

Economic Sanctions and Political Repression: Assessing the Impact of Coercive Diplomacy on Political Freedoms

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Abstract This article offers a thorough analysis of the unintended impact economic sanctions have on political repression—referred to in this study as the level of the government respect for democratic freedoms and human rights. We argue that economic coercion is a counterproductive policy tool that reduces the level of political freedoms in sanctioned countries. Instead of coercing the sanctioned regime into reforming itself, sanctions inadvertently enhance the regime’s coercive capacity and create incentives for the regime’s leadership to commit political repression. Cross-national time series data support our argument, confirming that the continued use of economic sanctions (even when aimed at promoting political liberalization and respect for human rights) will increase the level of political repression. These findings suggest that both scholars and policy makers should pay more attention to the externalities caused by economic coercion.

Keywords Economic sanctions · Democracy · Human rights · Political repression · Coercive diplomacy

Introduction

As early as Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Machiavelli, policy makers were advised to use economic statecraft as a weapon to weaken their rivals. Sanctions were argued to weaken the rival’s economy and, in turn, disrupt their military capabilities.

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Following the weakening of the targeted country, military actions would be more likely to succeed. After World War I, sanctions were used, although ineffectively, to coerce states to follow international laws and norms and to forestall conflict. Sanctions imposed since the early twentieth century differ from the economic warfare promoted by history's first realists because modern sanctions seek to secure political goals by pressuring the target economically rather than directly weakening them prior to the onset of military violence. Sanctions not only have a long history but also have become an especially popular foreign policy tool used by individual countries and intergovernmental organizations during the post-Cold War era. The recent record of the United Nations' (UN) use of economic sanctions is a good illustration of how sanctions have become a familiar feature of international relations. Up until the early 1990s, the UN employed multilateral sanctions only twice (Rhodesia and South Africa); since 1990, the UN has imposed sanctions on over a dozen countries.¹

In the recent history of economic statecraft, no issue has dominated the use of sanctions more than the promotion of democratic reforms and human rights. From the UN and American promotion of human rights throughout Latin America and Africa beginning in the 1970s to the ambitious attempts by the European Union and the USA to restore faltering democracies in Turkey and twice in Haiti, leaders select economic coercion as a dominant strategy when they seek to compel political reform within another regime. The prevalence of sanctions tied to democracy and human rights became widespread especially during the last decade of the Cold War and the post-Cold War era. During the first two decades of the Cold War (1950–1970), only a few sanction cases were explicitly aimed at promoting better human rights conditions and democratization. In the case of unilateral US sanctions, for instance, beginning with the Carter administration, economic coercion was used to target human rights abusers, particularly in Latin America. Carter's frequent use of sanctions started a trend in sanctioning for democracy and human right such that by 2000, more than half of the imposed sanctions were directed against illiberal democracies or authoritarian regimes to cease the violation of civil and political liberties or to impair their military and political capacity to repress.

Despite the frequent use of economic coercion for the promotion of democracy and human rights, very limited research has been devoted to inquire whether sanctions help or hurt these democratic freedoms and human rights in sanctioned countries (e.g., Gibbons 1999; Drury and Li 2006; Peksen 2009; Peksen and Drury 2008; Wood 2008). While scholars addressed the possible humanitarian consequences of sanctions in specific cases, there are only a handful of studies that examine the influence that these policies have on political circumstances in the targeted countries. Similarly, the effect of economic coercion on political liberties is largely overlooked by the literature that addresses the impact various international influences have on democracy and human rights. Drawing insight from the early literature on the political and the humanitarian consequences of sanctions, the purpose of this article

¹ These countries include Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Former Yugoslavia, Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Libya, North Korea, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan.

was to address the impact of economic coercion on the level of political repression within targeted states. In this study, political repression refers to the level of political freedoms and government respect for human rights (e.g., freedom from extrajudicial killings, torture and imprisonment).

More specifically, we argue and show empirically that economic coercion unintentionally creates conditions that permit the leadership in target countries to consolidate its hold on power and increase the use of political repression. We offer this argument as an alternative to the idea that the imposition of economic coercion will eventually force regimes to engage in political reforms and thus improve human rights and democratic freedoms in targeted countries (Galtung 1967). In what follows, we discuss the current view of economic sanctions as policy tools and then place this understanding in the context of political reforms. We go on to argue that these tools are counterproductive to the promotion of democracy and human rights because they create incentives for repression and consolidate the targeted regime's power. Using data from 1972 to 2000, we show that sanctions precede rather than dramatic drops in democracy and human rights. We end with a discussion of the implications of these findings for policy making.

Understanding Economic Sanctions

While the study of sanctions does not have the same long history as their use, in many regards, we have a good understanding of these economic tools. Considering their effectiveness, scholars ask a fundamental question: Do economic sanctions really work? Despite the increasing use of international economic sanctions, conventional wisdom—based on both case studies and large-*N* empirical research—holds that economic sanctions are generally ineffective and that they fail to induce a target to change its behavior (e.g., Galtung 1967; Wallensteen 1968; Barber 1979; Baldwin 1985; Haas 1997; Pape 1997). Research shows that among others factors, economic sanctions are more likely to succeed if target countries are economically dependent on the target (Hufbauer et al. 1990; Drury 1998), if sanctions inflict serious economic damage on the target (Tsebelis 1990), if sanctions aim at the political elites of the target countries (Morgan and Schwebach 1997; Kirshner 1997; Kaempfer and Lowenberg 1988), and if there is no expectation of future conflict between the target and sender countries (Drezner 1998). Scholars estimate that sanctions fail 65% to 95% of the time (Hufbauer et al. 1990; Pape 1997).

Scholars have also addressed the question of why sanctions are used—a particularly poignant question given their low effectiveness and frequent (and increasing) use. Drury (2001, 2005) shows that in the USA, the biggest factor in explaining the president's use of sanctions is a dispute involving an international issue with the target state rather than a domestic call for protectionism or political action. That is, the president uses sanctions to affect change in the target rather than using the sanctions as a cover for protectionist trade policies. Conversely, sanctions levied by the Congress are theorized and shown to be driven more by domestic economic concerns, but these sanctions tend to be much smaller in scope and often do not make serious demands of the targeted state. An example of Congressional sanctioning is the threat to sanction China over human rights. While certainly some

politicians were concerned with the treatment of Chinese citizens, much of the impetus to sanction was to reduce competition with US labor. What most scholars (and most databases) consider economic coercion are those initiated primarily by the executive branch and driven by the dispute or disagreement between the sender country and the target country.

To summarize, the understanding of sanctions is (1) that they often fail to produce their intended effect, but (2) they are used primarily to influence the targeted state (even if they are expected to fail) rather than being enacted based on the sender's domestic politics. The extant literature on the utility of economic coercion largely overlooks the possible unintended side effects sanctions may have. The literature on the humanitarian impact of economic coercion shows that sanctions could lead to civilian pain by disrupting the economic, demographic, health, and governance capacity of target countries (e.g., Cortright and Lopez 1995, 2000; Weiss et al. 1997; Weiss 1999; Gibbons 1999). The immediate economic costs and possible other indirect effects of economic pressure are found to be damaging to average citizens in such areas as personal security, physical quality of life, and a deterioration in social services. However, economic coercion could also lead to broader societal consequences such as causing a widening gap in income distribution, weakening civil society, and offering more incentives for the target elites to repress political parties and the media.

Besides the immediate humanitarian consequences of economic statecraft, a few studies highlight the possible consequences of sanctions on the political stability of sanctioned countries. Marinov (2005) finds that economic sanctions destabilize political leaders, while Allen (2004) shows that sanctions, especially in more democratic countries, cause more political violence such as riots and demonstrations. In these studies, one of the major justifications of why sanctions might destabilize domestic politics is linked with the disproportionate negative economic cost of sanctions on civilians that leads to greater dissatisfaction and violent protests against the regime. Thus, these studies imply that sanctions not only fail in their intended policy goals but also become detrimental to the domestic stability of the target states.

There are also a few studies that address the effect of sanctions on human rights (Drury and Li 2006; Wood 2008; Peksen 2009) and democratic freedoms (Gibbons 1999; Peksen and Drury 2008) in target states. Drury and Li (2006) show that the US threat to remove China's most favored nation status not only failed to promote more respect for human rights but also eroded those rights further. Specifically, they argue that the threat of coercion was counterproductive and resulted in fewer Chinese domestic political accommodations regarding the use of repression against citizens. Gibbons (1999) similarly examines the political and the humanitarian impact of the US-led sanctions against Haiti (1991–1994) in response to the military overthrow of Jean-Bertrand Aristide's civilian government. Although the sanctions were aimed at restoring democratic rule in Haiti, his case study evidence suggests that the sanctions were counterproductive and led to the further deterioration of civil and political liberties.

Scholars studying the relationship between international factors and democratization have also overlooked economic sanctions. A wide variety of factors are argued to have an impact on liberal governance. In particular, scholars find that

foreign aid, international financial crises, trade openness, foreign direct investment, military intervention, membership in international organizations, and the geographic diffusion of democracies all have differential and significant effects on democracy.² While many of these studies emphasize the importance of economic statecraft on democracy, they leave out arguably the most direct form of economic statecraft, namely sanctions.

The literature examining the role of international factors in the promotion of greater government respect for human rights, such as freedom from politically motivated torture and extrajudicial killings, also fails to consider economic sanctions. A number of studies consider the role of economic integration through international trade and foreign investment as a significant predictor of more government respect for human rights (Mitchell and McCormick 1988; Meyer 1996; Goldstone et al. 2000; Apodaca 2001; Richards et al. 2001; Hafner-Burton 2005a, b). Generally, these studies on economic globalization show that as countries are more integrated into the world economy, there is greater government respect for human rights. The reason for the improvement in human rights conditions is associated with economic globalization's positive impact on economic growth, emergence of a strong middle class, organized civil society movements, and higher educational achievements in economically globalized societies.

On the other hand, others have addressed the role of arms sales (Blanton 1999) and foreign economic aid (Mitchell and McCormick 1988; Knack 2004) as two widely used foreign policy tools that are often linked with an increasing level of human rights abuses. Both economic and military aid appears to contribute to the repressiveness of the receiving regimes since those regimes tend to disproportionately use the military assistance to enhance their coercive capacity, while development assistance appears to have no major influence on standard of living of average civilians. Others find evidence suggesting that implementation of World Bank and International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment agreements leads to more human rights violations in developing countries (Abouharb and Cingranelli 2006), while international human rights regimes and treaties create more incentives for and external pressure on political regimes to respect for human rights (Hafner-Burton 2005b). Finally, Poe and Tate (1994) and Poe et al. (1999) argue that militarized interstate disputes are a significant cause of human rights abuses in countries at war. Although various international factors significantly predict human rights practices, the literature on human rights has not offered a thorough examination of the role sanctions play in explaining the cross-national variance in governments' human rights practices.

Thus, the scarcity of research concerning the possible consequences sanctions have on the repressiveness of the target regimes leaves our understanding of the utility of economic coercion seriously lacking. The lack of research in this area is problematic given that sanctions are so often used as a means to promote human

² For examples, see: Huntington 1991, Gasiorowski 1995, Meernik 1996, Armijo 1999, Carothers 1999, Peceny 1999, Kopstein and Reilly 2000, Pevehouse 2002a, b, Knack 2004, Carothers and Ottoway 2005, Rudra 2005, Gleditsch and Ward 2006, Pickering and Kisangani 2006, and Pickering and Peceny 2006.

rights and democratic reform. It is unclear what effect these increasingly common policies have on the often suffering target. Turning to our argument of how economic sanctions might increase the repressiveness of the target regime, we explain that sanctions create incentives and structures that cause leaders to become more repressive. As a result, sanctions are more harmful than helpful in the promotion of democratic freedoms and human rights.

The Sanction–Repression Link

If sanctions are to coerce the target regime to engage in democratic reforms or increase its respect for human rights, then the sanctions must harm the economic well-being and political stability of the target political leadership. This harm is visited on the target by denying its leadership access to economic and military resources. Since the leadership uses these resources to stay in power by paying off its coalition and using the military to repress the population, it should have less coercive ability (Galtung 1967; Kirshner 1997; Blanton 1999; Davenport 1995).

According to this line of reasoning, economic coercion should also decrease the legitimacy of the target regime among its supporters as well as in the society in general. First, because economic resources are a key means by which the regime rewards supporters (including those in police, military, and civil services), the lack of access to external economic and other essential scarce resources should cause a loss of support among influential groups and subsequently further diminish the repressiveness of the regime (Wintrobe 1990, 1998; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Second, once economic coercion also inflicts economic pain on citizens, they may be more likely to rise up against the government and apply pressure to induce the government to comply with the sanctioning countries' demand for reform (Mack and Khan 2000). Economic coercion creates considerable economic frustration especially among average citizens as a result of the sanctions' humanitarian impact on growing poverty, unemployment, and the gap in income distribution. Growing frustration and feelings of injustice among citizens will likely escalate violent acts against the political leadership (Allen 2004; Peksen 2009). Once the target leadership is significantly hurt by the domestic violence, it is expected that economic coercion will likely force the regime to concede to foreign demands. The assumption here is that if the target leadership gives in to foreign pressure, this will help it regain legitimacy in the eyes of the society which had been disrupted by the sanctions.

There are serious questions that can be raised regarding this view of how economic sanctions operate in target countries. As the literature on humanitarian consequences of sanctions has long suggested, economic coercion barely harms the economic and political capacity of the targeted regimes while significantly harming the socioeconomic and political status of average civilians (Weiss et al. 1997; Gibbons 1999; Weiss 1999; Cortright et al. 2001). Therefore, we suggest that sanctions do not, in fact, put considerable pressure on the target regime to adopt reforms and open the political space for pro-democracy movements. Below, we offer an alternative perspective maintaining that economic coercion will increase the repressiveness of the regime by further restricting human rights and political freedoms of citizens.

The Corrosive Impact of Coercion on Democracy and Human Rights

As discussed above, sanctions do not operate the way they are intended to (i.e., placing pressure on the target leadership to capitulate). Instead, they typically fail to exact significant damage on the economic and coercive capacity of the target regime while disproportionately hurting the well-being of average citizens. In the following discussion, we first turn to the incentives that sanctions create for more political repression and then offer a discussion of why sanctions also enhance the ability of the target regime to repress and subsequently to assist political elites in strengthening the authoritarian state apparatus.

Economic sanctions will likely create incentives for the target leadership to become more repressive in the face of foreign pressures to avoid the domestic costs of giving into the sender's demands and maintain their authority over the society (Galtung 1967; Fearon 1994; Schultz 1998). If the target leadership acquiesces to the demands of a foreign power, they will look weak to their own citizens and lose the support from key social groups that help them maintain the status quo. Specifically, if the regime is willing to give into a public demand from another country—whether it is for political reforms, nuclear proliferation, or another foreign policy position taken by the target—political opposition groups will see that willingness as a sign of weakness.³ Essentially, the target leadership must be vulnerable to reverse whatever policy the sanctioning country wants changed. This sign of weakness will, in turn, likely embolden the opposition groups by increasing their support within the society as a credible rival against the regime (Drury and Li 2006).

Additionally, those groups opposing the regime may see economic sanctions as support from an external power especially when sanctions seek to destabilize the target leadership and demand major political reforms (e.g., greater respect for democratic freedom and human rights). By attacking the regime with sanctions and demands for reform, the sender signals the opposition that their own demands for reform are legitimate and that more support may be forthcoming, although this may be wishful thinking on the opposition's part. Thyne (2006) shows that simple diplomatic statements criticizing a regime can embolden the regime's opposition. If criticism can fire up an opposition group, certainly sanctions will have a similar or more powerful effect.

This situation is exactly what the regime wishes to avoid—an opposition group believing that it has support from another country. As a direct consequence, the targeted regime is likely to engage in repressive acts as a means to preempt any opposition. To maintain its power, the regime must send a clear signal to its public that it will not tolerate active political dissent. The possibility of the opposition challenging the regime, or simply looking weaker to the public in general, constitutes a serious threat to the regime's survivability. As a result, the target government becomes more resolute in its preference not to reform and to repress more.

³ Because most of the sanctioned regimes tend to be less democratic and have no popular legitimacy, their accommodation is perceived in the society as a sign of weakness. In liberal democratic systems, on the other hand, the same accommodation might be regarded as a positive step to avoid the escalation of crisis with other countries. We are grateful to Steven Roper for bringing this to our attention.

Another major reason why foreign economic coercion creates conditions to repress the public is because the sanctions expand domestic grievances against the state and might destabilize the political order in the form of growing anti-government violence. A large body of literature suggests that economic sanctions put a disproportionate and sometimes heavy burden on civilians (Weiss et al. 1997; Weiss 1999; Cortright et al. 2001; Cortright and Lopez 1995, 2000). Among other effects, sanctions worsen the poverty level, unemployment, inflation, and effective functioning of public health and other social services in target state. Because economic sanctions harm the livelihood of average civilians, the sanctions will likely create more frustration and grievances in the sanctioned countries among disadvantaged groups who are outside the support base of the political leadership. According to the relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1968), the growing frustration within the society resulting from economic hardship is expected to lead to more organized violence against the state. Earlier empirical evidence finds that countries under economic coercion are more likely to experience anti-government violence in the forms of protest and demonstrations (Allen 2004; Marinov 2005). As economic sanctions undermine political stability by causing more violence and political dissent, it is likely that the government will resort to physical force and repression to maintain the status quo (Peksen 2009). The use of repressive measures by the government against violent groups will consequently restrict democratic freedoms further and lead to more human rights violations.

The second unintended effect sanctions have is to solidify the leadership's hold on power, thereby enhancing their ability to coerce the populace. Sanctions help the targeted regime to concentrate coercive power by allowing it to manipulate the economic hardship caused by the coercion. The target leadership controls (or will take control of) the supply of resources (often made scarce by the sanctions). It will divert the cost of sanctions to average citizens and use remaining resources to maintain political support (Weiss et al. 1997; Gibbons 1999; Peksen 2009).⁴ Hence, the targeted elites likely remain unharmed by coercion, as economic sanctions disproportionately affect average citizens.

Because (1) sanctions restrict the flow of goods and services to the target state and (2) the leadership can control the flow of remaining resources within the country, groups that are key supporters of the leadership become more dependent on the regime for those resources. For example, if the military wants access to food and fuel (which have been made scarce by the sanctions), it must get them from the leadership. Thus, the military and regime-supporting groups depend on the regime even more than before the sanctions were imposed. The growing dependence of these key groups on the political leadership strengthens the regime's hold on power (Rowe 2000; Gibbons 1999; Reuther 1995). Thus, the sanctions unintentionally boost the allegiance of prominent groups as the target regime grants economic rents and secured access to scarce resources in return for the group's loyalty. As a result,

⁴ Furthermore, political elites also avoid the cost of sanctions by generating revenues and securing the supplies of scarce resources through illegal smuggling and other underground transnational economic channels (Andreas 2005; Gibbons 1999).

the regime's ability to maintain greater support among key social groups will provide the target leadership with more authority and power that can be used to oppress potential anti-regime groups.

To better illustrate this mechanism, we briefly turn to two sanction cases. Under the crushing UN sanctions against Iraq, Saddam Hussein was not only able to survive but flourish relative to the population. He was able to do this by diverting shrinking public resources to his supporters in the government and military (Reuther 1995). While Hussein's regime used public goods to pay off supporters prior to the embargo, the sanctions were meant to weaken his hold on power. Instead, it increased his importance as a supplier of those resources and allowed the Iraqi regime to consolidate its repressive authority over the society. Similarly, in the case of Rhodesia, Ian Smith's government was able to shift political power away from the tobacco farmers who were directly hurt by the sanctions to industrialists (Rowe 2000). Using the power of the government, Smith was able to create a new winning coalition so that he could stay in power and enhance the authoritarian regime while all other groups outside the government's support base suffered disproportionately from the coercion and were not even able to resist the Smith government's repressive measures. As a result of these two forces (e.g., new incentives to repress and consolidated power), we argue that the targeted regime is likely to engage in more repression rather than less. Next, we turn to the empirical evidence that shows the negative impact sanctions have on democracy and human rights.

Evidence of the Sanction–Repression Link

In the section above, we argued that sanctions create incentives for the target elite to limit political freedoms and help consolidate the regime's hold on power. To empirically test the argument that economic sanctions lead to more political repression by causing a decrease in the level of respect for democratic freedoms and human rights, we offer a cross-national, time series empirical examination of the impact sanctions have on political repression. More specifically, we focus on two major indicators—the level of respect for physical integrity rights by the government and the extent of political and civil liberties—to account for the repressiveness of a polity. “Political repression” can refer to various aspects of violent and non-violent tools used by political actors to maintain the status quo or eliminate their rivals. The indicators used in this analysis for democratic freedom and the government respect for human rights are two of the most commonly used variables to capture the level of political repressiveness by the government against its citizens (Abouharb and Cingranelli 2006; Rudra 2005; Gleditsch and Ward 2006).

Repression and Sanction Data

To analyze the effect sanctions have on political repression, the first measure we deploy is the Freedom House's Index of Democracy (2004) which is a commonly used indicator of the level of democracy in a country. The Freedom House Index is an additive index of political rights and civil liberties on a 13-point scale (2 through

14) where higher values indicate better democracy.⁵ In the measurement of the variable, four major aspects of civil liberties are considered, including: freedom of expression and belief, associational and organization rights, rule of law and personal autonomy, and individual rights. Political rights incorporate such political freedoms as the fairness of electoral processes, extent of political pluralism and participation, and the freedom of elected officials to have a decisive vote on public policies.

The second measure we use to tap political repression is the Physical Integrity Rights Index (CIRI Index) which is a widely used measure to account for the level of governmental respect for human rights. The CIRI Index is a nine-point scale that ranges from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 8—where 0 indicates no respect for physical integrity rights and 8 indicates full respect for those rights (Cingranelli and Richards 2004). This measure is composed of four different rights, including: extrajudicial killings, disappearances, political imprisonment, and torture.⁶ The data for this variable was originally gathered from the country reports of human rights abuses prepared by the US Department of State and Amnesty International.

In our analysis using the Hufbauer et al. (2008) sanction dataset, we first examine the impact of economic sanctions on political repression in general. Hence, our “economic sanctions” variable is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if a country is facing any type of sanction and 0 otherwise. This variable allows us to investigate whether economic sanctions in general lead to any corrosive impact on democratic freedom and human rights.

We also examine whether the sanctions aimed at promoting democracy and/or human rights cause any differential impact on political repression than sanctions aiming at other policy goals. More specifically, the “democracy sanctions” variable accounts for sanction episodes in which the primary goal of sanctioning countries is at least one of the following: to prevent the use of repressive measures by target regimes against opposition groups, to encourage better functioning of democratic procedures such as the conduct of free and fair elections and functioning of political parties and other grassroots organizations, and to restore failed democracies or discourage military intervention in domestic politics. Our “non-democracy sanctions” variable accounts for all other sanction episodes imposed with policy goals other than democracy and human rights promotion. Both of these dummy variables take the value of 1 if a country is under democracy or non-democracy sanctions in a given year and 0 otherwise.

The purpose of looking at sanctions based on their initial goals (i.e., human rights/democracy sanctions versus sanctions with other policy goals) is twofold. First, it allows us to examine whether sanctioning for democracy, which specifically aims at promoting democratic freedoms, achieves its intended goal or further deteriorates political liberties. Second, according to the theoretical framework previously

⁵ In the original dataset, the 13-point scale ranges from 1 to 7, where lower values indicate more democratic freedom. In this analysis, we recoded the index so that higher values indicate a higher level of civil and political liberties.

⁶ The definition of these four rights is available at the CIRI web site (Cingranelli and Richards 2004). Each of the four physical integrity variables is originally coded as an ordinal variable on a three-point scale with frequent violations (50 or more incidences), some violations (one through 49), and no violations.

Table 1 Mean Freedom House democracy scores for sanctioned and non-sanctioned states (1972–2000)

	Sanctioned state	Non-sanctioned state
All sanction types	5.14	8.12
Democracy sanctions	4.97	8.12
Non-democracy sanctions	5.3	8.12

Reported numbers are the average democracy scores for sanctioned and non-sanctioned states for the 1972–2000 period. Dependent variable: Freedom House Index of democracy (two through fourteen) with higher scores for better democracy

discussed, democracy sanctions might be more harmful than sanctions with other policy goals. Specifically, foreign pressure for political reforms (i.e., democratization) appears to be the type of coercion that should create more incentives for the regime to commit repression since demands for such reforms might be seen as a strong external support for the opposition that might increase the viability of political opposition.

For each of the dependent variables (Freedom House Index and CIRI Index), we assess the length of the sanction episode (the period during which the sanctions were in effect) by aggregating all sanctions cases from 1972 to 2000. Sanction episodes vary considerably in length, from less than 1 year to over 50 years; however, the median for sanction duration is 7 years and the mean is 10 years. To better capture the average impact of sanctions, we only assess the first 10 years of each episode. By limiting the number of years that we assess the sanction's impact on political repression, we make sure that the few extremely long sanction episodes are not driving the results.⁷ Further, the economic impact caused by a sanction typically occurs in the first few years since the negative impact of sanctions will be felt more during the early years of sanctions and become less significant as target countries find ways to adjust their economy to eliminate the cost of sanctions overtime. Thus, we argue that the negative effects will occur most in the first 10 years of sanctions. In addition to those first 10 years of sanctions, we also assess the 5 years prior to the sanction episode. This allows us to test whether sanctions are being driven by the political repression. That is, we need to assess that sanctions are not a reaction to new policies of repression or a backsliding of democratic reforms. If that was the case, we would expect the increase in political repression to occur before the sanctions rather than after them.

Empirical Evidence

We begin our analysis with a simple means difference assessment of Freedom House Index and the CIRI Index under each of the different types of sanctions (i.e., democracy sanctions, non-democracy sanctions, and all sanctions) compared to countries not under sanctions. Table 1 displays the average impact of sanctions on

⁷ Thus, only a few extreme cases, such as North Korea and Cuba, are excluded from our analysis.

Table 2 Mean physical integrity rights (CIRI index) scores for sanctioned and non-sanctioned countries (1972–2000)

	Sanctioned state	Non-sanctioned state
All sanction types	2.41	5.26
Democracy sanctions	2.35	5.26
Non-democracy sanctions	2.46	5.26

Reported numbers are the average human rights scores for sanctioned and non-sanctioned states for the 1972–2000 period. Dependent variable: CIRI Index (0 through 8) with higher scores for better human rights conditions

the Freedom House Index, and Table 2 displays the effect on the CIRI Index.⁸ According to the means difference test, the differences between countries being sanctioned and those not being sanctioned is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

At a minimum, the data support the idea that economic coercion does not promote democracy or human rights. The differences between those states under sanction and those not are rather striking. For the Freedom House score, considering all sanctions for the entire time of their imposition, there is a 58% difference in average democracy score between those countries under sanctions and those that are not (5.14 versus 8.12). The mean difference is even more striking for the CIRI Index: there is a 118% difference in the level of respect for human rights between those countries sanctioned and those that are not sanctioned (2.41 versus 5.26). We do not, however, observe a significant difference between democracy and non-democracy sanctions for the mean levels of Freedom House and CIRI variables. That is, according to the results in Tables 1 and 2, countries facing democracy sanctions do not have a much lower human rights or democracy scores than those facing sanctions with policy goals other than democracy and human rights promotion. While these results are illustrative, they do not show the impact of sanctions over time.

Beginning with Figs. 1 and 2, we show the average impact of economic sanctions over the 5 years preceding and 10 years following a sanction. The results for both the Freedom House Index and the CIRI Index are clear—sanctions lead to a significant drop in democratic freedoms. Put another way, leaders of the targeted countries begin to increase the level of political repression following the imposition of a sanction, and they continue to repress well into the duration of the sanction.⁹

This negative effect is similarly pronounced with sanctions aimed specifically at promoting democracy. Figures 3 and 4 display the effect of economic coercion aimed at promoting democratic reforms in the target. The decline in democracy and human rights is not trivial. After 10 years of sanctions, there is decrease in democracy greater than 30%. In the case of human rights, the decline is closer to 70%. These sanctions aimed at promoting freedom from political repression actually

⁸ Note that the tables are based on the entire length of the sanctions rather than the 15 years we use in the graphical analysis. The results do not change if we limit the data to 15 years.

⁹ According to a means difference test, the increasing political repression is statistically significant.

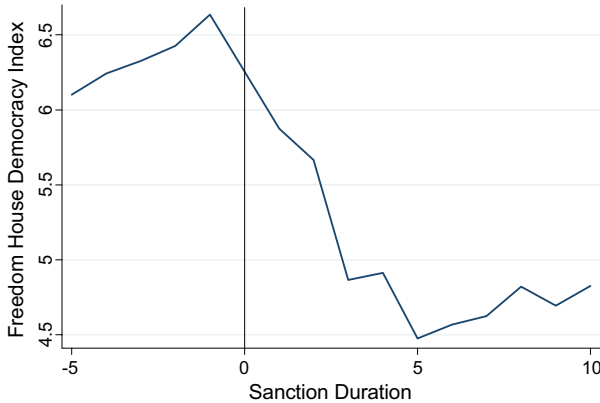


Fig. 1 Sanctions and democracy

lead to greater levels of repression. Finally, Figs. 5 and 6 show that even when considering sanctions that are not associated with democracy and human rights, there is still a very strong negative effect of those fundamental political freedoms. The impacts are not quite as strong but very similar in magnitude to the democracy promotion sanctions and all sanctions.

It is worth noting that to varying degrees, both democracy and human rights begin to decline prior to the onset of the sanctions. While this could be an indication that the sanctions are simply following or indicating a backsliding or new repressive effort in the targeted state, there is reason to support our argument that the sanctions are part of the cause in deteriorating rights. First, sanctions are rarely initiated without notice. Normally, the sanctioning state threatens the target in hopes that the threat of sanctions alone will procure a change in the target. Thus, the targeted state knows that the sanctions are likely to be imposed and may begin repressing its population in advance. If the leadership in the target fears that the sanctions may encourage opposition groups, they will want to begin countering that encouragement

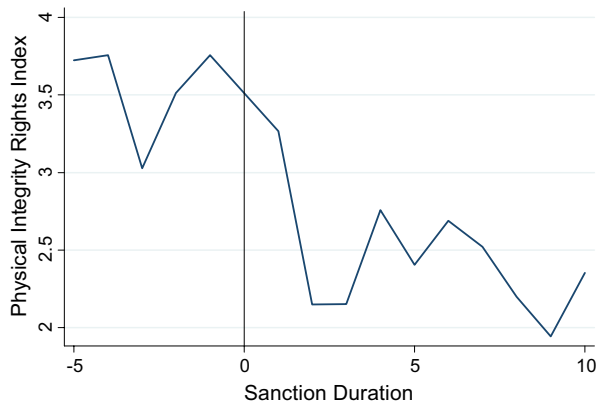


Fig. 2 Sanctions and human rights

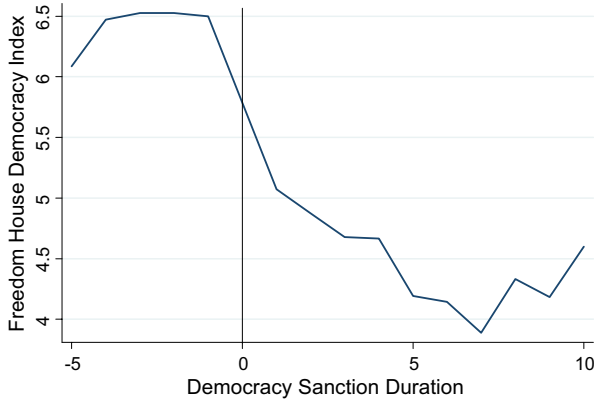


Fig. 3 Democracy sanctions and democracy

as early as possible. Thus, the effect (repression) actually precedes the cost (sanction) because the target anticipates the sanctions.

Second, Figs. 5 and 6 are based on sanctions that were not aimed at securing better human rights or democracy. The reason for their imposition against the target has nothing to do with the target regime's use of repression. As the figures show, however, there is still a strong negative effect following the sanctions. This relationship (nearly identical to the democracy promotion sanctions) suggests that the sanctions themselves are causing, or at a minimum partially causing, the rather dramatic increase in political repression.

What Have We Learnt? Where Do We Go From Here?

In this article, we argued that economic coercion will inadvertently increase the repressiveness of the target regime by (1) consolidating the power of the political leadership and (2) creating more incentives for the target leaders to employ

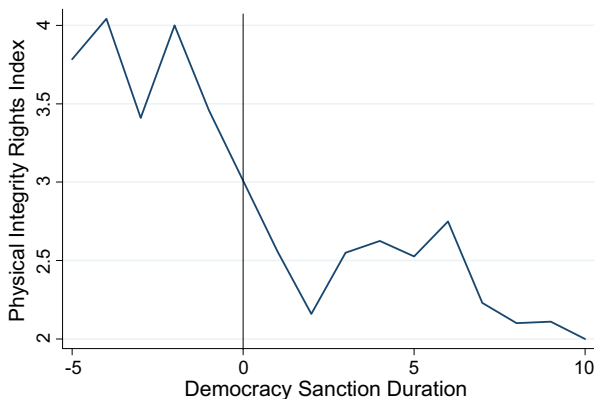


Fig. 4 Democracy sanctions and human rights

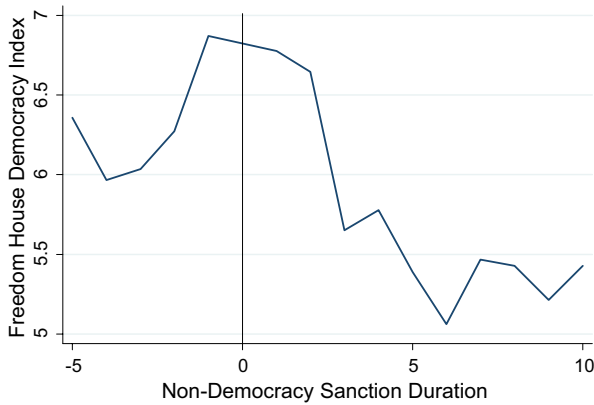


Fig. 5 Non-democracy sanctions and democracy

repression against civilians. The data analysis supports our argument that countries under economic sanctions will likely have less respect for human rights and democratic freedoms. Therefore, we conclude that economic coercion (even when aimed at promoting political liberalization and respect for human rights) is a counterproductive policy tool that deteriorates the level of political freedoms in sanctioned countries.

Offering a comprehensive examination of the corrosive impact sanctions have on human rights and political freedoms, this analysis contributes to the research on the consequences of sanctions. Despite the frequent use of sanctions for the promotion of human rights and democracy, very little research has addressed the impact of economic coercion on political liberties and human rights. This research also contributes to the literature on international democracy and human rights promotion. Although previous studies addressed the significance of several international factors (e.g., economic globalization, interstate conflicts, and foreign aid) in promoting democracy and human rights, no study within this literature has offered an investigation of the political effects of sanctions.

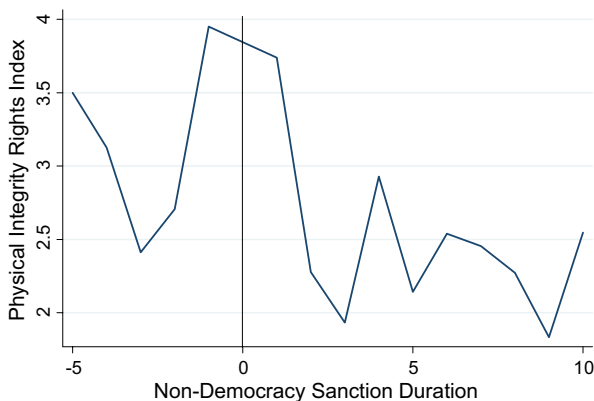


Fig. 6 Non-democracy sanctions and human rights

The findings of this study offer some guidance to policy makers about the political impact of sanctions in target countries by theoretically and empirically demonstrating that economic coercion leads to greater political repression. First, these findings suggest that economic sanctions appear to hurt anti-regime groups, which are the very groups that sanctions are often supposed to help, while causing no major disruption on the coercive capacity of the target leadership. A good illustration of this argument could be the US sanctions against Cuba. Despite the long history of extensive sanctions against Cuba, Fidel Castro's ability to survive sanctions and maintain his authoritarian rule for almost 50 years shows that the political leadership (the major target of sanctions) will unlikely be harmed from the coercion. Individual countries and intergovernmental organizations imposing sanctions should be aware of the delicate balance between using economic coercion to induce targets to change a policy and the possible unintended damage on political freedoms. Simply put, this research points out the possibility that applying economic pressure to the target will help the regime maintain its repressive capacity and offer incentives to use that capacity against their society. Consequently, due to the collateral damage to political freedoms, policy makers should consider the negative externalities caused by economic coercion in the overall assessment of the efficacy of economic statecraft.

To undermine the civilian pain and improve the effectiveness of sanctions, sender countries should seek ways to put the pressure directly on the political elites who are in charge of the wrongdoings. The majority of economic sanctions, so far, have been a blunt economic instrument that hits the whole target economy without any or very few discriminatory measures to lessen the negative impact on civilians. Sanctions in the forms of financial asset freezes, reduction or suspension of military arms sales, and aid and travel bans on country officials could be a way to target the political leadership. The significance of these targeted sanctions is that the political leadership is more likely to suffer from them since they are specifically aimed at the elites. Furthermore, these sanctions might cause less damage to civilians, lessening the negative impact on the regular functioning of domestic economies. Subsequently, as political elites face the cost of coercion more immediately through targeted sanctions, they should be more conciliatory towards the sender country's demands for more respect for democratic freedoms and human rights.

Another way of improving the effectiveness of sanctions on the targeted leadership would be to search for possible ways to improve the effectiveness of sanctions by undermining sanction busting. As discussed above, it is often the case that the targeted leadership continues to have access to the resources made scarce by sanctions through transnational underground actors and black market channels using neighboring countries (Andreas 2005). Sender countries should find ways to obtain cooperation from third-party countries by offering them incentives (for example foreign aid and loans) in return for their cooperation to undermine the ties between third-party countries and the target regimes. Thus, the target leadership will only feel the pressure of economic coercion if the sanctioning effectively cuts off the target's access to economic and other essential resources.

Policy makers have long overlooked the possible negative reaction of the authoritarian states in response to sanctions aimed at promoting human rights and democracy. Specifically, sanctioning countries should note that the symbolic nature

of sanctioning for democracy and human rights promotion is perceived by the targeted political elites as a serious threat to their survival. Our findings also imply that the use of coercion to induce other democratic reforms, such as respect for religious and ethnic rights of minority groups, might also become counterproductive and eventually detrimental to those groups seeking more rights and freedoms against the status quo regime.

Future research could also offer a comparative assessment of whether engagement strategies, that is, foreign aid and provisional economic loans, work more often and cause less damage on civilians than economic coercion. It is likely that engagement policies might be more successful in the promotion of political freedoms and human rights. Instead of disproportionately hurting social groups and straining the relations between the sender and the target country, foreign aid and loans may create incentives for the target leaders to take affirmative steps toward the advancement of political freedoms in their countries (Drury and Li 2006). Future research could assess the conditions under which engagement or incentives promote human rights and democracy.

In addition to a comparative assessment of engagement and punishment tools, future research should also investigate whether economic sanctions become more or less deleterious for human rights when used prior to or simultaneously with the other external tools such as foreign aid and economic loans. It seems likely that a mixed strategy—the carrot and stick of diplomatic tools—could be a more successful policy-making strategy than coercive diplomacy (George 1991). Specifically, if sanctioning countries fail to offer some incentives in return for cooperation, it is unlikely that the target political leadership will concede to foreign demands. Therefore, instead of relying only on punishment or engagement policy tools, a combination of immediate sanctions and future foreign aid might result in better outcomes for sender states. Detailed research on sanction cases where sender countries also offer incentives could be a starting point to understand the role that economic coercion combined with the other policy tools play in ending political violence and repression by repressive states.

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