

Effect of sanctions on political security

Sanctions have mixed effects on political security, with comprehensive measures often linked to repression, while targeted and democratic sanctions yield limited or positive outcomes.

Geographic region: Global

Effect size: Small effect ($g=0.027$)

Confidence in study findings: Medium (6 studies with 19 effect sizes)

Short summary

Sanctions, which may include comprehensive and targeted measures, are imposed by states or organizations like the U.N. to influence regimes, often in response to human rights violations or political repression. Evidence from six impact evaluation studies show that the effect of sanctions tend to vary according to its type and objective. Comprehensive sanctions tend to exacerbate discrimination and human rights violations, whereas targeted sanctions are associated with less severe effects. However, some positive outcomes have been observed in the context of U.S. and democratic sanctions, particularly in relation to women's rights and levels of democracy.

Long summary

The intervention

Sanctions typically include economic sanctions imposed by states or international organizations, such as the U.S. and the U.N., to influence the behavior of targeted regimes. These sanctions take various forms: comprehensive sanctions that impact entire economies (e.g., trade restrictions and financial measures), and targeted sanctions, which focus on specific individuals, entities, or sectors. Sanctions are often imposed in response to human rights violations, political repression, or actions aimed at destabilizing regimes. The design, scope, and application of these sanctions vary widely, with multilateral sanctions often involving coordinated action through international organizations and unilateral sanctions reflecting individual state policy goals.

How the intervention is expected to affect this outcome

Sanctions are intended to influence political security by pressuring targeted regimes to implement reforms, improve civil and political rights, and increase openness in political participation. However, the evidence suggests that sanctions often lead to unintended consequences, particularly in authoritarian or fragile states. Economic sanctions may incentivize governments to consolidate power, restrict civic freedoms, and suppress political participation as a means of maintaining control. Comprehensive sanctions, in particular, can exacerbate political insecurity by intensifying economic hardship, reducing political space, and fostering societal divisions. While targeted sanctions aim to limit adverse effects, they can still allow regimes to frame sanctions as external threats, rallying domestic support and justifying repressive measures. As a result, sanctions may hinder political and civic freedoms, limit participation in political processes, and reduce openness in the political space, with outcomes shaped by the type of sanctions and the political context in which they are applied.

The evidence base

This cell includes 6 impact evaluations, and the evidence consistently points out the unintended consequences of sanctions on political security. Most of the studies are rated with medium confidence. Note Rosenberg (2016) is not included in the effect size calculation as it did not have enough information to compute for d .

All the studies utilized secondary data, with some analyzing global datasets and later narrowing their focus to economies subjected to sanctions or those which have authoritarian regimes. Three studies concentrated on broader implications of U.S. sanctions.

Evidence findings

The effects of sanctions on political security are mixed and appear to depend largely on the type of sanction and its underlying objectives. Comprehensive and multilateral sanctions are associated with increased discrimination against minority groups and higher violations of physical integrity rights and civil liberties. In contrast, targeted sanctions tend to have minimal or no adverse effects on political rights. Notably, some studies find that U.S. sanctions are linked to improvements in women's emancipatory rights, while democratic sanctions have been associated with modest but statistically significant increases in democratization within authoritarian regimes.

Included studies

Adam and Tsarsitalidou (2019) analyse the impact of U.S.-imposed economic sanctions on civil liberties in targeted countries from 1972 to 2014. The study used a panel dataset of 166 countries, covering 42 years. It employed fixed-effects panel regressions and applied a potential outcomes framework. There were two dependent variables used to measure civil liberties, namely the Freedom House civil liberties index and the Cingranelli and Richards empowerment rights index. Meanwhile, the control variables included GDP per capita, regime type, and occurrences of war, to cite a few. The study finds that sanctions lead to a statistically significant decline in civil liberties in targeted countries, with the effects most pronounced for sanctions explicitly aimed at addressing human rights violations or destabilizing regimes. Multilateral sanctions, especially those involving international institutions, had stronger adverse effects on civil liberties compared to unilateral sanctions. The study is rated medium as it is non-experimental and due to its partial description of the intervention.

Gutmann (2019) investigates the effects of U.S. economic sanctions on human rights, specifically examining whether sanctions are "precision-guided" or "blunt" in their impact across various human rights categories. The analysis focuses on sanctions imposed by the US, which often aim to influence target countries' policies by creating economic pressure. The study is set within a context where sanctions are intended to address concerns such as political repression or human rights abuses without resorting to military intervention. The study applied an endogenous treatment-regression model. The dataset spans U.S. sanctions from 1976 to 2012 and includes multiple control variables for economic, political, and international alignment factors. Under the endogenous treatment model, the study finds that U.S. economic sanctions do not lead to significant negative effects on political rights in targeted countries. Political rights, which include freedoms related to political expression, assembly, and participation, show no statistically significant deterioration under sanctions. Notably, the study finds a statistically significant and positive association between U.S. sanctions and women's rights, indicating that emancipatory rights improve under these sanctions. The authors hypothesize that sanctions may create an environment in which social groups, including

women, are granted greater rights, either as a strategic move by sanctioned governments to gain domestic support or as an unintended side effect of international pressure. When putting into account the different forms of sanctions, the results show that U.S. economic sanctions, regardless of type or duration, do not significantly impact basic political rights and civil liberties in targeted countries. However, sanctions show a positive effect on emancipatory rights, especially when mild, directed at improving human rights, or imposed on democracies. This study is rated medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

Önder (2022) investigates the impact of economic sanctions on minority groups within targeted states. It emphasizes that sanctions can lead to increased discrimination against these groups, particularly in economic, political, and social dimensions. The research aims to understand how different types of sanctions (comprehensive vs. targeted) affect the treatment of minorities. The study employs an empirical approach using ordered logit models to analyze the effects of economic sanctions on minority groups. The sample consists of data related to countries that have experienced economic sanctions, focusing on the treatment of minority groups within these nations. The results indicate that economic sanctions are associated with higher levels of discrimination ($p < .01$) against minority groups, particularly under comprehensive sanctions ($p < .01$). The study is rated medium as it is non-experimental.

Øygarden (2017) investigates the impact of economic sanctions on human rights violations, particularly focusing on physical integrity rights and civil and political rights. The context is rooted in the debate over whether sanctions, often employed by major powers to achieve political objectives, inadvertently exacerbate human rights abuses in targeted countries. The study encompasses a global perspective, analyzing data from various countries that have been subjected to economic sanctions between the years 1981 and 2005. The research employs a quantitative analysis framework. The study utilizes a significant dataset, with the original dataset comprising 1,607 observations for physical integrity rights and an extended dataset that includes approximately 2,825 observations for empowerment rights indicators. The results revealed that economic sanctions are associated with an increase in violations of physical integrity rights, with a mean index score of 3.401 ($N = 1,595$) indicating significant abuses such as torture and political imprisonment. The empowerment rights index shows that sanctions negatively impact civil and political rights, including freedom of speech and movement. Sanctions lead to a rise in extra-judicial killings, with a mean score of 0.749 ($N = 1,600$). The study is rated medium as it is non-experimental.

Rosenberg et al. (2016) examines the effects of US economic sanctions targeting states and non-state actors (post-9/11 attacks) on foreign investment, corruption, ease of doing business, and other related measures. In this light, the US has used financial/economic sanctions as a tool to address security threats, such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and territorial aggression, and what role does it play in national security strategy. The dataset included 22 post-9/11 sanctions cases from Rice University's Threat and Impositions of Sanctions (TIES) dataset, the Petersen Institute for International Economics (PIIE) dataset of 21st century cases, the US Treasury Department's OFAC sanctions website, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Political Risk Services (PRS), the Worldwide Governance Index (WGI), and the Polity IV. The methodology followed an approach previously used by the U.S. Government Accountability Office to assess U.S. sanctions on Iran. This method involved selecting a set of "peer economies" for each sanctioned country—five similar countries matched on regional, economic, and political characteristics. By comparing the sanctioned countries with their peer economies, the study aimed to isolate changes in economic and political conditions that could be attributed to sanctions. Results show that economic sanctions have no significant effect on civil disorder or aggregate government stability. The study is rated as medium due to its partial description of the intervention.

von Soest (2014) examines the effects of "democratic sanctions" (those that explicitly aim to promote democracy), on authoritarian regimes (which have become the most common type of sanction issued against authoritarian states). It introduces a data set that categorizes

sanctions by their explicit objectives, distinguishing those aimed at democratization from other types of imposed sanctions from 1990–2010. This cross-sectional time-series study includes a sample of 2,079 country-years, with 532 country-years during which sanctions were imposed. All included cases were considered authoritarian at the start of the sanction episode. The main outcome of interest was the change in the level of democracy, measured using a combined Freedom House and Polity IV score. The study found that Democratic sanctions were associated with an increase of 0.160 points per year in the democracy score of targeted authoritarian countries. This result was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The positive effect of democratic sanctions remained significant after controlling for comprehensive sanctions, with the coefficient slightly larger at 0.197 in additional analyses. The study is rated medium confidence due to the partial description of the intervention,

Confidence assessment

Overall moderate: The cell covers studies with medium individual confidence assessments. There tends to be high consistency in the study findings, showing the negative effects of sanctions on political security.

Other outcomes of the study

Community and state governance / Government performance

Violence and atrocity prevention / Nature and scale of violence and atrocities

Human security / Economic security

Social cohesion / feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity