliation of their country, might actually *increase* their support for the norm-violating behavior (Grossman et al., 2018; Gruffydd-Jones, 2019). We consider such a backlash unlikely for international rankings: low numerical grades may be seen as less offensive than shaming that includes harsh rhetoric.

We test our hypothesis – rankings likely increase public support for compliance – using the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) tier ranking, which grades countries worldwide on their efforts against human trafficking. We capitalize

on the real-world demotion of Israel from Tier 1 (the top tier) to Tier 2 in 2021, and add a manipulated scenario in which Israel was demoted to Tier 3 (the bottom tier). This presents a likely case for the intended impact of rankings: given Israelis' appreciation for the United States, one would expect a demotion to trigger public support for stronger efforts against human trafficking, consistent with the American standards. The historical record reinforces this expectation: In 2001, when the State Department published the TIP ranking for the first time, Israel's placement in Tier 3 raised alarm among Israeli officials, leading them to significantly intensify the efforts against human trafficking (Efrat, 2012). The Israeli public may similarly favor stronger efforts following the U.S. criticism expressed in a lower tier ranking.

However, in a survey experiment among a sample of 1,135 Israelis we find little support for our hypothesis. A demotion to Tier 2 left Israelis unimpressed and made little impact on their support for the efforts against human trafficking. A demotion to Tier 3 produced an unexpected backlash effect: it *lowered* respondents' support for greater efforts against human trafficking by 9 percentage points, compared to the control group. The poor ranking likely felt as an insult, generating a defiant response which is the opposite of what the United States seeks to achieve. Still, the backlash effect was nearly reversed for respondents who were informed about a set of "undesirable" peers – developing countries – that received the same ranking as Israel's. This suggests that poor rankings may become less enraging when learning about others who are in the same boat.

Overall, this study suggests caution in our assessment of the effects of international rankings and identifies a potential gap between their impact on officials and on the public. While officials may be more responsive to the reputational pressure that the rankings seek to generate, ordinary citizens might dismiss low grades or even react defiantly by supporting their country's continued violation of international standards. This counterproductive outcome should be taken into account in future analysis – and design – of rankings and other GPIs. This outcome also offers support for the skeptical voices in the debate over international shaming and its ability to spur domestic demands for stronger human rights (Snyder, 2020a, 2020b; Terman, 2019).

1 Domestic effects of international rankings: What we know

In recent years, GPIs have become a popular instrument for exerting influence on states in an attempt to shape their behavior. A variety of actors – governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and think tanks – issue public grades of countries' performance, policies, and qualities in different areas. From the World Bank's "Ease of Doing Business Index" through Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" to the U.S. watch list of countries that insufficiently protect intellectual property rights, global indices have been produced and published as a means to compare states, fuel competition among them, and encourage them to take action in the directions which the producers of the indicators deem desirable.

But why would governments care about rankings of their country, published by external actors? How can numbers bring governments to change their behavior? As

Kelley and Simmons (2015, 2019) explain, the power and allure of rankings come from their simplicity: the use of numerical grades to represent a complex reality allows people to easily understand the judgment that the rankings convey about government performance and its (in)consistency with international standards. The numbers easily stick in one's mind, and they facilitate comparisons across countries and over time. It is exactly this easy comparison that allows rankings to fuel concerns about states' reputation: low rankings, compared to other countries, deal a blow to the national reputation and potentially hurt a government that values its country's good name. High rankings, by contrast, can burnish the national reputation. They present the country as a member in good standing of the international community and confer upon it legitimacy and respect, potentially boosting the country's influence and facilitating its cooperation with other countries. High rankings may, in fact, personally benefit government officials by meeting their desires for a positive self-image and social approval, whereas poor grades might undermine their personal reputation and self-esteem (Kelley, 2017: 39–42, 50).

Rankings may also resonate in the domestic political arena. Poor rankings can potentially mobilize domestic actors – such as NGOs or local businesses – and encourage them to put pressure on the government. While these actors may already be familiar with the policy that earned the negative assessment, the grade – issued by an external actor – lends support to these actors' demands for a better policy. The unfavorable comparison to other countries bolsters the actors' case in favor of a policy change, while also increasing the salience of the issue and galvanizing public attention. The negative rankings may then become a cudgel against the government in an electoral campaign, public protest, media criticism, or traditional lobbying (Kelley & Simmons, 2015: 58; Kelley & Simmons, 2019). Governments may respond to the domestic pressures by changing their policy.

A few studies demonstrate how domestic actors can employ international rankings to promote their policy goals. Morse (2019: 539–540) documents how associations of bankers and industries in Thailand demanded new laws on money laundering and terrorist financing, when the country's weak efforts in these areas led to its blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force. The government responded by passing new laws. Honig and Weaver (2019: 603) show how governmental and non-governmental actors use an index of foreign-aid transparency to put pressure on aid agencies.

Yet the analysis of the domestic politics of GPIs has thus far paid little attention to the general public. Scholars have indeed noted that the effect of rankings may be channeled through domestic public opinion (Kelley & Simmons, 2019: 500), but this mechanism has seen little empirical analysis to date. We seek to push the research program on rankings to focus more closely on public opinion, extending a similar recent development in the study of international shaming by NGOs or foreign countries. Studies of shaming have typically suggested that public condemnation of norm-violating behavior fuels government concerns for legitimacy and reputation and may encourage third parties to apply pressure to the violating state (Allendoerfer et al., 2020; Dietrich & Murdie, 2017; Kahn-Nisser, 2019). Only recently have scholars begun to more fully appreciate the impact of shaming on domestic public opinion. On the one hand, shaming could convince citizens that their nation's

policies are wrong and increase their support for compliance. On the other hand, shaming could backfire by rallying citizens behind their own government in rejection of foreign critics. Finally, shaming may have little effect on audiences that are insensitive to external criticism (Tingley & Tomz, 2022: 446). The recognition that shaming may influence citizens' support for compliance with international norms and create new demands for governments has fueled a wave of studies that assess shaming's impact on domestic public opinion (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Koliev, Page and Tallberg, 2022; Spektor et al., 2022).

Rankings constitute a specific form of shaming that conveys countries' distance from international norms in a numeric fashion (Kelley & Simmons, 2015: 58). We suggest that, much like "conventional" shaming, rankings may resonate among citizens and influence their support for the government and for government policies. Indeed, there are reasons to expect that rankings will receive even *greater* attention among citizens compared to ordinary shaming: The simplicity of rankings that boil down to a number; the crossnational comparison and competition that rankings fuel; and the wide media coverage they often receive (Doshi et al., 2019) – all these likely increase the public's attention to and interest in international rankings, relative to other forms of foreign criticism. Good grades that make the government appear competent or successful may enhance its domestic support; poor grades, by contrast, might erode the government's popularity, as they indicate that its conduct is inept, irresponsible, or corrupt (Dai, 2007). A poor assessment of a policy – which highlights its distance from international standards – may also generate a public preference for a policy change, putting pressure on the government to respond (Hagemann et al., 2017; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Page & Shapiro, 1983). In other words, domestic public opinion could potentially amplify the impact of international rankings, adding another layer of politics through which rankings may influence policy.

2 Theorizing the public's response to international rankings

There are good reasons to expect that rankings would affect citizens' assessment of their country's conduct and policies. Such an expectation arises, first, from studies that document the public's concern for the national reputation. These studies typically examine a country's reputation for credibility or for upholding commitments, rather than the more generalized notion of reputation – the perception of an actor's character and performance – that we address here. But these studies' overall message is pertinent for our purposes: individuals care about how their country is perceived abroad, and they wish their country to enjoy a positive reputation (Brutger & Kertzer, 2018; Tomz, 2008; Tomz & Weeks, 2021). If this is indeed the case, citizens should exhibit concern about negative international rankings that might tarnish the national reputation.

A growing literature on public attitudes toward international law suggests that citizens take international legal standards into account when deciding whether to support the use of force. In a significant number of studies, respondents were generally less likely to support forceful action when told it violated international law (Carpenter & Montgomery, 2020; Dill & Schubiger, 2021; Kreps & Wallace, 2016; Lupu &

Wallace, 2019). While rankings are not, in themselves, international legal standards, they do resemble such standards in that they are explicitly normative, identifying certain policies as desirable or ideal. The public nature of rankings and their goal of influencing state-level conduct similarly bring them close to being international "standards," even if unofficial ones. Publics that give weight to international legal rules and favor government compliance with them may be similarly receptive to international rankings and the demands they make on governments.

Further support for an expectation of public attentiveness to rankings comes from the literature on the signals that international organizations (IOs) send to mass audiences: legitimizing certain policy options or helping to assure voters about government competence. Several studies suggest that governments, in fact, join international institutions – or seek their approval for action – to convey messages to the public and to bolster public support for the government (Chapman, 2012; Fang, 2008; Simmons & Danner, 2010). And the signals that IOs send indeed stand a chance of being successfully received by domestic audiences: citizens may become more (less) supportive of the government's policy based on a positive (negative) signal from the relevant IO (Bearce & Cook, 2018; Greenhill, 2020; Grieco et al., 2011). Rankings may perform a similar signaling function, enhancing or lowering public support for the government's policy.

The simplicity of rankings and their easy-to-understand nature facilitate their impact on public opinion. As a large body of research has shown, citizens are often poorly informed and may not be attentive to international affairs (Holsti, 1992; Knecht, 2010). But even citizens with little understanding of policy can easily comprehend the meaning of simple indicators. Numerical grades, categories, and blacklists represent government performance – and its distance from international standards – in a manner that can be readily understood by citizens lacking political knowledge. Furthermore, citizens can easily grasp the comparative nature of rankings. While they may not understand the policy issue in depth, citizens do understand that their country has been blacklisted, grouped with pariah countries, or is performing below its neighbors. Having learned that their country lags behind its envisioned peers or is placed alongside countries that they consider a *non-peer* group, citizens may feel embarrassment or humiliation (Kelley, 2017: 50–51, 128).

This discussion leads one to expect that rankings will elicit reputational concerns among citizens. Citizens who wish their country to enjoy a good name would be concerned about it receiving poor rankings. They would support action to remove the opprobrium that the low grades have cast. In other words, citizens may respond to the pressure that rankings generate by supporting a change of policy that would bring the country closer to international standards.

***H1*:** Informing citizens about poor rankings of their country increases their support for policy changes to comply with international standards.

The null hypothesis is that poor rankings will *not* raise citizens' support for compliance with international standards. Indeed, there are good reasons to expect little effect of rankings on citizens' views. As Kelley (2017: 44–46) explains, the impact of performance indicators depends on the actors' sensitivity to

reputational pressure. Officials may exhibit such sensitivity if they fear that poor rankings might hinder their ability to achieve certain foreign policy goals, or if they anticipate a personal price: they or their party might be criticized or blamed for the country's poor performance, possibly putting their own careers in jeopardy. In that sense, citizens probably hold less concern about a possible damage to the national reputation: they are less likely to appreciate the repercussions of such damage, and, importantly, they will not be held personally responsible for it. Unlike officials, citizens will not face a direct blowback, such as low approval ratings, public protests, or removal from one's job due to the poor grade that the country has received. Accordingly, they will exhibit weaker concern about the country's unflattering ranking.

Additional reasons to doubt the impact of international rankings on mass audiences come from the broader literature on citizens' responses to the shaming of their country. Just like a news article exposing human rights violations, a critical report published by an NGO, or an IO resolution expressing condemnation, grading a country poorly is an exercise in shaming: it publicly expresses a disapproval of the failure to adhere to standards of appropriate conduct. Yet scholars have recently begun to question the effectiveness of shaming tactics. Building on social psychology research, Snyder (2020a: 114–115) suggests that shaming might produce anger, hatred, resistance, and the glorification of deviance from outgroup norms.

An important inspiration for this critique comes from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981) which argues that individuals derive self-esteem from the status of their group. Shaming could thus lead members of the disrespected group to feel angry and frustrated, resulting in a counterproductive backlash: it is "more likely to persuade insiders to rally around their group's endangered status than to promote reform of their biased and repressive practices" (Snyder, 2020b: 649). Terman (2019) further explicates the logic of this backlash, which she terms *defiance*: an *increase* in the support for the norm-offending behavior – and a rejection of the international demands for norm compliance – as a defensive reaction to social sanctioning. Since citizens identify with their country and care about its international status, they may see a status threat when their country is being criticized, devalued, or stigmatized. This might lead not only to a dismissal of the criticism, but to a defensive response of anger, hostility, and nationalist sentiments – which may translate to greater *support* for the norm violation. Redoubling the commitment to the violation of the norm thus becomes an expression of resistance in defense of the group's honor. Such a reaction serves as a coping mechanism, allowing the person to restore their self-esteem and to mitigate the cognitive dissonance resulting from the external criticism of their country.

It should be noted that shaming will not always trigger a backlash. A backlash response becomes more likely when the shamer is perceived as unfriendly or hostile to the target (Grossman et al., 2018; Snyder, 2020a, 2020b; Terman, 2019; Terman & Voeten, 2018); and when the shamer denounces deeply held cultural attitudes and practices of the target (Snyder, 2020a: 114). But even if shaming does not actually stimulate defiance among the target country's citizens, it does offend their self-esteem. At a minimum, they would ignore or dismiss the foreign denunciation. The dismissal/defiance expectation finds significant empirical support in multiple studies

(Ausderan, 2014; Chapman & Chaudoin, 2020; Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Gueorguiev et al., 2020; Spoerri & Freyberg-Inan, 2008).

What does this critical understanding of shaming imply for the impact of global indicators on the target country's citizens? Rankings aim to shame states and motivate them to improve their practices (Kelley & Simmons, 2019: 494). A poor grade is meant to embarrass the country being ranked, and the easy comparison to other countries could magnify the humiliating impact and deal a blow to citizens' self-esteem. Citizens might thus treat poor rankings negatively – with defiance or dismissal. At the same time, rankings produce shaming that is relatively low in intensity: they are less emotionally charged than verbal shaming and condemnation, which uses terms such as 'cruel,' 'abusive,' or 'tragic.' For this reason, rankings are less likely to trigger a backlash among citizens. The dismissal of poor rankings is more probable (Snyder, 2020a: 112–113). All this means that international rankings are unlikely to increase the public's support for compliance with international standards.

In summary, we expect that citizens, upon learning that their country was graded poorly, will support policy changes to comply with international standards (*H1*). Yet citizens may simply shrug (the null hypothesis, H_0).

3 Empirical domain: U.S. TIP report's impact on Israelis

We empirically explore the impact of indicators on mass attitudes through the country rankings of efforts against human trafficking, disseminated annually by the U.S. State Department in its Trafficking in Persons report since 2001. Based on extensive data collection through the American embassies worldwide, the TIP report ranks countries in four tiers, based on their compliance with the U.S.-defined minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. These standards require governments to prohibit and punish human trafficking, to make serious efforts to eliminate this practice through measures such as vigorous investigations and prosecutions, and to protect trafficking victims. Countries whose governments fully comply with the minimum standards are ranked in Tier 1; Tier 2 includes countries whose governments do not fully comply with these standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance; Tier 2 Watch List includes countries whose efforts to comply with the standards are seriously deficient; and noncomplying countries that are not making significant efforts to comply receive a Tier 3 designation (U.S. Department of State, 2021: 51–54). Through these rankings, the United States seeks to compel governments to strengthen their efforts against human trafficking.

The TIP ranking is a good fit for our purposes here. First, it is one of the most seminal GPIs: it has been in existence for two decades; it relies on extensive, systematic data collection; and it is the cornerstone of an entire diplomatic campaign, which includes ongoing exchange between the United States and local authorities as well as practical assistance for addressing human trafficking. Second, the State Department's ranking has been shown to be effective in fueling governments' concerns about their reputation and motivating them to curb trafficking. In a cross-national analysis, Kelley and Simmons (2015) find that a low ranking can push

governments to criminalize the trade in persons; in her book-length treatment of this subject, Kelley (2017) shows how this ranking allowed the United States to shape anti-trafficking policies in a large number of countries, from Japan to Oman. If the TIP tier rankings influence governments and motivate them to address human trafficking, then the rankings may similarly increase citizens' concerns about this problem and enhance their interest in compliance with international standards. The human trafficking case should thus be *a likely case* for demonstrating the pro-compliance impact of rankings on individual attitudes.

Among the countries monitored and assessed by the United States, Israel stands out as a particularly likely case for a pro-compliance effect of the tier rankings: the rankings triggered a sea change in the country's elite attitudes toward human trafficking in the early 2000s, resulting in a dramatic policy shift. Whereas Israeli policymakers, bureaucracy, and law enforcement all but ignored this problem in the 1990s, they all came to see it as a priority following the placing of Israel in Tier 3 in the first TIP report, published in 2001. That poor ranking presented an unflattering picture of Israeli indifference to the suffering of trafficked women and fueled strong concerns for the county's reputation among officials. These concerns translated into a burst of efforts to eliminate human trafficking, including heightened investigations, raids on brothels, and assistance to victims (Efrat, 2012: 203–206; Kelley, 2017: 212–218). The strong impact of the TIP ranking on Israeli officials – the sense of alarm and the policy transformation that followed – would lead us to expect a similar response among citizens, namely, a preference for stronger efforts against human trafficking.

That the source of the TIP rankings is the United States – a close ally and friend of Israel's – reinforces that expectation. The impact of GPIs may depend on the credibility and respectability of the actor issuing them. If that actor enjoys a high status and its approval is valued and coveted, the performance indicators it produces will carry greater weight (Johnston, 2008: 80; Snyder, 2020a: 120). While Israelis often consider international organizations and NGOs as hostile toward their country (Becker et al., 2015; Freedman, 2022; Steinberg, 2011), they view the United States as belonging in a desired in-group. Indeed, Israelis care deeply about their country's relations with the United States – more than the relations with any other foreign country. They tend to have a favorable opinion of the United States and to strongly support it. The Israeli public also believes in the U.S. commitment to Israel's security and wishes to maintain that commitment (Israeli, 2020). All this makes Israelis particularly susceptible to social influence by the United States through GPIs.

Choosing Israel as the site of our empirical investigation also allows us to exploit a real-world development and endow the analysis with some realism. The United States rewarded Israel for its efforts against human trafficking in the 2000s by moving it up to Tier 1 in 2012, where it stayed until 2020. Yet the 2021 TIP report demoted Israel to Tier 2, citing the decreasing seriousness of the government's efforts, manifested, for example, in fewer investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of traffickers compared to previous periods. This demotion made headlines – "Israel Goes Down in the Rankings" – and local NGOs held it up as evidence of Israel's failure to curb human trafficking (Gil-Ad, 2021). This news story quickly faded in Israel's intense news cycle. Yet by structuring our analysis around a

real-world event that actually took place we gain greater ecological validity. Furthermore, the act of demotion itself may stir reputational concerns, increase the sense of shame, and galvanize action. Kelley and Simmons (2015: 65) find that a drop in the TIP rankings pushes governments to criminalize human trafficking. A recent demotion may similarly boost citizens' support for fighting human trafficking. This, again, makes the Israeli case particularly likely for a pro-compliance effect of the rankings on public attitudes.

Yet limiting our analysis to the realistic scenario of the Tier 2 demotion would potentially prevent us from exploring the full impact of the rankings. Indeed, Kelley and Simmons (2015) find that the TIP rankings exert a particularly strong impact on countries placed in the Tier 2 Watch List or Tier 3. In their interpretation, countries ranked in these two tiers fall below a bright line of socially unacceptable behavior – generating a stronger pressure for compliance with anti-trafficking standards than the relatively mild criticism expressed in a Tier 2 placement. Following Grossman et al. (2018), we present respondents with the real-world scenario – a demotion from Tier 1 to Tier 2 – alongside a manipulated scenario in which Israel was lowered from Tier 1 to Tier 3.

How might the TIP rankings affect the Israeli public's support for the efforts against human trafficking? Consistent with *H1*, we expect poor rankings to increase Israeli citizens' support for compliance with the U.S. standards for combating human trafficking. The TIP rankings have strongly influenced Israeli officials, motivating them to comply with the U.S. anti-trafficking standards; and the strong attachment of Israelis to the United States leads us to expect a similar impact on Israeli citizens. A demotion to Tier 2 may thus generate reputational concerns, leading citizens to express support for anti-trafficking efforts that would restore the damaged reputation. A demotion to Tier 3 should induce an even stronger support for such efforts. Moreover, a peer group with a dubious reputation may amplify the impact of the Tier 2/3 ranking. If Israel is placed among countries that Israelis consider "undesirable", this could further boost public support for anti-trafficking efforts – to redeem Israel's status and land it among more "respectable" peers.

It is still possible, though, that the TIP rankings will fail to show the anticipated pro-compliance effect on Israeli citizens (H_0). In 2001, when Israel was ranked in Tier 3, Israeli officials were anxious about the poor ranking's negative impact on the country's reputation, which they strive to enhance (Efrat, 2012: 205–206; Efrat, 2016, 44). The public, by contrast, may be less preoccupied with the country's good name. In such case, a demotion to Tier 2 or 3 would have little effect on individual support for anti-trafficking efforts. Theoretically, the demotion might even trigger a backlash: angered and humiliated by the lower tier ranking, citizens may respond defiantly and become *less* supportive of anti-trafficking efforts. We judge such a response, however, to be unlikely. As noted above, numerical rankings resonate more weakly than other forms of shaming that use strong, evocative language to express denunciation. And in the case at hand, the rankings are particularly less likely to backfire since they come from the United States. Shaming that might register as a status threat in the target audience and provoke defiance typically comes from an out-group. Pressure from unfriendly outsiders might appear hostile, intended to bring one's country down. While shaming from one's friend can be surprising and

hurtful, it is more likely to be tolerated since it cannot be attributed to ill will (Snyder, 2020a: 114, 2020b: 648; Terman, 2019). Chinese citizens identify the United States as an out-group – a hostile geopolitical rival – and respond to American condemnations by backing their own government (Gruffydd-Jones, 2019). But for Israelis, the United States is a friend they look up to, and the criticism it issues is unlikely to be perceived as a deliberate attempt at denigration (Grossman et al., 2018: 1840). Furthermore, the TIP report's criticism of Israel does not denounce deeply ingrained attitudes or cultural practices. Rather, it highlights specific deficiencies in Israel's response to human trafficking – problems that Israel can rectify by adhering to the U.S. anti-trafficking standards. This type of shaming, which relates to a changeable behavior of the target rather than its inherent traits, is less likely to provoke a backlash (Snyder, 2020a: 114). Ranking demotion – if it fails to produce the intended increase in support for anti-trafficking efforts – is unlikely to backfire by reducing such support.

4 Methodology

To test our hypothesis, we fielded an online survey in Israel between October 28 and November 1, 2021. This survey, conducted in Hebrew, contained an embedded experiment, with survey respondents being asked to read a vignette describing a scenario where Israel was criticized by the United States for not doing enough to fight human trafficking. As shown below, several details in the vignette were manipulated.

4.1 Sample

Our sample consists of 1,135 respondents. They were recruited by *iPanel*, a company that conducts online surveys in Israel. The sample is not entirely representative of the Israeli population, with slight deviation from population benchmarks, such as a lower percentage of Arab citizens of Israel compared to the population at large. Still, our sample is diverse with regard to key socio-demographic and political variables. The mean age of respondents is 43.2 ($SD = 14.5$) with women constituting 48.4% of the sample. Those who identified as ideologically 'right' (1–3 on a 1–7 ideological self-placement measure) comprised 49.7% of the sample, while 'centrists' (4 on that measure) comprised 29.7% and 'leftists' (5–7 on that measure) comprised 20.6% of respondents. Such a distribution of age, gender, and political orientation is largely consistent with the overall Israeli population. Additional details about the sample are reported in Online Appendix A.

4.2 Experimental design

All respondents were first presented with a short paragraph introducing the issue of human trafficking in Israel. The paragraph described the victims of human trafficking: foreign citizens who come to Israel to work in the sex industry or other industries, such as agriculture, construction, and caretaking of the elderly. The text

also explained that victims typically suffer poor treatment: difficult work conditions, meager pay, threats, punishments, and, oftentimes, verbal abuse as well as physical violence. Respondents were then presented in the following paragraphs with the American criticism of the Israeli record in combating human trafficking.

Specifically, the experimental component involved a random assignment of the respondents to additional information provided in two separate sets of treatment: the tier ranking of Israel in the U.S. State Department's TIP report; and the naming of peer countries, that is, countries ranked in the same tier as Israel.

In the first experimental factor ("Tier"), respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the *No tier ranking* condition, respondents read the following statement: "Every year, the U.S. State Department assesses the countries of the world on their efforts against human trafficking. In 2021, the State Department criticized Israel for not making enough efforts to fight human trafficking." This condition serves as our de facto control condition, since it contains a critical statement that is *not* ranking based; and it provides no information on peer countries that faced American criticism. In the *Tier 2* condition, respondents were provided with a brief description of the TIP report's tier system. This was followed by two sentences noting that, for several years, Israel had been ranked in Tier 1 for its efforts to fight human trafficking, but in 2021 "the State Department demoted Israel to Tier 2 on the argument that Israel was not making enough efforts to fight human trafficking." Finally, in the *Tier 3* condition, respondents were shown a vignette almost identical to the vignette of the *Tier 2* condition, except the last sentence in that vignette indicated that Israel was demoted to Tier 3 (rather than Tier 2).

The second experimental factor ("Peers") is motivated by Kelley's (2017) insight about the possible frustration that might result from one's placement among "undesirable" peer countries. While the numerical ranking itself stands at the center of this study, the peer group of similarly graded countries may reinforce the impact of the ranking. We therefore include the peer group in the experiment in an exploratory manner as an influence that can magnify the ranking's effect (note that we do not examine the peers' independent effect on the support for fighting human trafficking). To gauge the impact of peers, we added a short sentence identifying additional countries placed in the same tier as Israel in the TIP report. Since only the above-mentioned *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions indicated tier placement, only respondents in these two conditions – but not in the *No tier ranking* condition – were randomly assigned to either receive or not receive the following information: "Other countries ranked in [Tier 2 / Tier 3] include India, Nigeria, and Kazakhstan" (these three countries indeed received a Tier 2 designation in the 2021 TIP report, alongside Israel). The full text of all experimental conditions is shown in Online Appendix B.

Overall, the experiment involved five conditions in a control condition [no tier ranking] + 2 (*Tier*: Tier 2, Tier 3) X 2 (*Peers*: mentioned, not mentioned) design. This design provides us with an opportunity to test the effect of Israel's TIP ranking on support for the efforts against human trafficking, compared to the baseline condition of U.S. criticism in a non-ranking format. This design also allows us to assess the compounding peer effect: whether the impact of the ranking changes when one becomes aware of other countries – especially countries one does not think highly of – that received the same ranking.

Online Appendix C reports balance tests and shows that respondents in the different conditions are indeed balanced on various socio-demographic characteristics and political measures.

4.3 Measures

After reading the vignette, respondents answered an item gauging the extent to which they support the efforts against human trafficking. Specifically, they were asked "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Israel should invest more in fighting human trafficking, even if this means investing less in fighting other crimes." Since respondents are not necessarily mindful of law-enforcement constraints, we chose to inform them of the potential costs of the efforts against human trafficking – fewer resources for fighting other crimes – thereby allowing them to express a more informed preference that recognizes the "price" of the American demand. This item was followed by a 5-point scale in which 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree.[1] We rescaled it to vary between 0 and 1 to create a dependent variable indicating support for the efforts against human trafficking, with higher values denoting greater *agreement* with the statement, i.e., support for doing more to combat human trafficking. The mean score in this measure is 0.59 ($SD = 0.27$).

To capture respondents' preference more directly and sharply, we also collapsed the "strongly agree" (1) and "agree" (2) responses into a single category and created a second, binary dependent variable where 1 denotes support for greater efforts against human trafficking, and 0 indicates a lack of such support. Overall, 44.2% of respondents expressed support for investing more in the suppression of human trafficking.

4.4 Estimation strategy

To test *H1*, our analysis takes the following functional form:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Tier\ 2 + \beta_2 Tier\ 3 + \beta_3 Peers + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where y_i denotes our dependent variable (support for greater efforts against human trafficking); β_1 and β_2 capture the coefficients of the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions, respectively, compared to the *No tier ranking* condition. Following *H1*, these two coefficients are expected to be positive and significant, denoting an increased support for fighting human trafficking after learning that Israel was not simply criticized by the U.S. State Department, but received an unflattering grade. In addition, β_3 captures the coefficient of the *Peers* indication, compared to no indication of similarly ranked peers (across the two tiers). Finally, ε is an idiosyncratic error term. This

[1] Respondents were also offered a sixth, "don't know" option. Those who chose it (5.7%) were excluded from the analysis. Including these respondents in the analysis has little effect on the results (see the robustness checks reported in Online Appendix D).

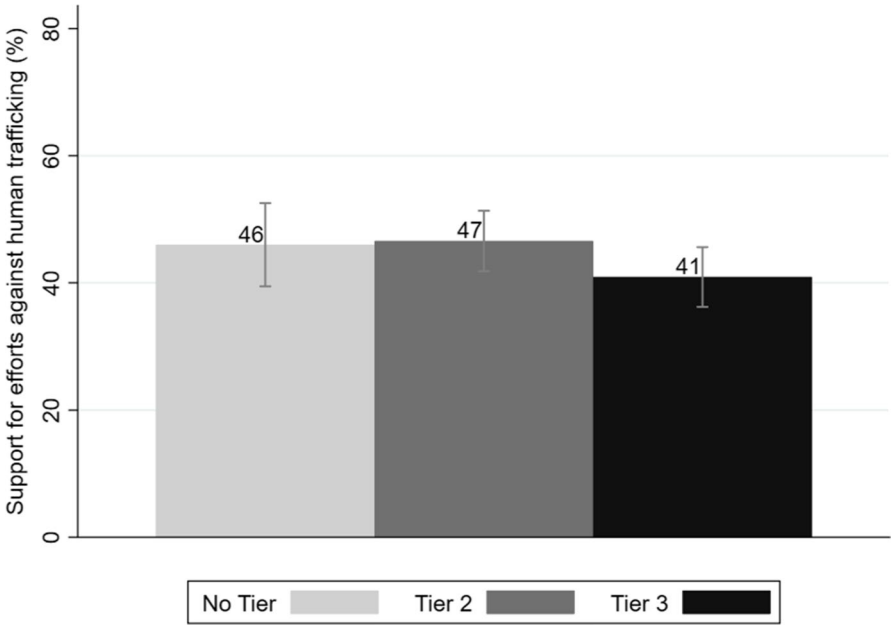

Fig. 1 Impact of TIP ranking on the support for greater efforts against human trafficking. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals

is our baseline model, and we also estimate a similar model controlling for several variables that capture respondents' socio-demographic profile and political views.

5 Results

We start by graphically presenting the effect of the experimental conditions on the binary measure of support for intensified efforts against human trafficking. We then test *H1* using multivariate regression analysis, based on Eq. (1).

Figure 1 presents the percentage of respondents who favor stepped-up effort against human trafficking across the three conditions in the first experimental factor ("Tier"): U.S. criticism without a numerical indicator (*No tier ranking*); U.S. criticism with a Tier 2 ranking (*Tier 2*); and U.S. criticism with a Tier 3 ranking (*Tier 3*). Contrary to *H1*, we find that the demoting of Israel to Tier 2 or Tier 3 does not elicit greater support for fighting human trafficking. If anything, a modest backlash effect appears in the *Tier 3* condition. More specifically, while in the *No tier ranking* condition 46.0% of respondents favored stronger efforts against human trafficking, in the *Tier 2* condition this estimate only slightly increases to 46.6%. In the *Tier 3* condition this estimate slightly *decreases*, by about 5 percentage points, to 40.9%. As the three estimates are insignificantly different from one another ($\chi^2(2) = 3.12$;

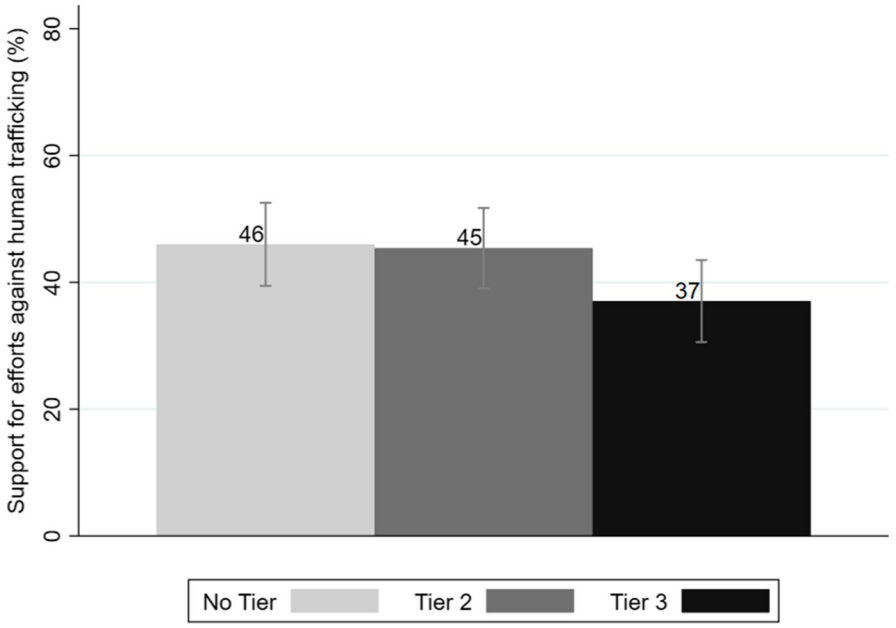

Fig. 2 Impact of TIP ranking on the support for greater efforts against human trafficking (omitting conditions with peer countries). Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals

$p = 0.210$),[2] we conclude that lower TIP rankings do *not* increase individual support for anti-trafficking efforts among Israeli citizens; indeed, we receive a preliminary indication that the lowest grade – Tier 3 – might, in fact, reduce such support.

The latter results include respondents who received information about peer countries in Tier 2/Tier 3 as well as respondents who did not receive such information. To get a "cleaner" assessment of the effect of TIP rankings – without the peer effect – we omit the two conditions that identify the similarly ranked countries. This leads to striking results, presented in Fig. 2. In the *Tier 2* condition, 45.4% of respondents supported greater efforts against human trafficking – indistinguishable from the 46.0% of respondents who expressed such preference in the *No tier ranking* condition. In the *Tier 3* condition, this estimate is only 37.0%, 9 percentage points lower than in the *No tier ranking* condition. The difference between the *No tier ranking* and *Tier 3* conditions is marginally significant at $p = 0.057$.[3] In other words, a Tier 3 ranking produces a backlash effect: when informed that the State Department demoted Israel to the lowest tier, citizens express *weaker* support for the efforts against human trafficking.

[2] Two-tailed tests are reported throughout. The difference between the *No tier ranking* and *Tier 2* conditions is $p = .886$; the difference between the *No tier ranking* and *Tier 3* conditions is $p = .214$.

[3] The difference between the *No tier ranking* and *Tier 2* conditions is $p = .896$.

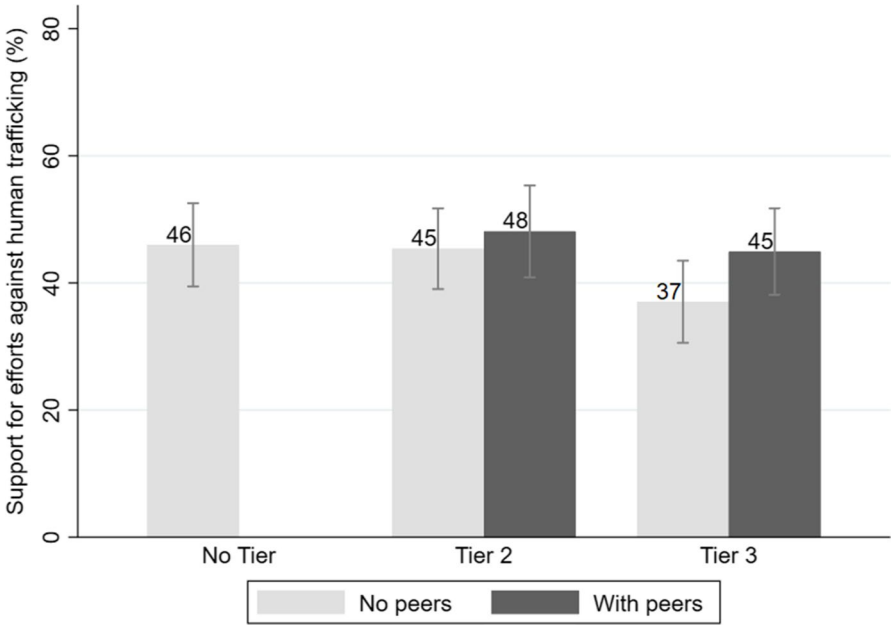

Fig. 3 Impact of TIP ranking and peer countries on the support for greater efforts against human trafficking. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals

As noted above, we thought such an effect would be unlikely in the present context, since the rankings originate from the United States – a friendly country. Yet, contrary to our expectations, a Tier 3 ranking does trigger a defiant response which is the opposite of what the rankings seek to achieve. Apparently, the demotion to the lowest tier offends Israelis to such an extent that it *reduces* their support for the U.S. goal of combating human trafficking. Note that the demotion to Tier 2 did not produce such an effect. Whereas being ranked in the middle tier may feel like a slap on the wrist, the bottom-tier ranking is apparently a punch in the face. This is consistent with Kelley and Simmons's (2015) finding about the greater impact of a Tier 3 designation.

Does awareness of peer countries – those ranked in the same tier as Israel – affect citizens' response to the TIP rankings? Fig. 3 presents the results across all five conditions, with the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions being separated to a condition with and without the peer countries. Overall, it seems that identifying those countries – India, Nigeria, and Kazakhstan – has a limited positive effect on respondents' support for the efforts against human trafficking compared to the "baseline" of only mentioning the tier ranking. The size of the effect is rather modest in the *Tier 2* condition—about 3 percentage points increase—with that increase being insignificant ($\chi^2(1)=0.31$; $p=0.577$). The peer effect is stronger in the *Tier 3* condition—an almost 8 percentage points increase—and this estimate is marginally significant ($\chi^2(1)=2.72$; $p=0.099$). Among those unaware of Israel's Tier 3 peers, only 37% supported greater efforts against human trafficking; the rate of support rose to 45%

among those informed that Israel's companions include poor, developing countries. This means that the mentioning of peers softened and reversed the blow of a Tier 3 ranking. For citizens, the similarly ranked peers perhaps provided a motivation to improve, as one wishes to distance themselves from an undesirable company. Furthermore, the awareness of peers may have offered solace: our country is not singled out for criticism; other countries face shaming as well. This renders the Tier 3 ranking somewhat more palatable and possibly mitigates the sense of injustice or unfairness that might accompany such ranking (Efrat, 2012: 203–204). The mentioning of peers was not enough to enhance the support for the efforts against trafficking beyond the level of the control condition *No tier ranking*, but the decline in support triggered by the Tier 3 ranking was erased. This suggests a countereffect of peers, and it provides preliminary evidence in favor of citizens' comparative thinking about rankings, complementing Kelley's (2017: 128–130) evidence on such thinking among officials.

To measure the effect of the ranking treatments while also controlling for the peers factor and individual-level measures, we employed two OLS regressions, with the 5-point measure of support for fighting human trafficking (rescaled to vary between 0 and 1) as our dependent variable. Higher values on this scale indicate increased support for fighting human trafficking.

Model 1 in Table 1 presents the baseline model intended to test *H1*, following Eq. (1). This model includes dummy variables for the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions, with the reference category being the *No tier ranking* condition. We also include a dummy variable for the *Peers* condition. Similar to the results presented above, those in the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions were not more likely to support the efforts against human trafficking, compared with those in the condition with no ranking mentioned. And while the *Tier 2* coefficient was close to zero, the *Tier 3* coefficient was marginally significant and *negative*: overall, the opposite of the *H1* prediction. Moreover, as shown at the bottom of Table 1, a coefficient equality test indicates that the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* coefficients are significantly different. These results attest to *Tier 3* having a significantly stronger negative effect compared to *Tier 2*.

In addition, respondents in the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions who were also exposed to information about peer countries were only slightly more likely to support enhanced efforts against human trafficking compared to respondents not exposed to a peer group, and this effect is not statistically significant ($p > 0.27$).[4]

Model 2 adds several individual-level control variables: a dummy variable for gender (female), as well as dummy variables for college education and for Jewish respondents. We also add controls for age, a 4-point religiosity item, and a 7-point right-left ideological self-placement item. Results suggest that respondents with higher levels of religiosity are less supportive of the efforts against human

[4] The *Peers* coefficient captures the combined effects of being exposed to peer countries in both *Tier 2* and *Tier 3*, compared to not being exposed to peer countries in both tiers. Notably, the effect of exposure to peer countries is rather similar across *Tier 2* and *Tier 3*, as the coefficient of an interaction between the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions and the *Peers* information is rather small and statistically insignificant ($b = -0.02$; $p = 0.589$).

Table 1 Determinants of support for greater efforts against human trafficking

	(1)	(2)
Tier Ranking		
Tier 2	-0.00	-0.01
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Tier 3	-0.04*	-0.05**
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Peer countries	0.02	0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age		0.00
		(0.00)
Gender (female = 1)		0.03
		(0.02)
College education		-0.02
		(0.02)
Jewish		-0.05
		(0.03)
Religiosity		-0.02*
		(0.01)
Right-Left ideology		0.02***
		(0.01)
Constant	0.60***	0.60***
	(0.02)	(0.05)
Coefficient equality *F*-test (*p*-value)		
Tier 2 = Tier 3	0.039	0.048
Observations	1,070	1,066
R-squared	0.01	0.04

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1 (two-tailed test). The dependent variable varies between 0 and 1, with higher values denoting support for greater efforts against human trafficking. The reference category for the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions is a condition with no mention of tier ranking. "Don't know" responses are excluded from the analysis.

trafficking, while leftist respondents are more supportive. With the inclusion of the individual-level controls, the main experimental result becomes stronger. The *Tier 3* condition clearly shows a backlash effect: a reduced support for strengthening the efforts against human trafficking. Holding all other variables at their respective mean, respondents in the control condition had a predicted value of 0.61 [95% CI: 0.57, 0.65] on the 0-to-1 scale of support for anti-trafficking efforts, while those in the *Tier 3* condition had a predicted value of 0.56 [0.54, 0.59] on that scale. This holds in a set of robustness checks reported in Online Appendix D. In Online Appendix E, we show that the effect of the *Tier 2* and *Tier 3* conditions on support for greater efforts against human trafficking is quite similar across the most

important demographic and political groups in Israel. This attests to the robustness of the backlash effect in the *Tier 3* condition.

Overall, these results do not provide support for *H1* but rather offer support for H_0. In our Israeli sample, TIP rankings did *not* increase the support for fighting human trafficking. If anything, placing Israel in the lowest tier resulted in a backlash effect, *reducing* citizens' support for the cause that the rankings seek to promote.

6 Conclusion

Can global indicators serve as policy levers? Can they nudge states closer to international standards? Our study examined one potential channel of indicators' influence – their impact on the public's preferences – which may be double-edged. On the one hand, citizens may demand a policy change that would bring the country closer to international standards and restore its reputation. On the other hand, the domestic response might be dismissive or defiant – allowing the government to repudiate the ranking and undermining its intended effect. We expected to find support for the former, but our study offered support for the latter. The State Department's TIP ranking, intended to boost the support for fighting human trafficking, made little impression on Israelis when their country was ranked in Tier 2; and it produced a backlash, making Israelis less supportive of the human-trafficking cause, once informed of their country's placement in Tier 3. That is hardly the effect that the State Department wishes for.

Obviously, a result obtained through a single-country design has its limits, as the impact of rankings on public opinion may vary between countries. Furthermore, one might argue that Israel presents a unique case: As their country faces constant international criticism, Israelis may have a lower tolerance for outsiders' exhortations, resulting in a backlash. Yet multiple studies suggest that the triggering of a backlash in response to international pressure is far from unique to Israel. International criticism and condemnation have also produced a backlash among respondents in China and Serbia, for example (Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Spoerri & Freyberg-Inan, 2008). Importantly, Greenhill and Reiter (2022) have recently found evidence of a backlash effect among American respondents in a study of attitudes toward prolonged solitary confinement (PSC): subjects were less likely to support ending PSC when informed about NGOs' criticism of this practice. Overall, this body of research suggests that a backlash effect may occur in various national contexts and is not limited to Israel.

Interestingly, Greenhill and Reiter suggest that the backlash effect they observed did *not* stem from respondents' negative disposition toward the critical NGOs. This comports with our finding here: the American criticism triggered a backlash despite the close and friendly relations between the United States and Israel. Both findings should lead us to rethink the view of backlash as more likely when subjects hold negative attitudes toward the signal sender (Snyder, 2020a, 2020b). Members of the in-group may find it difficult to tolerate external criticism, and will boost their support for the in-group, even when the sender is *not* viewed as suspicious or hostile.

Future research should seek to better specify the scope conditions under which domestic actors respond (un)favorably to international rankings. While our results indicate public dismissal or defiance of international rankings, it is possible that these attitudes are triggered by poor rankings in *sensitive areas*, such as human rights: citizens may refuse to accept the portrayal of their country as responsible for rights violations and human suffering. By contrast, poor rankings in less sensitive areas, such as the economy or the environment, may be better received by the public, possibly yielding the intended pro-compliance effect (Tingley & Tomz, 2022). It is also possible that the backlash effect observed here was the product of Israel's being given the lowest possible ranking. Citizens may more easily accept a negative ranking that is not the absolute worst.

This article also provides one of the first pieces of evidence demonstrating how citizens think in terms of relative status. It is widely assumed that policymakers care about the status of their country relative to others (Renshon, 2016). The analysis here shows that citizens may similarly worry about the grouping of their country with peers that are seemingly inferior; or, alternatively, they are more tolerant of criticism knowing that others are similarly targeted. This comparative thinking about one's peers may produce a countereffect capable of reversing the backlash produced by poor rankings. Note that this study has examined the impact of peers in a preliminary fashion, as a possible magnifier of rankings' effect. Future research may examine the independent effect of peers and clarify the underlying mechanism.

At the prescriptive level, this study suggests caution regarding the efficacy of rankings – at least in terms of their impact on the public. Policymakers may well take rankings seriously and initiate policy reform in the hope of obtaining better grades (Schueth, 2015). Yet these indicators might leave publics indifferent or even defiant. Policymakers may indeed take away a cynical message: that there is little need for public face-saving following a poor ranking. The government does not have to defend its record or otherwise rebut the criticism, since citizens will likely dismiss it anyway. What is the lesson here for actors seeking to advance international norms? If norms are to be promoted though pressure on the public, these actors should think carefully whether rankings indeed facilitate norm promotion. They should consider employing rankings that do not feel like a threat to the group's status – rankings that leave audiences receptive to the outside criticism, not resentful of it. For example, countries falling short of international standards may be compared with their own past performance, rather than shamed through a grade lower than their perceived peers (Cooley, 2015). This is, of course, but one possible proposal. But the broader point is that analysts of international rankings, and the actors producing them, should be mindful of the possibly limited – and even counterproductive – impact on the public. This does not mean that indicators can never move the public's preferences closer to international standards; it does mean that the intended impact of indicators on citizens should be designed and fostered rather than assumed.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare they have no conflict of interest or competing interests in relation to this article.

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