Article

Revisiting the Causal Links between Economic Sanctions and Human Rights Violations

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Abstract

There is some consensus in the literature that economic sanctions might prompt more human rights abuses in target countries. Yet, the causal mechanisms underlining the sanctions–repression nexus remain little understood. Using causal mediation analysis, we examine the processes through which sanctions might deteriorate human rights conditions. We specifically propose two indirect mechanisms driving human rights violations: increased domestic dissent and reduced government capacity. Sanctions are likely to trigger domestic dissent, and this instability would further induce the government to employ repression. Reduced government capacity caused by sanctions will harm the government's ability to screen and oversee its security agents, which would subsequently lead to increased human rights abuses. Results from a time-series, cross-national data analysis indicate that sanctions-induced dissent, particularly violent dissent, plays a significant mediating role in the sanctions–repression link. Likewise, we find strong evidence that diminished fiscal capacity triggered by sanctions is likely to result in more repression. There is also some modest evidence that corruption as a proxy for poor governance mediates the sanctions–repression relationship.

Keywords

economic sanctions, human rights, dissent, government capacity, mediation analysis

Introduction

In a 2018 report following his mission to Ecuador and Venezuela, the UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order, Alfred-Maurice de Zayas reported that economic "sanctions kill" (A/HRC/39/47/Add.1; United Nations 2018, 15). Likening sanctions to "medieval sieges of towns" that cause "many deaths," Mr. de Zayas remarked that "sanctions contravene the human rights obligations of the countries imposing them" (United Nations 2018, 13–14). These bold statements are consistent with much prior academic work: sanctions lead to a reduction in a country's human rights performance, as well as causing overall harm to human security (Adam and Tsarsitalidou 2019; Carneiro and Apolinário 2016; Peksen 2009; Peksen and Drury 2009; Wood 2008). Although sanctions may be a more humane form of coercion than military interventions or war, the use of economic statecraft is not without causalities (Allen and Lektzian 2013; Peksen 2011).

The growing academic consensus on the negative effects of economic sanctions is in stark contrast to the rights-promoting rhetoric and policy expectations that often accompany the frequent use of economic sanctions in the landscape of global politics. According to this rhetoric, foreign economic pressure should diminish a repressive leader's circle of support, ultimately leading to a lessening of human rights abuses, a change in policy, and political freedoms. How do we make sense of this disconnect between the rhetoric and academic findings? How exactly do economic sanctions induce more repression in target countries? In this paper, we shed light on the causal processes connecting economic sanctions to possible adverse human rights outcomes.[1]

Previous research finds that sanctions are negatively associated with government respect for human rights (Adam and Tsarsitalidou 2019; Carneiro and Apolinário 2016; Peksen 2009; Peksen and Drury 2009; Wood 2008). Yet, the causal mechanisms running from sanctions to deteriorating human rights are still unclear. Existing research suggests a few potential mediators,

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most especially increased dissent and reduced government capacity, as well as a more direct effect. These causal chains, however, have not been subject to close empirical scrutiny. Using causal mediation analysis, we examine the processes through which sanctions might lead to increased repression.

We specifically analyze whether domestic dissent and government capacity play mediating roles in explaining the possible effects of sanctions on human rights violations. Do economic sanctions undermine human rights primarily because they lead to higher levels of dissent or lower levels of government capacity? Or do economic sanctions harm human rights independently of these mechanisms? By taking advantage of advances in statistical approaches for understanding causal mediation, we are able to empirically assess these claims and build a better theoretical understanding of how economic sanctions might directly and indirectly affect domestic politics in target countries (Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2013; Imai et al. 2011; Tingley et al. 2014). From a policy standpoint, given the prevalent use of sanctions in foreign policy, a thorough understanding of these processes is critical to limiting the deleterious effects of sanctions on human rights in target countries.

Consistent with earlier studies that tested only the direct effect of sanctions (Adam and Tsarsitalidou 2019; Carneiro and Apolinário 2016; Peksen 2009; Peksen and Drury 2009; Wood 2008), we provide statistical evidence that sanctions might directly increase state repression. We then provide evidence that economic sanctions are likely to trigger more intense protest activities in target countries, and this domestic instability impels the government to use greater repression. Furthermore, we find that while sanctions-induced violent dissent leads to more state repression, nonviolent dissent is less likely to result in more repression. Our results suggest that diminished fiscal capacity as a result of sanctions is associated with increased physical integrity abuses, while we find some modest evidence that political corruption as a proxy for poor governance mediates the possible impact that sanctions have on the extent of repression in target states.

Below, we refer to the relevant literature on sanctions and explain the underlying direct causal argument in extant empirical work. We then develop and test our causal model of the rights-reducing, indirect effects of sanctions. We conclude with reflections on what this causal understanding means for future academic research and its implications for the policy community.

Economic Sanctions and Repression

Sender states often levy sanctions with the expectation that foreign economic pressure would induce targeted governments to acquiesce to their demands for policy change. According to the "naïve" theory of sanctions, the denial of target elites' access to essential economic and military resources through sanctions could potentially reduce the government's capacity to maintain status quo (Galtung 1967, 388; Kirshner 1997, 42). Reduced state capacity would essentially undermine the government's ability to employ repression and other means to eliminate or at least keep the rival groups under control. Hence, according to this line of thought, if sanctions weaken repressive target regimes' coercive capacity, there would be a decline, or at least no change, in the extent of state repression following the imposition of sanctions.

This theoretical expectation, however, falls short of explaining how sanctions often operate in target states. Current research finds that sanctions could result in the contraction of the target economy and financial distress (Hatipoglu and Peksen 2018; Hufbauer et al. 2007; Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2015; Peksen and Son 2015). The sanctions-led adverse economic effect tends to manifest itself mostly through widespread poverty (Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2016), more income inequality (Afesorgbor and Mahadevan 2016), and adverse public health outcomes (Allen and Lektzian 2013; Peksen 2011). Target leaders' command over the distribution of public resources enables them to disproportionately use those resources for themselves and their support base to keep their ruling coalition intact. Other groups thus shoulder the lion's share of the sanctions-induced economic pain and suffering (Afesorgbor and Mahadevan 2016; Gibbons 1999; Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2016; Weiss et al. 1997). In addition to the disproportionate use of public resources, sanctioned governments are adept at gaining access to the goods and products made scarce by sanctions through smuggling and other black-market channels (Andreas 2005; Early 2015; Early and Peksen 2019). Therefore, sanctions frequently fail to exact significant pressure on the target leadership to compel them to improve their human rights practices.

On the contrary, consistent with the earlier work, we theorize that sanctions might contribute to the deterioration of human rights conditions. In the following section, we first discuss how sanctions might directly incentivize target regimes to opt for more repressive means against their citizens. We then discuss two indirect mechanisms through which foreign pressure might lead to state repression. The first indirect mechanism focuses on the adverse human rights effects of political instability instigated by sanctions. The second indirect mechanism explicates the potential role of the quality of governance in mediating the relationship between sanctions and repression in target countries.

Decomposing the Impact of Sanctions on State Repression

Direct Effect of Sanctions on Repression

Sanctions might serve as a strong inducement for targeted regimes to become less tolerant of basic rights and freedoms. Governments under sanctions tend to be intransigent toward external demands for behavioral change as they interpret such foreign pressure as a direct threat to their survival and sovereignty (Peksen 2009; Wood 2008). Acquiescence to sanctions, especially external demands for more domestic reforms, could lead to a decline in the regime's political legitimacy and support. The government might therefore be more inclined to pursue repressive policies to publicly display its resolve against foreign coercion. The use of more repression in the shadow of sanctions would specifically signal to the constituency and the general public that the government has the power and determination to eliminate any challenges to its rule (Peksen and Drury 2010). Morgan (1995, 36), for instance, explains the escalation of human rights abuses in China in response to U.S. sanctions after the Tiananmen Square incident by noting that

> [M]any in the mainland government believe that without the ability to repress opposition their hold on power is lost . . . American calls for political freedom and civil liberties in mainland China may be heard as calls for political suicide by the mainland government.

Furthermore, targeted leaders might exploit sanctions to consolidate their authority and justify repression (Peksen 2009). Leaders often portray sanctions as an outright infringement of their sovereignty and national unity. The depiction of sanctions as a threat to national integrity and unity would subsequently allow them to "justify their repression against antiregime groups who are critical of the government under the guise of maintaining domestic cohesion" (Peksen 2009, 62–63). Hence, the perception of sanctions as a direct threat to the government's survival coupled with their portrayal as a breach of national sovereignty would enable regimes to commit more human rights abuses.

Mediating Effect of Dissent on the Sanctions–Repression Link

In addition to the direct effect of sanctions on state repression, sanctions might incite greater levels of domestic dissent, which then leads to more repression in target countries. Target governments might encounter higher levels of dissent as sanctions create more grievances and strengthen the opposition's mobilization capacity. First, sanctions might lead to financial crises and a considerable contraction of the economy (Hatipoglu and Peksen 2018; Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2015; Peksen and Son 2015). They are likely to beget more poverty (Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2016) and income inequality (Afesorgbor and Mahadevan 2016) in target countries. The perception of declining economic conditions in target countries might reduce mass support for the regime (Alexseev and Hale 2020). Under sanctions, target incumbents may also have fewer resources available to win over people's hearts and minds (Escribà-Folch 2012; Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010; Wood 2008).

In addition, sanctions might push target regimes to reduce the provision of public goods (Allen and Lektzian 2013; Escribà-Folch 2012; McLean and Whang, 2019; Peksen 2011), confiscate private property and wealth (Peksen 2017), and pursue discriminatory policies against minority groups (Peksen 2016), thus generating more public discontent with the incumbents in target countries. In line with the relative deprivation theory (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Davies 1962; De Juan and Wegner 2019; Gurr 1970), we expect that growing grievances and inequality would encourage more citizens to stage protests against the government.

Moreover, sanctions might improve the mobilization capacity of opposition groups in target countries. Domestic opposition groups often interpret sanctions as an external sign of disapproval of the government by the international community and support for the opposition. They might take advantage of the international disapproval by rallying citizens against the government (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015, 125–126; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017; Kaempfer, Lowenberg, and Mertens 2004; Park 2019; Peksen and Drury 2009). More specifically, sanctions against the incumbent regimes might decrease the opposition's perceived costs of mobilization and increase the opposition's perceived probability of successful resistance (Carneiro and Apolinário 2016, 571–575; Kaempfer and Lowenberg 1992, 137–156).

For example, U.S. sanctions on Venezuela targeting the Nicolás Maduro regime since 2014 have sent a strong signal of regime disapproval. In 2015, the opposition coalition Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) won a two-thirds supermajority of seats in the National Assembly. The backing of the United States and greater mobilization strength have emboldened the opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, and his supporters to continue to challenge the Maduro government (BBC 2019; Córdoba 2017). As Tarrow (2011, 33) points out, "[c]ontentious politics is produced when threats are experienced and opportunities are perceived, when the existence of available allies is demonstrated, and when the vulnerability of opponents is exposed."

Hence, the mounting antigovernment sentiment coupled with the increased mobilization capacity of the opposition could lead to more domestic dissent and political violence in target countries (Allen 2008; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017). More specifically, Allen (2008) finds that sanctions increase dissent when a country has a more open political system. Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest (2017) find that sanctions lead to increased dissent at the threat stage, especially if the sanctions are multilateral and relate to human rights issues. In these times, the threat of sanctions is an "international stamp of approval" for would-be dissidents (Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017, 86).

The sanctions–dissent link outlined above raises two related questions: how do target governments respond to the domestic instability? Do they treat violent and nonviolent resistance alike? Several studies have indicated that governments facing political violence are more likely to opt for repressive measures such as political imprisonment and killings (Davenport 1995, 2007; Gartner and Regan 1996; Lichbach 1994; Moore 2000; Ritter and Conrad 2016). When there are limited resources to buy off the opposition, repression could be a viable strategy for target regimes to quell dissent and restore political order. Therefore, facing domestic threats triggered by sanctions, targeted leaders may have more incentives to elevate repression levels (Carneiro and Apolinário 2016; Peksen 2009; Peksen and Drury 2009, 2010; Wood 2008). We thus expect that target governments undergoing instability are likely to respond to antigovernment movements using repressive means.

However, we also argue that target governments are less likely to employ repression to address nonviolent dissent compared with violent uprisings. There are two reasons for this contention. First, targeted leaders are more likely to perceive violent resistance as threatening than nonviolent unrest (Carey 2010; Gartner and Regan 1996; Poe 2004). This is because, compared with nonviolent groups, making concessions to violent protesters might incite more dissent and violence in the future and thus weaken the regime's authority (Klein and Regan 2018). Leaders would therefore be more inclined to suppress violent protests before they become a bigger threat to the status quo.

Second, using repression against nonviolent campaigns usually generates greater backlash and reputation costs than doing so against violent uprisings. Backlash costs refer to stronger antigovernment dissent and defections by political elites and security forces (Chenoweth and Stephan 2012; Francisco 1995; Nepstad 2013). The backlash costs may further challenge the targeted leaders' political survival (Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Kang 2017; Chenoweth and Stephan 2012). Reputation costs concern the shrinking support for and rising disapproval of targeted regimes from the international community (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Rasler 1996). The reputation costs might force senders to continue or even escalate their sanctions campaigns against targets, inflicting more damage on the latter. Thus, to avoid these backlash and reputation costs, only when sanctions induce more violent unrest would target governments raise repression levels to deter dissent behavior. They will be more concerned about being punished by domestic and international audiences for employing severe repression against nonviolent protesters, incentivizing them to adopt different approaches to violent and nonviolent unrest. Based on the discussion above, we postulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The total and direct effects of economic sanctions on human rights are negative, and the mediation effect of increased dissent is negative.

Hypothesis 2: While increased dissent serves as a mediator between sanctions and human rights violations, sanctions-induced nonviolent dissent is less likely to instigate more state repression than violent dissent.

Mediating Effect of Government Capacity on the Sanctions–Repression Link

In a theoretically ideal world, target states capitulate when sanctioned because they have fewer resources with which to buy off the political elites necessary for regime survival, while also facing increased scrutiny from the overall selectorate and broader population (Drezner 2011; Lektzian and Souva 2007; Pape 1997). As pressure continues to mount, the constrained leader is forced to make policy changes in line with the sender state's preferences; the leader does this to alleviate elite and popular pressure and retain office. If the leader does not make changes, emboldened elites and the general population may further revolt, necessitating a regime change that is more in line with the ideals of the sender state.

Although the theoretical process underlying sanction success may seem straightforward, the logic also implies some changes in the ability of the targeted state to govern effectively. We can see these changes in two interrelated directions: diminished fiscal capacity and quality of governance. Because the target state has fewer resources with which to operate, it will have to make cuts to government programs and budgets (Dizaji 2014; Oechslin 2014). Likewise, corruption could increase following sanctions, limiting the quality of governance within the target state (Andreas 2005; de Vries, Portela, and Guijarro-Usobiaga 2014). As Le Billon (2005, 690) summarizes, "[f]or lack of an alternative ordinary people resort to corruption and illegal economic activities to cope with the hardships of war or economic sanctions." This corruption will permeate to

government agencies, even agencies with judicial or managerial roles. More specifically, studies show that growing economic hardships and reduced access to essential needs due to trade and other restrictions induce public officials and ordinary citizens to participate in illicit economic activities (Early and Peksen 2019). Among others, these shadow sector activities include bribing government officials, tax evasion, and engaging in black-market transactions. In the case of the U.S.-led sanctions against Haiti in 1990s, for instance, Haitian military officials were actively involved in sanctions-busting trade and other illicit economic transactions such as the illegal sale of oil and drug trafficking (Gibbons 1999).

Budget cuts and increases in corruption will limit the oversight capabilities of executive branch principals on their bureaucratic agents, ultimately leading to increases in "agency slack," which can be defined as any "independent action by an agent that is undesired by the principal" (Hawkins et al. 2006, 8). "Slack" can take two main forms: shirking, when the agent does not put forth the effort the principal requires, or slippage, when the agent substitutes its actions away from those that reflect the principal's preferences and in line with its own preferences. Increases in shirking and slippage as a result of less oversight is a well-established pattern of bureaucratic governance (Braun and Guston 2003; Miller 2005). Although shirking and slippage may increase in many government sectors as a result of sanctions-induced budget cuts and corruption, we contend that government cuts and increased corruption will in particular change the principal–agent dynamics in the government's security sector in ways that will ultimately undermine human rights performance.

Human rights abuses can occur as a result of executive branch directions, where a regime leader orders security forces to kill dissidents or make opponents disappear. The human rights abuses in Argentina in the late 1970s by military actors are a good example of an executive branch ordering human rights abuses from its agents (Mignone, Estlund, and Issacharoff 1984). However, not all human rights abuses are a result of a direct order. Even in consolidated democracies with long traditions of respect for human rights norms, some human rights abuses occur as a result of agent discretion or shirking (Bell et al. 2019; Bohara et al. 2008; Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward, and Filippov 2014; Clay and Digiuseppe 2017; Englehart 2009; Herbst 2004). When left unmonitored, a police or military officer may torture a suspected terrorist because it appears to make the task of getting information from the suspect easier. Accounts of police misconduct plague even the most rights-supporting regimes, like the death of a prisoner in Sweden as a result of ill-treatment and torture in 2008 (Eck and Fariss 2018).

Similarly, an unmonitored police or military officer may kill a suspect in an effort to get a bribe; corrupt officers may use human rights abuses to further their private rents. Corruption can limit the fear of reprisal for agents participating in abuses. Furthermore, a state with less capacity cannot as effectively screen potential agents, likely leading to more security agents with a penchant for violence (Mitchell 2004). As Bohara et al. (2008, 7) point out, "[w]here there is high corruption, agents in government bureaucracies are more likely to be able to avoid accountability and hide their characters and actions from principals, and this likely applies to the police and security forces." If sanctions create shadow economies that exacerbate corruption within the state (Andreas 2005; Early and Peksen 2019), corruption will worsen agency slack, ultimately increasing government repression.

In line with this reasoning, sanctions might have another pathway through which to increase human rights abuses. By reducing government revenues, sanctions could indirectly increase human rights abuses by limiting the apparatus through which governments can monitor and screen security agents. Similarly, by increasing corruption, sanctions could create more agency slack, leading to more abuses from agents that see limited threat of reprisal or prosecution for their actions. Although not all agents may prefer repression, ceteris paribus, unmonitored agents will be more likely to violate human rights, even if not directly ordered by government officials. As such, sanctions might indirectly lead to an increase in human rights abuses through decreases in government revenue and increases in corruption, which will limit the ability of government principals to monitor security agents. Based on the literature and preceding discussion, we derive the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: The total and direct effects of economic sanctions on human rights are negative, and the mediation effect of reduced government tax revenue is negative.

Hypothesis 4: The total and direct effects of economic sanctions on human rights are negative, and the mediation effect of corruption is negative.

Research Design

We construct a time-series cross-national dataset with the estimation sample consisting of 152 states from 1990 to 2005. The sample size and time frame were determined by the availability of our key variables of interest, particularly violent and nonviolent protest (for the start year) and sanctions (for the end year).[2]

Methodological Approach

To address the hypotheses outlined above, we adopt a causal mediation potential outcomes approach (Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2013; Imai et al. 2011; Tingley et al. 2014). This approach enables us to estimate the average

total effect (ATE) and the average direct effect (ADE) of sanctions on human rights practices, and the average causal mediation effect (ACME) of domestic dissent and government capacity. More specifically, the ADE is the effect of sanctions on state repression through pathways apart from dissent or government capacity, while the ACME is the effect of sanctions through dissent or government capacity. These quantities of interest are calculated by using $N = 1{,}000$ simulations and 95 percent confidence intervals. We first fit models for our mediators (i.e., dissent intensity and government capacity) and our outcome variable (i.e., human rights practices), and then simulate model parameters from their sampling distribution. Thus, we are able to simulate the potential outcomes given the simulated values of the mediators. After these steps, we compute the causal mediation effects of dissent intensity and government capacity on the sanctions–repression connection.

Outcome Variable: Government Respect for Physical Integrity Rights

Our hypotheses focus on how sanctions affect human rights and whether this possible effect is mediated by increased dissent and reduced government capacity. To capture human rights performance in target countries, we use the Physical Integrity Rights Index from the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Project (Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay 2014). The CIRI Physical Integrity Rights Index provides information on the degree of government respect for physical integrity regarding torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and disappearance, ranging from 0 (*highest levels of human rights abuses*) to 8 (*highest levels of human rights protection*).

For robustness checks, we rely on the Political Terror Scale (PTS; Gibney et al. 2019) and Latent Human Rights Protection Scores (Fariss 2015, 2019). We use ordinary least squares (OLS) to estimate our CIRI physical integrity rights, Fariss' latent mean variable, and two PTS indexes. The results of these robustness checks across different human rights measures appear in the online appendix.

Main Explanatory Variable: Economic Sanctions

Our key independent variable is the presence of imposed sanctions. This variable is coded one if any economic sanctions are imposed on a country in a given year, and zero otherwise. For the information on sanctions, we rely on the Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES) dataset 4.0 (Morgan, Bapat, and Kobayashi 2014). To take advantage of the increased number of sanction cases, we also use the data from Hufbauer et al. (2007). As a common practice in the literature, we exclude sanctions issues—trade disputes and sanctions aimed at improving environmental policies—in the TIES data because such nontraditional sanctions regimes are unlikely to cause any major economic and political distress to be able to have a discernible effect on human rights conditions.[3]

Mediating Variables: Dissent Intensity and Government Capacity

We assess three potential channels through which sanctions affect human rights: domestic dissent, fiscal capacity, and quality of governance. As our theory suggests that the government might resort to repression in response to perceived threats, the dissent intensity variable, which captures both the number of protests and the severity of conflicts, allows us to better test our arguments. To measure the intensity of domestic dissent, we rely on the Integrated Data for Events Analysis (IDEA) dataset, updated by Virtual Research Associates (Bond et al. 2003; Murdie and Bhasin 2011). We rely on this dataset for two reasons. First, the sources of the IDEA data—which are coded from Reuters Global News Service—are more comprehensive than the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive (Banks and Wilson 2019)—which are based on the *New York Times*.

Second, the updated IDEA dataset has information on the intensity of protests, not just the count of protests. In the updated IDEA data, each protest event has been weighted by Goldstein's conflictual-cooperative scale (Goldstein 1992). The resulting values thus better capture the overall intensity of domestic unrest (Bell et al. 2013). We use weighted antigovernment protest, violent antigovernment protest, and nonviolent antigovernment protest from the dataset to assess the intensity of different forms of dissent in target countries, and all the values are logged to reduce skewness. We reverse the scale for the purpose of more intuitive interpretation, so higher values indicate more intense dissent.

To capture government capacity, we employ two different measures. The first one is fiscal capacity. This measure reflects a government's extractive capacity and its ability to monitor the use of violence (Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward, and Filippov 2014; Englehart 2009; Hendrix 2010). We use the *Relative Political Extraction* variable from the Relative Political Capacity dataset (Kugler and Tammen 2012). This variable captures the government's capacity of extracting resources from the population by employing estimated tax revenues as a share of gross domestic product (GDP), ranging from 0.142 to 3.124 in our sample with higher scores indicating a greater tax capacity.

Second, we use corruption levels to proxy a target state's government capacity to monitor state agents (Englehart 2009). Information regarding this variable comes from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)'s Political Corruption Index (Coppedge et al. 2019; McMann et al. 2016). The political corruption variable captures the prevalence of official corruption in four dimensions, including the executive, public sector, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. The score ranges from 0.006 to 0.972 in our sample, and a higher score indicates more official corruption. We evaluate the relationships between sanctions and our three mediators using OLS models.

Other Covariates and Model Specification

In the mediator model predicting dissent intensity, following prior studies on the sanctions–dissent link (Allen 2008; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017), we include a battery of control variables that could be influencing both sanction onset and dissent. We include the GDP per capita and population variables in the model and take the natural log of the variables to correct for the skewness of the data. The GDP and population data come from the World Development Indicators (WDI; World Bank 2019). In addition, previous research indicates that sanctions are more likely to incite antigovernment protests in mixed regimes (Allen 2008). Therefore, we include both Polity 2 and Polity 2 squared in the model to examine the potential curvilinear relationship between regime type and dissent levels. We use Polity 2 from the Polity IV project (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2013) to measure political regime. It is coded on a 21-point scale, ranging from −10 (*strongly autocratic*) to +10 (*strongly democratic*).[4] To account for the potential media bias in the events data concerning protests (Murdie and Bhasin 2011), we also include logged IDEA media coverage in the mediator models predicting dissent levels. This variable is the total amount of news coverage a country receives in Reuters within a year and comes from Virtual Research Associates. Earlier research suggests that the past dissent is positively correlated with current dissent (Murdie and Bhasin 2011; Rasler 1996); we thus include a lagged dependent variable in the models predicting dissent intensity to mitigate the temporal effects.

In the mediator models predicting government capacity, we include relevant controls that are based on extant literature on the determinants of fiscal capacity and corruption—economic development, trade openness, GDP growth, and democracy levels (Gupta 2007; Hummel, Gerring, and Burt, 2019; Montinola and Jackman 2002; Treisman 2007). Trade openness is calculated as the sum of exports and imports of goods and services as the ratio of GDP. Data on trade openness and economic growth come from the World Bank's WDI database. We include two additional covariates—civil war and international war—in the models predicting fiscal capacity to account for the possible impacts of conflicts on the government's tax capacity (Besley and Persson 2008). Both the international war and civil war variables are binary measures coded one if a country experiences an international militarized conflict with at least one thousand battle-related deaths in a given year or an internal conflict with at least twenty-five battle-related deaths in a given year, and zero otherwise. The data are from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/the Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset (Allansson, Melander, and Themnér 2017; Gleditsch et al. 2002).

In the outcome models predicting the government respect for human rights, we control for GDP per capita, population, and the presence of an international war and a civil war. Previous research indicates that economic development is positively associated with government respect for physical integrity rights, while larger populations and the presence of conflicts are negatively associated with physical integrity rights (Hill and Jones 2014; Poe and Tate 1994; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999; Richards, Webb, and Clay 2015). The civil war and international war variables consider the possibility that the extent of repression is likely to increase in countries experiencing an interstate or an internal conflict (Poe and Tate 1994; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999).

We also control for the regime type to account for the likely positive association between democracy and government respect for human rights (Davenport and Armstrong 2004; Regan and Henderson 2002; Richards, Webb, and Clay 2015). In addition, logged IDEA media coverage is included in the outcome models predicting physical integrity rights to control for the potential media bias in covering human rights practices (Peksen, Peterson, and Drury 2014). Prior research suggests that human rights practices have a high degree of temporal dependence (Poe and Tate 1994; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999). To account for the serial correlation, we include a lagged dependent variable in the current year in our models predicting repression levels.

We estimate our models in two temporal orderings. First, all the models are estimated with the independent variables measured in the current year, t, and the mediators and outcome variable measured in the future year, $t + 1$. In addition, because fiscal capacity and corruption involve policy domain and may take longer than domestic dissent to take effect after sanctions, we rerun the government capacity models and the outcome model at $t + 2$.

Table 1. Causal Mediation Analysis of Sanctions and Human Rights, Dissent Intensity as the Mediator (1990–2005).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	All dissent ($t + 1$)	Violent dissent ($t + 1$)	Nonviolent dissent ($t + 1$)
Mediator model: The impact of sanctions on dissent intensity			
Sanctions	0.175** (0.077)	0.165** (0.079)	0.107** (0.047)
Population (ln)	0.300*** (0.028)	0.289*** (0.028)	0.152*** (0.018)
GDP per capita (ln)	0.169*** (0.027)	0.155*** (0.027)	0.084*** (0.016)
Democracy	0.014*** (0.004)	0.018*** (0.004)	−0.002 (0.003)
Democracy squared	−0.0004 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Human rights	−0.108*** (0.017)	−0.121*** (0.018)	−0.008 (0.011)
IDEA coverage (ln)	−0.006 (0.023)	−0.012 (0.024)	0.025* (0.014)
Lagged DV	0.386*** (0.023)	0.338*** (0.024)	0.291*** (0.031)
Constant	−4.980*** (0.464)	−4.620*** (0.456)	−3.070*** (0.301)
Observations	2,220	2,220	2,220
R^2	.459	.403	.287
Outcome model: Predicting government respect for physical integrity rights			
Sanctions	−0.142* (0.073)	−0.144** (0.072)	−0.165** (0.073)
All dissent (ln)	−0.083*** (0.020)		
Violent dissent (ln)		−0.094*** (0.020)	
Nonviolent dissent (ln)			0.027 (0.031)
Population (ln)	−0.174*** (0.027)	−0.173*** (0.027)	−0.219*** (0.027)
GDP per capita (ln)	0.174*** (0.027)	0.174*** (0.027)	0.149*** (0.027)
International war	−0.276 (0.182)	−0.244 (0.182)	−0.402** (0.177)
Civil war	−0.513*** (0.109)	−0.498*** (0.109)	−0.585*** (0.108)
Democracy	0.032*** (0.005)	0.033*** (0.005)	0.031*** (0.005)
IDEA coverage (ln)	0.015 (0.028)	0.014 (0.028)	0.015 (0.029)
Lagged DV	0.623*** (0.018)	0.621*** (0.018)	0.632*** (0.018)
Constant	3.171*** (0.432)	3.183*** (0.426)	3.973*** (0.433)
Observations	2,204	2,204	2,204
R^2	.734	.735	.732
Causal mediation quantities of interest			
ACME	−0.0148**	−0.0148**	0.0031
ADE	−0.1396**	−0.1410**	−0.1624**
Total effect	−0.1545**	−0.1559**	−0.1593**

Robust standard errors are in parentheses. GDP = gross domestic product; IDEA = Integrated Data for Events Analysis; DV = dependent variable; ACME = average causal mediation effect; ADE = average direct effect.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

Analysis and Results

Empirical Results for the Sanctions–Dissent–Repression Link

Table 1 reports the results from the models where our mediator is domestic dissent intensity and our outcome variable is physical integrity rights. Model 1 presents the results for sanctions' impacts on the intensity of all antigovernment protests, while Models 2 and 3 provide the results for sanctions' effects on the intensity of violent protest and nonviolent protest, respectively. Hypothesis 1 indicates that sanctions will directly lead to increases in repression and that domestic dissent will indirectly connect sanctions and rights abuses.

The empirical evidence provides strong support for Hypothesis 1. In the mediator model assessing the impact of sanctions on antigovernment protest, we find that sanctions incite more intense dissent, regardless of violent or nonviolent campaigns. In the outcome model predicting target countries' respect for physical integrity rights, we find that sanctions worsen human rights performance, lending support to prior research that links imposed sanctions to physical integrity repression (Clay 2018; Escribà-Folch 2012; Peksen 2009; Wood 2008). In addition, in the outcome model, the impact of dissent levels on physical integrity rights is negative and statistically significant, indicating that sanctioned governments will use stronger repression to address domestic unrest.

Our theoretical argument suggests, however, that target incumbents will not more strongly repress nonviolent campaigns in comparison with violent uprisings. In the outcome model, the results in models 2 and 3 show that while higher levels of violent dissent triggered by sanctions are negatively correlated with respect for human rights, increased nonviolent dissent has no statistically significant association with stronger state repression. This finding offers support for our second hypothesis that target countries tend to react differently to violent and nonviolent unrest.

We then estimate three quantities of interest: the ACME, ADE of economic sanctions, and the ATE of sanctions. Table 1 presents these quantities of interest. The ADE represents the impact of sanctions on state repression without being mediated by increased dissent. The results indicate that when a state suffers from one imposition of sanctions, its CIRI Physical Integrity Rights score will decrease by 0.1545 along the 9-point scale. The negative and statistically significant ACME of dissent intensity suggests that when a sanctioned country experiences higher levels of dissent intensity, its physical integrity rights will deteriorate in comparison with the target state facing no increased dissent. Mediation through heightened dissent levels accounts for about 9 percent of the total effect of sanctions on repression. The results show that although the direct effect of sanctions plays a major role in undermining a target's human rights, the mediation effect of dissent intensity is not negligible. These findings offer further support for our first causal mediation hypothesis.

Moreover, models 2 and 3 in Table 1 show the heterogeneous effects of violent and nonviolent dissent on the sanctions–repression link. We find evidence that whereas increased violent dissent serves as a mediator connecting imposition of sanctions and physical integrity repression, nonviolent dissent does not similarly result in more abuses, providing further support for Hypothesis 2. Given that earlier work only focuses on the impact of sanctions on domestic protest (Allen 2008; Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017), our findings thus advance the literature by showing how sanctions, dissent, and repression are linked.

Empirical Results for the Sanctions–Government Capacity–Repression Link

Models 1 and 2 in Table 2 report the results from the mediator model of tax capacity and the outcome model predicting respect for physical integrity rights. Our results indicate that the association between sanctions and diminished fiscal capacity is statistically significant. We also find that weakened tax capacity is correlated with increased repression. The ACME presented in Table 2 further shows that tax capacity plays an important mediating role in the relationship between sanctions and physical integrity abuses, no matter whether human rights practices are estimated at one year or two years after the imposition of sanctions. Our third hypothesis therefore receives strong, consistent support.

As for Hypothesis 4, we would like to test whether sanctions' negative impacts on human rights are mediated by corruption. In the mediator models that predict corruption (models 3 and 4 in Table 2), we detect no statistically significant impact of sanctions on corruption at $t + 1$ and $t + 2$. The results are different from earlier research that implies sanctions may lead to higher levels of corruption in target countries (Biersteker, Eckert, and Tourinho 2016; Rosenberg et al. 2016). In the outcome model predicting physical integrity rights (models 3 and 4 in Table 2), our results suggest that corruption leads to increases in rights abuses. With regard to the mediation effects of corruption, the results offer some evidence that corruption in the longer term mediates sanctions and more repression ($p = .10$). The findings thus provide modest support for the claim that higher levels of corruption induced by sanctions exert a negative influence on respect for human rights.

Conclusion

What effect do economic sanctions have on human rights? Although the naïve view of sanctions leading to an improvement in human rights in target countries has been largely discredited in the academic literature, scholars and advocates still lack a thorough account of the causal processes through which economic sanctions might affect human rights in target countries. Drawing on the existing literature, we present a theoretical model connecting economic sanctions both directly and indirectly to increases in human rights abuses. Directly, sanctioned states may heighten repression to show resolve and preemptively consolidate their power in anticipation of threats against the regime. Indirectly, we propose two mechanisms through which sanctions could drive abuses. First, sanctions might lead to increased domestic dissent against the target government. When this occurs, the government will increase repression in an attempt to quell dissent, especially when it is violent. Second, reduced government capacity because of sanctions will harm the government's ability to screen and oversee its security agents, which will then lead to an increased likelihood of human rights abuses.

We rely on advances in the causal mediation literature to test the implications of our argument. Furthermore, our tests allow us to disentangle multiple types of dissent and government capacity. We find that whereas violent dissent acts as a mediator between sanctions and increased

Table 2. Causal Mediation Analysis of Sanctions and Human Rights, Government Capacity as the Mediator (1990–2005).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Tax capacity ($t + 1$)	Tax capacity ($t + 2$)	Corruption ($t + 1$)	Corruption ($t + 2$)
Mediator model: The impact of sanctions on government capacity				
Sanctions	−0.025*** (0.009)	−0.036*** (0.012)	0.001 (0.002)	0.005 (0.003)
Trade openness	−0.0001 (0.0001)	−0.0002** (0.0001)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
GDP per capita (ln)	0.002 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	−0.004*** (0.001)	−0.007*** (0.001)
GDP growth	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.001*** (0.0002)	−0.001*** (0.0002)
International war	0.004 (0.022)	−0.015 (0.021)		
Civil war	−0.009 (0.011)	−0.015 (0.012)		
Democracy	0.0004 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	−0.0002* (0.0001)	−0.0004* (0.0002)
Lagged DV	0.881*** (0.020)	0.822*** (0.021)	0.981*** (0.005)	0.962*** (0.008)
Constant	0.113*** (0.024)	0.177*** (0.026)	0.044*** (0.010)	0.083*** (0.015)
Observations	2,101	2,101	2,170	2,170
R^2	.824	.734	.988	.976
Outcome model: Predicting government respect for physical integrity rights				
Sanctions	−0.191** (0.075)	−0.107 (0.080)	−0.139* (0.072)	−0.054 (0.077)
Tax capacity	0.235*** (0.082)	0.279*** (0.083)		
Corruption			−0.718*** (0.141)	−0.949*** (0.140)
Population (ln)	−0.205*** (0.026)	−0.244*** (0.027)	−0.208*** (0.026)	−0.251*** (0.027)
GDP per capita (ln)	0.162*** (0.027)	0.195*** (0.028)	0.081** (0.032)	0.086** (0.032)
International war	−0.402** (0.182)	−0.488*** (0.171)	−0.526*** (0.183)	−0.645*** (0.172)
Civil war	−0.602*** (0.109)	−0.592*** (0.113)	−0.625*** (0.109)	−0.599*** (0.113)
Democracy	0.031*** (0.005)	0.034*** (0.005)	0.026*** (0.005)	0.029*** (0.005)
IDEA coverage (ln)	0.011 (0.028)	0.008 (0.030)	0.011 (0.028)	0.007 (0.030)
Lagged DV	0.619*** (0.018)	0.562*** (0.020)	0.610*** (0.019)	0.545*** (0.020)
Constant	3.520*** (0.418)	4.089*** (0.436)	4.900*** (0.458)	5.968*** (0.478)
Observations	2,138	2,146	2,190	2,194
R^2	.735	.701	.738	.703
Causal mediation quantities of interest				
ACME	−0.0054**	−0.0077***	−0.0008	−0.0050*
ADE	−0.1730**	−0.0797	−0.1203	−0.0187
Total effect	−0.1784**	−0.0874	−0.1212	−0.0237

Robust standard errors are in parentheses. GDP = gross domestic product; DV = dependent variable; IDEA = Integrated Data for Events Analysis; ACME = average causal mediation effect; ADE = average direct effect.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

abuses, nonviolent dissent as a result of sanctions does not similarly increase abuses. Concerning government capacity, we find that the causal process between sanctions and increased abuses is mediated by increased corruption. We also find evidence that the target government's fiscal capacity is weakened as a result of sanctions and that diminished capacity leads to more abuses.

Our study shows the importance of delving into the underlying causal logic in established relationships such as the sanctions–repression nexus. Although existing studies have shown that sanctions can increase human rights abuses, by examining the causal process, our study provides some concrete guidelines on what policymakers and practitioners could do to limit the possible human rights effects of sanctions. First, activists could encourage nonviolent dissent, a practice already central to many peace NGOs (nongovernmental organizations; Schock 2005, 2015). By directing dissent to nonviolent tactics, organizations may limit the use of repression by a target government that is already concerned about its survival. Second, for those policymakers interested in using sanctions as a foreign policy tool, it may be necessary to couple sanctions with programs and aid designed to limit corruption. We do not want this suggestion to seem unrealistically optimistic: controlling corruption within a target state is incredibly difficult. And, further, foreign aid programs designed to help local populations in sanctioned states are not without their own corruption, as painfully evident in the case of the 1990s United Nations' Oil-for-Food Program in Iraq. Understanding the causal process, however, can suggest potential policy interventions that may not have been evident before.

Our research into the causal process also suggests some avenues for future research. First, although existing studies have suggested a link between sanctions and government capacity, we have not found any quantitative sanction studies that specifically focus on increases in corruption as a result of sanctions. In investigating the causal process connecting sanctions to human rights deterioration, we were able to identify this link. Future studies on sanctions should investigate how increased corruption may serve to insulate regime leaders, ultimately limiting sanction success.

Furthermore, our research highlights the importance of looking specifically at the agents of abuse, a topic of growing importance in the repression literature (Bell et al. 2019; Bohara et al. 2008; Cingranelli, Fajardo-Heyward, and Filippov 2014; Clay and Digiuseppe 2017; Englehart 2009; Herbst 2004). By investigating how security agents' incentives could be affected by government changes as a result of sanctions, we are able to show how international factors can affect domestic conditions through seemingly innocuous changes in bureaucratic functioning. More research into the principal–agent dynamics underlying human rights abuses is definitely necessary. Finally, we acknowledge that there could be additional indirect channels or mechanisms connecting sanctions to human rights abuses. Our research focuses on the arguably most likely channels of dissent and government capacity. Potential other channels could conceivably include diminished human capital or increased ethnic tensions in target countries. Given the continued use of sanctions as a foreign policy tool, future research that investigates other potential channels may help policymakers better structure sanctions to avoid harm in target countries.

Authors' Note

The authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

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Notes

1. Like much of the human rights literature in political science, our paper focuses specifically on physical integrity rights abuses like torture and political killing. The term "repression" is often used to discuss these human rights abuses. We hope future scholars will draw upon this work to examine other types of human rights abuses, like empowerment rights or women's rights.
2. The Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES) dataset ends in 2005 and an updated version is not yet available.
3. In the online appendix, we explore the possible differential impacts of various types of sanctions on target countries. Specifically, we model sanctions count, human rights sanctions, nonhuman rights sanctions, U.S. sanctions, Intergovernmental Organization (IGO) sanctions, multilateral sanctions, sanctions severity, and targeted sanctions. Although these results provide a lot of additional information for scholars interested in the differential impacts of various sanction subtypes, the general findings are consistent with our main results and also show that targeted sanctions and human rights sanctions may not have deleterious effects on physical integrity rights.
4. Results provided in the online appendix also divide the sample based on democracy scores, similar to Allen (2008).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

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