

SASCAT: Natural language processing approach to the study of economic sanctions

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Abstract

Existing datasets of economic sanctions rely primarily on secondary sources and do not tend to take full advantage of government documents related to economic coercion. Such data may miss sanctions, and do not capture important details in how coercive measures are threatened, imposed and removed. The latter processes often have much to do with the domestic politics in sender countries. Understanding these processes may be necessary in order to fully account for sanctions' effectiveness. We present a natural language processing (NLP) approach to retrieving sanctions-related government documents. We apply our method to the case of US sanctions. The United States is the world's pre-eminent user of sanctions. Our method can be applied to other cases. We collect all sanctions events originating in the office of the US president, and all congressional sanctions, for 1988–2016. Our approach has three advantages: (1) by design, it captures all sanctions-related documents; (2) the resulting data are disaggregated by imposing branch of government; (3) the data include the original language of the measures. These features directly shed light on interbranch delegation, domestic (partisan) conflict, and policy priorities. We show that our data record more episodes than most existing sanctions' data, and have features that other datasets lack. The availability of the original text opens up new avenues for research and analysis.

Keywords

delegation, deterrence, economic sanctions, text-as-data, US foreign policy

Introduction

The primary motivation for research on economic sanctions is to answer the question of whether this foreign policy tool 'works' – achieves the goals it is meant to. Scholars have argued variously that: (1) sanctions work; (2) sanctions do not work; and (3) sanctions work but their effect is conditional and non-trivial to detect.¹ On

(1), it could be that sanctions work most of the time but we can only appreciate that if we define the menu of interventions and the expectations of the sender appropriately (Baldwin, 1999). On (2), sanctions may not work because of sanctions-busting or nationalist rally-around-the-flag effects (Early, 2015; Barry & Kleinberg, 2015; Grossman, Manekin & Margalit, 2018).² Type (3) research has been particularly productive (Drezner, 2003). This is where our contribution lies – we ask how the domestic politics and legislative processes of sender

¹ An important point in the literature is that the economic costs a state bears and the political costs borne by the political agent or agents holding office should not be equated (Galtung, 1967; Tsebelis, 1990; Smith, 1996; Pape, 1997; Rowe, 2001). See also work by Allen (2008); Barry & Kleinberg (2015); Biersteker, Eckert & Tourinho (2016); Dashti-Gibson, Davis & Radcliff (1997); Drezner (2000); Drury & Li (2006); Early (2015); Escribà-Folch & Wright (2010); Grauvogel & von Soest (2010); Lektzian & Souva (2001); McLean & Whang (2010); Marinov (2005); Martin (1992); Miller (2014); Pape (1997); Peksen & Drury (2010); Peterson (2013); Farrell & Newman (2019); Jentleson (2022).

² Other work in this vein includes Pape (1997), Marinov (2005), Licht (2017), and Alexeev & Hale (2020).

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countries contribute to the design of economic pressure – and, hence, to its expected success.

We focus on the case of the USA as sender state. The United States is the most prolific and most powerful user of sanctions (Hufbauer, Schott & Elliott, 1990; Morgan, Bapat & Kobayashi, 2014). We present a novel, natural language processing (NLP) approach to retrieve congressional and presidential documents related to economic sanctions between 1988 and 2016. Altogether, these documents include 1,718 sanctions events or actions, including 932 sanctions measures approved by Congress (laws) and 786 sanctions actions approved by the president (executive orders, presidential memoranda, and presidential proclamations).

Initial analyses we have conducted point to the importance of interbranch politics and delegation in the use of sanctions, as well as the distinct value of legislative sanctions as commitment devices for deterring the violation of international norms. A strength of our approach is that it allows domestic politics in the sender to be brought into the picture (Hatipoglu, 2014) and affords a new perspective on puzzles such as why sanctions may be hard to end (Dorussen & Mo, 2001). This is complementary to the traditional model of sanctions, looking at effectiveness through the prism of interstate bargaining, a model that has produced contested findings and has caused scholars to question its applicability (Morgan & Kobayashi, 2021).

Domestic institutions and the design of sanctions

A large research agenda looks at the importance of democratic institutions in international relations. Some work examines the importance of legislatures for communicating true intentions and helping to avert war (Fearon, 1994; Schultz, 1998). Other scholarship considers how legislatures can provide credible commitments to carry out international agreements (Martin, 2000), place pressure on heads of state to alter military policies (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Kriner, 2010), or constrain the executive on issues such as trade and immigration (Bailey, Goldstein & Weingast, 1997; Milner & Tingley, 2016).

But scholars have given relatively little attention to the domestic institutional dynamics associated with the crafting of economic sanctions. Work on legislative involvement in sanctions policy has mainly focused on the political incentives facing legislators in sanctions debates. This research has shown that legislators often have incentives to support or oppose sanctions due to the positions of interest groups, other constituencies, or the

public (Lindsay, 1986; Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 1992; Whang, 2011; McLean & Whang, 2021).

There also exists some work on the significance of legislative involvement in sanctions. Martin (2000) shows that legislative activism on sanctions can bolster a country's leverage in international negotiations. Hatipoglu (2014) finds that legislative involvement in the imposition of sanctions makes it more difficult to remove sanctions later. Tama (2020) shows that sanctions legislation can have a variety of additional effects. These studies are consistent with classic work on two-level games (Putnam, 1988). But other sanctions work highlights international dynamics and heads of state as the key drivers of sanctions decisionmaking, suggesting that legislators do not play an important role in this policy area (Drury, 1998; Cox & Drury, 2006).

Largely missing from prior work is consideration of the different ways that legislators can design sanctions and how these design choices might contribute to the effectiveness of sanctions. One key design feature of sanctions legislation is the extent and type of leeway that it grants to heads of state or bureaucrats for carrying out sanctions policy. On one end of the spectrum, a legal instrument can require the imposition of sanctions without giving the head of state or bureaucrats any discretion regarding its implementation. On the other end of the spectrum, a legal instrument can call for the use of sanctions without requiring that any type of action be taken. In between these poles, legislators can mandate the use of sanctions but provide the executive an opt-out in the form of a waiver or stipulate that the sanctions do not need to be imposed if the sanctions target meets certain conditions.³

These kinds of design choices are important in part because they can influence the effectiveness and outcomes of sanctions. For example, more flexibility in sanctions legislation may translate into reduced effectiveness by sending a weaker signal of resolve to the target, or it may translate into greater effectiveness by allowing the executive to calibrate the use of sanctions more carefully. At the same time, greater flexibility may reduce unintended consequences by allowing the executive to use its expertise to implement sanctions in ways that mitigate

³ Other work has shown that policymakers can have a variety of goals when employing sanctions, including coercing, constraining, signaling, or deterring (Giumelli, 2011; Biersteker, Eckert & Tourinho, 2016; Grauvogel, Licht & von Soest, 2017; Rosenberg & Tama, 2019). Giumelli (2011) explains how these goals can shape features of sanctions design, such as the intensity or specificity associated with sanctions.

unwanted effects, such as increased repression or worsened humanitarian conditions in the target country (Peksen & Drury, 2010; Moret, 2015; Liou, Murdie & Peksen, 2021).

Existing datasets provide information on government decisions to impose or lift sanctions, but do not include information on intermediate steps such as waiving a law's sanctions provision or certifying that sanctions do not need to be imposed because the target has met certain conditions. The dataset we introduce next allows scholars to examine the design of sanctions, and to begin linking design to effectiveness.

Statements and actions on sanctions: Computer-assisted text approach (SASCAT)

We define sanctions as governmental actions to impose restrictions on customary economic exchange with a foreign government, actor, or institution, in connection with the target's behavior. We exclude trade wars and purely economic issues such as market access. We include governments and non-state actors as the possible targets of coercion.

We built the data in the following steps. We started out by collecting 130 diverse relevant texts as a training set from THOMAS, later superseded by Congress.gov, and the American Presidency Project. The texts were chosen to represent the wide variety of policy areas that can serve as the trigger for sanctions (including human rights, armed conflict, weapons proliferation, drug trafficking, trade policies, and environmental practices), as well as to represent a wide variety of sanctions targets. We also assembled from the same sources an equal number of documents that are not relevant to sanctions (e.g. a document speaking about preserving the National Parks).

We used the labeled text to train a machine learning algorithm (a so-called supervised classifier) to differentiate between sanctions relevant and irrelevant documents. Specifically, we used a support vector machine (SVM) with linear kernel. This is a widely adopted approach in NLP when dealing with binary classifications. We have tested its performance and decided hyper-parameters in a ten-fold cross-validation setting. We then used this approach to classify each document in our collection and we employed the algorithm's confidence score on each operation for better understanding its performance. We collected all documents where the probabilities between the two classes were very close (± 0.20 , which means that the classifier was highly 'undecided' between the two classes). We also extracted a number of random documents classified by the classifier as relevant or not relevant. We gave this sample of

the entire collection to expert coders to flag them as relevant or irrelevant. We did this to check the performance of the classifier and to provide new annotations on which to further train. We repeated this process until the performance of the classifiers was judged satisfying and the tool was no longer making clear mistakes.

Output, codebook, and comparison

We next asked human coders to go through the documents and break them down into a structure akin to what is usually known as sanctions episodes, retrieving information on the targets, goals, and nature of the measures. An episode for us is an instance of coercion in which a set of target entities (states, elites, organizations) is subject to pressure over a set of goals. If the same document relaxes sanctions on some but increases sanctions on other entities, we divide it into separate episodes to reflect the different trajectories. If the goals differ for some targets, different goals merit separate episodes. The coders extracted from the text a number of additional (binary) variables. Some of what we extracted aims to mirror similar information in existing data. We extract information on who is targeted (states, government elites, or non-state entities), what the sanctions trajectory is (increasing or decreasing pressure), and which international institutions and US agencies are mentioned as enforcers of the measures. Other variables we collected, such as the length of a law and whether the law allows sanctions to be waived by the president or includes provisions for conditioning sanctions on the future behavior of the sanctions target, are unique to SASCAT.

The full set of variables is described in the Codebook, available as part of the replication archive at the *JPR* website, in order to help researchers use the documents.

This process generated 1,718 sanctions events, or actions. This number is roughly equally split between congressional and presidential events. Nine out of ten countries are targeted one time or another – with the top 20 recurring countries⁴ mentioned in between 40 and 100 documents.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of types of measure, by branch, and indicates that Congress and the executive use sanctions in different ways. For instance, Congress more often stops military aid via sanctions; 30% of congressional sanctions involve military aid, but only 5% of presidential ones do. This is consistent with Congress

⁴ Iran, Israel, Myanmar, PR Korea, Russia, Cuba, Pakistan, China, Haiti, Syria, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Libya, Bolivia, and Peru.

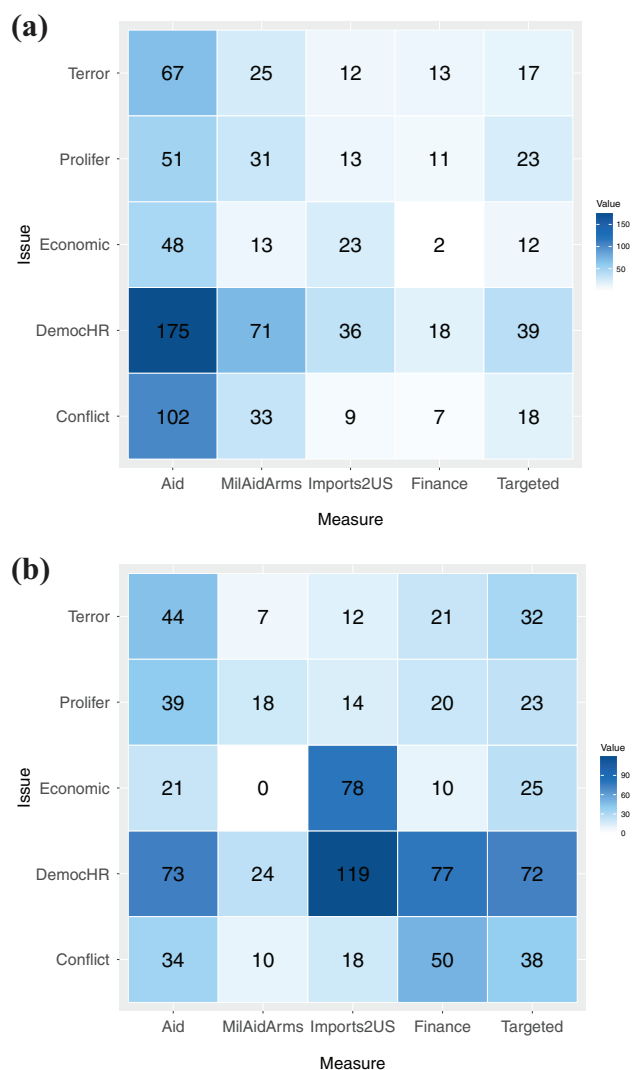


Figure 1. SASCAT: An interbranch look at all US sanctions (a) Heatmap Congress; (b) Heatmap Presidency

using sanctions more often out of a sense of moral outrage – to stop military equipment, provided by the USA, from being used for repressive purposes. Presidents, by contrast, may be more concerned with maintaining close military ties with security partners.

In laws enacted by Congress, we find 932 sanctions episodes. Of those, 786 require the president to undertake some action, suggesting that the main goal of sanctions legislation may be to bind the president's hands. About 10% of legislation represents 'sense of Congress' resolutions that do not fit this mold, while another 10% or so are laws that authorize the use of sanctions but do not require the president to take any particular action.

This data collection has advantages over other datasets in use, of which HSE and TIES are the best known (Hufbauer, Schott & Elliott, 1990; Morgan, Bapat &

Kobayashi, 2014). First, existing datasets often use secondary sources to identify cases (though the HSE explicitly refers to a number of primary sources).⁵ Second, the precise nature of extant data collection procedures is not known. The specific set of sources that have been queried and the specific searches (keyword combinations) are seldom provided – or are offered only as illustrative examples. This, together with the previous point, makes it difficult to be confident that all episodes of sanctions have been identified (or whether a different search will not produce additional cases). Third, existing datasets do not systematically record whether the sanctions originate in legislation, whether the executive is using delegated powers to enforce them, and whether the sanctions aim to deter any violations of a norm (as opposed to coerce a specified target into compliance).⁶

Figure 2 shows a comparison between SASCAT and three existing datasets in terms of number of countries sanctioned by year. HSE and TIES record only about half of US sanctions events noted by SASCAT. The newly released Felbermayr et al. (2020) Global Sanctions Data Base (GSDB) has information on more US sanctions than SASCAT. Because there are no accompanying case-studies or case-level documentation for the GSDB cases, it is difficult to confirm that instances GSDB refers to have indeed been missed by SASCAT.

Next, we outline some of the biggest gaps in existing research that our dataset can help tackle. We choose to focus on the different dimensions of sanctions threats, and on issues related to delegation of authority from the legislative to the executive branch.

Partisan conflict, delegation, and bolstering deterrence through commitment

One of the striking findings we uncover is that a full quarter of all congressional sanctions instruments, but not presidential ones, target any government or entity engaged in a predefined violation. They enable sanctions, but actual punishment remains contingent on the perpetration of a violation. This illustrates a dynamic

⁵ These include bibliographic sources, Lexis-Nexis searches, searches on Keesings' World News archive, and searches on United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) files to identify if and when countries were targeted by sanctions. While the UN and EU files include primary sources, without a clearly described procedure for obtaining all sanctions-relevant documents, it is not certain that the resulting resource would be comprehensive.

⁶ TIES records, for example, whether the origin of sanctions is legislative, bureaucratic, or executive, but no further information is provided, and the variable is frequently given as a missing value.

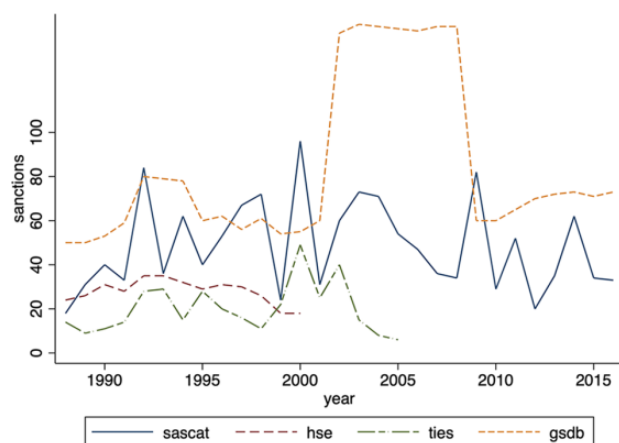


Figure 2. US economic sanctions: Countries subject to sanctions in four datasets

scholars tend to miss:⁷ congressional action on coercion is – surprisingly often – aimed at norm-promotion. This norm-promotion concerns behavior as varied as coup d'états, child abduction, and nuclear non-proliferation.

While others have bemoaned the legislature's lack of capacity for quick action, especially in foreign policy crises, we see in it also an advantage. Game-theoretic models of extended deterrence show that, when a sender can commit to fight every violator, violations are least likely to begin with (Fudenberg & Tirole, 1991). The question is how to engineer such commitment so that it is believable. Having a law on the books that ties the president's hands may serve this role. Communicating credible commitment and thus achieving extended deterrence may be the true comparative advantage of Congress in economic coercion.

The issue of producing threats via credible (legislative) commitment is related to the issue of delegation: how much authority the president has to decide on sanctions' implementation. As Fiorina (1982) has argued, the legislature is not naturally enamored of conceding authority to the presidency. There are different ways in which executive authority can be circumscribed in economic sanctions. Two key ways are: making the sanctions binding, by requiring their imposition or, conditional on making the sanctions binding, allowing the president to issue a certification or a waiver, thereby avoiding the imposition of sanctions.

A large literature shows that partisan motivations have major impact on congressional activity in US foreign policy (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007; Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2007; Kriner, 2010; Snyder, Shapiro & Bloch-

Table I. Logit model of contributors to binding sanction laws

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> <i>Binding yes/no</i>	
	(1)	(2)
other_actors	0.854** (0.218)	0.857** (0.219)
mixed_control		0.272 [†] (0.160)
target_any_gov	0.762** (0.195)	0.766** (0.195)
constant	1.040** (0.092)	0.857** (0.134)
Observations	932	925
Log likelihood	−506.904	−503.629
Akaike inf. crit.	1,019.80	1,015.259

[†] $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Elkon, 2009; Jeong & Quirk, 2019).⁸ This work would imply that the degree of presidential flexibility in sanctions legislation would be heavily driven by the partisan balance between Congress and the president – for instance, that Congress would be more likely to grant the president discretion on sanctions when it is controlled by the president's party.

Yet, Congress shapes sanctions policy not only based on domestic political considerations, but also with an eye toward effective foreign policy. We observe that more than 20% of sanctions laws are 'sense of Congress' or other measures that do not force executive action. Such measures may be implemented, if the president decides to. But why Congress would make them optional is something of a puzzle. It may be that they are ways to convey a signal to foreign partners without the aggravating or offense-causing implications of passing a binding law aimed at allies.⁹

Table I shows results of a logit model, estimating the likelihood of sanctions legislation being binding, rather than falling in one of the non-binding categories in the data (we used STATA 16). The mentioning of foreign partners and multilateral organizations (variable 'other_actors') is significantly associated with non-binding documents. Sanctions laws with broad remit (variable 'target_any_gov' measures whether sanctions target any violator of a standard) are more likely to seek to bind the president's hands. The partisan control variable

⁸ See also Schultz (2017), Goldgeier & Saunders (2018).

⁹ For instance, consider the following example from a 1996 law: 'Urges the President to commence diplomatic efforts with US allies to establish multilateral trade sanctions against Iran' (Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, P.L. 104–172).

⁷ In an exception to this rule, Miller (2014) has shown that US legislation has deterred potential nuclear proliferating states from pursuing weapons programs.

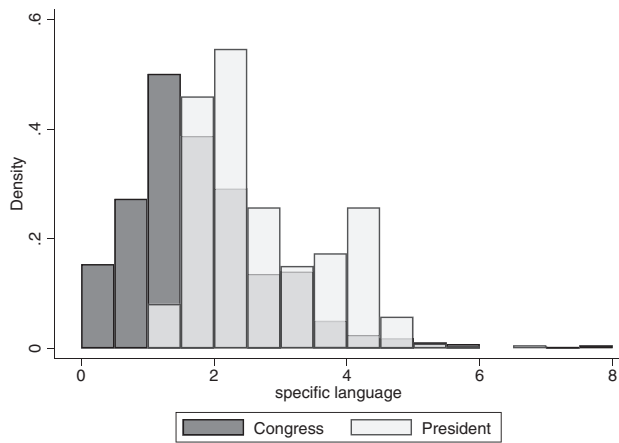


Figure 3. Measure of the specificity of sanctions language: ratio of concrete words and entities to vague words and conditionals

‘mixed_control’, which is a dummy coded as 1 when the same party does not control both the presidency and both chambers of Congress, is significant at the 90% level, with mixed party control translating to less delegated discretion. Our data allow scholars to study binding hands in economic sanctions in ways other efforts do not.

Understanding variation in the degree and type of authority Congress gives the presidency regarding the use of pressure may have important implications for how we think about the design and effectiveness of US economic sanctions – and, possibly, of sanctions generally. Congress must contend with the fact that, once a law is passed, enforcement reverts to the executive branch (Early & Preble, 2020). If legislators are able to provide a complete list of contingent instructions, the enforcing actor would always know how to act in order to fulfill the legislative mandate – and, if the legislation does not include opt-out provisions, the enforcing actor may be unable to deviate from those instructions. There is evidence that Congress uses more conditional language in its sanctions legislation than the president in presidential actions. Figure 3 shows the comparative ratio of concrete words and named entities to that of vague words and conditional statements.¹⁰ Congressional language is less specific and more conditional.

¹⁰ See Eichorst & Lin (2019) on the methodology for measuring vague vs. concrete language in a corpus. To take a couple of examples, ‘sometimes’/‘some’ and ‘always’/‘all’ are parts of more vague and more concrete statements. Entities refers to named-entity-recognition: these are specific people and organizations, as detected by text analysis (McCallum & Li, 2003). Conditionals are statements such as ‘if and only if’, ‘unless’, and others.

Table II. Presidential discretion and the length of a sanctions provision in binding sanctions laws

	(1) <i>Short provisions</i>	(2) <i>Long provisions</i>
avg. words	86	578
waiver	25%	49%
certification	36%	56%
Observations	622	59

While conditional statements help specify what steps should be met by the target of sanctions, two types of additional instruments allow Congress to further narrow down what discretion the president has in deciding the course of sanctions against the target: waivers and certifications. About 42% of the legislative texts requiring the president to impose sanctions also allow for the executive to either issue a certification or a waiver, thus potentially averting the imposition of sanctions. As it happens, more than a third of presidential actions are documents in which the executive branch takes advantage of this authority. The latter distinction is important, even if seldom recognized. Certification involves the president transmitting to Congress a notification that a potential target is in compliance with the goals of sanctions. Waiver authority means the president needs only to state that applying sanctions is not in the US national interest, a phrase that allows a very broad remit. Importantly, in the case of a waiver, the target is not said to be in compliance with the objective of sanctions. Rather, the message is that imposing sanctions would be too costly in some way to the United States.

Table II demonstrates that both waivers and certifications play a significant part of congressional sanctions. The table also helps demonstrate that whether the president receives authority of either kind may depend on the length of a sanctions provision – which can itself reflect how complex the issue is.

SASCAT and future work

Our new dataset strongly suggests that future work may shed light on the role of partisan divisions and inter-branch preferences over economic coercion. Recent skirmishes between Congress and the president over sanctions suggest that each office may have preferences that are more strongly rooted in the structural position and incentives of each branch than in partisan orientations (Tama, 2020). Future work can use our data as a useful departure point to understand such dynamics.

Another contribution of the approach we facilitate is that it accounts for a richer set of signals that can be sent via economic sanctions policy. Whereas existing approaches see the possibility of costly signals only in imposed measures, the legislative process allows Congress to signal US interests in another way. Further work can consider how and which allies are mentioned in legislation, and connect them to the eventual level of cooperation and success observed.

Further research could focus on adapting our approach in order to recognize sanctions in other types of data (for instance news articles). Future work can also apply our approach to the design of sanctions policy by other countries and by multilateral sanctioning organizations such as the European Union and United Nations (Giumelli, Hoffmann & Ksiazczakova, 2021; Biersteker, Eckert & Tourinho, 2016). While the roles of legislatures on international issues vary across countries, a growing body of scholarship has shown that many legislatures have substantial influence over foreign policy (Raunio & Wagner, 2017; Mello & Peters, 2018). This foreign policy involvement of legislatures often includes involvement in sanctions policymaking. For instance, legislatures in European Union member states are responsible for passing national legislation to impose certain sanctions. Legislators can also influence sanctions policymaking at the EU level. For instance, in 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for a new EU human rights sanctions regime, which led to the establishment of such a regime by the European Council the following year.¹¹ In addition, multilateral institutions establishing sanctions can provide different types of authorities or grant different levels of flexibility to the national governments responsible for implementing the sanctions. Questions of design, delegation, and discretion are therefore relevant in a variety of contexts and our approach can be helpful in a variety of ways.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets>.

Authors' note


Authors' names in alphabetical order.


¹¹ Hagar Hajjar, 'The European Magnitsky Law: A milestone with a lot of potential', Atlantic Council (10 December 2020).

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