

## The effect of sanctions on civic participation

Sanctions influence civic participation in authoritarian regimes, with threats increasing anti-government protests and imposed sanctions often fuelling pro-government mobilization, particularly in environments with high-media censorship.

Geographic region: Global

Effect size: Harmful effect ( $g=-0.104$ )

Confidence in study findings: Low (2 studies with 11 effect sizes)

### Short summary

Overall, sanctions have harmful effects on civic participation, especially in authoritarian regimes. Whilst threats of sanctions signal international disapproval, emboldening opposition groups and increasing anti-government protests, in fact imposed sanctions are often framed by regimes as attacks on national sovereignty, fueling pro-government mobilization. This effect is particularly pronounced in regimes with high media censorship. Evidence from global datasets shows that sanction threats have stronger effects on dissent, while imposed sanctions enable regimes to consolidate support through nationalist framing and coercion.

### Long summary

#### *The intervention*

Sanctions, including both threatened and imposed measures, are policy tools used to influence the domestic politics of authoritarian regimes. Sanctions aim to pressure governments to alter policies, address governance issues, or foster democratization. Threats of sanctions serve as signals of international disapproval and support for opposition movements, while imposed sanctions can take the form of economic restrictions or other measures targeting governments or specific entities. These interventions often focus on addressing human rights violations or political repression, and their duration and intensity vary depending on the sender and goals. Sanctions, whether threatened or enacted, interact with domestic political dynamics and can affect civic participation by influencing dissent or bolstering regime support.

#### *How the intervention is expected to affect this outcome*

Overall, sanctions are expected to influence domestic political dynamics of a targeted state. Sanctions and their threats may signal an international disapproval of an authoritarian regime. It acts as a catalyst to mobilize public dissent, which may encourage citizens to participate in collective actions and protests. On the other hand, authoritarian leaders may strategically frame sanctions as a form of attack on national sovereignty. This kind of narrative may fuel nationalist sentiment and motivate citizens to conduct pro-government demonstrations. Moreover, the regime may coerce or incentivize participation to the protests. Media control also plays a critical role as authoritarian regimes may utilize propaganda and censorship to suppress opposition.

#### *The evidence base*

This cell includes 2 impact evaluations. One of the studies is rated with medium confidence while the other is rated with low confidence.

All the studies utilized secondary data. Both studies utilize global datasets, consequently narrowing down the sample to authoritarian regimes.

### *Evidence findings*

Threats of international sanctions, rather than those which are implemented, increase anti-government protest activity in targeted authoritarian regimes. Sanction threats are seen as a signal of international disapproval of the regime and support for opposition groups, thus creating opportunity for domestic dissent and collective action, even prior material deprivation. Moreover, sanctions focused on human rights violations or issued by multiple actors send clearer signals for domestic dissents. On the other hand, imposed sanctions do not lead to increased protest as it may allow regimes to deflect blame for poor economic performance or appeal to nationalist narratives. Sanctions or threats also frequently lead to an increase in pro-government mobilization in authoritarian regimes as autocratic leaders exploit these interventions and frame them as a threat to national sovereignty, fuelling nationalism and encouraging government support. This is more pronounced in regimes that have high levels of media censorship, allowing leaders to suppress opposing viewpoints and amplify their narratives.

### *Included studies*

**Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest (2017)** explore how international threats of sanctions affect domestic protest activity in authoritarian regimes, proposing that these threats serve as signals of support for opposition movements. The authors argue that the threat of sanctions, especially those backed by multiple countries or aimed at human rights violations, send strong international signals that embolden citizens to protest against their government, even before any economic impact occurs. The study uses the Threats and Imposition of Sanctions (TIES) dataset alongside the Mass Mobilization dataset to track monthly instances of protest in various regimes from 1990 to 2005. Count models (i.e., zero-inflated models and fixed effects estimators) are used to assess the effect of both sanction threats and actual sanctions on protest activity, while controlling for factors like regime type and previous repression levels. The threat of international sanctions significantly mobilizes protest activity in authoritarian regimes, while the actual imposition of sanctions has little effect. This effect is strongest when threats specifically target human rights abuses, and are backed by multiple international actors, as these factors increase perceived legitimacy and external backing for opposition movements. This study is rated medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

**Hellmeier (2020)** assesses how international pressure, including economic sanctions and diplomatic threats, affects domestic mobilization in favour of authoritarian regimes. The study explores how authoritarian leaders in countries such as Venezuela, Iran, and Zimbabwe use foreign pressure as a tool to rally public support, often framing sanctions as attacks on national sovereignty to foster nationalist sentiment. Using a quantitative analysis with data from 74 authoritarian regimes between 2003 and 2015, the study combines information on pro-government rallies from the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database with sanctions and threat data from the European Sanctions Database. A multivariate regression analysis is employed to examine the frequency of pro-government rallies in response to foreign pressure. The study also tests how the presence of media censorship in target countries moderates this relationship. This study finds a significant increase in the probability of pro-government rallies in response to foreign threats and sanctions. In authoritarian regimes, these external pressures prompt leaders to organize rallies that frame sanctions as threats to national

sovereignty. The effect is amplified in countries with high media censorship. The study is rated low confidence due to the partial description of the intervention and evaluation questions.

*Confidence assessment*

Overall low: the cell contains less than four studies and one of the studies is rated as low confidence, while the other is rated as medium confidence.

**Other outcomes in the study:**

None