

THREE ESSAYS ON THE INITIATION AND CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC  
SANCTIONS

by

RYAN YU-LIN LIOU

(Under the Direction of Amanda Murdie)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I explore the motivations behind countries' use of economic sanctions and their impacts. The first essay shows that human rights advocacy prompts greater support for sanctions among US citizens against governments violating these rights. This support is primarily driven by concerns over the US's reputation. The second essay explores how struggling governments may deploy sanctions to divert attention from domestic difficulties and solicit support. Findings suggest that such a diversionary tactic is more common when governments face large-scale nonviolent mobilization and legislative opposition. In the third essay, I demonstrate that citizens of targeted countries tend to oppose human rights values when exposed to competing narratives from the sanctioning country and their own government. Additionally, information about sanctions diminishes people's sympathy for antigovernment protests. Target citizens' perception of the sanctioning country as a threat serving as a key factor in these unintended consequences.

INDEX WORDS: Economic sanctions, Foreign policy, Public opinion, Protests,  
International advocacy, Human rights

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BA, National Taiwan University, Taiwan, 2010

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2024

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To my beloved father,  
Chin-Liang Liou

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Along the journey of writing my dissertation, I am fortunate to be surrounded by wonderful colleagues. My advisor, Amanda Murdie, has given me tremendous support and invaluable mentorship. She supports me and believes in me at each challenging juncture in my PhD years – comps, my father’s passing away, the pandemic, being a parent, job market, etc. As an international scholar and a first-generation student, I benefited enormously from her kindness, wisdom, co-authorship, and working with her. I couldn’t have achieved all these without her guidance. She has been my role model, and I am deeply grateful to her.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my committee members. Dursun Peksen is an amazing scholar and coauthor. I am grateful to him for many stimulating conversations and feedback. His knowledge and work on sanctions have inspired me and profoundly shaped my dissertation. I am thankful to K. Chad Clay for his insights and energy. He has been very helpful since my day one at the UGA. I appreciate Ryan Powers, who provided suggestions and resources to my survey experiments. I also benefitted a lot from working as his research assistant. I also thank my cohort and friends at UGA, Neil, Naji, Filip, Linan, Jenica, Brian, Alex, Shanshan, Jason, Qingyan, and Aman, for their care and comradeship.

I am thankful for receiving the Fellowship for Studying Abroad from the Ministry of Education of Taiwan and the Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the International Studies Association. This dissertation could not have been completed without their financial support.

Finally, I owe a debt of appreciation to my family for their love, kindness, and encouragement. My parents are my biggest supporters. When my father bragged about me to his friends, I always felt embarrassed. But I hope this work would make him proud. I believe he would be smiling happily when I told him I got my PhD. I thank my wife, Huei-Jyun, for her continuously being my inspiration and happiness. She is my Muse, Athena, and Venus. I am filled with admiration and gratitude for her unconditional love. Our son, Joey, has joined us in filling our days with joy. Every day is better because of their presence, and I am grateful to them for igniting my life.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Economic coercion is one of the most frequently-used foreign policy tools nowadays. What motivates countries to employ economic coercion? What outcomes arise after countries impose economic coercion? In this dissertation, I address these two core questions and contribute to the field in three ways.

First, my dissertation offers insights into the debate about the role of non-state actors in sanctions initiation and effectiveness. Existing explanations mainly focus on the international perspective of why countries initiate sanctions, like solving territorial disputes, constraining aggression, and promoting target countries' democracy. I move beyond the traditional focus on the motivations of sanctions and unravel the "black boxes" of sanctions initiation. I further illustrate how various factors within a sender country, including the pursuit of political benefits by its leaders, domestic difficulties, and the influence of human rights organizations, can shape sanction policies. I thus expand the scope of sanctions initiation research, advancing our understanding of how domestic politics and non-state actors can shape sanctions policy (Attia 2024; Kaempfer and Lowenberg 1992; Kustra 2021; McGillivray and Stam 2004; McLean and Whang 2014; Urtuzuastigui 2023; Whang 2011).

Second, I extend the boomerang model (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and the spiral model (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999) and shed light on how human rights messaging influences public opinion in sanctioning and target countries. Consistent with the boomerang model, my

findings show that human rights messaging about physical integrity repression can mobilize public support for sanctions as a means to address human rights abuses. However, even though international advocacy may rally support for human rights pressure, my findings also indicate that when the pressure is actually placed, the target government's messages tend to prevail over those of the coercing entity. Accordingly, these human rights sanctions fail to sway target citizens' opinion. This speaks to the spiral model, which suggests that international pressure often initially faces resistance and contestation in target countries.

Third, I provide micro-level evidence to the literature indicating sanctions have negative impacts on target countries' human rights (Adam and Tsarsitalidou 2019; Carneiro and Apolinário, Jr. 2016; Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2021; Peksen 2009; Wood 2008). My findings suggest that when citizens are exposed to messages about human rights sanctions as well as their government's counter-narratives, their endorsement of human rights principles and sympathy for protests decrease. Consequently, this may empower the target government to employ coercive tactics with greater latitude against its citizens. More broadly, my findings echo recent studies that suggest the limited effectiveness of international pressure on influencing public opinion (Grossman, Manekin, and Margalit 2018; Kohno, Montinola, and Winters 2023; Terman 2023).

My dissertation consists of three essays. They answer the following three questions:

1. Can and how do international organizations' human rights messaging rally public support from third-party countries' citizens for using human rights sanctions?
2. How does the domestic environment affect a government's incentives to sanction another country?
3. How do people in target countries perceive and react to foreign human rights sanctions?

## **1.1 Can International Advocacy Rally Public Support for Human Rights**

### **Sanctions? Experimental Evidence from the United States**

I examine the impact of advocacy information disseminated by intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) on citizens' approval of sanctioning repressive regimes. Results from a survey experiment in the US show that exposure to human rights messages leads to increased support for sanctions against rights-abusing governments among US citizens. Additionally, information highlighting physical integrity rights violations in foreign countries, compared to restrictions on empowerment rights, elicits greater popular backing for sanctions. Further examination indicates that the primary driver behind this public support stems from concerns about potential damage to the international standing of the US if no action is taken.

## **1.2 Mass Mobilization, Elite Competition, and Diversionary Use of Sanctions**

I uncover the strategic reasons governments might impose sanctions. I argue that nonviolent mass mobilization can spur a government to sanction foreign entities to bolster domestic support. In contrast, violent unrest does not elicit a similar response. Furthermore, legislative competition also affects the propensity to impose sanctions. Governments grappling with significant internal pressures tend to use foreign sanctions as a tool to solidify unity and demonstrate competence. The empirical analyses show that diversionary use of sanctions is more likely when incumbent leaders face maximalist nonviolent citizen mobilization and strong opposition parties. Contrary to conventional wisdom, my findings suggest that politicians may strategically utilize sanctions as a tool for propaganda to advance their political interests.

### **1.3 Back up or Backfire? The Impact of Human Rights Sanctions on Target Citizens' Attitudes Toward Human Rights and Mobilizations**

I explore the repercussions of sanctions on the human rights perceptions of citizens in target countries. While those imposing sanctions may assert their commitment to upholding human rights and challenging repressive regimes, the target governments often frame these sanctions as infringements on their sovereignty and threats to national interests. Through a survey experiment in India, I demonstrate that people's support for human rights and sympathy for protests can diminish when exposed to competing narratives on foreign sanctions. This inquiry underscores the unforeseen consequences of human rights sanctions.

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## CHAPTER 2

### Can International Advocacy Rally Public Support for Human Rights Sanctions?

#### Experimental Evidence from the United States

##### **2.1 Introduction**

Human rights organizations (HROs) regularly publicize rights abuse and shame governments that commit violations. Oftentimes, they even call on the international community to use targeted sanctions or “smart sanctions” against abusive regimes. For example, in response to the Myanmar junta’s genocide against Rohingya, Human Rights Watch urged that “The United Nations Security Council and concerned countries impose targeted sanctions and an arms embargo on the Burmese military to end its ethnic cleansing campaign against Rohingya Muslims” (Human Rights Watch 2017). Similarly, Amnesty International called on “the Security Council to add to the pressure on Myanmar authorities by seriously considering options such as an arms embargo against the military and targeted financial sanctions against individuals responsible for crimes and serious abuses” (Amnesty International 2017).

Human rights messaging typically generates two types of pressure (Brysk 1993; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse and Sikkink 1999). On the one hand, human rights advocacy might mobilize third-party states “from above” to exert pressure on the repressive regimes to stop abuses. Murdie and Peksen (2013, 2014) find that naming and shaming campaigns by HROs can help focus the international community’s attention on target states’ human rights situations via information production and dissemination, thus prompting economic sanctions and humanitarian

military interventions. On the other hand, human rights messaging informs citizens of the shamed countries about their domestic human rights problems (Ausderan 2014; Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz 2012). If such a message helps form a strong force “from below,” then repressive regimes will likely have more difficulty continuing to commit repression and demobilizing resistance (Williamson and Malik 2021).

A great deal of literature has highlighted the positive, though conditional, effects of naming and shaming activities on human rights conditions or mobilizations (Brysk 1993; DeMeritt 2012; Hawkins 2002; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Krain 2012; McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015; Murdie and Davis 2012; Ramos, Ron, and Thoms 2007; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Woo and Murdie 2017). While this body of research offers many insights into how transnational advocacy influences *target* countries, much remains unknown about how this advocacy influences *third-party* countries, particularly whether and how the messaging could encourage the international audience to take action. Action or consensus mobilization in third-party countries, especially in liberal democracies, is often assumed, but not tested. Additionally, the mechanisms underlying this potential relationship between human rights messaging and change in public attitudes is not well understood.

If human rights messages lack resonance, it is difficult for transnational advocates to expand the network of entities pressuring regimes that commit rights abuses (Park, Murdie, and Davis 2021). Moreover, for shaming to work as pressure “from above,” human rights messages need to be transmitted to international audiences, sway their preexisting opinions on repressive regimes, and spur citizens to urge “doing something” to stop human suffering. Prior work also finds that human rights messaging will be more effective when combined with pressures from the international community such as third-party states (Murdie 2014, 214–18).

This paper examines two questions. First, does international organizations’ human rights messaging rally support from third-party countries’ citizens concerning the use of human rights sanctions? Second, what kind of information resonates with more people? I hypothesize that information about repression helps increase third-party countries’ popular approval of applying sanctions against repressive governments.<sup>1</sup> When ordinary citizens are more aware of human rights atrocities, they might be more in favor of exercising coercion on those who are involved in the abuses. I further argue that compared with information about empowerment rights repression, information about physical integrity rights repression is more likely to activate third-party countries’ citizens to support sanctions.

To test these expectations, I administered a survey experiment in the US in September 2022 via Lucid Academic Marketplace.<sup>2</sup> I find that the UN’s human rights messaging, particularly when it referred to physical integrity rights violations, increased respondents’ support for the use of sanctions against the rights-abusing government. However, I find weaker evidence for Human Rights Watch’s advocacy. Further analysis suggests that the primary motivation behind this public support is concern over potential damage to the US’s international standing if no action is taken. Additionally, I find that the “rally effect” of human rights messaging for sanctions is largest among respondents who have low interest in information about foreign affairs and among respondents who favor lower levels of isolationism.

My experiment considers public support for using economic sanctions as the outcome measure for three reasons. First, sanctions are a popular foreign policy tool to address

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<sup>1</sup> This study does not intend to assess the impact of advocacy information on mass attitudes toward other foreign policy tools like military intervention. This study focuses on whether human rights massaging encourages third-party citizens to identify with HRO’s proposed policies, i.e., human rights sanctions.

<sup>2</sup> The survey design was registered with Open Science Framework (OSF) at <https://osf.io/ecnpw>. The University of Georgia Institutional Review Board approved this experiment.

international human rights crises. Second, HROs often advocate for the international community to employ sanctions to pressure abusive regimes into behavior change. Third, sanctions are costly to most of the people in sanction-imposing states. If respondents are willing to approve sanctions despite the significant costs, it suggests that human rights messaging works.

This study makes several contributions. First, it provides micro-level evidence that human rights messaging could shape third-party public attitudes. The findings suggest that US citizens are more likely to be motivated if the messages refer to the abuse of physical integrity rights. Second, prior studies mainly focus on physical integrity rights violations like government killings and torture. I add another important dimension of human rights—empowerment rights such as freedoms of speech and assembly—and empirically test how the public reacts to the repression of empowerment rights. My findings suggest that information about empowerment rights restrictions in foreign countries does not galvanize individuals to approve of sanctioning abusive regimes. This study’s third contribution is examining the mechanisms connecting human rights messaging to higher support for human rights sanctions. I show that concern over the US’s reputation and image is the primary driver of Americans’ increased support for sanctions when they receive messages from the UN. In contrast, concerns over external threats and morality do not prompt Americans to support human rights sanctions.

This paper also entails significant policy implications. Whether or not the public supports using sanctions is essential for forming and continuing sanctions policies. This study shows that exposure to information about massive human rights abuses in foreign countries will increase public support for issuing sanctions. For governments that want to garner more popular approval for their sanction policies, information framing and delivery can be important components in persuading domestic audiences. For protesters in repressive regimes like Myanmar and Russia,

highlighting and spreading information about government repression is critical for obtaining international support.

## **2.2 Human Rights Information and Mass Attitudes on Interventions**

Human rights atrocities often elicit overseas attention and incur international denunciation (Hess and Martin 2006; Martin 2007). Research has underlined the role of human rights information in triggering international interventions. For example, the HROs' naming and shaming and the media's disclosure of human rights violations might cause the abusive states to be more likely to experience economic sanctions (Murdie and Peksen 2013; Peksen, Peterson, and Drury 2014), humanitarian military intervention (Murdie and Peksen 2014), foreign aid suspension or reduction (Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018; Lebovic and Voeten 2009), and International Monetary Fund program exclusion (Woo and Murdie 2017).

A growing body of work has explored the micro-foundation of international responses to human rights abuses. The main finding is that increased awareness of overseas repression can rally support for placing additional constraints on the abusers. Experimental studies suggest that information about foreign countries' rights abuses will encourage respondents to approve military attacks on abusive regimes (Tomz and Weeks 2020), endorse military interventions (Agerberg and Kreft 2023; S. Kreps and Maxey 2018), and support sanctions (Allendoerfer 2017; Brancati 2014; Dasandi et al. 2022; Green-Riley, Kruszewska-Eduardo, and Fu 2021; Putnam and Shapiro 2017). For example, Allendoerfer (2017) finds that US citizens who are aware of rights violations in the recipient countries will approve of cutting foreign aid to the abusive recipients. However, scholars also find that exposure to additional information about potential economic costs of sanctions to the sanctioning country will reduce respondents' support

for condemnations and economic sanctions (Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Peterson 2017; Zarpli 2023).

## **2.3 International Organizations as Reliable Information Providers to the Public**

International Organizations (IOs) can shape public attitudes about foreign policies by showing approval or disapproval of state governments' policies or behavior (Chapman and Reiter 2004; Thompson 2006; Grieco et al. 2011; Chapman 2011; Murdie and Peksen 2014; Ausderan 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016; Lushenko, Raman, and Kreps 2022). IOs and activists can influence policies by calling attention to issues, creating new issues, and producing politically usable information (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Ordinary citizens consider intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) more credible and neutral than states, rendering these organizations important information providers, especially regarding international affairs. For example, Kreps and Wallace (2016) find that criticisms from the UN and Human Rights Watch can prompt US citizens to think that drone strikes are morally wrong or hurt the US's international image, thereby reducing their willingness to support drone strikes. Similarly, but in the opposite direction, scholars find that with UN approval, the use of drone strikes will be perceived as more legitimate and receive higher mass support (Lushenko, Raman, and Kreps 2022). Scholars also find that in Pakistan, people increase their support for human rights reforms and willingness to mobilize in support of these reforms when they know these policy proposals are endorsed by the UN (Anjum, Chilton, and Usman 2021). Other studies also find evidence in other issue areas like deforestation, refugees, and humanitarian interventions where UN endorsements can rally more

support for proposed policies (Greenhill 2020; Wallace 2019). These findings together point to the importance of IOs in shaping public attitudes.

However, several studies also indicate that IO's human rights messaging sometimes cannot move public opinion as expected (Carpenter 2007; Carpenter et al. 2014; McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015; Bracic and Murdie 2020; Dietrich 2021; Greenhill and Reiter 2022; Chapman and Li 2023). For example, Bracic and Murdie (2020) demonstrate that repressive regimes' counterclaims, like labeling the abused as a terrorist, will undermine the effectiveness of international advocacy in prompting people into action against abusers. In a similar vein, Greenhill and Reiter (2022) find that human rights messaging from the UN and INGOs does not effectively shift public attitudes toward these organizations' desired outcomes. Instead, when people receive both the IO human rights messaging and the government's defense, they have no more or even less support for protecting prisoners' rights. Morrison (2023) also shows that the naming and shaming sometimes result in a backlash effect; that is, HRO's naming and shaming prompt people who view the victims of rights abuses as threatening and identify with the repressive leader to increase their support for the repressive leader. Together, these studies point to the possibility that human rights messaging will be ineffective in rallying mass support for penalizing the violators.

## **2.4 Variations in Human Rights Violations**

This paper evaluates whether and how exposure to information about overseas repression provided by IOs and INGOs raises third-party citizens' approval of human rights sanctions. Generally, violations of civil and political rights can be categorized into two types: (1) physical integrity rights abuses, such as brutal crackdowns on protests, torture, and extrajudicial killings,

and (2) empowerment rights abuses, such as political bans and restrictions on expression and assembly. I posit that compared with information on physical integrity rights abuses, information on empowerment rights abuses will be less likely to encourage third-party countries' citizens to support the exertion of economic pressure on the repressive government.

Physical integrity rights abuses are often highly visible<sup>3</sup> acts of violence; they are also called violent repression or high-intensity coercion (Way and Levitsky 2006). Physical integrity abuse or high-intensity coercion against challengers often backfires. It might not only incite domestic loyalty shifts away from the regimes but also provoke increased criticism and punishment from the international community, such as sanctions (Aytaç, Schiumerini, and Stokes 2018; Binnendijk and Marovic 2006; Chenoweth 2018; Chenoweth and Stephan 2012; Francisco 1995; Hawkins 2002; Hess and Martin 2006; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). Keck and Sikkink (1998) find that transnational advocacy efforts on issues involving “bodily harm to vulnerable populations” are most likely to be successful because these issues are more dramatic and resonate with basic ideas of human dignity (1998, 205). A recent experimental study also shows that information about torture and ill-treatment in detention is more likely to move public opinion in favor of sanctioning the repressive regime compared to information about restriction of expression freedom (Arı and Sonmez 2024). One major reason for this outcome is that physical integrity rights are more established and universally accepted, and the general public would prioritize those rights (Arı and Sonmez 2024).

By contrast, abuse of empowerment rights is “nonviolent” government interference or low-intensity coercion (Way and Levitsky 2006). Different from the direct use of physical violence, empowerment rights violations are more subtle acts to suppress challengers, such as

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<sup>3</sup> However, sometimes they can occur in secret. For example, forced disappearance and stealth torture.

restrictions on freedom of expression and association, election manipulation, surveillance of opposition, censorship, and suppression of independent media (Chenoweth 2018; Smithey and Kurtz 2018; Way and Levitsky 2006). Compared to physical integrity rights abuse, empowerment rights abuse typically involves lower levels of violence and lethality, which in turn might attract less public and media attention (Chenoweth 2017, 2021, 233–38; Escribà-Folch 2013, 545–48; Gartner and Regan 1996; Pan 2020; Park, Murdie, and Davis 2021).

Taken together, I expect that although exposure to human rights messaging will likely galvanize citizens into approving the use of sanctions against repressive regimes, information on empowerment rights repression will unlikely fuel the public’s sense of urgency to take action and thus gather less support for sanctions.

The preceding discussions lead me to derive the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** The UN’s advocacy information about the repression of physical integrity rights in a foreign country will increase respondents’ support for sanctioning the abusive government, while information about the repression of empowerment rights will be less likely to increase support.

**Hypothesis 2:** INGOs’ advocacy information about the repression of physical integrity rights in a foreign country will increase respondents’ support for sanctioning the abusive government, while information about the repression of empowerment rights will be less likely to increase support.

Studies suggest that multilateral actions imply higher legitimacy and that the burden would be shared by other states (Lushenko, Raman, and Kreps 2022; Wallace 2019). Accordingly, the general public might be more inclined to support sanctions when other countries are also involved in these actions. Multilateral sanctions might also make people

believe the actions would be more likely to succeed, thereby producing heightened public support (Ari and Sonmez 2024). I thus expect that citizens will increase their support when they learn that the sanctions are not levied by the US alone but with multilateral senders.

**Hypothesis 3:** Learning that the sanctions will be joined by other countries will increase support for the use of sanctions.

## **2.5 How Information about Rights Abuse Could Prompt Support for**

### **Sanctions**

I propose four mechanisms to clarify the connections between human rights messaging and support for sanctions: threat perception, reputation concerns, empathy, and moral obligation.

First, threat perceptions of the rights-violating governments could drive popular support for the use of sanctions. Past research indicates that abusive regimes are often treated as threats because their violent propensity at the domestic level might transfer to aggression at the interstate level (Caprioli and Trumbore 2003, 2006). Informed citizens in liberal countries might not only worry that interactions with repressive regimes might hurt their countries' national interests (Chu 2021), but also regard non-engagement or confrontation with those regimes as a punishment for misbehaviors (Escribà-Folch, Muradova, and Rodon 2021; Putnam and Shapiro 2017; Tomz and Weeks 2020). I expect that citizens of sanctioning countries will consider physical integrity rights repression more threatening than empowerment rights repression, and this heightened threat perception will likely boost support for the imposition of sanctions.

Second, people who view promoting human rights as an important aspect of international image might be inclined to support the deployment of sanctions against repressive regimes (Powers and Renshon 2021). They might be afraid that doing nothing in response to grave

human rights abuses will undermine their country's reputation. Moreover, when the abuse is highly visible, such as arresting and beating peaceful protesters, it will be more likely to arouse a sense of emergency to intervene. Therefore, I posit that concerns over their country's international reputation and image might induce citizens in liberal states to support their government's intervention to help the oppressed populations, especially when those people are under repression by overt physical violence.

Third, stories of human suffering might strike an empathic chord among the third-party public toward the suffering population, which could intensify the former's willingness to help the latter (Bayram and Holmes 2020; Green-Riley, Kruszewska-Eduardo, and Fu 2021; Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga 2017; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019). Empathy toward the repressed might be translated into support for providing assistance to the repressed citizens and penalizing the repressive governments. Thus, I propose that if people who identify with universal human rights values learn of the news of repression through physical violence, they will be more likely to approve their government's decision to use sanctions against those involved in the abuses.

Fourth, IOs and INGOs endorsements might trigger ordinary citizens to produce a higher moral obligation to protect foreign civilians. Wheeler (2000) argues that people support their governments' humanitarian interventions, like "use of force against states that grossly violate human rights (p. 6)" because they think there is a moral responsibility to protect human rights everywhere. Kreps and Maxey (2018) also find that moral obligation is the main driving factor of public approval for humanitarian interventions. Receiving information about humanitarian suffering overseas will likely increase citizens' support for sanctions by arousing feelings of moral duty.

## 2.6 Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I fielded a survey experiment in September 2022 on a sample of 2,341 American adults. The survey was programmed in Qualtrics and then distributed through the survey platform Lucid.<sup>4</sup> Participants who did not pass a pre-treatment attention check were screened out of the survey before the experiment. The sample size for the survey was 2,204 after eliminating those participants. All hypotheses were registered before fielding the survey and receiving the data.

I conduct the experiment in the US for three reasons. First, the US has been the most prolific user of economic sanctions around the world, accounting for more than one third of all sanction cases in the world since 1950 (Kirilakha et al. 2021; Morgan, Bapat, and Kobayashi 2014). The US government also frequently claims that it imposes sanctions with the goal of improving human rights. Research also indicates that human rights sanctions against repressive regimes receive bipartisan support in Congress (Tama 2023). Since sanctions are the US's major foreign policy tool, exploring how the citizens react to foreign repression and how they think about the use of sanctions yields important insight into the domestic explanations for the US's initiation of human rights sanctions. Second, promoting human rights is important to many Americans, even knowing its associated economic costs (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2021). When human rights become "meta-norms," the public will likely push policymakers to impose sanctions on rights-abusive governments (Horne 2001; Terman 2023, 36–38). Third, the US is an established democracy where people are free to access information, and public attitudes will likely affect foreign policy decisions (Kertzer and Zeitsoff 2017; Matthew A. Baum and Potter

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<sup>4</sup> Lucid used quota sampling to approximate the US adult population with respect to gender, age, race/ethnicity, and region.

2015; Slantchev 2006). It thus offers an appropriate context for evaluating how human rights advocacy could influence sanction policies via changes in mass attitudes.

The experiment evaluates the effects of information about human rights violations on US citizens' preference regarding the punishment of the abusive government. The experimental approach allows me to isolate potential confounders and directly test the theoretical expectations derived from the literature on human rights advocacy and foreign policy.

The survey instrument includes three separate binary treatments, thereby involving a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial design with a total of eight experimental groups. All participants read a baseline statement: "The US has expressed concerns about the deteriorating human rights conditions in Country A." I manipulate whether participants receive the baseline vignette or an additional one of the two types of rights abuses prompts: physical integrity rights repression or empowerment rights repression, one of the two advocacy sources: Human Rights Watch or The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Country A, and one of the two types of sanctions: unilateral sanctions or multilateral sanctions. The vignette has wording that is similar to news coverage of Human Rights Watch calls for action and The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights. Respondents receive random assignments to control or treatment groups. The randomization resulted in well-balanced groups of respondents across the subsamples. Descriptive statistics of demographic and conditioning variables and t-tests between the control and treatment groups are shown in Tables 2.A-2.D of the Appendix. Additionally, I used multinomial logit tests with the treatment groups as the dependent variables and regressed them on demographic and conditioning variables. Results indicate that these covariates do little to explain the assignment to the subsamples (Table 2.E).

- **Physical integrity rights repression information:**

{*Human Rights Watch or The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Country A*} has also condemned the human rights abuses, indicating that the government has violently clamped down on unarmed citizens and that security forces have used excessive force while arresting demonstrators. Police used pepper spray and fired pepper balls at journalists wearing identifying badges. Widespread torture of detainees was reported.

- **Empowerment rights repression information:**

{*Human Rights Watch or The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Country A*} has also condemned the human rights abuses, indicating that the government has stripped the media licenses of local outlets and banned satellite television. Freedom of speech was severely limited. Public gatherings are also considered illegal without government approval, and the approved activities are under the scrutiny of the police.

Respondents in the treatment groups were then told: {*Human Rights Watch or The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Country A*} called on the international community to significantly increase economic pressure on Country A's leadership in order to help stop further rights violations.

After receiving the assigned vignette, all respondents learned that: "Based on the situation in Country A, the U.S. government is planning to impose economic sanctions against the government officials of Country A." Respondents who receive the treatment of multilateral sanctions will read an additional prompt: "Other countries are also considering sanctions against Country A. It is likely that U.S. sanctions will be joined by other governments."

The main outcome variable is respondents' levels of support for using sanctions, which is measured with the following question: "Do you support or oppose the U.S. imposing sanctions on Country A's government?" The response options formed a seven-point scale ranging from "Support a great deal" to "Oppose a great deal," with "Neither support nor oppose" anchoring the center. If respondents did not choose "Oppose," they were then asked: "What kinds of sanctions do you think the government should use? Please check all that apply." The list of options includes trade sanctions, bans on military assistance, arms embargoes, restrictions on economic assistance, financial sanctions, travel bans, and others. The order of the list was randomized.

I then evaluate four mechanisms that connect human rights messaging with support for sanctions: threat perception, reputation concerns, empathy, and moral obligation. Respondents were asked: "When you thought about whether or not to support the use of sanctions against Country A's government, how well does each of the following statements explain your decision?" (1) Country A would pose a threat to the US (*threat perception*). (2) Not taking any actions would damage the US reputation and image (*reputation concern*). (3) I feel empathetic toward Country A's people (*empathy*). (4) The US has a moral obligation to take actions (*moral obligation*).

I also control for potential confounding factors, including gender, age, education, income, political party identification, political ideology, region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West, and the reference group is Northeast), interest in foreign affairs, and isolationism. Interest in foreign affairs was coded based on responses to the question: "How interested are you in information about what's going on in foreign affairs?" Responses are on a four-point scale ranging from "very interested" to "not interested at all." Isolationism was constructed as an average response

on a seven-point scale to the following two statements: “The U.S. needs to play an active role in solving conflicts around the world” (reserved coding); and “The U.S. government should just try to take care of the wellbeing of Americans and not get involved with other nations.” Overall, the demographic variables do not have a significant effect on respondents’ support for sanctions.

## 2.7 Results

In this section, I present results from the analysis evaluating the effects of IO’s human rights messaging on mass support for sanctioning abusive states. I estimate intention-to-treat (ITT) effects by regressing my dependent variable—support for sanctions—on each treatment. The findings suggest that human rights messaging does increase support for human rights sanctions, but not across information providers and types of messaging. Regarding Hypotheses 1 and 2, the results of OLS regressions are presented in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. Column 1 reports the results of a simple bivariate regression model on the impact of the UN’s advocacy on support for sanctions. When participants were informed by the UN of a foreign country’s physical integrity rights violations, on average, they expressed about 0.42 points higher support (on a scale of 1-7) for using sanctions against the violating regime. Column 2 of Table 2.1 confirms that this conclusion did not change when I included several control variables. As for information on empowerment rights abuse, the results show that the UN’s advocacy increased by 0.3 points in support of sanctions (Column 3 of Table 2.1). However, as shown in Column 4 of Table 2.1, when control variables were included, both effect size and level of statistical significance dropped ( $p < 0.1$ ).

Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2.2 indicate that when participants received similar repression messages from Human Rights Watch, they expressed higher support for sanctions. However,

when control variables were included, the results became weaker regarding effect size and statistical significance. One potential explanation for this finding is that some Americans might think the UN provides more authoritative information than Human Rights Watch. Another possible explanation is that Americans do not know Human Rights Watch, while the UN is perceived as a prestigious institution. However, it is worth noting that this finding should not be interpreted as Human Rights Watch's advocacy doesn't work. As Murdie and Peksen (2013) indicate, HROs may prompt use of sanctions through not only information production but also population empowerment, although they do not find evidence of the latter. My study's experiment design only reflected the impacts of information delivery and was unable to test how HROs use their presence in third-party countries to raise public awareness of foreign rights violations and influence the government's decisions to sanction.

Overall, the findings indicate that the UN's messaging seems more likely to resonate among US citizens than that of Human Rights Watch. Also, information about the repression of physical integrity rights is more likely to activate people to support their government's use of sanctions against the abusive regime. This result is consistent with a recent conjoint experiment showing that people are more likely to be swayed by more salient abuse of rights (Ari and Sonmez 2024).

Regarding Hypothesis 3, contrary to my expectation, learning that other countries will join the US sanctions did not have a statistically significant impact on support for sanctions (Table 2.3). To my surprise, the additional information about multilateral actions did not mobilize more mass support for the government's use of sanctions. The findings of this survey cannot tell us why, but I have two speculations. The first possibility is that when Americans know that other countries will be responsible for taking actions against the rights-violating

country, they might think then it is not necessary for the US to intervene. The second potential explanation is the US citizens think multilateralism will likely hurt the US's control over policy (Milner and Tingley 2013).

Tables 2.4 and 2.5 report the effects of each proposed mediator on support for economic sanctions. Using causal mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2011), I find that the UN's messages on foreign physical integrity rights violations activated respondents' concern over the US's international reputation and image, thereby increasing their support for using sanctions against the abusive regime. About 19.7 % of that effect arose because respondents worry that not taking action would damage the US reputation and image (Table 2.4). Similarly, mediation through reputation concern accounted for about 15.6 % of the total effect of empowerment rights violations on support for sanctions (Table 2.5). In contrast, threat perceptions, sympathy, and moral obligations do not statistically significantly trigger more public support for human rights sanctions.

These findings echo a recent survey experimental study conducted in Japan that shows that citizens' decision to support human rights sanctions are influenced by strategic consideration; that is, people are less inclined to support the use of aid sanctions against the repressive regime if they know that rival donor countries will use aid to compete for power and influence (Kohno et al. 2021).

**Table 0.1. Effects of the UN's Human Rights Messaging on Public Support for Sanctions**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
The UN's Physical Integrity Rights Abuse Information	0.419** (0.137)	0.404** (0.130)		
The UN's Empowerment Rights Abuse Information			0.300* (0.143)	0.252† (0.136)
Male		0.189 (0.139)		0.193 (0.137)
Age		0.093* (0.040)		0.092* (0.042)
Education		0.038 (0.038)		0.001 (0.036)
Income		0.065 (0.044)		0.022 (0.048)
Republicans		-0.286 (0.175)		-0.067 (0.170)
Ideology		0.010 (0.056)		-0.035 (0.053)
Midwest		-0.206 (0.221)		0.014 (0.225)
West		0.040 (0.178)		0.191 (0.171)
South		0.311† (0.184)		0.163 (0.196)
Interest in Foreign Affairs		-0.413*** (0.087)		-0.350*** (0.079)
Isolationism		-0.185** (0.066)		-0.335*** (0.068)
Constant	4.931*** (0.097)	5.950*** (0.434)	4.931*** (0.097)	6.779*** (0.478)

Note: OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.  $N = 2,204$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , †  $p < 0.1$ .

**Table 0.2. Effects of HRW's Human Rights Messaging on Public Support for Sanctions**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
HRW's Physical Integrity Rights Abuse Information	0.431** (0.140)	0.260† (0.136)		
HRW's Empowerment Rights Abuse Information			-0.148 (0.154)	-0.186 (0.151)
Male		0.170 (0.141)		0.312* (0.154)
Age		0.070† (0.042)		0.055 (0.051)
Education		-0.017 (0.037)		-0.002 (0.041)
Income		0.113* (0.047)		0.063 (0.050)
Republicans		-0.214 (0.179)		-0.052 (0.195)
Ideology		0.054 (0.052)		-0.061 (0.063)
Midwest		-0.078 (0.209)		-0.264 (0.291)
West		-0.005 (0.171)		-0.069 (0.214)
South		0.106 (0.197)		0.264 (0.221)
Interest in Foreign Affairs		-0.366*** (0.084)		-0.352*** (0.092)
Isolationism		-0.222** (0.068)		-0.161* (0.075)
Constant	4.931*** (0.097)	6.071*** (0.450)	4.931*** (0.097)	6.219*** (0.519)

Note: OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.  $N = 2,204$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , †  $p < 0.1$ .

**Table 0.3. Effects of Human Rights Messaging on Public Support for Multilateral Sanctions**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
The UN's Physical Integrity Rights Abuse Information	0.122 (0.138)			
The UN's Empowerment Rights Abuse Information		-0.001 (0.144)		
HRW's Physical Integrity Rights Abuse Information			0.134 (0.142)	
HRW's Empowerment Rights Abuse Information				0.019 (0.141)
Male	0.120 (0.140)	0.201 (0.153)	0.131 (0.153)	0.083 (0.141)
Age	0.059 (0.045)	0.077† (0.045)	0.080† (0.045)	0.043 (0.045)
Education	-0.008 (0.036)	0.004 (0.040)	-0.033 (0.039)	0.009 (0.038)
Income	0.093* (0.046)	0.089† (0.051)	0.065 (0.048)	0.048 (0.047)
Republicans	-0.167 (0.170)	-0.033 (0.189)	0.050 (0.182)	-0.294 (0.180)
Ideology	-0.097† (0.055)	-0.003 (0.058)	-0.042 (0.058)	0.009 (0.058)
Midwest	-0.096 (0.232)	-0.030 (0.234)	-0.074 (0.235)	-0.055 (0.219)
West	0.131 (0.176)	-0.177 (0.180)	-0.091 (0.195)	-0.016 (0.181)
South	0.253 (0.202)	-0.070 (0.215)	0.164 (0.213)	0.186 (0.205)
Interest in Foreign Affairs	-0.370*** (0.088)	-0.302*** (0.089)	-0.507*** (0.086)	-0.407*** (0.086)
Isolationism	-0.214** (0.067)	-0.289*** (0.063)	-0.230*** (0.069)	-0.213** (0.066)
Constant	6.601*** (0.502)	6.393*** (0.486)	6.911*** (0.485)	6.491*** (0.463)

Note: OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.  $N = 2,204$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , †  $p < 0.1$ .

**Table 0.4. Causal Mediation Analysis of the UN’s Physical Integrity Rights Messaging and Public Support for Sanctions**

	<i>Threat Perceptions</i>		<i>Reputation Concern</i>		<i>Empathy</i>		<i>Moral Obligation</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>
ACME	0.01	[-0.02, 0.03]	0.09	[0.02, 0.16]	0.03	[-0.04, 0.09]	0.04	[-0.04, 0.12]
ADE	0.42	[0.15, 0.67]	0.34	[0.08, 0.59]	0.40	[0.14, 0.64]	0.38	[0.13, 0.62]
ATE	0.43	[0.17, 0.67]	0.43	[0.18, 0.68]	0.43	[0.18, 0.68]	0.43	[0.18, 0.69]
Percentage of Total Effect Mediated	1.7%		19.7%		6.1%		10.0%	

Notes: The mediator and outcome models are estimated by OLS regressions without control variables. 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors with 300 simulations.

**Table 0.5. Causal Mediation Analysis of HRW’s Physical Integrity Rights Messaging and Public Support for Sanctions**

	<i>Threat Perceptions</i>		<i>Reputation Concern</i>		<i>Empathy</i>		<i>Moral Obligation</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% confidence interval</i>
ACME	0.002	[-0.03, 0.03]	0.07	[0.01, 0.14]	0.06	[-0.002, 0.12]	0.08	[-0.01, 0.18]
ADE	0.43	[0.15, 0.68]	0.36	[0.10, 0.61]	0.37	[0.11, 0.624]	0.35	[0.10, 0.59]
ATE	0.43	[0.17, 0.68]	0.43	[0.18, 0.69]	0.43	[0.18, 0.68]	0.43	[0.18, 0.70]
Percentage of Total Effect Mediated	0.7%		15.6%		12.7%		18.8%	

Notes: The mediator and outcome models are estimated by OLS regressions without control variables. 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors with 300 simulations.

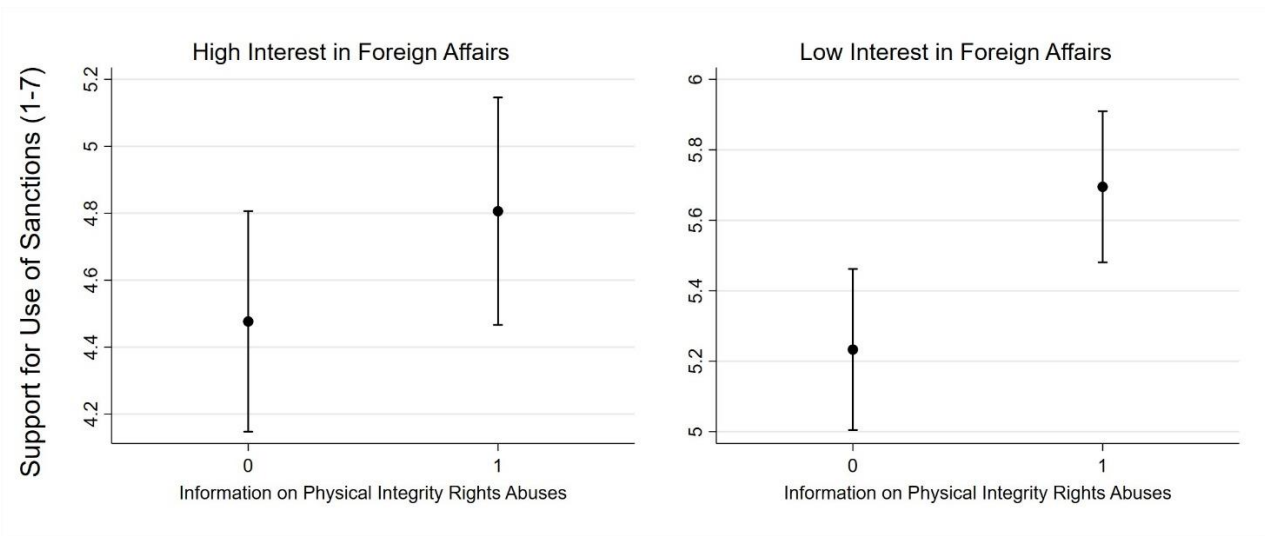
## **Subgroup Analysis<sup>5</sup>**

When grouping respondents based on their interests in information about what's going on in foreign affairs, I find that human rights messaging is less likely to affect people who have a high interest in foreign affairs and only move those who have a low interest in foreign affairs more favor sanctions. Figure 2.1 indicates that the UN's information about foreign physical integrity rights repression sways only respondents who are less interested in what's going on in foreign affairs; it doesn't significantly affect those with high interest in foreign affairs. One explanation for this finding is that those respondents may already have access to information about foreign human rights violations, so IO's human rights messaging does not add new information and change their attitudes.

In contrast, people who are less interested in foreign affairs are more likely to use UN messaging as an informational shortcut. Another explanation is that people who have a high interest in foreign affairs in general do not support the use of sanctions potentially because they know that sanctions do not help improve or even worsen human rights. Their baseline support for sanctions is lower than those with a low interest in foreign affairs. Figure 2.2 shows that HRW's human rights messaging has no discernible impact on respondents' attitudes toward sanctions, no matter if they have a high or low interest in foreign affairs. Figures 2.3 and 2.4 suggest that respondents who score low on isolationism are more likely to increase their support for sanctions when they receive information about physical integrity rights. However, the same information does not strike a chord among those scoring high on isolationism.

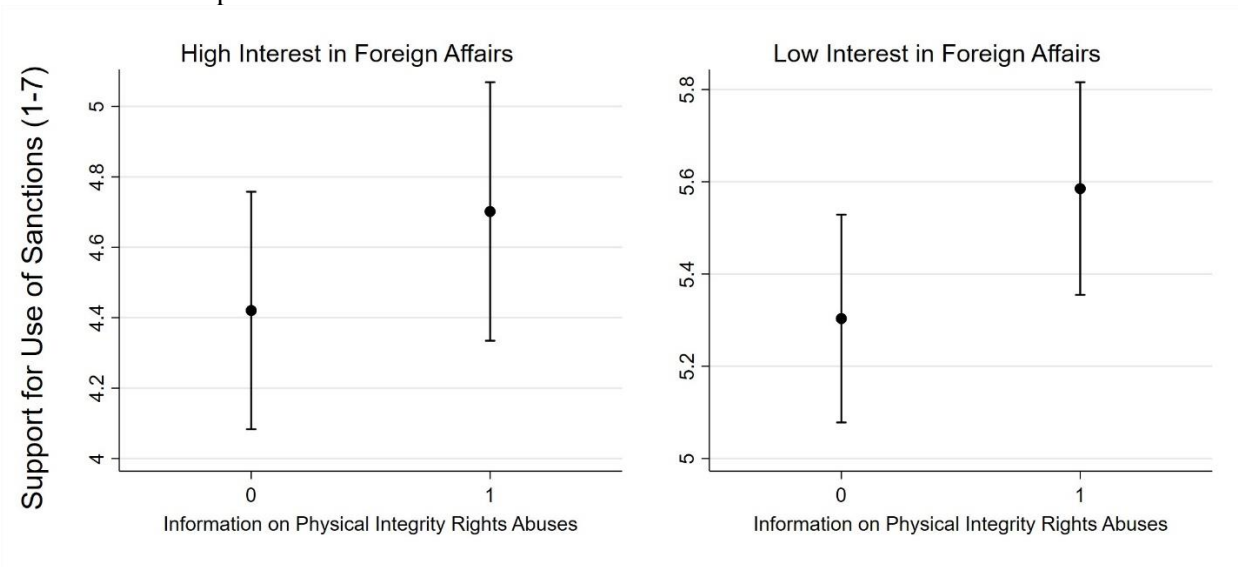
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<sup>5</sup> I did not pre-register hypotheses concerning subgroups.



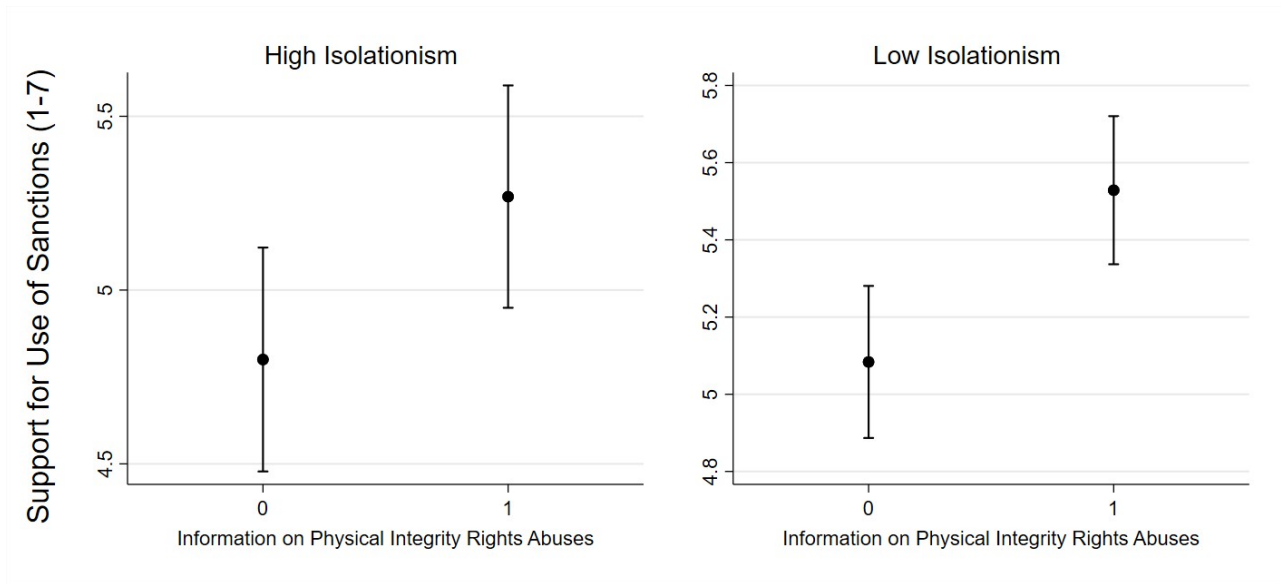
**Figure 0.1. Average Treatment Effects of UN Physical Integrity Rights Information Grouped by Interest in Foreign Affairs**

Notes: Point estimates from OLS regressions of the outcome variable on the treatments and control variables. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.



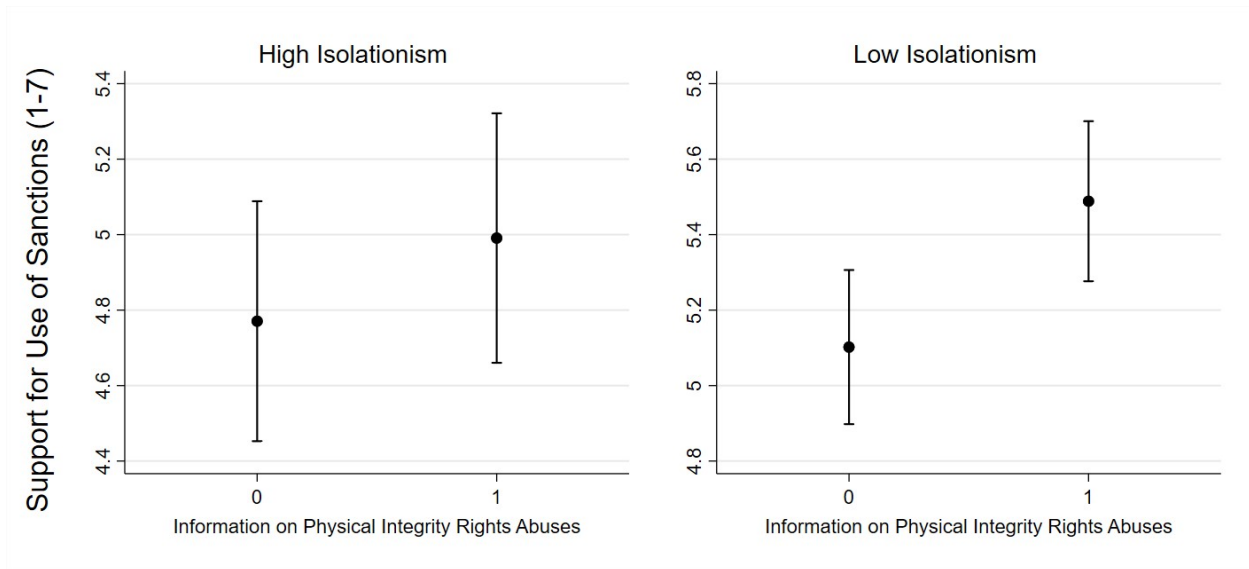
**Figure 0.2. Average Treatment Effects of HRW Physical Integrity Rights Information Grouped by Interest in Foreign Affairs**

Notes: Point estimates from OLS regressions of the outcome variable on the treatments and control variables. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.



**Figure 0.3. Average Treatment Effects of UN Physical Integrity Rights Information Grouped by Levels of Isolationism**

Notes: Point estimates from OLS regressions of the outcome variable on the treatments and control variables. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.



**Figure 0.4. Average Treatment Effects of HWR Physical Integrity Rights Information Grouped by Levels of Isolationism**

Notes: Point estimates from OLS regressions of the outcome variable on the treatments and control variables. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.

## 2.8 Discussion and Conclusion

This study has sought to shed light on the impact of IO's human rights messaging on public support for sanctions against repressive regimes. I assess how information about foreign physical integrity rights abuses and empowerment rights abuses from the UN and Human Rights Watch affect US citizens' approval of their government's use of sanctions. I find that human rights messaging from the UN and Human Rights Watch could increase respondents' support for their government's use of sanctions. Overall, US citizens seem more likely to be persuaded by the UN messages than by Human Rights Watch's. This finding is consistent with Greenhill (2020) concerning the greater impact of the UN on shaping public attitudes compared to other types of IOs like NGOs. The finding also echoes a recent Pew Research Center survey, which indicates that 70 % of US citizens credit the UN for promoting human rights (Bell et al. 2020).

I further find that the information about the repression of physical integrity rights in a foreign country increased US citizens' support for sanctions. However, I find weaker evidence of the positive impact of empowerment rights abuse on rallying support. This finding is also consistent with a recent study conducted in Israel, which shows that when people are informed of foreign human rights abuses, they will be more likely to oppose the sale of arms to the abusive states (Efrat and Yair 2023). However, my study differs from this research in two important aspects. First, my study differentiates human rights information and finds that abuse of physical integrity rights is more likely to activate third-party citizens' support. Second, while Efrat and Yair (2023) argue that normative concerns outweigh material considerations, I use mediation analysis and show in the context of the US, that people support penalizing rights-violating states mainly because they care about the US's reputation and image, which can be considered as material, rather than because they have normative concerns like sympathy and moral obligations.

Overall, this study's findings depict mixed prospects for human rights protection. On the one hand, the finding shows that the international public might care about human rights, though strategically. On the other hand, physical integrity rights only account for a small portion of human rights. There are other dimensions of human rights, such as the right to expression, right to religion, and right to health. Nowadays, repressive regimes more frequently use "non-violent" forms of state repression like administrative crackdown against NGOs (Chaudhry 2022; Smidt et al. 2021), censorship (Xu 2021), and propaganda (Cook 2020). This paper shows that international audiences might respond less to these situations than to more salient, violent human rights violations.

Future work might expand upon my study in several noteworthy ways. First, scholars could explore whether public opinion on economic sanctions can really pressure decision-makers and affect sanction policies. Another related extension could examine how elected officials respond to pressure from domestic audiences like the public, advocacy groups, and the international community. Additionally, future research could also evaluate whether and how domestic support for sanctions would increase the effectiveness of sanctions. Public backing might increase sender governments' bargaining leverage vis-à-vis their targets.

## 2.9 References

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## 2.10 Appendices

### **Appendix 0.A. Balance between Control and Treatment Groups (Column 2 of Table 2.1)**

	Means		Differences in means	
	Control (N=205)	The UN's Physical Integrity Abuse (N=203)	t-statistic	p-value
Male	0.532	0.493	0.789	0.215
Age Group	3.254	3.507	-1.524	0.936
Education	4.746	4.576	0.862	0.195
Income	2.698	2.537	1.0584	0.145
Republicans	0.361	0.340	0.445	0.328
Ideology	3.868	3.847	0.125	0.450
Northeast	0.220	0.222	-0.053	0.523
Midwest	0.171	0.182	-0.305	0.620
West	0.4	0.340	1.256	0.105
South	0.210	0.256	-1.108	0.866
Interest in Foreign Affairs	2.254	2.172	0.887	0.188
Isolationism	4.359	4.328	0.244	0.404

### **Appendix 0.B. Balance between Control and Treatment Groups (Column 4 of Table 2.1)**

	Means		Differences in means	
	Control (N=205)	The UN's Empowerment Abuse (N=208)	t-statistic	p-value
Male	0.532	0.5	0.643	0.260
Age Group	3.254	3.466	-1.298	0.903
Education	4.746	4.788	-0.204	0.581
Income	2.698	2.793	-0.633	0.736
Republicans	0.361	0.351	0.212	0.416
Ideology	3.868	3.721	0.877	0.190
Northeast	0.220	0.188	0.807	0.210
Midwest	0.171	0.192	-0.568	0.715
West	0.4	0.394	0.1195	0.343
South	0.210	0.226	-0.398	0.655
Interest in Foreign Affairs	2.254	2.072	1.969	0.025
Isolationism	4.359	4.204	1.232	0.109

**Appendix 0.C. Balance between Control and Treatment Groups (Column 2 of Table 2.2)**

	Means		Differences in means	
	Control (N=205)	HWR's Physical Integrity Abuse (N=206)	t-statistic	p-value
Male	0.532	0.534	-0.0461	0.518
Age Group	3.254	3.471	-1.328	0.908
Education	4.746	4.684	0.303	0.381
Income	2.698	2.684	0.0829	0.467
Republicans	0.361	0.325	0.762	0.223
Ideology	3.868	3.883	-0.091	0.450
Northeast	0.220	0.223	-0.092	0.536
Midwest	0.171	0.214	-1.102	0.864
West	0.4	0.340	1.263	0.104
South	0.210	0.223	-0.333	0.630
Interest in Foreign Affairs	2.254	2.141	1.227	0.110
Isolationism	4.359	4.109	1.968	0.025

**Appendix 0.D. Balance between Control and Treatment Groups (Column 4 of Table 2.1)**

	Means		Differences in means	
	Control (N=205)	HRW's Empowerment Abuse (N=189)	t-statistic	p-value
Male	0.532	0.503	0.576	0.283
Age Group	3.254	3.423	-1.021	0.846
Education	4.746	4.624	0.580	0.281
Income	2.698	2.608	0.550	0.291
Republicans	0.361	0.317	0.910	0.182
Ideology	3.868	3.778	0.518	0.302
Northeast	0.220	0.180	0.980	0.164
Midwest	0.171	0.138	0.908	0.182
West	0.4	0.392	0.171	0.432
South	0.210	0.291	-1.867	0.969
Interest in Foreign Affairs	2.254	2.243	0.107	0.457
Isolationism	4.359	4.275	0.629	0.265

**Appendix 0.E. Multinomial Logit of Treatment Groups**

	The UN's Physical Integrity Rights Abuse	The UN's Empower ment Rights Abuse	HRW's Physical Integrity Rights Abuse	HRW's Empower ment Rights Abuse
Male	-0.212 (0.211)	0.228 (0.207)	-0.031 (0.209)	-0.086 (0.212)
Age Group	0.101 (0.065)	-0.077 (0.066)	-0.092 (0.066)	0.076 (0.069)
Education	-0.074 (0.058)	0.039 (0.056)	0.043 (0.057)	-0.048 (0.058)
Income	-0.052 (0.073)	-0.045 (0.076)	0.006 (0.071)	-0.006 (0.074)
Republicans	-0.095 (0.255)	-0.041 (0.256)	0.303 (0.257)	-0.165 (0.258)
Ideology	0.005 (0.073)	0.055 (0.074)	-0.069 (0.074)	-0.019 (0.071)
Midwest	0.024 (0.321)	-0.332 (0.327)	-0.222 (0.316)	0.071 (0.352)
West	-0.157 (0.273)	-0.174 (0.275)	0.171 (0.273)	0.233 (0.284)
South	0.186 (0.301)	-0.198 (0.311)	-0.012 (0.308)	0.529* (0.309)
Interests in Foreign Affairs	-0.147 (0.119)	0.187 (0.116)	0.089 (0.119)	0.002 (0.119)
Isolationism	-0.017 (0.082)	0.061 (0.082)	0.144* (0.084)	-0.046 (0.083)
Constant	0.666 (0.612)	-0.620 (0.604)	-0.559 (0.579)	0.037 (0.587)

Note: MLE coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Control group is the omitted DV category. Northeast is the omitted regional dummy.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## CHAPTER 3

### Mass Mobilization, Elite Competition, and Diversionary Use of Sanctions

#### 3.1 Introduction

In times of domestic unrest, what strategies do regimes use to withstand the mounting pressure? Existing research on diversionary behavior indicates that leaders under domestic pressure might initiate international militarized conflicts (Fordham 1998; Clark 2003; Oneal and Tir 2006; Russett 1990; Pickering and Kisangani 2005; Morgan and Bickers 1992; Tir 2010) or employ domestic repression (Klein and Tokdemir 2019; Martinez Machain and Rosenberg 2018; Tir and Jasinski 2008) in order to divert citizens' attention from difficulties. This paper draws attention to another possible diversionary instrument: imposing economic coercion on foreign countries.

In comparison to more costly military tools, economic coercion can serve as an alternative or complementary solution for troubled governments to defuse domestic pressures. I propose that when a government faces higher levels of elite competition, nonviolent mass mobilization might motivate it to initiate sanctions on foreign governments to divert attention and rally incumbent support. Violent unrest, in contrast, does not create a similar diversionary incentive to impose sanctions because armed protesters are less legitimate in the eyes of domestic and international audiences, and repression against them will be less likely to produce a backlash. Governments thereby tend to employ repression rather than external coercion to

address violent dissent. I further consider how elite competition might affect the propensity to use diversionary sanctions. When the opposition parties are stronger, the insecure government party has more incentives to employ foreign sanctions to unify society and project competence. In addition, a more intense legislative competition places additional constraints on the ruling party to undertake reforms to co-opt and repress protesters. These conditions jointly induce the troubled government to apply foreign economic pressure on another country.

I estimate a multinomial logit model that simultaneously predicts the initiation of economic sanctions and military actions. Empirical evidence indicates that when opposition parties are not weak, large-scale nonviolent mobilization increases the likelihood that the country will issue sanctions. Violent mobilization, in contrast, prompts neither diversionary sanctions nor military actions. My findings further show that military conflicts are not the preferred diversionary option for governments facing this enormous domestic pressure.

This paper makes two important contributions to scholarship on foreign policy. First, I refine the diversionary literature and join the emerging body of research on nonmilitary diversionary behavior (Carter 2020; Liao and Hwang 2022; Li, James, and Drury 2009; Yeh and Wu 2020; Barberá et al. 2022; Amarasinghe 2022). I focus on economic coercion—a primary foreign policy tool and show that sanctions, as opposed to military actions, are more likely to be used to respond to domestic dissent. My findings shed light on the strategic choices of states in responding to internal pressure. This expansion of diversionary theory to encompass economic coercion contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how governments use foreign policy tools to manage domestic difficulties and maintain political stability.

Second, this study offers an additional explanation for sanctions policy. While past studies investigate the impacts of economic downturn, high unemployment rate, and inflation on

sanctions initiation (Attia 2024; Drury 2000, 2001, 2005, 59–131), I focus on the effects of domestic political dissent and further distinguish the impact of nonviolent resistance from violent unrest on prompting sanctions. This study demonstrates that popular dissent combined with intense elite competition might incentivize governments to impose foreign economic coercion, adding to the research highlighting the impacts of nonstate actors and domestic politics on sanctions initiation (Attia 2024; Kaempfer and Lowenberg 1992; Kustra 2021; Lindsay 1986; McLean and Whang 2014; Peksen, Peterson, and Drury 2014; Rubenzer and Redd 2010; Urtuzuastigui 2023; Whang 2011).

In the next section, I incorporate insights from diversionary research into my own argument, concerning how domestic challenges, particularly nonviolent mobilization, might induce economic coercion. I also discuss how the levels of elite competition condition the impacts of popular dissent on sanctions use. Next, I present the data and research methods used to test my hypothesis and discuss the statistical results. I conclude the paper with implications of my analysis and directions for future research.

### **3.2 Economic Sanctions as a Preferred Tool than Military Actions**

Diversionsary war theory indicates domestic unrest will prompt the use of external force. Unlike the conventional view, this paper suggests that governments facing formidable domestic opposition tend to use foreign sanctions over military force.

When leaders encounter domestic challenges like citizen mobilization, they typically have a range of options to consolidate their power and reestablish their legitimacy. Domestically, one approach is to employ coercive tools like repression (Davenport 2007; Davies 2016; Klein and Tokdemir 2019; Martinez Machain and Rosenberg 2018). Externally, they can use military

and nonmilitary foreign policies to divert domestic attention. A large body of literature has linked leaders' domestic problems to the use of force abroad. This line of research suggests that domestic challenges—such as economic downturn, inflation, inequality, low approval ratings, upcoming elections, and political unrest—raise governments' propensity to engage in external militarized disputes (Fordham 1998; Oneal and Tir 2006; Russett 1990; Pickering and Kisangani 2005; Wiegand 2018; Tir 2010; Mitchell and Thyne 2010; Oakes 2006; Kisangani and Pickering 2007; Long and Pickering 2021; Miller 1999; Nicholls, Huth, and Appel 2010).

However, relatively less attention has been paid to how domestic challenges affect governments' nonmilitary foreign policy. Recent studies find evidence that leaders might use state-controlled media, social media, or tough rhetoric to distract public attention from instability and to generate rally effects (Barberá et al. 2022; Carter 2020; Li, James, and Drury 2009; Liao and Hwang 2022; Yeh and Wu 2020). This paper moves beyond the typical focus on the diversionary use of force and investigates the possibility that troubled governments utilize economic coercion for diversionary purposes.

Economic sanctions can be a contentious issue that draws media attention like military actions. It is possible that the domestic population would not be aware of sanctions to the same extent as military actions. However, governments with the goal of diverting attention will make an effort to propagandize their actions to maximize media exposure (Barberá et al. 2022). They will be inclined to articulate the problem and highlight the emergency. This has been illustrated by the numerous reports of Chinese government-controlled media on sanctions policy following Chinese sanctions on the US and the EU in 2021. As such, imposing economic coercion might still attract some citizens' attention and shift their focus away from domestic issues to foreign policy issues.

Unlike military coercion, economic coercion is a less costly and risky diversionary foreign policy tool. For both military and nonmilitary actions, the potential costs have two dimensions: the costs of carrying out actions and the costs of the actions' failure. In fact, military force has become a less popular foreign policy tool since 1945 (Brooks 2013; Gartzke 2007; Goertz, Diehl, and Balas 2016). First, engaging in a militarized conflict not only requires mobilizing considerable resources but also generates high levels of economic and geo-political costs like military retaliation or alliance against the aggressor (Zhang 2019). War casualties will likely further lead to a decrease in leader or government popularity (Gartner 2008; Geys 2010; Kuijpers 2019). Second, compared to failed sanctions, when incumbents lose a war, they might face a greater prospect of losing office and punishment (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Croco 2011; Goemans 2000).

For instance, examining American public opinion, Jentleson (1992) and Eichenberg (2005) suggest that people are sensitive to the risks of military actions and thus less willing to support the use of force in most scenarios. A recent cross-national study further shows that engaging in militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) does not boost but hurts leaders' popularity (Seo and Horiuchi 2023). In contrast to military actions, economic sanctions typically encounter fewer public objections (Jentleson and Britton 1998; Tomz and Weeks 2020). Most sanction policies like travel bans, asset freezes, aid suspensions, and arms embargoes require fewer resources and incur fewer costs than involvement in militarized conflicts. Moreover, the failure of sanctions might be difficult for ordinary citizens to discern relative to the failure of military actions, producing less significant political risks; thus, the possible political gains might outweigh such risks (Whang 2011). Therefore, for governments in the face of growing domestic

dissent, applying foreign economic pressure could be a relatively cost-effective diversionary tactic compared to military actions.

### **3.3 Sanctions as a Tool to Bolster Support**

I postulate that governments have more incentives during domestic pressure to use foreign economic coercion to gather support and consolidate power. I further propose that antigovernment mobilization might better capture domestic pressure than economic indicators for two reasons. First, the public may not think leaders are responsible for economic problems (Johnson and Barnes 2011). Second, poor economic performance may trigger grievances but not necessarily lead to political unrest, which ultimately motivates leaders' diversionary behavior.

Scholarship suggests that initiating external disputes can help focus citizens' attention on the conflicts and boost incumbent governments' popularity (Baker and Oneal 2001; Baum 2002; DeRouen 2000; Hwang, Cho, and Wiegand 2018; Mueller 1973, 193–247; Richards et al. 1993; Singh and Tir 2018; Tir and Singh 2013). Drawing on insights from this line of work, I theorize that embattled governments might levy economic sanctions abroad to (1) increase national cohesion, (2) set the agenda, and (3) strengthen leadership.

The first potential benefit of initiating sanctions is producing a rally effect in sender countries (Lindsay 1986, 166–68). Sender governments might use sanctioning foreign countries as a way to scapegoat the target countries for policy failures and redirect the blame and frustration toward the targets. When an external enemy is pinpointed, it could be used to stimulate citizens' nationalist sentiments and induce higher levels of cohesion (Hufbauer et al. 2007, 6; Kam and Ramos 2008; Mueller 1973; Theiler 2018). This increased in-group solidarity might in turn render the sender governments increased support from populations (Hetherington

and Nelson 2003; Russett 1990). Using the case of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress, Matush (2023) demonstrates that leaders can use tools short of military conflicts, like aggressive diplomatic rhetoric, to intentionally elicit a backlash from a foreign actor and signal their commitment to domestic audiences, helping boost the leaders' popularity. In a similar vein, Tir and Singh (2013) examine 26 countries in the 2001–2006 period and find that involvement in a recent foreign policy crisis will create more public support for incumbent governments.

Second, during domestic turmoil, incumbent governments might use economic sanctions to set policy agendas. Research suggests that leaders are able to exploit conflicts or other less salient activities to reset their national agenda and shift the attention of domestic audiences, including media, legislature, and citizens, to foreign policy issues because their audiences' attention to issues is finite (Peake 2001; DeRouen and Peake 2002; Kisangani and Pickering 2007). Imposing sanctions might produce an agenda-setting effect similar to military actions by increasing the salience of foreign policy events and reducing attention to domestic difficulties. For example, in an attempt to refocus public attention from domestic problems like job losses to foreign disputes, the Trump administration intensified US economic pressure on several countries such as Iran, Russia, China, North Korea, Venezuela, and Mexico (Drezner 2019).

Finally, ordinary citizens prefer a competent leader, and sanctioning foreign countries might create images of competence and toughness for sender country leaders (McLean and Whang 2014; Smith 1998; Whang 2011). As an example, the Chinese government has used economic coercion, sometimes symbolic, to demonstrate its resolve and portray itself as the guardian defending against foreign "offenders" (Gloria 2021; Reilly 2012). By criticizing or punishing the targets, the leaders in sanctioning states might signal that they are capable of

“doing something” and accommodating demands from the domestic populace (Debre 2021; Lindsay 1986, 155–58, 166–68; Peksen, Peterson, and Drury 2014; Putnam and Shapiro 2017; Whang 2011) and the international community (Allendoerfer, Murdie, and Welch 2020; Lindsay 1986, 164–66; Murdie and Peksen 2013).

For example, the British government levied sanctions against Italy in 1935 in response to strong domestic demands to punish Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia (Lindsay 1986). Similarly, to address growing criticism of dereliction from the opposition parties, Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark decided to impose sanctions on the Soviet Union (Nossal 1994, 142–49). Additionally, sanctioning foreign countries might serve as a legitimate excuse for diversionary governments to mobilize additional resources and weaken opposition capacity by signaling their strength (Baker and Oneal 2001). All of these factors might eventually increase sanctioners’ political capital.

Taken together, when faced with a dissatisfied public, a government would be more inclined to formulate sanction policies to solicit domestic support and draw public attention away from its poor performance. However, it is important to note that this paper does not aim to evaluate the effectiveness of diversionary sanctions. Oaks (2006) finds that diversionary use of force does not reduce domestic unrest. Using a sample of US sanctions, Webb (2018) finds that the imposition of sanctions reduces US presidential approval, whereas Whang (2011) finds that US sanctions increase approval for US presidents. Singh and Tir (2018), however, show that the initiation of low-hostility conflicts increases incumbent support among voters who identify with the incumbent’s party, and high-hostility conflicts boost incumbent support among those who do not identify with the incumbent’s party. Whether sanctions can really boost sender governments’ popularity is worth further examination, but beyond the scope of this paper.

Next, I turn to two possible heterogeneous effects of domestic mobilization on the government's use of diversionary sanctions.

### **3.4 Varying Government Responses to Nonviolent and Violent Dissent**

My argument in the above sections indicates that economic coercion is a cost-effective tool to mobilize public support and can be an alternative to military actions. I posit that domestic dissent will motivate governments to initiate sanctions. However, not all dissent will trigger this kind of diversionary action. In this section, I explain that governments tend to react differently to nonviolent and violent unrest. I argue that unarmed protests, as opposed to violent uprisings, will prompt governments to use external coercion to seek rally effects.

In comparison with launching military operations, initiating sanctions, or conceding to protesters, repression is a less costly tool for governments, particularly autocracies, to retain political order (Davies 2016; DeMeritt 2016). Research finds that violent protesters are often met with state repression, such as political imprisonment, torture, and killings (Davenport 2007; Gartner and Regan 1996; Moore 2000; Ritter and Conrad 2016). By contrast, governments are less inclined to respond to nonviolent dissent using severe repressive measures (Carey 2010; Klein and Regan 2018).

Relative to clamping down violent uprisings, physical repression against unarmed protesters is less feasible for diversionary governments. State terror toward nonviolent dissent will more likely induce increased mass mobilization and defections from political elites and security forces (Chenoweth 2018; Chenoweth and Stephan 2012; Francisco 1995; Nepstad 2013), and these loyalty shifts might further challenge the survival of repressive regimes (Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang 2017; Chenoweth and Stephan 2012). Numerous studies also

show that the violent acts of a campaign will undermine movement legitimacy; therefore, people are less likely to identify with or participate in violent protests. Conversely, nonviolent demonstrations tend to be viewed as more legitimate and draw more public support than violent ones (Chenoweth and Schock 2015; Huet-vaughn 2015; Huff and Kruszewska 2016; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan, and Joo 2021; Wasow 2020; Wouters 2019). In addition, nonviolent resistance is more likely to elicit sympathy from the international community, and state violence against unarmed demonstrators may lead to “naming and shaming” or economic sanctions (Chenoweth 2021; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Martin 2007).

Taken together, governments are less willing to respond to nonviolent dissent with repression compared to circumstances of violent unrest. In times of nonviolent resistance, governments have restricted capacity and willingness to employ domestic repression, and they might in turn seek outside options like diversionary sanctions to solidify unity and consolidate their hold on power.

### **3.5 How Elite Competition Conditions the Impact of Mass Mobilization on Sanctions Initiation**

In this section, I discuss another dimension that affects leaders’ propensity to issue diversionary sanctions: levels of elite competition. Here elite competition describes the contention in legislature between the government party and opposition parties. I posit that mass mobilization and strong legislative opposition jointly constitute greater government insecurity, which subsequently incentivizes the diversionary use of sanctions.

First, opposition parties usually voice alternative views and are more aligned with antigovernment protesters. When a government is relatively weak, that is, when opposition parties have more seats in the legislature, the ruling party should be more concerned about existing mass uprisings. In this scenario, failing to redress grievances among the mass public might lead to a high risk of election loss. This increased uncertainty over electoral victory generates more motivations to use foreign policy tools to gather domestic support. In contrast, when the ruling party is strong and has an electoral advantage, the leaders should be less worried about losing office. Therefore, it is less necessary for the government party to take risks to respond to civil dissent by initiating an economic confrontation with another country.

Second, a stronger legislative opposition places additional constraints on undertaking reforms to co-opt and repress protesters. When political competition in the legislature is more intense, it is difficult for the ruling party to win nonpartisan support and push through policy reform. Organized opposition parties will hinder potential domestic policy changes that the ruling party wants to use to appease the public. As Brulé (2006) points out, “an uncooperative Congress reduces the number of remedial policies available, compelling the president to look beyond the domestic arena for opportunities to demonstrate his competence.” Brulé (2006) finds that when there are more legislative constraints on presidential action, the US President is more likely to launch military actions in response to economic difficulties. Unlike domestic policy reforms, sanction policies can be adopted without legislative approval. I expect that a government in the face of popular dissent and stronger opposition parties will likely impose diversionary sanctions on foreign countries in an attempt to create a unified front. A government with more seats in the legislature, in contrast, would have more policy tools at its disposal and be

more capable of controlling the political discourse. Therefore, mere citizen protests would be unlikely to prompt a strong government to initiate economic sanctions to rally support.

Furthermore, even if the struggling government is able to carry out policy reforms, the effects of the reforms might take longer to see and might not be able to satisfy dissenters in the short term. These constraints might increase the leader's tendency to adopt diversionary foreign policy tools to reverse domestic discontent. Initiating an external economic conflict might have more immediate political effects than introducing policy reforms. Some governments might resort to eye-catching and low-cost foreign policies like sanctions to establish leadership and boost approval (Whang 2011).

Taken together, when leaders face large mass mobilization and high levels of legislative opposition, they anticipate the difficulties of enacting rapid domestic policy changes to appease dissenters. Thus, embattled governments will have incentives to use foreign economic coercion to distract people from domestic difficulties and improve popularity. Based on the preceding discussion, I postulate the following:

**Hypothesis:** Diversionary use of sanctions is more likely when domestic nonviolent mass mobilization is combined with stronger elite competition.

### **3.6 Research Design**

To test the hypothesis presented above, I construct a panel dataset with a country-year unit of analysis, covering 137 countries from 1975 through 2005. The sample size and time period are determined by the availability of the variables of interest.

## **Outcome Variables**

The primary interest of this study is the onset of sanctions episodes after domestic pressures. I follow previous research and consider different foreign policy options as substitutes or complements (Bennett and Nordstrom 2000; Clark 2001; Clark and Reed 2005; Davies 2016; Oakes 2012). I thus construct dependent variables as a set of different policy outcomes. I estimate the multinomial logit model because militarized conflicts and sanctions are on the table at the same time when struggling leaders are selecting diversion tactics. I code the outcome variable 0 = no economic sanction or militarized conflict (baseline category), 1 = when a country imposes economic sanctions in a given year, and 2 = when a country launches military actions in a given year. This setup allows me to make pair-wise comparisons among the three categories of the outcome variable. If sanctions and military actions occur in the same country-year, I code it 2 (military force). Doing so serves as a more conservative test of my argument because I propose that economic coercion is an alternative to the use of military force for politically unstable regimes, and if military actions are taken, we cannot consider sanctions as preferred over force.

The sanctions data come from the Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES) dataset 4.0 (Morgan, Bapat, and Kobayashi 2014). Sanctions include trade restrictions, blockade, financial sanctions, foreign aid suspension, termination of economic cooperation, and travel bans. Data on militarized conflicts are taken from the Correlates of War (COW) Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) dataset 5.0 (Palmer et al. 2022). I consider the initiation of military force present when the dispute hostility level is 4 (use of force) or 5 (war) and when the country of the dispute took the first action.

## **Key Independent Variables**

The key independent variable is an interaction term where the constituent parts represent (1) the presence of maximalist citizen mobilization and (2) the opposition seat share in the legislature.

The data on large citizen mobilization are taken from the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) 2.1 dataset (Chenoweth and Lewis 2013; Chenoweth and Shay 2019). I include campaigns that have goals of removal of incumbent leaders, significant institutional reform, policy change, self-determination, and greater autonomy in the sample. I do not analyze campaigns that call for ex-pulsion of foreign occupiers as the focus in this paper is to examine how domestic pressure motivates leaders to initiate sanctions abroad. Nonviolent mass unrest refers to maximalist campaigns that are composed of unarmed civilians who did not directly threaten or harm the physical well-being of their opponent, while violent mass unrest involves the regular and deliberate use of violence by civilians or guerrilla challengers (Chenoweth and Lewis 2013, 418–19).

*Opposition seat share* ranges from 0 to 1, is calculated by dividing the number of all opposition parties' seats by the total seats in the legislature, both of which are derived from the Database of Political Institutions (DPI) (Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini 2021). The *Opposition seat share* is coded 0 if a country does not have a legislature or the opposition parties do not take any seat in the legislature.

## **Model Specification**

First, I control for two indicators which are commonly used in the diversionary research: *GDP growth* and *Inflation* (e.g., DeRouen 2000; Fordham 2005; Johnson and Barnes 2011; Mitchell and Prins 2004; Pickering and Kisangani 2010). To account for the possible effects of

trade dependence of a country on its tendency to use diversionary foreign policies, I also control for *Trade Openness* (% of GDP). The economy-related variables all come from the World Development Indicators (WDI) dataset (World Bank 2021). I take the natural log of the inflation and trade openness variables to correct for the skewness of the data.

I further include a binary variable denoting *Election Year* to account for the effect of elections. It equals 1 if there is an election in the potentially sanctioning country in the next year and 0 otherwise. The data are from the DPI (Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini 2021).

I account for the potential effects of economic power and military capabilities on the uses of sanctions and military force. I use *GDP* per Capita to measure economic power, and the data are from WDI. I use *Military spending* to measure military capabilities. Military spending is a country's total military budget (thousands) in a given year, and the data come from National Material Capabilities (NMC) Data v.6.0. (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972). Both capabilities variables are logged to reduce the skewness.

Additionally, a country's levels of democracy and human rights conditions are likely to affect both domestic mobilization and its propensity for sanctions and military actions (Cox and Drury 2006; Goenner 2007; Lektzian and Souva 2007). For instance, some regimes have other domestic repressive tools as alternatives to external diversion, whereas other regimes like mature democracies have more constraints on employing repression (Enterline and Gleditsch 2000; Gelpi 1997; Tir and Jasinski 2008). As a result, I control for *Democracy Levels* and *Human Rights*. I operationalize democracy levels using the electoral democracy index from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2019). Data on human rights performance are taken from the Latent Human Rights Protection Scores (Fariss 2014, 2019), which account for a changing standard of accountability in physical integrity rights over time.

Finally, to address potential temporal dependence, I include cubic polynomials of time since the last use of force or sanctions (Carter and Signorino 2010). Table 3.A of the Appendix presents the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the models.

### **3.7 Findings**

I find support for the hypothesis concerning the conditional impact of mass unrest on the likelihood of sanction initiation and the likelihood of force initiation as opposition seat share increases. Table 3.1 provides the baseline results. The first column shows that the interaction term for nonviolent mobilization and opposition seat share is positive and statistically significant. The substantive effect is illustrated in Figure 3.1. At sufficiently low levels of elite competition, as indicated on the left-hand side of the graph, political protests have no statistically discernible effect on sanctions initiation. By contrast, when the elite competition becomes more intense, nonviolent protests will increase the likelihood of sanctions use. The results show that a country's nonviolent mobilization, as opposed to armed unrest, increases its propensity to sanction other countries.

Furthermore, I find no evidence that domestic unrest positively correlates with the initiation of militarized conflicts. This finding departs from prior studies suggesting domestic unrest triggers diversionary use of force. Overall, the findings lend support to my contention that diversionary governments will respond differently to nonviolent and violent resistance and are more likely to be motivated to impose foreign sanctions when they encounter stronger competition with opposition parties in the legislature.

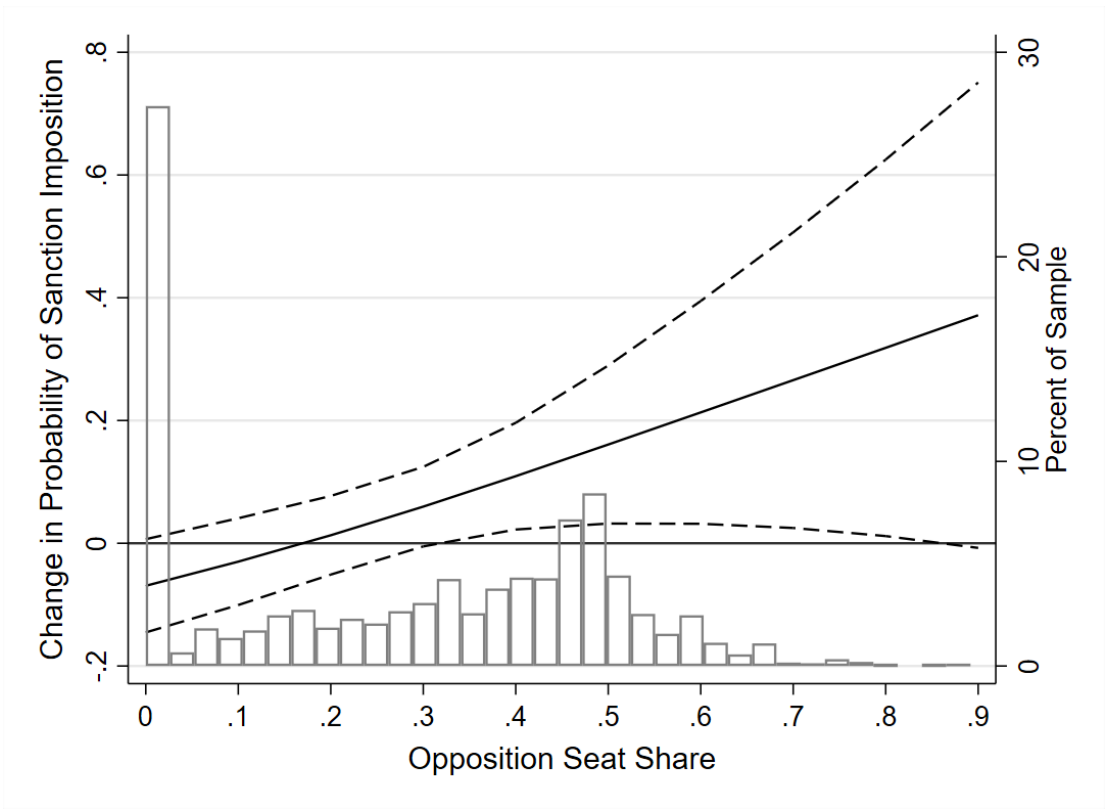
Among the control variables included in Table 3.1, a country's democracy levels are positively correlated with its propensity to impose economic sanctions but not associated with its

use of force. Military spending has a significant and positive correlation with both sanction initiation and force initiation. Contrary to most findings in the diversionary literature, GDP growth, inflation, and elections do not have a statistically significant impact on both onsets of economic and military coercion. This finding implies that poor economic performance will unlikely motivate troubled governments to initiate sanctions or military actions.

**Table 0.1. The Conditional Effects of Mass Unrest on Sanction Initiation and Military Force Initiation**

	<b>Outcome 1</b>	<b>Outcome 2</b>
	<b>Sanction Initiation</b>	<b>Force Initiation</b>
Nonviolent mass unrest $t-1$	-1.528(1.063)	-0.053(0.405)
Violent mass unrest $t-1$	-1.363†(0.697)	0.451(0.293)
Opposition seat share $t-1$	-3.737**(1.138)	0.472(0.600)
Nonviolent mass unrest* Opposition seat share $t-1$	8.147**(2.937)	-1.760(1.691)
Violent mass unrest* Opposition seat share $t-1$	2.195(1.761)	-0.528(0.694)
GDP growth (%) $t-1$	-0.027(0.018)	-0.013(0.015)
Inflation (ln) $t-1$	0.141(0.144)	-0.101(0.110)
Legislative election $t+1$	-0.307(0.220)	0.033(0.142)
Executive election $t+1$	0.035(0.331)	-0.070(0.210)
Trade openness (ln) $t-1$	0.004(0.004)	-0.006*(0.003)
GDP per Capita (ln) $t-1$	-0.206(0.227)	-0.059(0.109)
Military spending (ln) $-1$	0.386*(0.178)	0.382*** (0.062)
Democracy levels $t-1$	2.983*(1.337)	-0.714(0.538)
Human rights $t-1$	-0.083(0.228)	-0.119(0.126)
Cold War	0.299(0.395)	-0.430*(0.212)
Years since last initiation	-0.850*** (0.152)	-0.437*** (0.058)
Years squared	0.045*** (0.010)	0.019*** (0.003)
Years cubic	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Constant	-5.745** (1.975)	-4.201*** (0.923)
Observations		2,985

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country are in parentheses. \*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05, †p < 0.1.



**Figure 0.1. Marginal Effect of Nonviolent Unrest on Sanction Initiation, Based on Outcome 1 of Table 3.1**

Note: Solid line represents the marginal effect of nonviolent mass unrest on sanction initiation as the number of opposition seat share changes. Dashed line represents 95 percent confidence intervals.

### 3.8 Conclusion

This study provides a diversionary explanation for the use of economic sanctions. I expand the diversionary literature by showing that sanctions could be preferred over military force for troubled governments. My argument suggests that unpopular leaders might use sanctions as a propaganda tool to maintain their grip on power. I show that popular nonviolent resistance and strong elite competition will incentivize a government to initiate foreign economic coercion. I find evidence that when opposition parties are not weak, nonviolent citizen mobilization will increase the likelihood of sanctions initiation. The findings also show that violent dissent does not trigger similar diversionary motivation for embattled governments.

This paper advances the sanctions literature by presenting evidence on the strategic use of sanctions. Economic sanctions are widely understood as an instrument for achieving foreign policy goals like promoting democracy or deterring terrorism. By showing that popular dissent and elite competition could prompt governments to initiate sanctions abroad, this study offers additional insight into the driver of some sanction policies and complements the literature that highlights the influences of domestic political incentives on sanctions onset (Drury 2000, 2001, 2005; Kaempfer and Lowenberg 1992; Kustra 2021; Lindsay 1986; McLean and Whang 2014; Peksen, Peterson, and Drury 2014; Rubenzer and Redd 2010; Whang 2011). The finding also speaks to a recent study showing that the shamer's main goal sometimes is not to change the target's behavior but to further domestic interests (Terman 2023).

Moreover, this study also contributes to the scholarship on diversionary behavior and foreign policy. First, the findings challenge the conventional view that troubled governments will resort to military actions. My findings suggest that sanctions could be a preferred option over military force for diversionary governments. Second, this paper delves into governments'

different reactions to the varying types of domestic unrest. Prior research has shown that domestic unrest induces diversionary behavior. However, by distinguishing nonviolent and violent resistance, this paper shows that nonviolent mobilization will trigger diversionary sanctions, whereas violent unrest does not similarly motivate leaders to use diversionary foreign policies. Furthermore, this paper joins the burgeoning literature that points to less costly, nonmilitary diversionary tactics (Carter 2020; Liao and Hwang 2022; Li, James, and Drury 2009; Yeh and Wu 2020; Barberá et al. 2022; Amarasinghe 2022; Attia 2023).

There are still important issues for which more knowledge is needed. First, future research could examine the effectiveness of diversionary sanctions, that is, whether sanctions can really bolster incumbents' popularity or reduce domestic dissent. Another related extension would be to explore the moderating effects of media freedom in states that use diversionary sanctions. It is possible that in states with high levels of media freedom, leaders might be less able to manipulate information and generate rally effects via sanctions. In contrast, in states with high levels of media censorship, leaders might more easily control the flow of information and use diversionary sanctions to rally citizens around the flag. A third avenue for future work might expand upon this study and use the dyadic unit of analysis to investigate which countries are more likely to be targeted by diversionary sanctions. For diversionary tactics to work, leaders might target human rights abusers to propagandize domestic audiences (Tokdemir and Mark 2018). In addition, diversionary leaders might be less inclined to target geopolitical friends than rivals. They might also be less prone to target weak countries and powerful countries because the former might attract less media attention, and the latter might incur greater sanction failure costs.

### 3.9 References

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### 3.10 Appendix

**Appendix 0.A. Summary Statistics Based on Model Shown in Table 3.1**

Variables	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Diversion	2,985	0.335	0.708	0	2
Nonviolent mass Unrest	2,985	0.049	0.215	0	1
Violent mass Unrest	2,985	0.177	0.382	0	1
Opposition seat share	2,985	0.278	0.216	0	0.892
GDP Growth (%)	2,985	3.657	5.108	-64.047	35.625
Inflation (ln)	2,985	3.358	0.575	0.689	9.373
Legislative election	2,985	0.224	0.417	0	1
Executive election	2,985	0.103	0.303	0	1
Trade openness (ln)	2,985	72.655	48.100	0.021	410.937
GDP per Capita (ln)	2,985	7.615	1.499	3.127	11.246
Military spending (ln)	2,985	12.666	3.022	0	19.938
Electoral democracy index	2,985	0.505	0.286	0.013	0.923
Human rights latent mean	2,985	0.0581	1.561	-3.393	5.000
Cold War	2,985	0.408	0.491	0	1
Years since the last initiation	2,985	17.293	17.163	0	55

## CHAPTER 4

### Back up or Backfire? The Impact of Human Rights Sanctions on Target

#### Citizens' Attitudes Toward Human Rights and Mobilizations

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Foreign governments and international organizations frequently employ economic sanctions to show disapproval of target governments' behavior and offer support for local populations. These international pressures might be able to encourage suffering citizens to rise against their government to demand policy change (Allen 2008; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017; Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2020). For example, in 1995, the US and the European Union (EU) suspended their foreign aid to Nigeria in response to the military regime's serious human rights abuses (CNN 1998). These human rights sanctions forced the Nigerian regime to release several political prisoners and agree to hold democratic elections (BBC 1998; New York Times 1998). The case of sanctions on the South African government (1985-1993) for its apartheid policies serves as another example. The sanctions imposed by the US, France, Japan, and other countries signified that the international community supported human rights and was more aligned with activists' appeals. The signal indicated clear disapproval and declining legitimacy of the apartheid government, which enabled dissidents to possess greater mobilization strength and bargaining power vis-à-vis their government (Crawford and Klotz 1999; Levy 1999).

While sanctions can be used to demonstrate sanctioners' commitment to human rights values, they can also be considered a stigmatizing act and create humiliated fury in local populations (Adler-Nissen 2014). Target governments often describe these punishments as infringements on their sovereignty and threats to national interests. Evidence shows that international sanctions, even though well-intended, might encounter defiance or even backfire. Ordinary citizens in target countries might rally around the flag, expressing more support for their government's policy (Galtung 1967; Grauvogel and von Soest 2014; Grossman, Manekin, and Margalit 2018; Seitz and Zazzaro 2020). State agents in sanctioned states might also perpetrate more rights abuses (Peksen 2009; Adam and Tsarsitalidou 2019; Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2021). In 2009, Uganda faced threats of aid withdrawal from several Western countries due to its Anti-Homosexuality Bill. These sanctions were intended to promote human rights values and change the Ugandan government's behavior. However, proponents of the bill framed the sanction threats as Western imperialism and attempts to undermine Ugandan sovereignty. Ugandan politicians urged to protect Uganda's cultural values from the influence of the West, and the president even chose to sign the bill in public to "demonstrate Uganda's independence in the face of Western pressure" (Nuñez-Mietz and Iommi 2017). The narratives seemed to work – people went to the street to show support for their government and the discrimination bill (Dasandi 2022).

In Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999)'s seminal work, they use the spiral model to capture the dynamics of how international human rights pressures interact with different actors like target governments and local populations. Transnational advocacy networks can invoke international human rights norms and pressure norm-violating states, eventually prompting improvements in human rights conditions. However, repressive governments also have several

strategies to counteract foreign pressures. Thus, international advocacy may initially encounter denials from the norm-violating governments. At this denial stage, the repressive governments deflect the criticism and pressure by invoking non-intervention norm or using anti-colonial rhetoric to arouse nationalist sentiment against foreign interventions. The antigovernment protests induced by international pressure might validate the governments' accusations that the domestic opposition and foreign interveners endanger their national sovereignty and interests. This might create a "rally around the flag" effect. But when international pressure is able to help raise awareness, empower civil society, and encourage more dissenters against repression, the repressive governments might gradually be willing to make policy changes (Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2023; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). Overall, the spiral model informs us that it is normal to see target governments confront pressure using counter-narratives and that norm compliance and norm defiance are both possible pathways introduced by international advocacy.

I extend this logic from the country level to the individual level and apply the spiral model to economic sanctions. I conceptualize the interplay between international pressure and local contestation as involving backup and backfire processes. Potentially, except in fully autocratic states, people would likely receive messages from international media outlets and their government. I investigate how narratives surrounding human rights sanctions,<sup>6</sup> conveyed by both the sanctioning entity and the targeted government, may influence target citizens' attitudes toward human rights issues and mass mobilizations. While existing research has acknowledged the defensive strategies employed by target governments to neutralize criticism, it has largely overlooked the integration of these defensive responses into our understanding of the

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<sup>6</sup> Human rights sanctions are defined as actions—such as trade restrictions, suspension of foreign aid, arms embargoes, asset freeze, and travel bans—levied against governments or individuals that are responsible for human rights violations.

effectiveness or ineffectiveness of interventions aimed at advancing human rights at the micro level. Two notable exceptions are Bracic and Murdie (2020) and Greenhill and Reiter (2022). Both studies indicate that target governments' counter-narratives on human rights criticism can thwart the transnational advocacy's efforts to influence local public opinion.

In this paper, I assess how the threat of human rights sanctions and a sanctioned government's counter-narratives shape mass attitudes in the target country. Sanctions-imposing countries and international organizations tend to describe human rights sanctions as a form of international support for protecting target citizens' human rights and disapproval of the target regime's behavior. Such framing might stimulate target citizens to be more supportive of human rights and challenge their government's policy. Target governments, however, regularly portray sanctions as senders' attempts to interfere in domestic affairs and destabilize the target countries. Such a narrative might convince people that sanctions threaten their country's sovereignty and national interests. Receiving these competing narratives, how do ordinary citizens in sanctioned countries react? Do sanctions help back up human rights promotion in target states, or do they backfire?

I fielded an online survey experiment in India<sup>7</sup> and asked respondents in the treatment group to evaluate a hypothetical scenario where the EU threatens to impose economic sanctions in response to the Indian government's discriminatory immigration policy that restricts Muslim migrants. They received competing narratives about sanctions, including the EU's narrative on human rights protection and the Indian government's narrative about sovereignty interference. All respondents then were told that some people plan to protest against the Indian government to demand policy change, while other people are going to stage a counterdemonstration to show

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<sup>7</sup> The survey design was registered with Open Science Framework (OSF) and was approved by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (PROJECT00004647).

their approval of the government's effort to restrict Muslim migrants. The outcomes were respondents' attitudes toward human rights, immigration, antigovernment protest, and pro-government rally.

The findings indicate the target government's messages get the upper hand over the coercer's. Contested information about sanctions reduced Indian citizens' support for human rights values. They became less supportive of the universal human rights norm and immigrants being allowed in. Moreover, these treated respondents expressed reduced sympathy for the antigovernment protesters. Contrary to my expectations, the backlash effects appeared among government skeptics and moderates, whereas information on sanctions did not have a significant impact on government supporters. Additionally, I find no evidence of "rally-around the flag" effects: sanctions information had no significant influence on support for the pro-government mobilization. I used mediation analysis to examine the potential mechanisms through which the threat of sanctions produces a backlash. Respondents who were exposed to the treatment considered that the EU posed an economic threat to India. This threat perception, in turn, lowered public support for human rights protection and sympathy for the protesters.

This article contributes to the existing work in two ways. First, much has shown that economic sanctions exacerbate human rights conditions in target countries (Wood 2008; Peksen 2009; Carneiro and Apolinário 2016; Adam and Tsarsitalidou 2019; Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2021). I complement this line of observational research by shedding light on the micro-level underpinnings of the sanctions-repression link. My experiment suggests that under external threats, citizens in the target country were less aligned with human rights values and less sympathetic to antigovernment protesters. This might therefore give the target government more leeway in using coercive means against the public.

Second, this study contributes to the debate about whether international advocacy helps or harms local populations. I experimentally evaluate the contestation dimension of the spiral model and demonstrate how foreign human rights pressure and norm backlash could operate at the individual level. My findings suggest that sanctions, even the ones that claim to advance human rights, are unable to sway target citizens when citizens are also exposed to their government's messages through its reframing of the sanctions, adding to the growing body of scholarship on international pressure's negative impacts on public opinion in target countries (Grossman, Manekin, and Margalit 2018; Kohno, Montinola, and Winters 2023; Terman 2023). This paper also echoes prior studies suggesting that target governments can exploit nationalist narratives (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014; Hellmeier 2021) or counterarguments (Bracic and Murdie 2020; Greenhill and Reiter 2022) to deflect international criticism, thus complementing the spiral model which indicates that foreign critiques may encounter defiance and contestation in target countries.

My findings also have important policy implications. Human rights promotion requires collective work from various actors. For example, international organizations and state governments need to work closely with local human rights groups and activists to strengthen their determination to protect and promote human rights. In addition, international organizations and foreign governments should be careful about the messages they deliver to the recipients of the information. Any message that could provoke backlash might not help achieve better human rights conditions. Moreover, due to media bias, people nowadays might only receive certain information based on their political tendencies. How to push human rights messages to the groups that potentially do not welcome human rights protection becomes another problem that international organizations and foreign governments must consider.

## 4.2 Foreign Human Rights Pressure and Its Impacts

Existing work on how foreign human rights pressure affects target countries and local populations generates mixed evidence. In general, there are two strands of findings: the backup perspective and the backfire perspective.

### *Backup Perspective*

The backup perspective suggests international human rights condemnation can help shift target countries in an intended way. According to research on human rights advocacy, norm promoters or entrepreneurs might be able to socialize norm-violating states into being compliant with the norm through persuasion, moral consciousness-raising, and other mechanisms (Risse and Sikkink 1999). A wide array of evidence has been accumulated supporting the positive impact of human rights norm promotion on states' norm compliance (e.g., Brysk 1993; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Hawkins 2002; Ramos, Ron, and Thoms 2007; DeMeritt 2012; Krain 2012; Murdie and Davis 2012; Koliev, Sommerer, and Tallberg 2021; Koliev and Lebovic 2022).

However, there is relatively less research on how international criticism influences norm compliance at the individual level. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) use psychology theories to explain how international pressure could encourage leaders' conformity with the norm: "The unpleasant experience of dissonance leads actors to reduce it by changing either their attitudes or their behavior." People might conform to norms to avoid social disapproval and enhance their self-esteem (1998, 902–4). An experimental study shows that human rights organizations' personal narratives that emphasize an individual case or story of victimization increase respondents' support for human rights protection through stimulating their empathy and increasing knowledge of the issue (McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015). A recent survey

experiment also suggests that international pressure can reduce target citizens' support for their government's human rights policy (Koliev, Page, and Tallberg 2022). Additionally, studies show that naming and shaming can help provide citizens with information on repression and thus influence public attitudes toward their countries' human rights conditions (Ausderan 2014; Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz 2012). Public awareness of lack of government respect for human rights is not a guarantee for compliance with human rights norms but is a first and important step to demand policy change. This leads to the following question: can foreign human rights pressure motivate local populations to challenge their government's policy?

One line of sanctions research suggests that citizens in target countries are likely to reduce their support for their government (Marinov 2005; Park 2019) and that they are more likely to engage in anti-regime movements (Allen 2008; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017). Two primary mechanisms connect sanctions to domestic dissent. The first mechanism is the signaling effect of sanctions on target citizens. Sanctions may signal international disapproval of the target regime's behavior and approval of antiregime movements (Crawford and Klotz 1999; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017; Lindsay 1986, 164–66; Nossal 1989, 306). This signal of support might increase the legitimacy of the oppositions and undermine the loyalties of the target regimes (Grauvogel 2015), which might in turn improve the challengers' capacity for mobilization. Furthermore, when people believe that international sanctions would impose additional political pressure and costs on the incumbent regime, they might view resistance activities as less costly. When sanctions signal the international community's withdrawal of support for the target regime and support for the resistance against repression, even when they are symbolic or diplomatic, challengers may believe that they will gain additional leverage vis-à-vis their government (Klotz 1999; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017; Liou, Murdie, and

Peksen 2023). Together, the decreased perceived costs of protests and increased perceived chances of winning concessions might motivate more citizens to challenge their government and prompt resistance activities (Wood 2008, 491–95; Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2021).

The second mechanism that links sanctions to demand for policy change is the way in which foreign economic pressure may provoke economic insecurity and motivate dissenters to challenge the state (Rowe 2001; Allen 2008; Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2021). Sanctions are likely to stimulate target citizens' economic insecurity because of the anticipation of economic difficulties induced by foreign coercion (Afesorgbor and Mahadevan 2016; Hatipoglu and Peksen 2018; Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2015, 2016; Peksen 2017; Peksen and Son 2015; Rowe 2001). The potential or actual declining economic conditions might fuel discontent among the target's citizens, which could then lead to heightened domestic dissent against the target government. For example, the United Nations (UN) sanctions on Libya targeting Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 1992 greatly damaged the Libyan economy and subsequently prompted several antigovernment activities (O'Sullivan 2003, 186–204).

Overall, the backup perspective implies that international sanctions can incentivize target citizens to support human rights reforms and anti-regime uprisings.

### *Backfire Perspective*

The public's reactions to international criticism could also go in the opposite direction, especially when target citizens receive counter-narratives from their governments. A growing body of research indicates that international norm advocacy or pressure might fail or even backfire, generating norm resistance and defiance (Abramson, Menon, and Gitlin 2024; Adler-Nissen 2014; Bailey 2008; Bloomfield and Scott 2017; Cavari, Efrat, and Yair 2024; Efrat and Yair 2023; Greenhill and Reiter 2022; Nuñez-Mietz and Iommi 2017; Snyder 2022; Terman

2023; Velasco 2023), or arousing increased hostility toward foreign norms promoters and critics (Abramson, Menon, and Gitlin 2024; Grossman, Manekin, and Margalit 2018). Foreign criticism of norm violations might arouse a sense of humiliation, anger, and resentment (Snyder 2022, 189–211). Some citizens might associate foreign condemnation with an attack on their country, thereby prompting in-group and out-group sentiment. These psychological processes lead target citizens to defensive reactions and reject the norms transnational advocacy networks intend to promote (Terman 2023, 55–68). For example, based on a survey experiment in China, Gruffydd-Jones (2019) finds that when human rights pressure comes from a geopolitical rival, the Chinese public *reduces* their grievances over human rights conditions, which is the opposite outcome that human rights promoters aim to achieve.

Other research further suggests that more intense international pressure can generate a backlash effect. For example, scholars find that although human rights norm promotion itself could move bureaucrats at foreign missions in favor of human rights protection, the positive impact of the norm promotion disappears when these state agents know that their country might be shamed (Terechshenko et al. 2019). Allendoerfer, Murdie, and Welch (2020) find that human rights advocacy from human rights organizations leads to human rights improvement. However, when the advocacy prompts third-party economic sanctions or military interventions on rights-violating countries, the target countries' human rights conditions will instead deteriorate.

Regarding sanctions research, in contrast to the sanctions-dissent argument, the sanctions-rally argument suggests that foreign economic pressure will not hurt target leaders' popularity but will instead increase pro-government support and regime control over the population, particularly in target regimes that block the free flow of information (Charap and Sucher 2015; Connolly 2016; Galtung 1967; Haass 1998; Hellmeier 2021; Kaempfer,

Lowenberg, and Mertens 2004; Kazun 2016; Kohno, Montinola, and Winters 2023; Mazaheri 2010; Movchan 2017; Pape 1998; Rowe 2001; Seitz and Zazzaro 2020). Much of this literature indicates that sanctions might incentivize the target public to treat sender countries as external threats. This heightened threat perception, in turn, might induce higher levels of solidarity in the target countries.

Moreover, sanctioned regimes controlling the media might use nationalist propaganda to manipulate the narrative around sanctions and their domestic effects, thus shifting the blame for suffering onto the senders and the opposition groups. This blame-shifting might delegitimize dissent activities and frustrate the opposition's ability to challenge the government (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014; Hellmeier 2021; Jaeger 2016; Kazun 2016; Kim 2014; Sejersen 2021). Therefore, sanctions do not always narrow target regimes' support base; instead, targets may take advantage of foreign economic pressure to reinforce their grip on power.

For instance, in the case of the UN sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s, Saddam Hussein rallied the Iraqi population's support by accusing Western governments of "starving 18 million Iraqi people" and depicting the sanctions as unjust and imperial (Mazaheri 2010, 259–60). Similarly, when faced with the UN sanctions against the former Yugoslavia (1991–1996), Slobodan Milosevic blamed the senders for Serbia's economic distress and leveraged propaganda to provoke nationalism and mobilize support for the regime (Cortright and Lopez 2000, 73–76; Peksen 2010, 452).

Furthermore, some target regimes, like those of Nicolás Maduro and Vladimir Putin, have successfully demobilized domestic dissent by criminalizing antigovernment activists and claiming that challengers and foreign governments conspire against political leadership (Chenoweth 2021, 233–34; Human Rights Watch 2020). The accusation of treachery might grant

the target incumbents more legitimacy as defenders of national security and weaken dissent campaigns. Hong Kong is a recent example of how a sanctioned government may attempt to neutralize threats to its power. The local press, Apple Daily, has been not only critical of Hong Kong and Chinese authorities but also supportive of the pro-democracy protests. The government accused Apple Daily of colluding with foreign countries and inciting the imposition of sanctions against the Hong Kong government and Chinese officials following the protests. The founder of Apple Daily, Jimmy Lai, was arrested and jailed for his participation in the protests. Apple Daily was eventually forced to shut down after the government claimed that its acts were “suspected to endanger national security” and arrested senior journalists (Riordan and Liu 2021).

Overall, these demobilization tactics might undermine protesters’ positions vis-à-vis governments and counteract the dissent effect induced by sanctions.

### *Frames of Foreign Pressure*

The previous sections indicate that the target public could perceive international human rights pressure in two competing ways. A growing body of literature on sanctions also underlines the importance of framing and media in shaping mass attitudes toward senders and target governments (Hellmeier 2021; Kazun 2016; Peksen 2010; Sejersen 2021). Framing can reorient people’s thinking about an issue (Chong and Druckman 2007b, 104). There are two common narratives when threats or impositions of human rights sanctions are in place: the protection frame and the interference frame. The protection frame suggests that sanctions are the international community’s demonstration of support for protecting the human rights of the target public. The interference frame, on the other hand, suggests that sanctions are foreign interference in domestic affairs and are used to destabilize target countries and threaten national sovereignty.

Many sender countries and human rights organizations tend to frame human rights sanctions as international support for stopping human suffering and disapproval of target regimes' behaviors. Many scholars have shown that international human rights pressure, including naming and shaming and economic sanctions, can mobilize larger antigovernment protest participation (Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017; McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015; Murdie and Bhasin 2011). Citizens in target countries might think the international community echoes protesters' demands and places their appeals on the international agenda, thus legitimatizing the claims of protest campaigns against the repressive governments. Therefore, the public might be more inclined to question their government's legitimacy or competence, and bystanders might also be more likely to identify with protesters. Research finds evidence in Venezuela that human rights frames of sanctions are more likely to receive support from the target public (Sejersen 2021).

In contrast, sanctions can also be portrayed by target governments and state-controlled media as foreign forces' attempts to interfere in domestic affairs and destabilize the target countries. For example, when facing sanctions against Zimbabwe, Robert Gabriel Mugabe framed Tony Blair and George W. Bush as neo-colonialists and accused them of interfering with Zimbabwe's sovereignty (Chimbarange, Mukenge, and Mutambwa 2013). Such a frame highlights the illegitimacy of foreign coercion and might encourage people to believe that sanctions created a crisis. The interference frame might arouse citizens' nationalist sentiment and further increase support for their governments (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014; Hellmeier 2021; Mazaheri 2010, 259–61). Additionally, the nationalist portrayal of foreign interventions might be used to withstand the effects of sanctions and dismiss the allegations of the regimes' norm-breaking behavior (Schlippak and Treib 2017). In this context, it is difficult for protesters to

broaden their appeal and justify their resistance actions. Therefore, when an interference narrative can fuel citizens' national pride, they will be more inclined to disapprove of antigovernment activities and rally around their government.

I explore the impact of competing information on target citizens' attitudes since, in the real-world scenario, it is most likely that target citizens will be exposed to contested narratives around human rights sanctions provided by different media outlets (Chong and Druckman 2007a). The above discussions concerning the backup perspective, the backfire perspectives, and frames of foreign pressure lead to the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1a (Backup Hypothesis - Support for Human Rights):** Participants who are exposed to competing narratives on foreign sanctions will increase support for human rights.

**Hypothesis 1b (Backfire Hypothesis - Human Rights Backsliding):** Participants who are exposed to competing narratives on foreign sanctions will decrease support for human rights.

**Hypothesis 2a (Backup Hypothesis - Support for Anti-government Mobilization):** Participants who are exposed to competing narratives on foreign sanctions will increase support for antigovernment mobilization.

**Hypothesis 2b (Backfire Hypothesis - Support for Pro-government Rally):** Participants who are exposed to competing narratives on foreign sanctions will decrease support for antigovernment mobilization and increase support for pro-government mobilization.

### *The Roles of Predispositions*

Citizens' reactions to international pressure and counterarguments might be also influenced by their preexisting attitudes toward their governments. Some citizens' attitudes might not be malleable when they encounter information that conflicts with their prior beliefs (Brewer 2001; Chong and Druckman 2007b; Ditto and Lopez 1992; Nickerson 1998; Taber and

Lodge 2006). Such citizens tend to be skeptical of new messages. Also, in the context of social movements, it is more difficult to mobilize opponents than to line up the neutral parties and existing supporters (Chenoweth 2021, 108–9).

By contrast, moderates—those who do not hold strong political positions—are more likely to be swayed by new information compared with those who have firm political stances (Baum 2002; Sejersen 2021). Therefore, I posit that the backup effect of sanctions information will be greater among those citizens who hold unfavorable or neutral views toward the government, whereas the backlash effect of sanctions information will be greater among those citizens who have favorable or neutral views toward the government.

**Hypothesis 3:** The magnitude of the dissent effect should be larger among those who are unfavorable and neutral toward the incumbent government than among those who are favorable toward the government.

**Hypothesis 4:** The magnitude of the backlash effects should be larger among those who are favorable and neutral toward the incumbent government than among those who are unfavorable toward the government.

### **4.3 Research Design**

To examine how international human rights pressure could shape target citizens' attitudes toward human rights and mobilizations, I administered a pre-registered online experiment in India using Qualtrics. A total of 1,076 attentive respondents were collected via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. I chose India for two reasons. First, according to a human rights advocacy group's report (Human Rights Watch 2023), there has been a deteriorating human rights situation in India in recent years. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led

government continued its systematic discrimination of religious minorities, particularly targeting Muslims. However, there are no human rights sanctions currently in place. This allows me to create a hypothetical and plausible scenario in which India is threatened with sanctions over rights violations and therefore mitigate the possibility that the treatment would be affected by respondents' preexisting attitudes on human rights sanctions and isolate the effect of sanctions information from potential confounders. Second, India is considered a partly free democracy where we could expect people to receive competing information from both their government and the international media. This context makes India a suitable setting in which to examine how the contested narratives around human rights sanctions influence public attitudes.

In the experiment, each respondent was randomly assigned to two experimental conditions: the control group and competing narratives concerning foreign human rights sanctions (Table 4.1 summarizes the experimental conditions and outcome measures). The randomization resulted in well-balanced groups of respondents across the subsamples. Descriptive statistics of demographic variables and t-tests between the control and treatment groups are shown in Table 4.A of the Appendix. Additionally, I used multinomial logit tests with the treatment group as the dependent variable and regressed it on demographic variables. Results indicate that these demographic covariates have no significant impact on the assignment to the control and treatment groups (Table 4.B of the Appendix).

All respondents first read the initial control statement as follows: "In December 2019, the Indian government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Under the new legislation, irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan will be allowed to obtain Indian citizenship. However, Muslim migrants will be denied the same rights." Members in the treatment group considered a hypothetical future in which India is threatened with sanctions

from the EU. They received competing narratives about sanctions, including the EU's narrative on human rights protection and the Indian government's narrative about sovereignty interference.

The vignette is below:

“After reviewing this new immigration policy, the European Union (EU) said that the Indian government violated the human rights of the Muslim migrants and that all people should be treated with respect. The EU further announced plans to impose economic sanctions against the Indian government if it did not reverse the law. The EU threatened to cut off economic aid to India and restrict several Indian products from selling to EU countries. The sanctions signify the EU's commitment and resolve to promote and protect human rights. The Indian government accused the EU of meddling in India's domestic affairs and breaking the norm of non-interference. The Indian government claimed to rebuff any aggression and defend India's sovereignty and national interests.” Then, all respondents were told: “In response to the government's immigration policy, some people plan to organize a protest against the Indian government. They argue that the new immigration law violates human rights and demand that the government abolish it. At the same time, other people are going to stage a counter-demonstration. These government supporters would like to express their approval of the government's effort to restrict Muslim migrants.”

I have three outcome variables: *support for human rights*, *support for antigovernment mobilization*, *support for progovernment mobilization*. I measure target citizens' *support for human rights* by asking respondents their level of agreement with the following statements: (1) “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law” (Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and (2) “India should allow

immigrants from other countries to come and live in India.” The above six statements are on a 0-10 scale and are randomized to mitigate priming effects.

To measure *support for the antigovernment mobilization*, I asked participants to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) “I sympathize with the antigovernment demonstrators” and (2) “I support the appeals of the antigovernment demonstration.” I also examine respondents’ *support for the pro-government mobilization*, which is captured by their level of agreement with the following statements: (1) “I sympathize with the pro-government demonstrators” and (2) “I support the appeals of the pro-government demonstration.”

**Table 0.1. Summary of the Experimental Conditions and Outcome Measures**

<i>Control Group</i>	<i>Treatment Group</i>	<i>Outcome Measures</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information about CAA and antigovernment and pro-government mass mobilizations.</li> <li>• No information about sanctions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information about CAA and antigovernment and pro-government mass mobilizations.</li> <li>• Information regarding the threat of EU human rights sanctions in response to Indian government’s discriminatory immigration policy.</li> <li>• The information includes both the EU’s narrative on human rights protection and the Indian government’s narrative about sovereignty interference.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support for the human rights norm (levels of agreement with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 7).</li> <li>2. Support for allowing immigrants.</li> <li>3. Sympathy for the protesters.</li> <li>4. Support for the appeals of the protest.</li> <li>5. Sympathy for the pro-government rally.</li> <li>6. Support for the appeals of the pro-government rally.</li> </ol>

Next, I assess six potential mechanisms through which foreign sanctions could influence public opinion: (1) (dis)satisfaction with the government performance, (2) (dis)trust in government, (3) perceived opportunity for government concessions, (4) national sentiments, (5) security threat perceptions of the sender(s), and (6) economic threat perceptions of the sender(s). I measure these potential mediators by asking respondents to express agreement or disagreement

with the following statements: (1) “The Indian government is doing its job nicely.” (2) “I can trust the Indian government to do what is right.” (3) “The Indian government is very likely to concede to the demands of the anti-government demonstrators.” (4) National sentiment is constructed as an average response on the following three statements: “I am proud to be Indian”; “India is a better country than most other countries”; “People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.” (5) “The EU poses a security threat to India.” (6) “The EU poses an economic threat to India.” The order of these mediation questions was randomized.

Finally, to increase precision, I control for a set of demographic variables, including gender, age, Bahujan Samaj Party, Nationalist Congress Party, highest level of education, household income level, religion, and religiosity.

#### **4.4 Results and Discussion**

I estimate the intention to treat (ITT) effects by regressing each dependent variable on treatment status. Table 4.2 reports the estimates of the influence of the competing narratives around foreign sanctions on public attitudes toward human rights. The results show that the threat of human rights sanctions has a statistically significant and negative effect on target citizens’ human rights values. In terms of the human rights norm (Column 1 of Table 4.2), on average, when Indian adults are exposed to competing narratives about human rights sanctions, their level of agreement with the human rights norm (All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law) declines by about 0.36 points on a 0-10 scale. With all other factors being equal, the backlash effect was greater among Hindus and Christians.

Additionally, people in the treatment group showed less support for immigration (Column 2 of Table 4.2). Specifically, information about foreign sanctions lowered respondents' support for allowing more immigrants into India by approximately 0.4 points. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 display the results of these calculations with 95% confidence intervals. The results do not align with the backup perspective that expects a positive relationship between international pressure and norm acceptance.

Moreover, the EU's human rights pressure does not help increase citizens' sympathy or support for demonstrations where protesters opposed the government's immigration policy (Columns 1 and 2 of Table 4.3). Learning of the EU's threat of human rights sanctions reduces Indians' sympathy for antigovernment protesters by about 0.32 points on a 0-10 scale. Figure 4.3 presents this effect with 95% confidence intervals. However, receiving information about foreign human rights sanctions does not trigger a rally-around-the-flag effect either. Respondents in the treatment group did not express more sympathy or support for the counter-demonstration, where people showed their approval of the Indian government's discrimination policy against Muslim migrants (Columns 3 and 4 of Table 4.3).

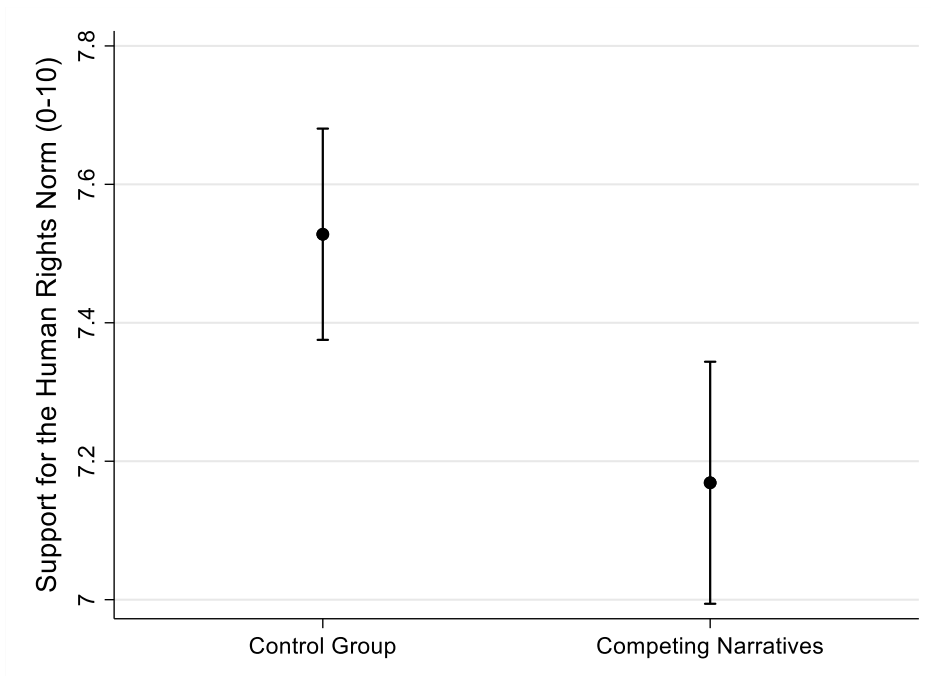
In sum, the findings align more with the backfire perspective, indicating that the threat of human rights sanctions does not move the target country's public opinion toward the sanctioner's intended direction. Instead, the threat seems to generate a counterproductive effect, that is, public support for human rights values and sympathy for antigovernment protests both decrease. These findings also speak to one of the important implications from Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999)'s and Murdie and Davis's studies (2012): without working with and successfully mobilizing local domestic opposition, international pressure is difficult to move target governments from the denial phase to the later stages of the spiral model and advance human rights.

**Table 0.2. Effects of Competing Narratives about Human Rights Sanctions on Target Citizens' Attitudes Toward Human Rights**

	(1) Support for the Human Rights Norm	(2) Support for Immigration
Human Rights Sanctions	-0.359** (0.119)	-0.396** (0.145)
Male	0.156 (0.129)	-0.105 (0.161)
Age (group, 1-5)	-0.114 (0.078)	-0.821*** (0.097)
BJP	-0.113 (0.145)	0.049 (0.179)
INC	0.154 (0.147)	0.305† (0.176)
Education (1-7)	0.171* (0.079)	-0.137 (0.084)
Income (1-5)	0.179*** (0.052)	-0.220*** (0.066)
Hindu	-0.896** (0.324)	0.040 (0.496)
Muslim	-0.444 (0.391)	0.517 (0.558)
Christian	-0.872* (0.372)	0.520 (0.535)
Religiosity (1-5)	0.112* (0.049)	0.009 (0.065)
Constant	6.699*** (0.644)	10.213*** (0.793)
Observations	1,076	1,076

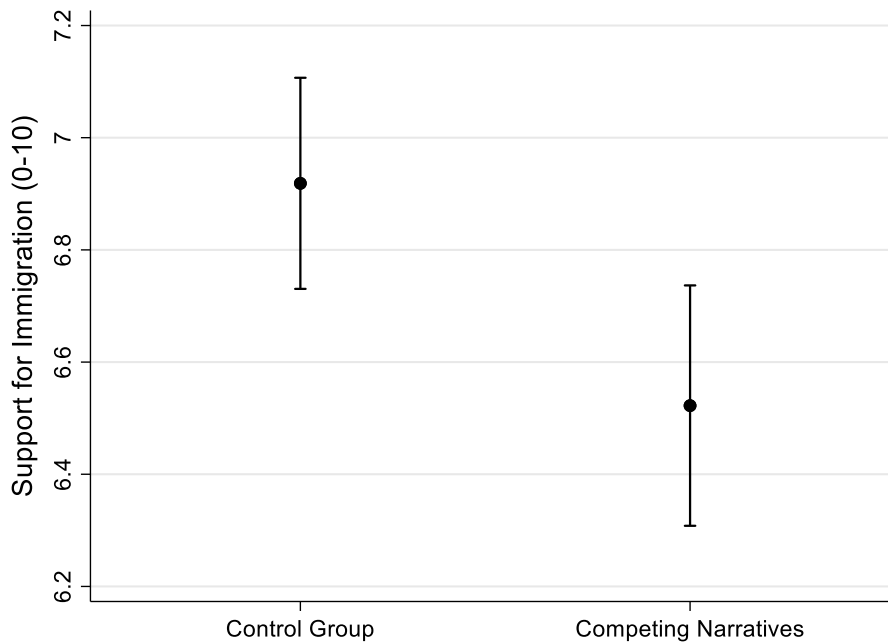
Notes: OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05, †p < 0.1.



**Figure 0.1. Effects of Competing Narratives about Human Rights Sanctions on Support for the Human Rights Norm**

Notes: Point estimates represent intention to treat (ITT) effects from OLS regressions of the outcome variable on the treatment and control variables. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.



**Figure 0.2. Effect of Competing Narratives about Human Rights Sanctions on Support for Allowing Immigrants in India**

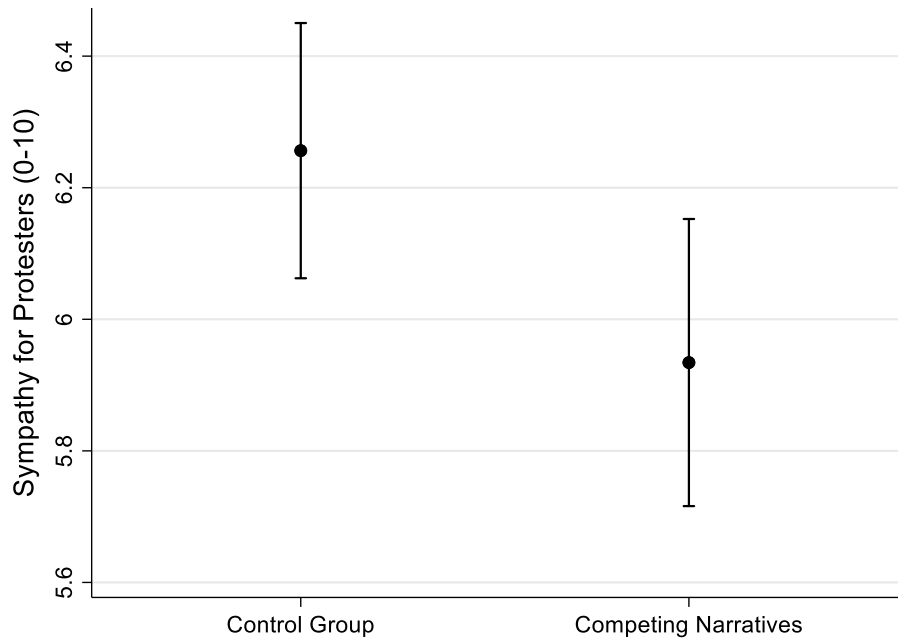
Notes: Point estimates represent intention to treat (ITT) effects from OLS regressions of the outcome variable on the treatment and control variables. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.

**Table 0.3. Effects of Competing Narratives about Human Rights Sanctions on Target Citizens Attitudes Toward Mass Mobilizations**

	(1) Sympathy for the Protest	(2) Support the Appeals of the Protest	(3) Sympathy for the Pro-government Rally	(4) Support the Appeals of the Pro-government Rally
Human Rights Sanctions	-0.322* (0.149)	-0.169 (0.153)	-0.088 (0.140)	-0.124 (0.137)
Male	0.098 (0.163)	-0.002 (0.168)	-0.327* (0.154)	-0.249† (0.148)
Age (group, 1-5)	-0.834*** (0.092)	-0.834*** (0.096)	-0.459*** (0.088)	-0.485*** (0.089)
BJP	-0.464** (0.176)	-0.423* (0.185)	1.034*** (0.173)	1.071*** (0.170)
INC	0.167 (0.177)	0.432* (0.189)	0.622** (0.191)	0.324† (0.188)
Education (1-7)	-0.079 (0.089)	-0.153† (0.088)	-0.243** (0.086)	-0.191* (0.082)
Income (1-5)	-0.301*** (0.070)	-0.368*** (0.072)	-0.117† (0.063)	-0.109† (0.062)
Hindu	0.730 (0.547)	0.810 (0.597)	1.228* (0.537)	1.212* (0.540)
Muslim	1.293* (0.633)	1.679* (0.674)	0.108 (0.633)	-0.102 (0.629)
Christian	0.704 (0.588)	1.105† (0.644)	0.314 (0.580)	0.565 (0.585)
Religiosity (1-5)	0.021 (0.067)	0.058 (0.070)	-0.007 (0.066)	-0.041 (0.067)
Constant	6.551*** (0.875)	7.373*** (0.920)	3.399*** (0.668)	3.099*** (0.636)
Observations	1,076	1,076	1,076	1,076

Notes: OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05, †p < 0.1.



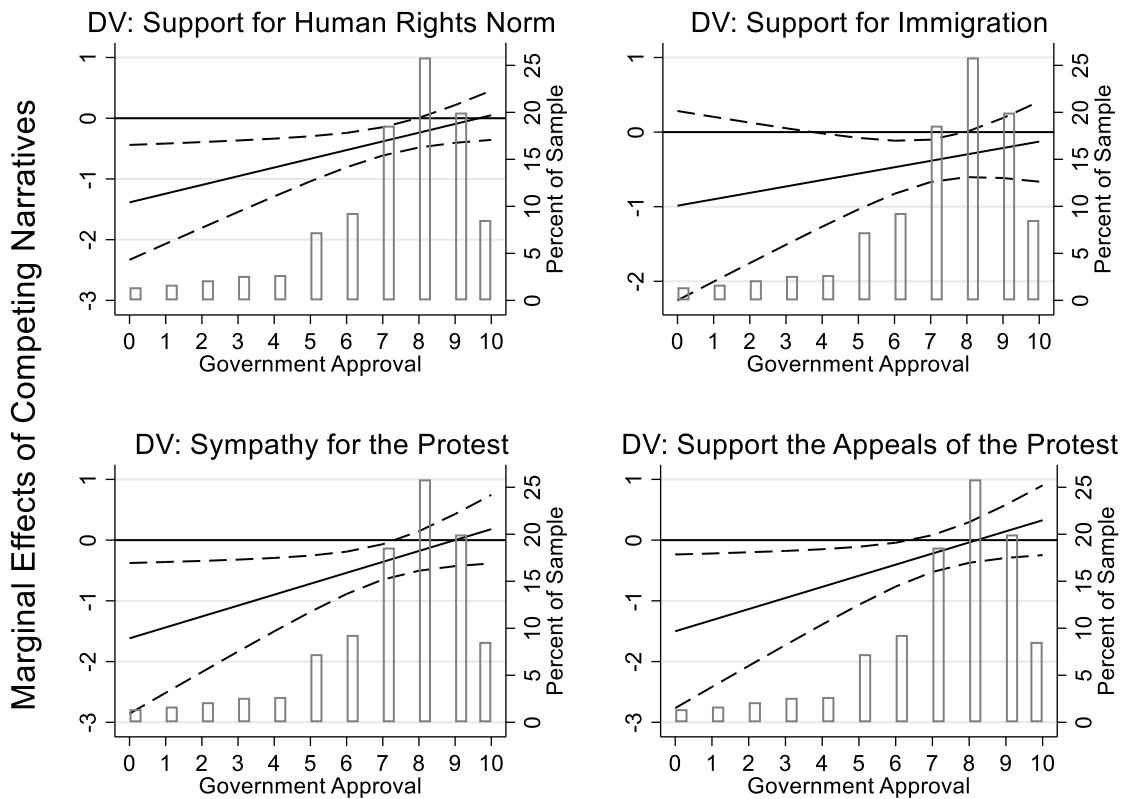
**Figure 0.3. Effect of Competing Narratives about Human Rights Sanctions on Sympathy for Protesters**

Notes: Point estimates represent intention to treat (ITT) effects from OLS regressions of the outcome variable on the treatment and control variables. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.

#### 4.5 Subgroup Analysis

I expect that the impacts of foreign sanctions information will be moderated by respondents’ preexisting attitudes toward the Indian government. Moderates—those who do not hold strong political positions—should be more likely to be swayed by new information. Therefore, I posit that the backup effect of sanctions threat information will be greater among those citizens who hold unfavorable or neutral views toward the government, whereas the backlash effect of sanctions threat information will be greater among those who hold favorable or neutral views toward the government. I measure this moderation variable, *prior attitudes toward the government*, by asking respondents before the treatments: “On a scale from 0 to 10, please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: I approve of the performance of the Indian government in the past two years.”

Figure 4.4 shows the marginal effects of competing human rights sanctions information on public opinion as respondents' prior attitudes toward the Indian government change. Surprisingly, the backlash effects only appear among government skeptics and moderates. In contrast, foreign sanctions information does not have a significant impact on government supporters. Respondents who held unfavorable and neutral toward the Indian government reduced their support for the human rights norm and immigration. They also had diminished sympathy and support for the antigovernment protest. In contrast, respondents with high levels of government approval were unaffected by the new competing narratives about human rights sanctions.



**Figure 0.4. Marginal Effect of Competing Narratives about Human Rights Sanctions Conditional on Respondents' Prior Attitudes Toward the Government**

Notes: Solid line represents the marginal effect of competing narrative of human rights sanctions on attitudes toward human rights and antigovernment protest at different levels of prior government approval. Dashed line represents 95 percent confidence intervals.

## 4.6 Mechanisms

Tables 4.4-4.6 report the effects of each proposed mediator that links narratives around foreign sanctions to respondents' attitudes toward human rights and protesters. Using causal mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2011), I find statistically significant evidence on the mediating role of economic threat perceptions. Respondents were more likely to view the EU as an economic threat to India when receiving contested information about the EU's human rights sanctions. This threat perception, in turn, lowered public support for the human rights norm, accepting immigrants, and sympathy for the protesters. Specifically, about 23.3% of the human rights backsliding effect arose because foreign sanctions increased Indian citizens' economic threat perceptions. The economic threat perceptions also play significant mediating roles in explaining the negative relationship between sanctions information and support for immigration, accounting for about 59.7% of that effect. These heightened threat perceptions also strongly mediate respondents to be less sympathetic toward the protesters, accounting for about 68.9% of the total effect.

**Table 0.4. Causal Mediation Analysis of the Relationship Between Human Rights Sanctions and Support for the Human Rights Norm**

	<i>Government Performance</i>		<i>Trust in Government</i>		<i>Government Concessions</i>	
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
ACME	-0.03	[-0.07, 0.004]	-0.14	[-0.04, 0.01]	-0.02	[-0.06, 0.02]
ADE	-0.32	[-0.55, -0.11]	-0.34	[-0.57, -0.13]	-0.33	[-0.56, -0.13]
ATE	-0.35	[-0.60, -0.14]	-0.35	[-0.59, -0.14]	-0.35	[-0.60, -0.15]
Total Effect Mediated	8.9%		3.9%		5.1%	

	<i>National Sentiments</i>		<i>Security Threat Perception</i>		<i>Economic Threat Perception</i>	
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
ACME	-0.04	[-0.10, 0.02]	0.001	[-0.03, 0.03]	0.08	[0.04, 0.14]
ADE	-0.31	[-0.53, -0.11]	-0.35	[-0.58, -0.14]	-0.43	[-0.66, -0.22]
ATE	-0.35	[-0.59, -0.14]	-0.35	[-0.59, -0.14]	-0.35	[-0.59, -0.15]
Total Effect Mediated	11.3%		0.3%		23.3%	

Notes: The mediator and outcome models are estimated by OLS regressions with control variables (N=1,076). 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors with 500 simulations.

**Table 0.5. Causal Mediation Analysis of the Relationship Between Human Rights Sanctions and Support for Allowing Immigrants**

	<i>Government Performance</i>		<i>Trust in Government</i>		<i>Government Concessions</i>	
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
ACME	-0.06	[-0.12, 0.01]	-0.03	[-0.08, 0.02]	-0.06	[-0.17, 0.06]
ADE	-0.33	[-0.61, -0.08]	-0.36	[-0.64, -0.10]	-0.33	[-0.59, -0.10]
ATE	-0.39	[-0.68, -0.13]	-0.39	[-0.69, -0.13]	-0.39	[-0.68, -0.12]
Total Effect Mediated	14.8%		7.2%		14.7%	

	<i>National Sentiments</i>		<i>Security Threat Perception</i>		<i>Economic Threat Perception</i>	
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
ACME	-0.05	[-0.12, 0.03]	0.005	[-0.11, 0.13]	0.23	[0.13, 0.35]
ADE	-0.34	[-0.61, -0.09]	-0.39	[-0.65, -0.16]	-0.62	[-0.89, -0.38]
ATE	-0.38	[-0.68, -0.13]	-0.39	[-0.69, -0.12]	-0.39	[-0.68, -0.13]
Total Effect Mediated	12.0%		1.3%		59.7%	

Notes: The mediator and outcome models are estimated by OLS regressions with control variables (N=1,076). 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors with 500 simulations.

**Table 0.6. Causal Mediation Analysis of the Relationship Between Human Rights Sanctions and Sympathy for Protesters**

	<i>Government Performance</i>		<i>Trust in Government</i>		<i>Government Concessions</i>	
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
ACME	-0.04	[-0.09, 0.01]	-0.01	[-0.04, 0.01]	-0.07	[-0.20, 0.07]
ADE	-0.27	[-0.56, -0.01]	-0.30	[-0.59, -0.04]	-0.25	[-0.50, -0.01]
ATE	-0.31	[-0.62, -0.05]	-0.31	[-0.61, -0.05]	-0.31	[-0.62, -0.04]
Total Effect Mediated	13.0%		3.7%		21.0%	

	<i>National Sentiments</i>		<i>Security Threat Perception</i>		<i>Economic Threat Perception</i>	
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
ACME	-0.05	[-0.12, 0.03]	0.004	[-0.12, 0.13]	0.22	[0.12, 0.33]
ADE	-0.26	[-0.54, -0.007]	-0.32	[-0.58, -0.78]	-0.53	[-0.81, -0.28]
ATE	-0.31	[-0.61, -0.04]	-0.31	[-0.62, -0.04]	-0.31	[-0.61, -0.05]
Total Effect Mediated	15.6%		-0.01%		68.7%	

Notes: The mediator and outcome models are estimated by OLS regressions with control variables (N=1,076). 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors with 500 simulations.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Human rights sanctions usually intend to move people toward embracing human rights values and make people more likely to demand policy change from their rights-violating government. I estimated the average and conditional effects of human rights sanctions information among Indian respondents. My experimental findings suggest that the threat of human rights sanctions produces a backlash effect. When citizens in India received competing narratives about foreign sanctions, stating both protection of human rights and threats to national interests and sovereignty, they became less supportive of human rights protection and less sympathetic toward the antigovernment protest that demanded policy change. This backlash effect was especially evident among people who did not have existing high levels of government approval. Overall, these findings uncover unforeseen ramifications of widely used human rights sanctions.

This study has important implications. First, this paper advances the literature on the sanctions-repression link. While previous observational research has shown the negative relationship between foreign sanctions and human rights conditions in target countries, this study provides micro-level evidence of human rights backsliding. If foreign sanctions lower local populations' support for human rights and sympathy for protesters, rights-abusing governments might have more justification for their repressive actions against citizens.

Second, this paper speaks to the existing research on the counterproductive consequences of international interventions on local populations. The target government's messages might get the upper hand over the sanctioner, and target citizens might defy the values intended to be promoted. My findings echo prior research indicating that mere international criticism or punishment is insufficient to change targets' attitudes or behaviors and that greater levels of commitment to local populations and the pressure "from below" might also be needed. (Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2023; Murdie and Bhasin 2011; Murdie and Davis 2012; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). The findings also align with the spiral model's acknowledgment of the challenges and limitations of promoting human rights across different contexts.

This study points to several pending issues for future research. First, it will be worthwhile to delve deeper into how different sectors in target countries respond to foreign sanctions. Most existing studies look at the public as a whole. However, since sanctions may generate varying impacts on different occupations, industries, and interest groups, teasing out the diverse domestic responses to foreign sanctions could be one possible new line of inquiry. Second, another interesting extension could explore whether different sanctioners (like the UN and the US), varying intensity of sanctions (like comprehensive and targeted sanctions), and various sanctions tools (like foreign aid suspension and asset freeze) would generate more nuanced results

concerning target citizens' public opinion. For example, one possibility is that local populations would perceive the UN's human rights pressure as less threatening and more credible, thereby being more willing to accept the norm and question their government's policy. Finally, this study indicates that sanctions might backfire in the short term; however, as Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999)'s spiral model points out, international human rights pressure and target governments may interact in back-and-forth stages of resistance and concessions. A valuable direction for future research will be to explore the long-term or potentially non-linear effects of human rights sanctions on public attitudes by conducting several waves of experiments, surveys, or interviews.

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## 4.9 Appendices

### **Appendix 0.A. Balance between Control and Treatment Groups (Model 1 of Table 4.1)**

	Means		Differences in means	
	Control (N=555)	Foreign Sanctions Information (N=521)	t-statistic	p-value
Male	0.721	0.747	-0.960	0.337
Age Group	2.506	2.441	1.239	0.216
BJP	0.425	0.468	-1.422	0.156
INC	0.294	0.274	0.698	0.485
Education	6.076	6.031	0.829	0.407
Income	2.832	2.756	1.111	0.267
Hindu	0.782	0.806	-0.978	0.328
Muslim	0.058	0.079	-1.371	0.171
Christian	0.124	0.089	1.913	0.056
Religiosity	0.210	0.256	-1.108	0.866

**Appendix 0.B. Multinomial Logit of the Treatment Group**

	Foreign Sanctions Information
Male	0.098 (0.140)
Age	-0.090 (0.073)
BJP	0.187 (0.154)
INC	-0.026 (0.169)
Education	-0.048 (0.071)
Income	-0.056 (0.057)
Hindu	0.315 (0.370)
Muslim	0.635 (0.440)
Christian	0.026 (0.416)
Religiosity	0.013 (0.051)

Note: MLE coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Control group is the omitted DV category. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

My dissertation highlights the role of non-state actors in sanctions initiation and impacts. The first essay shows that governments facing domestic challenges tend to use sanctions to unify society and divert public attention. My research shows that nonviolent protests combined with intense elite competition incentivize governments to impose foreign sanctions. In the second essay, I demonstrate that the UN's messages on physical integrity rights abuse will increase support for sanctioning the rights-abusing government. Further analysis suggests that the primary motivation behind this support is concern over potential damage to the US's international standing if no action is taken. In the third essay, I indicate that competing narratives on human rights sanctions decrease target citizens' support for human rights values as well as their sympathy for antigovernment protests. The driving mechanism of this backlash effect is the heightened threat perceptions induced by the sanctions.

This dissertation makes several theoretical contributions. First, it enriches the debate surrounding the effectiveness of international advocacy efforts in influencing third-party citizens and local populations. I find that messages from authoritative sources like the UN, particularly regarding physical integrity repression, can increase public endorsement of economic sanctions in addressing human rights abuses. However, despite initial rallying of support, sanctioners' messages are often overshadowed by the target government's narratives, echoing the spiral model's recognition of resistance to international pressure.

Second, my findings advance our understanding of the relationship between economic sanctions and human rights conditions in target countries. While previous research has highlighted the negative effects of sanctions on human rights, this study delves into the micro-level dynamics underlying this connection. Through a survey experiment, I reveal that under external threats, citizens within target countries tend to become less aligned with human rights values and less sympathetic to protesters. Therefore, international sanctions, even well-intended, may inadvertently grant the target government more leeway to employ coercive measures against its populace.

Third, I shed new light on the strategic decision-making processes of states facing domestic pressures by demonstrating that sanctions, rather than military actions, are more likely to be employed in response to domestic dissent as a diversionary tactic. This expansion of diversionary theory to include economic coercion offers a more nuanced understanding of how governments navigate internal challenges. Additionally, together with the findings showing that international advocacy can increase public support for sanctions, I expand the scope of sanctions initiation research and advance our understanding of how domestic politics and non-state actors can shape sanctions policy (Attia 2024; Kaempfer and Lowenberg 1992; Kustra 2021; McGillivray and Stam 2004; McLean and Whang 2014; Urtuzuastigui 2023; Whang 2011).

This dissertation also entails important policy implications. The findings underscore the importance of framing and delivering information to garner public support for sanctions policies. The findings indicate the need for international organizations and governments to carefully consider the potential backlash that certain messages may provoke and highlight the role of media in shaping public perceptions.

My dissertation projects open up avenues for future research. I plan to extend my dissertation and advance two primary research trajectories. First, I will explore whether people rally behind leaders who impose sanctions on countries violating human rights. My pilot survey results indicate that the use of human rights sanctions creates a rally effect within the sender country by shaping public perceptions that (1) the leader is more competent, (2) the sender country is more prestigious in the world, and (3) the US has more influence in the world, compared to the scenario of doing nothing in response to human rights violations overseas.

My second research trajectory delves into economic sanctions' political and humanitarian impacts. I will analyze how sanctioned dictators stabilize domestic situations and remain in the office. The tentative findings suggest that sanctioned dictators will co-opt potential supporters and restrict citizens' collective action capacity to weaken the public's incentives to mobilize against the regime. My second project in this stream will evaluate whether sanctions inadvertently trigger increased conflict-related sexual violence in target countries. With limited resources and escalating political instability, sanctions might embolden insurgent groups to employ sexual violence as a tool for cohesion and highlight the reigning government's incompetence. This study will contribute to discussions on human security and conflict management.

My analyses also suggest several additional lines of inquiry. First, scholars could explore how different sectors in target countries respond to international interventions. Investigating the varied local responses to interventions could be fruitful. Second, another related extension could evaluate how different sanctioning entities and the intensity of sanctions affect target citizens' attitudes. Finally, another avenue worthy of further exploration is to understand how domestic

support for sanctions would increase sender governments' bargaining leverage over targets and thus make them more likely to achieve their intended goals.