Not all dictators are equal: Coups, fraudulent elections, and the selective targeting of democratic sanctions

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, Western powers have frequently used sanctions to fight declining levels of democracy and human rights violations abroad. However, some of the world's most repressive autocracies have never been subjected to sanctions, while other more competitive authoritarian regimes have been exposed to repeated sanction episodes. In this article, we concentrate on the cost–benefit analysis of Western senders that issue democratic sanctions, those which aim to instigate democratization, against authoritarian states. We argue that Western leaders weight domestic and international pressure to impose sanctions against the probability of sanction success and the sender's own political and economic costs. Their cost–benefit calculus is fundamentally influenced by the strength of trigger events indicating infringements of democratic and human rights. Western sanction senders are most likely to respond to coups d'état, the most drastic trigger events, and tend to sanction vulnerable targets to a higher extent than stable authoritarian regimes. Senders are also more likely to sanction poor targets less integrated in the global economy and countries that do not align with the Western international political agenda, especially in responding to 'weaker' trigger events such as controversial elections. The analysis is carried out using a new dataset of US and EU sanctions against authoritarian states in the period 1990–2010.

Keywords

authoritarian regimes, coup d'état, fraudulent elections, imposition, sanctions, trigger events, vulnerability

Introduction

The end of the Cold War initiated a rapid global wave of democratization. With the new unipolar world order dominated by the United States, democracy and human rights rose on the global agenda and Western states increased their pressure on authoritarian regimes to democratize (Levitsky & Way, 2010). As a consequence, the expectation has increased on Western powers, such as the European Union and the United States, to respond with sanctions against states where elections have been rigged, opposition forces have been repressed or elected leaders have been disposed from power.

Although sanctions have become an important tool to respond to authoritarianism globally, there is a general suspicion – both in the public debate and the academic literature – that Western leaders use them selectively. Indeed, intuitively it seems puzzling that some of the most autocratic regimes with the poorest human rights records have escaped international sanctions, whereas several more competitive and liberal regimes have been subjected to repeated sanction episodes.

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The academic literature has only partly dealt with these issues, analyzing the 'selection effects' associated with the imposition of sanctions more generally (and not only in relation to sanctions specifically designed to promote democracy and human rights). Moreover, the discussion about 'selection effects' has often been associated with the study of sanction effectiveness, arguing that strategic target selection has skewed the empirical results of studies focusing on the general effectiveness of these coercive measures (e.g. Drezner, 1999; Lacy & Niou, 2004; Morgan, Bapat & Krustev, 2009; Nooruddin, 2002). Lack of systematic research on the selective use of democratic sanctions is troubling, especially given new contributions to comparative democratization research suggesting that Western powers have had a tendency to promote stability rather than democracy in strategically and economically important countries (Brownlee, 2012; Donno, 2013).

Responding to these studies, we concentrate on sanctions that explicitly aim to improve the level of democracy or human rights protection (hereafter 'democratic sanctions'), asking the question: What factors affect the likelihood that the USA and the EU as the main global sanction senders impose democratic sanctions on authoritarian regimes?

We theorize that Western leaders use democratic sanctions to promote foreign policy goals, strengthen their international reputation and increase domestic support. We identify three factors which determine Western leaders' cost–benefit calculus to impose democratic sanctions: (1) the domestic and global pressure to impose sanctions on the target, (2) target vulnerability (likelihood of success), and (3) the anticipated sender costs.

To support our theoretical argument, we utilize a newly compiled dataset of post-Cold War sanctions issued against authoritarian regimes in the period 1990–2010 and run a series of logistic regressions. The analysis shows that coups d'état are the strongest predictor for the imposition of democratic sanctions, as they are the most blatant signal of democratic and human rights infringements, but also 'weaker' triggers such as controversial elections significantly increase the prospects for democratic sanctions. Target vulnerability is another fundamental consideration, as sanction senders are eager to show their ability to affect domestic policies in target countries. Lastly, we show that sanctions are more likely against countries where the Western senders have the least to lose from regime destabilization. Sanctions are more commonly imposed on economically poor countries and on countries with low levels of foreign direct investments. The political orientation of the prospective target is also important, as democratic sanctions are more likely to be imposed against authoritarian countries exhibiting an international agenda distinct from that of the EU and the USA.

This article proceeds as follows. After discussing the particularity of democratic sanctions and of coups, controversial elections, and decreasing human rights as potential triggers for their use, we examine how, in inter-relation with these dynamic trigger events, three structural factors affect the probability of democratic sanctions. We then present the data and the research design, followed by the discussion of empirical results on the selective targeting of democratic sanctions. We conclude with a discussion on the implications of our findings.

The logic of democratic sanctions

Democratic sanctions have become an important tool for Western leaders to show domestic and international audiences that they are serious about international norms of democracy and human rights and do not tolerate drastic departures from such principles. More than 50% of all the sanctions directed toward autocratic regimes recorded in the new global dataset on post-Cold War sanctions explicitly aim to bring about democratization, that is, improvements in civil liberties and political rights. Political rights and civil liberties are conceptually distinct in that the former focuses on participation in the political process, most fundamentally electoral rights, and the latter on freedom of expression and the physical integrity of citizens, that is, human rights. However, they are closely interlinked as the liberalization of the political system is the prime means to strengthen non-repressive governance, whereas improved human rights open up the potential for increased political rights (Davenport & Armstrong, 2004; Møller & Skaaning, 2013). We therefore perceive sanctions that seek to strengthen political or human rights as 'democratic sanctions'.[1]

Although democracy has become increasingly accepted as a global norm after the end of the Cold War and Western states have pursued an ambitious agenda in promoting democracy internationally, instigating democratization or even foreign regime change is arguably less central to Western countries' international political

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[1] Empirically, there is also a significant overlap between human rights and democracy sanctions. In our sample, there are only two instances where human rights sanctions were implemented against authoritarian regimes without also demanding improvements in political rights.
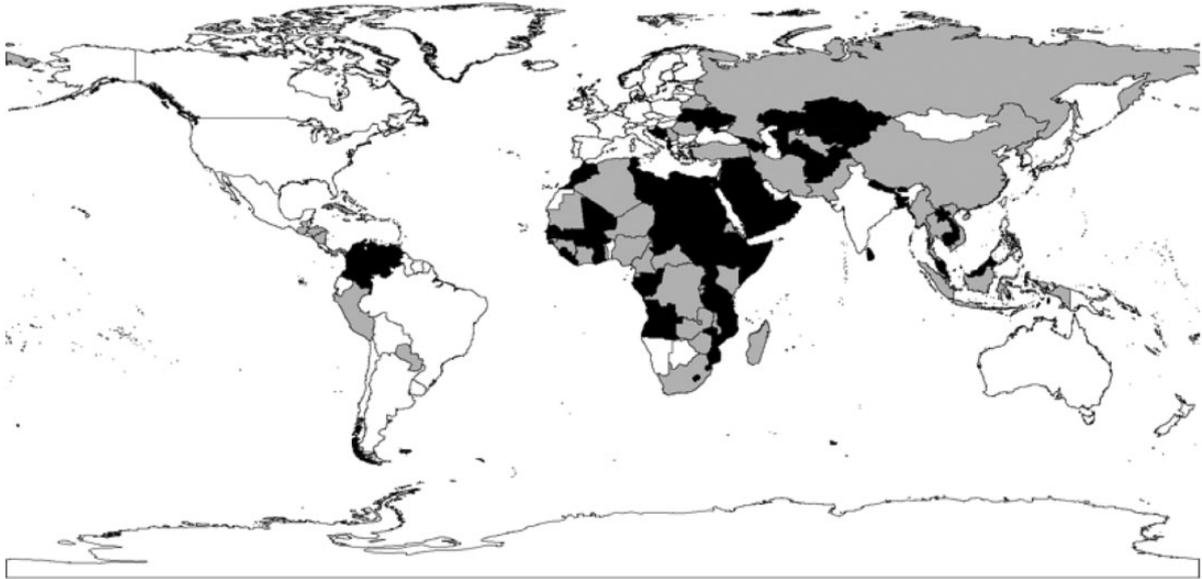
Figure 1. Map of authoritarian states and imposed democratic sanctions

White countries have been democracies for most of the period 1990–2010; black-colored countries were autocracies for most of the period but have not been subjected to democratic sanctions; grey countries are autocracies that were subjected to democratic sanctions for at least one year of the observed period. Classifications according to Wahman, Teorell & Hadenius (2013).

agenda than the safeguarding of domestic security and economic interests (McKoy & Miller, 2012). It has, hence, been argued that democracy promotion 'has played at best a secondary role' (Schraeder, 2003: 33) in the foreign policy of Western democracies. When regimes breach international democratic norms, Western states are more likely to make a strategic decision involving the potential costs of issuing a sanction and the expected chances of achieving concessions from the target than in security-related issues (Donno, 2013).

Summarizing the widespread consensus, Donno (2013: 5) states that '[e]nforcement is less likely to be found in geopolitically important countries or strategic allies where the external actor's interest in promoting democracy is trumped by other foreign policy goals'. Figure 1 indeed shows clear patterns in the imposition of democratic sanctions. Most strikingly, the stable (at least until the wake of the Arab Spring) and strategically important authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have been spared. Indeed, Middle Eastern scholars have questioned whether especially the American reluctance to enforce democratic norms in some Middle Eastern countries reflects the existence of other more central goals in the US foreign policy agenda (Brownlee, 2012).

Whereas democracy can be interpreted as a secondary goal in the hierarchy of foreign policy objectives of potential Western senders, the demands associated with

democratic sanctions constitutes a major threat to the *target* (Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010; Marinov, 2005). In accordance, the sanctions literature identified democracy as a 'major sanction goal', where targets are unlikely to respond to sanction threats by accommodating sender demands (Drezner, 1999: 107–112; Drury & Li, 2006; Hufbauer et al., 2007). Such theoretical expectations are supported by data from Morgan, Bapat & Krustev (2009), the Threat and Imposition of Sanctions (TIES) dataset on sanction threats and imposed sanctions.[2] Only 10% of sanction threats related to democracy or human rights accomplished a complete or partial concession by the target, whereas sanction threats linked to other goals resulted in the complete or partial concession of targets in 22% of cases.

Strategic targeting of democratic sanctions

Democratic sanctions are important for Western leaders to promote foreign policy goals of global democratization, to show a decisive international stand and to garner domestic public support. However, as argued in the

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[2] Data include threats of sanctions against all countries classified as authoritarian by Wahman, Teorell & Hadenius (2013) issued by the EU or the USA. Due to small-N for the post-Cold War period (Morgan, Bapat & Krustev, 2009 collect data from 1971–2000), data for the Cold War period were also included for this test.

section above, democracy has only been secondary in the hierarchy of foreign policy goals. Senders can, hence, be expected to issue sanctions in a strategic manner to maximize domestic political support, international reputation, and policy impact in the targeted state, while minimizing their own expected economic and political costs. In our analysis, we focus on three different dimensions that are crucial for the cost–benefit analysis of Western leaders and their decision to sanction an authoritarian state. Below we hypothesize how these dimensions independently and in combination affect the willingness of Western senders to impose democratic sanctions.

Pressure to impose sanctions

As Western nations have become increasingly vocal in their advocacy for democracy, there has also been an increased expectation to react to human rights violations and autocratic tendencies globally (Jentleson, 2000: 127). Western leaders find it increasingly difficult to ignore human rights abuses in authoritarian states; doing so leaves them vulnerable to domestic criticism by their political opponents, civil society, and the media (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink, 2013). However, authoritarian backsliding can take many forms and different signs of democratic retreat are likely to cause varying levels of public and political attention. Surprisingly, existing research analyzing the imposition of sanctions has almost exclusively focused on structural variables – be they related to the sender or to the target, or to the dyadic relationship between the two[3] – and has neglected the actual autocratic behavior of the target (see for instance Cox & Drury, 2006; Drezner, 1998; Hafner-Burton & Montgomery, 2008; Lektzian & Souva, 2007; Nooruddin, 2002; Whang, 2010).[4]

In addition, there has been puzzlingly little discussion on whether sanctions are mostly used as a reaction to authoritarian stability or democratic decline (Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010; Escribà-Folch, 2012). Some authors state that sanctions are usually used as a reaction to drastic democratic deterioration (Laakso, Kivimäki & Seppänen, 2007), whereas others suggest that the most severe repressors are selected in the first place (Peksen & Drury, 2010; Peksen, 2009; Wood, 2008). Yet, there has

not been a systematic analysis on how 'trigger variables', such as coups d'état, flawed elections or swift deterioration of human rights, in conjunction with structural variables, influence the decision to impose sanctions.

We expect that pressure to sanction an authoritarian regime is especially high when dramatic trigger events not only create global attention but also justification for foreign intervention. Coups d'état, understood as successful, 'illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive' (Powell & Thyne, 2011: 252), are the most blatant signal to the international arena of violating democratic norms with no detailed fact-finding necessary. In addition, coups not only constitute a deterioration of democracy but regularly have severe security implications, domestically and regionally. Hence, we expect coups d'état to be the most powerful predictor of the imposition of democratic sanctions.

Also, elections whose preparation, organization, and outcome are contested by international observers (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2010) and the sheer deterioration of human rights without drastic events can serve as a stronger trigger than continuously low levels of democratic rights. However, fraudulent elections and human rights deteriorations often do not attract the same international attention as coups d'état. Moreover, the complicated nature of these 'weaker' signals often provides a less clear mandate for using coercive foreign policy measures. As these ambiguities give Western leaders more leeway in selecting targets strategically, we expect senders to be especially reluctant to impose democratic sanctions in relation to these weaker signals when the expected cost to target is high.

> *H1:* The probability of democratic sanctions increases when dramatic trigger events, such as coups d'état, heighten the expectations on the sender to impose sanctions.

Target vulnerability

Not only do senders have an incentive to appear firm in their enforcement of democracy, they also have strong reasons to appear successful when deciding to do so. Governments that issue unsuccessful sanctions or backtrack in international conflicts more generally both appear weak in front of domestic audiences and will lose reputation on the international stage (Clare & Danilovic, 2010; Schelling, 1980). Moreover, repeated unsuccessful sanctions will devalue the tool's effectiveness as a mean to instigate democratization in foreign states as regimes threatened by the imposition of sanctions would have

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[3] This is obviously a simplified situation as more complex sanction networks might be at play (Cranmer, Heinrich & Desmarais, 2014) and as the changing international system has also been mentioned (Marinov & Goemans, 2014).

[4] Drury (2000) also considered domestic US politics as potential factors to influence the decision to impose sanctions but found that they are of secondary importance compared to sender–target relations.

few incentives to accommodate senders' demands (Drezner, 1998; Hovi, Huseby & Sprinz, 2005). In light of this argument, senders should be more willing to impose sanctions against weak targets – those with crumbling economies, domestic protests, and fragmented ruling coalitions – as such regimes are more likely to concede or break down in the face of sanctions.

The most immediate signal to potential senders is provided by the occurrence of mass protests (Teorell, 2010). In these cases, sanctioners can reasonably expect that their measures will contribute to a further destabilization of autocrats (Major, 2012). Target vulnerability can also arise due to economic crises, which may significantly depress legitimation strategies and approval ratings for autocratic rulers and, in turn, create divisions within the ruling elite (Geddes, 1999; Teorell, 2010).

In addition, Western senders face stronger demands to sanction countries with high Western linkage (Drezner, 1998). The basic rationale is that political, economic, or social ties raise the awareness for a potential target in the sender, which, in turn, means that information about democratic infringements will be conveyed more easily and that pressure to intervene will be stronger (Smith, 2005). Thus high Western linkage makes potential targets more prone to external sanction pressure. A growing literature has also dealt with the democratic impact of so-called 'black knights' (e.g. Levitsky & Way, 2010), most notably China and Russia. Black knights have the capacity to undermine Western democracy promotion by replacing Western investment when countries come under increased international pressure, thereby reducing the potential target's vulnerability. Accordingly, we would expect that Western senders are more reluctant to issue sanctions against countries with strong black knight support, fearing that such sanctions would amount to little behavioral concession in the target state.

> H2: Countries politically and economically vulnerable to Western pressure are more likely to be targeted by democratic sanctions.

Sender costs

Recent research has shown how democratic sanctions, and sanctions more generally, tend to destabilize the targeted regime (Marinov, 2005; Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010; von Soest & Wahman, forthcoming). If the regime in power is supportive of Western international political objectives, such destabilization might come at a high political and/or economic cost for the sender. It has been argued that Western powers have tolerated

authoritarian behavior in countries such as Egypt under Mubarak and Saudi Arabia as they have been important allies in promoting other, more prioritized foreign policy goals (e.g. Brownlee, 2012).

Besides these political costs, senders' economic costs of issuing sanctions also vary greatly depending on the potential target's economic strength and standing in the global economy. Accordingly, we assume senders to be more reluctant to target richer countries with a large economy. Earlier research has also emphasized the importance of trade (Early, 2011; McLean & Whang, 2010) and foreign direct investment (FDI) (Lektzian & Biglaiser, 2013). Higher trade levels and FDI give more economic leverage to sanctioners but also increase their costs. Business representatives have a strong incentive to lobby against sanctions that cut off their export opportunities and existing business ties to an authoritarian country (Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 1992). Finally, major economies such as the USA or EU countries are reliant on oil imports for their industry and transport sectors. Hence, imposing sanctions on oil exporters can be potentially very costly for senders.

> H3: If their expected political and economic costs are low, sanction senders are more likely to impose democratic sanctions.

Data and research design

This study utilizes a sequence of time-series–cross-sectional logistic analyses where the dependent variable recorded whether a Western (EU or US) sanction was imposed in any given year. In the main operationalization of the dependent variable we merge the EU and US categories, implicating that we account for the first year with an EU *or* US sanction as the year of the sanction onset. We also run supplementary analyses where the EU and US categories were separated. Country-years where a Western democratic sanction was already in place at $t–1$ were left out of the models as sanction senders could not make a new independent decision on whether to sanction a specific country.[5] We employed cubic polynomials based on the time since the last 'event' in the data (i.e. the last democratic sanction onset) to account for possible temporal dependence

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[5] In some cases sanctions are intensified over the course of the sanction episode. We have, however, decided only to include the first year of a sanction episode in our models as including subsequent years would make it harder to identify the original sanction trigger.

(Carter & Signorino, 2010).[6] Standard errors have also been clustered by country.

The sample consists of all authoritarian country-years (where there was no democratic sanction in place at *t*–1) in the period 1990–2010 as defined in the dataset by Hadenius & Teorell (2007) (updated by Wahman, Teorell & Hadenius, 2013). In this dataset, all countries with a democracy score of less than 7.5 on a combined 10-point Freedom House and Polity IV scale were classified as authoritarian (see below, 'measurement of independent variables').

How best to distinguish democracy from autocracy has been a topic of intense debate within political science (e.g. Collier & Adcock, 2001; Verkuilen & Munck, 2002). As this article uses a continuous rather than a dichotomous understanding of democracy, Hadenius & Teorell's (2007) regime categorization was the most suitable. However, to ensure that the results are not dependent on our categorization of democracy, we ran robustness tests using the dichotomous classification by Boix, Miller & Rosato (2013).

A new dataset on post-Cold War sanctions

In order to assess the factors which account for the initial imposition of *democratic* sanctions we had to clearly differentiate various demands connected to sanctions. To achieve this, we had to go beyond the commonly used data from Hufbauer et al. (2007) and also Morgan, Bapat & Krustev (2009) and construct a new dataset.

First and most fundamentally, our dataset divides all goals into coherent categories and clearly separates democratic sanctions from other demands. Adapting the model proposed by Charron (2011, 7–11; see also Hufbauer et al., 2007, 52–55), we classified the goals of sanctions according to broad categories. We define a democratic sanction as one that explicitly aims to increase the level of democracy or human rights. This category includes those sanctions where the imposing documents or senders' statements contain the demand for:

(1) new elections,
(2) the modification of the constitution or the electoral code,
(3) the admission of an international electoral observation mission,
(4) the restoration of a democratically elected leader,
(5) the protection of human rights, and/or

(6) the explicit desire to bring about democratic regime change (Portela & von Soest, 2012).

Furthermore, the dataset recognizes other goals, which include fighting narcotics, ending the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terminating bellicosity/establishing peace agreements, and fighting terrorism. These sanction categories were not included in the measurement of the dependent variable. However, sanctions often pursue several goals simultaneously. We coded the dependent variable as 1 in cases where at least one of the stated goals relates to democracy or human rights improvement.

In addition, we had to depart from Hufbauer et al.'s and Morgan, Bapat and Krustev's coding of the beginning and end of sanction episodes, as for our analysis it is important to demarcate the beginning of an episode as the point not only when entirely new sanctions are imposed but also when the sanction's goal changes substantially so that democratic demands are made. Third, the dataset runs all the way to 2010, whereas the Hufbauer et al. and Morgan, Bapat and Krustev datasets stop assessing sanction cases at 2005. Also, even the assessment for the cases before this date is often inconclusive.[7] Finally, going beyond existing large-N research, which has focused almost exclusively on economic sanctions, all coercive measures that potentially exert economic and political effects are understood as sanctions. These are economic (e.g. restrictions on exports and imports, aid sanctions), political (e.g. restrictive measures to enforce other sanctions), military (e.g. arms embargoes), and diplomatic (e.g. the recalling of ambassadors) sanctions (Portela & von Soest, 2012).

The dataset is composed of the entire universe of newly imposed sanctions by the USA and the EU in the period 1990–2010. Data were obtained from the websites of the US Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, US State Department, Directorate of Defense Trade Controls, and the European Commission external relations departments. These data were complemented by the Hufbauer et al. and the Morgan, Bapat & Krustev datasets and further publications (for data sources and coding procedure see online appendix). The dataset only includes countries that the Wahman, Teorell & Hadenius dataset (2013) has coded as being 'non-democratic regimes' at the start of the sanction episode.

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[6] That is, we include t, t^2, and t^3 since the last event in all the models.

[7] Morgan, Bapat & Krustev (2009) also have several missing sanction cases, particularly in relation to EU democratic sanctions. More than one-third of the democratic sanction cases analyzed are not listed in their dataset.

Measurement of independent variables

The theory section predicted that the willingness to sanction non-democratic regimes is a product of a cost–benefit analysis which balances the pressure to impose sanctions with regime vulnerability and expected costs for the sender. Below we describe the operationalizations to measure these three dimensions.

Pressure to impose sanctions. The models include both clear trigger events and absolute levels of democracy. We have used the data from Powell & Thyne (2011) to recognize events of coups. We have excluded cases where coups replaced a non-elected leader with another (e.g. intramilitary coups or palace-coups). To measure *controversial elections*, we utilize the widely used NELDA dataset (Hyde & Marinov, 2012), which has a comparative advantage over other sources in its coverage over space and time. We have coded an election as 'controversial' if at least one of the following conditions applies: (i) there were allegations from Western monitors of significant vote fraud, (ii) an international monitor was denied the opportunity to monitor an election, or (iii) an international monitor refused to go to an election because it did not believe that it would be free and fair.[8]

The models also control for *decreases in civil liberties*, by including the one-year change in the Freedom House Civil Liberties Score. In addition, following Hadenius & Teorell (2005, 2007), we measure the *absolute level of democracy* with a combined Freedom House and Polity IV score. The combined score is used to compensate for the individual shortcomings of the two indices (Norris, 2012).[9] The aggregate is derived by computing the average Freedom House political rights and civil liberties score (reversed and transformed to a 0–10 scale) and combining it with the revised combined autocracy and democracy score from the Polity IV data (also converted to a 0–10 scale).

Above, we argued that the propensity to issue democratic sanctions is not only a function of different triggering events but also depend on the existing ties between potential senders and targets. A clear indication of such linkage is *shared membership in international organizations*.

In order to measure the number of organizational ties with the EU and the USA, we relied on the data collected by Pevehouse, Nordstrom & Warnke (2004) and counted the number of organizations where both the sender and the target are full members. Since the data only went up to 2000, we updated the dataset for the last decade. Following Pevehouse (2005: 69), we excluded financial, environmental, technical, and cultural organizations. For the EU, we counted all organizations containing at least one EU member nation.[10]

Target vulnerability. Different variables are included to account for the target's political and economic vulnerability. We account for the number of *popular protests* by adding the number of antigovernment demonstrations, strikes, and riots recorded in the Banks & Wilson (2012) dataset.[11] To assess economic vulnerability, we include measures for *economic growth* and *inflation*. Economic growth is measured as annual percentage growth in GDP per capita and inflation as the annual percentage inflation in the GDP deflator (World Bank, 2011).

Although a country is generally vulnerable, it is not necessarily particularly vulnerable to Western pressure. Above, we talked about the potential of black knight support which might influence the decision to impose democratic sanctions. To account for this aspect, we include ties to *black knights* in the model and use the same approach as in relation to Western organizational ties. For every country we counted the number of organizational links between Russia and China and the potential target.[12] Data were taken from Pevehouse, Nordstrom & Warnke (2004) and updated with information from the CIA World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013).

Sender costs. *Economic development* is regularly measured with GDP per capita; the data were taken from the World Bank's (2011) World Development Indicators dataset. *Trade* is calculated as the absolute dyadic export and import flows from the senders (the EU and the USA) to the target; the data were taken from Barbieri, Keshk & Pollins (2009). Since no combined EU statistics exist for the period of interest, we approximate EU trade

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[8] We have not lagged the coups and controversial election variables, as lagging these variables would seriously underestimate their importance (normally sanctions would follow promptly after the trigger event). We found no cases where there are reasons to suspect revered causality.

[9] This combined FH/Polity IV index shows higher validity and reliability than its constituent parts and also outperforms all rival indices (Hadenius & Teorell, 2005).

[10] We only counted countries that were EU members in that particular year.

[11] Banks & Wilson (2012) count all incidents of antigovernment demonstrations or riots with more than 100 participants and strikes with more than 1,000 participants.

[12] Excluding those organizations that have the United States or any EU country as members.

dependency by adding trade data from the five largest EU economies (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK). *FDI* is measured as the net inflow of foreign investments as a percentage of GDP per capita (World Bank, 2011),[13] and *oil production* in millions of metric tons (Ross, 2011).

To measure the political dimension of the sender-cost argument, we rely on the UN general assembly roll-call data made available by Strezhnev & Voeten (2013) to establish *sender-target political closeness*.[14] More specifically, we use their two-category dyadic voting similarity index (0–1),[15] which is calculated for every UN session. The fundamental reasoning behind this operationalization is that it is politically more costly for senders to impose sanctions on countries that share a similar international agenda than on those that do not. To establish the combined EU/US–target political closeness, we use the mean dyadic voting similarity index between the United States and the EU and a potential target. The EU score is approximated by using the mean similarity index of the five largest EU countries.

Results

The total sample for the merged EU and US models includes 1,520 country-years across 119 countries.[16] In total, 39 new democratic sanction episodes were initiated in the period 1990–2010; there was a great deal of overlap between EU and US sanction imposition – the EU imposed 29 democratic sanctions whereas the United States initiated new sanctions in 27 events. In case of

overlapping sanctions, the sanction episode is initiated when the first sender (either the EU or the USA) imposed sanctions.

All independent variables, with the exception of the democratic trigger variables and protests, were lagged one year to assure temporal priority. Due to the relative rarity of democratic sanction onset we have also run rare-event logistic models as robustness check (King & Zeng, 2001). Running the analyses as rare event models did not alter the results substantially. All models also include cubic polynomials to account for possible temporal dependence and we have checked the models for multicollinearity.

Coups d'état as fundamental triggers of democratic sanctions

In Models 1–4 (Table I), we show the impact of our four trigger variables; coups, controversial elections, decrease in civil liberties, and the absolute level of democracy. Model 1 shows the main specification, Model 2 uses the Boix, Miller & Rosato (2013) authoritarian sample, and Models 3 and 4 separate EU and US sanctions, respectively. Apart from the trigger variables the models also control for whether a non-democratic sanction (e.g. aiming at fighting terrorism or establishing peace) was already in place at t–1.

The models clearly support H1 that sanctions are often an effect of dramatic trigger events rather than constantly low levels of democracy or more subtle declines. Whereas the coefficients for coups and internationally controversial elections are strongly significant, the results are not supportive of the idea that absolute low levels of democracy or declining levels of civil liberties increase the probability of democratic sanctions. The coefficient for the levels of democracy is insignificant in all models, regardless of whether we use the HTW or BMR sample or whether we separate EU and US sanctions. Similarly, the effect of declining levels of civil liberties is small and insignificant. A dramatic decline in the respect of civil liberties, resulting in a 3-point increase in the Freedom House Civil Liberties score (high Freedom House scores represent low levels of civil liberties), in the absence of a coup or controversial election only increases the predicted probability of a democratic sanction by less than 0.02.[17]

In contrast to the insignificant effect of declining civil liberties levels, Table II shows how coups and controversial elections change the predicted probability of a democratic sanction. In the instance of a coup, the predicted

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[13] Note that the FDI data is not dyadic. Unfortunately, data availability has made it impossible to use dyadic data without losing a significant part of our sample. However, as an additional robustness test we replaced the FDI variable with a variable accounting for bilateral investment treaties (BITs). Here we note whether a BIT is active between the USA and/or the EU in any given year. We only include individual BITs with the EU. Data on BITs are collected from UNCTAD.

[14] Earlier examples of studies using UN vote data to measure dyadic political closeness include Gartzke (1998) and Alesina & Dollar (2000).

[15] The voting similarity index (0–1) is equal to (total number of votes where both countries agree divided by total number of joint votes). We use two-category vote data (yes or no), and not the similarity index also including 'abstain' as an option.

[16] The sample becomes somewhat larger in the separate models (especially the model only looking at the EU) as fewer country-years are excluded due to the fact that a democratic sanction was already in place at t–1. It is possible that sanctions were implemented by a different sender. Such cases would not be recognized as a new sanction in the merged models, but would be of importance in the models where EU and US sanctions are separated.

[17] See Figure A1 of the online appendix.

Table I. Triggers for democratic sanctions

	Democratic sanctions			
	HTW (Western sanctions) (1)	BMR (Western sanctions) (2)	HTW (EU sanctions) (3)	HTW (US sanctions) (4)
Coup	5.127** (.763)	4.869** (.644)	3.765** (.695)	4.947** (.680)
Controversial election	2.584** (.458)	2.433** (.407)	2.620** (.464)	2.275** (.495)
Decrease in civil liberties	.411 (.318)	.453 (.354)	.368 (.363)	.349 (.417)
Level of democracy (0–10)	−.056 (.089)	−.040 (.095)	−.081 (.090)	−.116 (.111)
Non-democratic sanction (lagged)	.053 (.622)	.031 (.654)	−.273 (.781)	−.523 (.999)
Constant	−1.135 (.716)	−2.177* (.875)	−1.956* (.943)	−1.115 (.860)
Country-years	1,520	1,529	1,668	1,583
Countries	119	119	123	119
Log pseudo likelihood	−114.581	−121.533	−104.544	−85.068
Pseudo R2	.381	.331	.285	.360

$**p < .01$, $*p < .05$, $†p < .1$. Entries are logistic coefficients; robust standard errors clustered by country are given within parentheses. All models include cubic polynomials (not presented in table).

Table II. Change in predicted probability

Trigger	Probability change (Western sanction)	Probability change (EU sanction)	Probability change (US sanction)
Coup	.517	.231	.349
90% Conf. interval	.268–.767	.044–.417	.070–.615
Internationally controversial election	.073	.083	.032
90% Conf. interval	.002–.144	−.006–.172	−.000–.064
	Probability (Western sanction)	Probability (EU sanction)	Probability (US sanction)
Baseline probability, no coup and no controversial election	.007	.007	.004
90% Conf. interval	.001–.012	.001–.013	.001–.007

The partial change is computed with the prchange command in the Spost add-on module for Stata (Long & Freese, 2006). Calculations are made for a country with ten years without prior sanctions (e.g. a country in year 2000 without prior sanctions in our studied time period, $t^1 = 10$, $t^2 = 100$, $t^3 = 1,000$). In the calculation for coups we assume no controversial election in the same year; for controversial elections we assume no coup. All other continuous variables are held at their means.

probability of a Western democratic sanction increases with a dramatic 0.52.[18] The effect of controversial elections is also strong, but not as substantial as the effect of coups. A controversial election increases the probability of a democratic sanction by about 0.07. Both the EU and the USA (Models 3 and 4) are significantly more likely to sanction a country if it has experienced a coup or a controversial election,[19] but there are some differences between

the two senders in how much these two trigger variables change the predicted probability of a sanction. The effect of a controversial election is somewhat larger for the probability of an EU sanction, whereas coups have a larger effect for US sanctions. A potential explanation warranting further analysis could be the EU's comparatively strong election oversight within its region (Donno, 2013: 118–120). But the main results stay the same for both sanction senders.

A potential explanation for the strong effect of coups is that the coup variable simply represents a dramatic decline in democracy. It might, hence, be that cases with similar declines in democracy, without a coup, would face the same increased risk of being punished by Western senders. However, robustness tests with interaction terms between

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[18] Probability calculated for a country with ten prior years without sanctions, no internationally controversial elections, and all other continuous variables held at their mean.

[19] However, with the specification of the post estimation the marginal effect of controversial elections in the separated EU and US models falls just short of the 90% confidence interval.

coups and changed levels of democracy, presented in the online appendix, show that countries with coups are significantly more likely to experience democratic sanctions than countries without coups but similar levels of democratic decline.[20] Furthermore, these robustness tests also demonstrate that a coup paired with a dramatic decline in democracy almost inevitably leads to a democratic sanction.

Selective targeting of authoritarian regimes

The analyses made clear that democratic sanctions are regularly a reaction to dramatic trigger events, most notably coups and also to some extent controversial elections. However, the response to triggers is only one part of the story. To study the selective targeting of sanctions we introduce Table III.

The main models in Table III are Models 5 and 6, whereas Model 7 adds an interaction term between controversial elections and FDI.[21] Most fundamentally, Models 5 and 6 strongly confirm that Western senders apply democratic sanctions selectively, even when controlling for the two most important triggers, coups and controversial elections. The results lend strong support for both H2 and H3, indicating that senders are more likely to sanction vulnerable states where the chance of success is high and that sanctions are more likely when the expected economic and political costs are low.

Several of the coefficients for the variables associated with target vulnerability in Table III are statistically significant and in the expected direction. Both models support the idea that sanctions are more likely in countries with high levels of inflation. The coefficient for popular protests falls just short of statistical significance at the 10% level in Model 5, but is significant at the lowest level of significance in the model using the BMR sample (Model 6).

We also find support for the idea that sanctions are more common against countries with high organizational linkage to the West. These are countries where the expectation to impose sanctions and their expected effectiveness are high (Table III).[22] Other authors have included a

variable measuring the geographic proximity between the capital of the sender and the capital of the target (Gleditsch & Ward, 2001, 2006). However, our findings regarding proximity are mixed. Whereas geographical proximity is significant in the EU model, it is not for the US model.[23] This indicates that simply measuring geographic proximity is too crude a proxy for linkage and strategic importance. Linkage between senders and targets can be high despite large geographic distance. In Table A3 of the online appendix we introduce a model of EU and US sanctions with region dummies. The results show regional differences, but most fundamentally also suggest a relationship that is more complex than a linear relationship between sanction propensity and geographic distance. In addition, we do not find any significant results in relation to the linkage to potential sanction busters (China and Russia). This is not to say that the support of potential black knights is unimportant; however, such dynamics are not captured by the estimation strategies employed here.

We also find strong support for H3, arguing that high political and economic costs for the potential sender reduce their inclination to impose democratic sanctions. There is a strong and negative correlation between the political closeness of a potential authoritarian target to the West and the probability of democratic sanctions.[24] The more similar to the West an authoritarian country votes in the UN General Assembly, the less likely it is to be targeted by Western democratic sanctions. These results support the idea put forward in earlier research that political considerations affect the degree to which the West enforces democratic norms in authoritarian countries (Donno, 2013).

Models 5 and 6 also support H3 in regard to economic costs for the sender. We do not find any significant results in relation to trade and oil production, but we find limited support for the claim that economically poor countries are more likely to get sanctioned. The coefficient for GDP per capita is not significant in Model 6, but it is significant in Model 5 at the 5% level.[25] Most importantly, however, there is a statistically significant and strong negative correlation between FDI and the

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[20] See Figure A2 in the online appendix.

[21] Due to the inclusion of the black knight organizational ties variable, China and Russia are not included in the sample of the Table III models. However, we also re-ran the models without control for black knight organizational ties (and including Russia and China) without any changes in the substantial results.

[22] The models are somewhat affected by multicollinearity. Table A1 in the online appendix shows multicollinearity statistics. VIF scores in regard to Western trade, political closeness, and Western organization ties are all above 10. However, excluding highly correlated covariates does not substantially alter the results.

[23] See Table A2 of the online appendix.

[24] Here we use a one-year lag for the political closeness measure. However the data represent UN assembly sessions rather than calendar years. Occasionally sessions run into January in the next calendar year. To ensure temporal priority, we also ran the models using a two-year lag. Increasing the lag did not affect the significance of the closeness measure.

[25] Log transforming the GDP per capita measure does not change the results substantially.

Table III. Determinants of democratic sanctions

	HTW (Western sanctions) (5)	BMR (Western sanctions) (6)	HTW (Western sanctions) (7)
Coup	5.128** (.994)	5.050** (.812)	5.121** (1.014)
Controversial election	2.909** (.449)	2.881** (.412)	3.278** (.495)
Non-democratic sanction t–1	.848 (.567)	.483 (.704)	.870 (.560)
Protests	.095 (.060)	.123† (.063)	.090 (.065)
GDP growth t–1	−.026 (.032)	−.024 (.035)	−.023 (.030)
GDP inflation t–1	.022** (.008)	.031** (.009)	.022** (.008)
GDP per capita (thousands USD) t–1	−.178* (.088)	−.115 (.091)	−.181* (.088)
Western organizational ties t–1	.301** (.116)	.338* (.132)	.316** (.115)
Black knight organizational ties t–1	−.082 (.156)	−.107 (.135)	−.048 (.160)
Political closeness t–1	−4.413** (1.640)	−5.587** (1.831)	−4.495* (1.741)
Western trade (log)	−.083 (.173)	−.073 (.135)	−.091 (.175)
Oil production t–1	.001 (.007)	−.001 (.008)	.002 (.007)
FDI t–1	−.046* (.022)	−.056** (.016)	−.029 (.036)
Controversial election*FDI t–1	−	−	−.236* (.120)
Constant	−.963 (1.490)	−2.620† (1.544)	−.992 (1.537)
Country-years	1,219	1,229	1,219
Countries	104	103	104
Log pseudo likelihood	−93.899	−90.423	−92.617
Pseudo R2	.434	.419	.441

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .1$. Entries are logistic coefficients; robust standard errors clustered by country are given within parentheses. All models include cubic polynomials (not presented in table).

probability for democratic sanctions. As we do not have sufficient dyadic FDI data, we also introduce Model 12 (Table A4) as a robustness test in the online appendix. In this model, we replace FDI with bilateral investment treaties (BITs) between the EU/USA and the potential target. As with FDI, we observe a significant and negative coefficient between western BITs and the propensity for democratic sanctions.[26] In Model 7 we introduce an interaction term between controversial elections and FDI (plotted in Figure 2).

As argued in the theory section, controversial elections represent a 'weaker' trigger than coups where potential senders might be especially reluctant to issue costly sanctions.[27] Indeed, the interaction term shows that sanctions are less common after controversial elections in countries with high levels of FDI. In countries without any foreign investments the predicted probability of a democratic sanction is approximately 0.17 after a controversial election. When FDI makes up 10% of the GDP, however, the probability of a democratic sanction after a controversial election is only about 0.03. The strong results in relation to FDI are very much in line with the recent findings of Lektzian & Biglaiser (2014) regarding the imposition of all US sanctions (sanctions implemented to achieve various goals).

Conclusion

Although the so-called selection bias has been described as a fundamental problem in the study of sanction effectiveness, the literature reveals conflicting expectations of how this selective use of sanctions biases the results of empirical sanctions research (Morgan & Schwebach, 1997; Nooruddin, 2002). Moreover, there has been little discussion about the fact that international sanctions are designed to accomplish varying types of behavioral change by the target. When making the strategic decision (not) to impose sanctions, the prospective sender accounts for the target's actual behavior and considers its own economic and political costs.

[26] See footnote 13 for operationalization.

[27] It is also possible to think of instances where the reactions to coups are conditioned on the expected sender costs. However, senders are likely to react to coups differently depending on the nature of the new regime (i.e. depending on whether the new regime is likely to pursue a pro-Western political agenda or not).
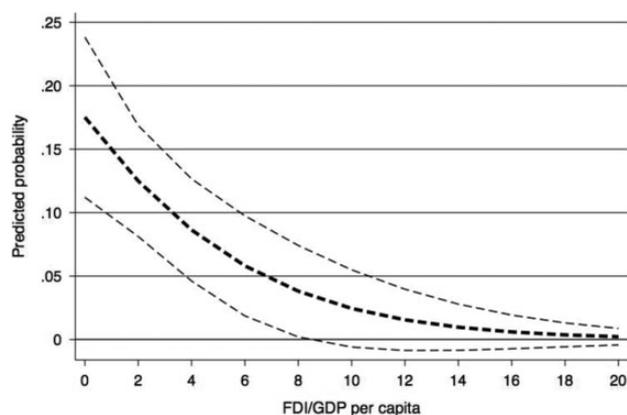
Figure 2. Predicted probability of democratic sanctions after controversial election

Predicted probabilities calculated using margins in Stata 12. Outer boundaries show 90% confidence interval. Post-estimations are calculated based on Model 8 for a country without coups and with all continuous variables held at their means.

The results of our logistic regressions show that senders are most likely to respond with sanctions after dramatic trigger events, such as coups d'état, where the international pressure to sanction is high. Hence, Western senders do in fact react on drastic infringements of civil liberties and political rights and where arguably the effect of democratic sanctions is strong. This contradicts the assumption that senders are purely motivated by realpolitik and geostrategic interests. The likelihood of sanctions also increases with less dramatic trigger events like controversial elections, especially if the expected domestic costs for the sender are low. We have also shown that sanction implementation is more likely in unstable and thereby vulnerable regimes – those with mobilized citizens and crumbling economies.

Yet although international pressure to impose sanctions on repressive authoritarian regimes has generally increased in the post-Cold War period, senders balance the aim of instigating democratic reform abroad with other national interests. Clearly, potential senders also take their own political and economic costs into consideration when deciding whether to impose sanctions to improve levels of democracy in authoritarian countries. Those authoritarian countries that pursue a similar international agenda as the West, as approximated by similar voting patterns in the UN General Assembly, are significantly less likely to be targeted by democratic sanctions. Similarly, Western senders are mindful of the economic repercussions that democratic sanctions have for themselves. High FDI in a prospective authoritarian target

(strongly) and GDP per capita (to a limited extent) reduce the EU's and USA's inclination to impose democratic sanctions.

All in all, the implementation of democratic sanctions is not a pure reflection of the level of autocracy or repression in a given country. Unstable autocracies with swift democratic deterioration are far more likely to be sanctioned than stable repressive autocracies with constantly low levels of democracy. These results have implications for comparative democratization and sanctions research. Those wishing to study the effect of international factors in domestic processes of democratization must be aware of the potential endogeneity problem; Western nations are likely to put less democratization pressure on regimes expected to be stable than countries with high vulnerability. Ineffective, drawn-out sanction episodes against stable authoritarian regimes come with high economic and political costs for the sender and thus diminish returns for the imposing government (Bolks & Al-Sowayel, 2000; Dizaji & van Bergeijk, 2013).

This study was carried out with a large sample of cases covering an extensive period of time. In the future, more qualitative case study research is needed to study decisions to impose democratic sanctions in greater detail, which should help to further uncover causal mechanisms and enhance our understanding of specific sanction senders. Also, the differences in sanctioning behavior between the EU and the United States warrants further systematic analysis. As sanctions have become one of the most important tools to push authoritarian states toward democracy, understanding how this tool is used in the post-Cold War era is key for comparative politics analysis focused on democratization and international relations research concerned with the effects of sanctions.

Replication data

The online appendix, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article can be found at http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets and at http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/soest and https://sites.google.com/site/miwahman1/.

Acknowledgements

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