

## UNITED NATIONS SANCTIONS AND PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR TARGET LEADERS' POLICY CHOICES

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### **Abstract:**

Previous sanctions research shows that international institutions, such as the United Nations, can shape sanctions effectiveness by helping members of a sanctioning coalition overcome collective action problems. We argue that sanction institutionalization plays another important role – it influences the target country's willingness to resist sanctions by altering public support for the target government's decisions. We formulate theoretical expectations that link sanctions institutionalization to changed views among the target public. These expectations help us design a survey experiment to evaluate the proposed relationships and underlying causal mechanisms in the case of hypothetical sanctions imposed by the United Nations, on the one hand, and China or the United States, on the other. We conducted the survey experiment in India in 2022. Our results suggest that target leadership experiences a decline in public support when they refuse to offer concessions under institutionalized sanctions imposed by the UN. In contrast, the leaders do not suffer a similar political cost when they choose to stand firm against unilateral sanctions, or when they back down and offer concessions to a unilateral sender or the UN.

## **Introduction**

Much of sanctions scholarship approaches economic sanctions as a coercive foreign policy, i.e., an economic restriction that threatens or imposes costs on a country with the goal of changing its policy (implemented or anticipated). All main sources of sanctions data (HSE, TIES, TSC, EUSANCT, and GSDB) collect and code information consistently with this conceptualization. Yet, economic costs generated by sanctions often fail to translate into policy concessions from the targeted country. Peksen (2019) points out that existing studies may be ill equipped to assess causes of sanction failures because these studies suffer from the sender-biased conception of sanctions effectiveness. An alternative – and likely more fruitful approach – is to connect the impact of sanctions on the target country to domestic reactions to this impact. Domestic political developments would then help explain target governments' responses to senders' demands and hence sanctions outcomes.

Our argument builds on this insight: domestic support for the target government's policy choices constitutes a key element of the causal mechanism underpinning sanctions success. When support declines in response to economic sanctions and their impact, the leadership experiences political costs, which can threaten its tenure in office (Marinov 2005). Although the target government can attempt to minimize or even reverse political costs by generating a rally-round-the-flag effect or through suppression of critical voices, these methods may not be effective, especially in more democratic target countries. Hence, the government may find it preferable to grant concessions to the sender to be able to remain in office. We focus on this link between sanctions and public support for leaders' decisions in target countries.

We argue that domestic audiences alter their support for leaders' decisions in response to sanction institutionalization. Previous research finds that only two factors are robustly associated with sanctions success: economic costs and sanctions institutionalization (Bapat et al. 2013). Therefore, institutional backing should be instrumental in explaining political costs to the target government through reduction in domestic support.

To investigate whether public opinion takes sanction institutionalization into account and, if it does, whether the change in public opinion favors the government, we design a survey experiment which asks respondents to express their support for their government's policies in the face of sanctions imposed by another country or an international organization. Our survey also includes questions probing the respondents' motivations for the answers they provide.

We find that sanction institutionalization is politically costly for target leaders when they refuse to offer concessions. In contrast, there is no evidence of such political costs when the target stands firm against unilateral sanctions. In addition, we conclude that our finding stems from the respondents' concerns regarding personal economic costs associated with institutionalized

sanctions. In contrast, two other motivations – the legitimacy and reputational effects of institutionalized sanctions – do not receive support in our analyses.

### **Sanctions, Multilateral Institutions, and Public Opinion**

How do institutional institutions shape the success of sanctions? Existing studies of economic sanctions indicate that international institutions can influence the likelihood of policy concessions by sanctioned countries, especially in the case of multilateral sanctions (Mansfield 1995; Cortell and Davis 1996; Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2008; Biersteker et al. 2018). Multilateral sanctions can generate more significant costs for the target country than unilateral measures (Bapat and Morgan 2009; Weber and Schneider 2020). However, the incentive to free-ride and the risk of co-senders' defection threaten the multilateral sanctions' effectiveness. Co-senders can turn to international institutions to mitigate these cooperation challenges. Institutions promote cooperation within the sanctioning coalition through various mechanisms, such as facilitating collective decision-making, monitoring and verifying compliance with sanctions requirements, and using issue linkages to incentivize compliance (Martin 1992, 1993; Drezner 2000). Consequently, sanction institutionalization should have a positive effect on the target country's costs.

This theoretical expectation has been met with some debate in empirical studies gauging the effectiveness of sanctions backed by international organizations. Early and Spice (2015) argue that international institutions are not uniform in their ability to enhance cooperation. Specifically, institutions with larger memberships have lower success rates in reducing countries' sanction-busting behavior than smaller institutions. This difference can be attributed to challenges associated with establishing and maintaining cooperation in larger groups. This implies that global institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), may not be as successful as regional institutions like the European Union (EU). Weber and Schneider (2022) challenge this conclusion and report that the UN and EU sanctions have comparable success rates – two-thirds of sanctions imposed by these institutions reach their objectives; in contrast, unilateral US sanctions succeed in 41% of cases. On balance, empirical evidence supports the conclusion that sanctions institutionalization – securing the backing of an international institution in support of a sanctioning coalition – can increase economic pressure on the target government, thereby improving the odds of sanctions success.

At the same time, international institutions enhance the overall efficiency of coercive efforts by reducing sender governments' costs of sanctions due to coordination, monitoring, and enforcement activities. Drezner (2000) argues that international institutions are crucial because they can alleviate enforcement difficulties endemic to multilateral sanctions. Bapat and Morgan (2009:1080) use TIES data to confirm that international institutions matter in determining sanction

success since “certain institutional structures governing the decision process of the coalition could serve to provide consistency to the [sanction] coalition’s demands.”<sup>1</sup> These findings indicate that international institutions substantially decrease the bargaining and enforcement costs of sanctions, making sanctions a less costly foreign policy option for sender governments and hence decreasing their likelihood of backing down from sanction implementation.

Another motivation for sanction institutionalization centers on the greater legitimacy of coercive measures, including economic sanctions, when imposed or supported by an international organization. Brzoska (2015) suggests that senders are more willing to cooperate and avoid sanction-busting if they perceive sanctions as legitimate, and such perception tends to favor international organizations. The perception of legitimacy is critical because international institutions do not possess independent mechanisms for sanctions enforcement. Consequently, the success of institutionalized sanctions primarily depends on member governments’ acceptance of economic restrictions adopted by the institution and willingness to adjust their behavior in compliance with these restrictions. Voluntary compliance makes enforcement easier for the primary sender government and helps reduce sanction-busting, whether implicit or explicit.

Moreover, the participation of international institutions can help convey a credible message to the target and legitimize the use of economic coercion as the right thing to do. Martin (1993) argues that sanctions are more likely to succeed if a leading sanctioner bears more costs and receives the backing of an international institution, which increases domestic audience costs and, thus, boosts the credibility of the sender’s commitment. Hurd (2005) also shows that the collective legitimation process in international institutions can shape the sender country’s strategic responses. External authorization of coercion can affect participants’ belief systems and lead to adjustments in their behavior, as well as provide a moral justification for the use of sanctions. This shift in favor of coercive policies occurs in countries that initiate such policies, as well as among domestic publics abroad (Thompson 2006). More generally, the endorsement of coercive measures by international institutions produces a pro-coercion shift in public opinion.

Note that much of previous research centers on governments imposing sanctions – their beliefs, preferences, and choices – and their influences on the outcome of economic sanctions. Much less attention has been given to analyzing whether and how these macro-level relationships between institutionalized sanctions, on the one hand, and costs and legitimacy of economic coercion, on the other, shape individuals’ perceptions. Therefore, in contrast to existing country-level or government-level studies, our investigation of sanction institutionalization focuses on the views of citizens, particularly citizens of target countries. In this paper, we examine *how sanction institutionalization affects target country citizens’ beliefs regarding the costs and legitimacy of*

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<sup>1</sup> This study departs from previous research, such as Martin (1993) and Drezner (2000), which relies on the HSEO data.

*sanctions*. These beliefs, in turn, can exert pressure on the target government to alter its behavior and offer concessions to senders to avoid sanctions or have them lifted once imposed.

What are the effects of public opinion on the success of sanctions? A growing number of studies seek to understand under what conditions citizens of sender and target countries support coercive policies. On the sender's side, there is a long history of scholarship explaining the effects of public opinion and citizen attitudes on the onset of aggressive foreign policies (Mueller 1973; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Holsti 2004; Baum and Potter 2008; Canes-Wrone 2015). Research on the symbolic use of sanctions (Whang 2011; McLean and Whang 2014; Heinrich et al. 2017) and the domestic politics of economic coercion (McLean and Roblyer 2016; Fang and Li 2020; Kohno et al. 2021) also demonstrates that the sender country leaders pay attention to the domestic public opinion when they impose sanctions.

On the target's side, recent studies find that public opinion in target countries has a nuanced relationship with economic sanctions. Specifically, scholars assess whether sanctions make the target country's public adopt a more hostile position towards the sanctioning country and support their government's policy that triggered economic sanctions. These assessments take two main methodological approaches: a statistical analysis using observational data (Seitz and Zazzaro 2019; Hellmeier 2021), or a survey experiment (Grauvogel 2015; Grossman et al. 2018; Frye 2019; Alexseev and Hale 2020; Gueorguiev et al. 2020; Sejersen 2021). Overall, findings are mixed, and the target country public's attitudes towards sanctions and their incumbent leaders, as well as government policies, vary depending on the framing of sanctions.

At the same time, these studies agree that sanctions may not produce the desired public pressure on sanctioned countries' leadership. In sanctioned autocracies, pro-government mobilization tends to increase, and the public remains primarily supportive of their government, although deteriorating economic circumstances may erode this support (Frye 2019; Hellmeier 2020). In democratic target countries, public support for the sanctioned government and its policies generally grows (Grossman et al. 2018; Seitz and Zazzaro 2019). Therefore, senders' efforts to generate domestic pressure on target governments appear to fail, and may even result in a backlash effect, rallying greater domestic support for sanctioned governments.

Importantly, these studies opt for a research design that is either agnostic about the identity of sanctioners or highly context-specific, especially in the case of experiments. Little is known about target countries' public attitudes towards sanctions imposed by international institutions, let alone public support or opposition to sanction-related responses of the target government. The lack of research in this area is surprising given that institutionalization of multilateral sanctions raises the predicted probability of success by at least 83% (Bapat and Morgan 2009: 1091). Our paper fills this gap by employing a survey experiment to evaluate how the target country public responds to institutionalized sanctions and their government's responses to these sanctions. We expect

sanctions institutionalization to shape the target public's beliefs about the costs and legitimacy of sanctions and the desirability of their government's response options, thereby influencing public support for government policy during a sanctions episode.

### **Sanction Institutionalization and the Target Public's Support for Leaders' Decisions**

Our study follows previous research in identifying the target population as a political actor who can influence sanctioned countries' willingness to offer concessions to sender countries. If the public fails to support their government or its policies in the face of economic sanctions, this domestic pressure can reduce the government's resolve to stand firm. At the same time, our approach differs from the previous studies of public opinion in sanctioned countries in that we focus on determinants of public opinion and investigate the role of sanction institutionalization.<sup>2</sup> A wide range of scholarly works studies the relationship between international institutions and public opinion. For example, informational asymmetry leads members of the public to take cues from international institutions when their leader attempts to use aggressive foreign policies, and international institutions function as a mechanism that endorses or constrains the ability of national leaders to go to war (Chapman and Reiter 2004; Chapman 2009; Fang 2008; Thompson 2009). Overall, the public generally pays attention to messages from international institutions in their decision to support coercive measures but varies considerably in the strength of this preference (Jentleson 2003; Eichenberg 2005; Page and Bouton 2008).

Do international institutions matter in the politics of economic sanctions? We argue that the target country's public forms perceptions regarding sanctions' costs and legitimacy, and sanction institutionalization shapes these perceptions. These perceptions can explain what causes variation in the public preference in the targeted country for sanction institutionalization. We suggest three effects of sanction institutionalization on the public support for the target government's policies.

First, the population of a targeted country recognizes the role that institutions play in enabling and maintaining cooperation among sender countries (Johns and Davies 2014; Grieco et al. 2011; Bearce and Cook 2018). Greater co-sender cooperation implies fewer overt and covert opportunities for circumventing sanctions and a greater likelihood of maintaining a durable sanctioning coalition. Under these circumstances, the target population should conclude that sanctions will generate greater costs for their country than in the case of unilateral sanctions, and

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<sup>2</sup> Grossman et al. (2018) analyze the effect of sender identity and differentiate between unilateral sanctions and multilateral sanctions; their study conceptualizes both US and EU sanctions as unilateral, whereas multilateral sanctions are imposed by the Middle East Quartet (the UN, the EU, the US and Russia). In contrast, our theoretical approach follows traditional sanctions literature (e.g., Drezner 2000, Bapat and Morgan 2009) to define the identity of sanctioners. That is, we define sanctions by individual sender governments as unilateral sanctions, by multiple sender governments as multilateral sanctions, and by multilateral sanctions with institutional support or backing as institutionalized sanctions.

hence policy concessions may be a more preferable course of action. Similarly, the institutionalization of economic sanctions signals to the target country's residents a broader international acceptance of restrictions imposed against the target's economy. Greater legitimacy of sanctions is costly because it increases other countries' willingness to comply voluntarily with sanctions. Higher rates of compliance, then, reinforce the cost-based effect of institutionalized sanctions.

Target compliance occurs when the target government chooses to back down on the policies that caused sanctions, as opposed to standing firm upon institutionalized sanctions. This implies that the cost effects of sanctions on public opinion depend on target responses to sanctions. It is possible that backing down from the initial policy reveals the inconsistency of the government's commitment, thereby signaling the incompetency of the government and generating concerns about the reputation and credibility of future initiatives (Guisinger and Smith, 2002; Gelpi and Grieco, 2015; Tomz, 2007). However, backing down does not have to lead to public punishment because institutionalized sanctions create greater costs. Backing down will lead to the termination of sanctions, making all the expected costs of sanctions unrealized. The government's decision to back down can be justified to evade sanction costs. On the other hand, standing firm against sanctions implies that the target country should embrace all the expected costs, which the target public should consider when evaluating the government's decision. In sum, we expect the cost effects of sanctions institutionalization, if any, would result in less public support the government decisions particularly when the government stands firm.

Second, enhanced legitimacy of economic coercion through institutional backing can result in damage to the target country's reputation. While the target government can dismiss unilateral sanctions as an adversarial government's self-serving effort, which requires resistance, it is more challenging to use the same justification for standing firm in the face of a broad multilateral coalition supported by an international organization. Reputationally, resistance becomes more difficult because the target country stands in opposition to a unified effort from the country's neighbors or the global community, depending on the type of sanctioning institution. The public's concern for their country's international standing and reputation could convince the citizens that resistance would be too damaging. Their government should offer concessions in exchange for sanctions termination.

Third, an alternative reputational effect can emerge if the target's public believes their government ought to stand up to the sanctioning international organization to establish a reputation for resolve. When a government resists coercive efforts, it signals to foreign audiences that it is determined to prevail, regardless of economic costs. Such a signal should be particularly strong when the target resists a sender coalition unified by institutionalized sanctions with their ability to impose severe sanction costs. Once the target country establishes the reputation of a highly resolved political actor, it can expect to do better in future international negotiations and deter potential attempts at

coercion. Suppose the target country's population recognizes the benefit of standing firm in the present to realize future benefits. In that case, it may approve of a government's tough stance and dislike concessions prior to or after sanction imposition.

Note that the first two effects of sanctions institutionalization point in the same direction, while the third suggests the opposite relationship between sanction institutionalization and the public's approval of their government's decision-making. We summarize these expectations as follows:

- The cost effect: Target populations' perception of anticipated sanction costs shapes their preference for their government's response to sanctions.
- The legitimacy effect: Target populations' perception of sanction legitimacy shapes their preference for their government's response to sanctions.
- The reputational effect: Target populations' perception of reputational benefits from standing firm shapes their preference for their government's response to sanctions.

If residents of a target country view institutionalized sanctions as a more costly or legitimate form of economic coercion, they should prefer conflict de-escalation as a policy response by their government. This means that before sanction imposition, the target government should seek to avoid sanctions by offering concessions on the issue that caused the dispute in the first place. Secondly, if the sender does impose sanctions, the target government should not stand firm in the face of economic coercion; concessions and the return to status quo ante would be the preferred policy path. If, however, the government deviates from these preferred responses, we expect target country residents to disapprove of their government's decisions. Thus, when the cost or legitimacy effects dominate, we expect that the target's public will oppose standing firm on the institutionalized sanctions, while they will not oppose backing down.

In contrast, if the target's public primarily values their country's reputation for resolve, they should prefer their government to confront the sender's demands with resistance before and after sanction imposition. When the target government refuses to back down and continues implementing the policy that resulted in an international dispute, the population's approval of the government's decision-making should increase. On the flip side, concessions at any stage of the sanctions interactions should lead to a decline in public approval. In sum, target country residents' support of their government's decision-making should depend on the relative scale of these effects. Although the effects of sanctions institutionalization can operate simultaneously, one may dominate in a given sanctions episode, which should be reflected in changes in public support for their government's policies.

We translate these theoretical expectations of links between sanctions institutionalization and public opinion in target countries into a survey experiment. Specifically, we examine which effect is dominant in determining the public support for the target government's decisions to stand firm



or back down when faced with institutionalized sanctions. We formulate our theoretical expectations in two stages. In the first stage, if the reputational effect is greater than the other two effects of costs and legitimacy, we expect that the target population will support the government response when the government stands firm against sanctions and will oppose it if the government chooses to back down. However, suppose the target population's preference is primarily responsive to sanction costs or institutional legitimacy. In that case, we expect the target population to oppose the government response when it stands firm against sanctions and support when it backs down, thereby offering concessions to the sender. This result would lead us to the second stage, where we attempt to differentiate between the sanction costs and the institutional legitimacy mechanisms. We use our experiment results to offer suggestive evidence regarding why target populations disapprove of the government's response to stand firm and vice versa under institutional sanctions.

## **Research Design**

To investigate the effects of sanctions on public support for government decisions, we conducted an online survey experiment in India in January 2022. We focus on the Indian case to offer a unique opportunity to empirically examine how sanctions, particularly those by multilateral institutions, affect public opinion in a realistic setting. Historically, India has experienced a large number of sanctions: according to the Threat and Imposition of Sanctions (TIES) dataset, which covers the period between 1945 and 2005, the country was the target of 31 sanctions episodes out of the total of 1412 cases. The US was the primary sender in 20 cases, and the dataset also records 3 cases of multilateral sanctions.

We collected data from a diverse sample of 5,066 adults in India, including hard-to-reach groups, such as ethnic minorities and seniors, recruited by Dynata. Our recruited sample is close to the nationally representative sample with respect to gender, age, regions, and education (based on the adult population, as reflected in the Census, i.e., 18 years of age and older). To screen out inattentive respondents, we included built-in manipulation checks in the survey: asked respondents not to choose any numbers between 0 and 9, and those who chose any numbers were dropped from the sample. We also removed those respondents who are over 100 years old or who provided flat-lining or straight-lining through grid questions to ensure that our findings are not driven by suspicious responses. As a robustness check, we also check if the main findings remain substantively the same when removing speeders (those who spent less time than 1/3 of the median time spent by the whole sample to finish the survey).

The experiment presents respondents with a hypothetical case about the Indian government's decision to purchase military systems, which can lead to economic sanctions against India. Note that, although the scenario presented to our respondents is hypothetical, it draws on the actual

foreign policy decision made by the Indian government to represent a realistic event: in 2018, India and Russia signed a “\$5.5 billion deal for five long-range surface-to-air missile systems, which India says it needs to counter a threat from China.” In response, the United States threatened India with a range of sanctions under Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which lists Russia as an adversary for its attacks against Ukraine, 2016 election meddling in the US, and support for the Assad regime in Syria. Previously, the United States had imposed sanctions under CAATSA against Turkey for a similar purchase of Russian S-400 missiles. Russia delivered the S-400 air defense missile systems to India in 2021.

Our respondents read the following vignette: “the Indian government signed a \$5.5 billion deal to purchase defensive surface-to-air missile systems. These systems can target and attack multiple aircraft and will strengthen India’s air defense network.” Our experiment design includes the strategic sequencing of actions by the Indian government and external actors to estimate how a series of actions may affect public support, as illustrated in Figure 1. For the external actors, we opt for realistic scenarios in which the sanctioner is either an actual international organization or a government of an actual country. Therefore, our scenarios feature the United Nations as a multilateral sender, and the United States and China as unilateral senders. We provide respondents with a relatively more friendly nation (the United States) and a less friendly or even potentially adversarial country (China) as external actors which can impose sanctions on India.<sup>3</sup> We provide two alternative scenarios of unilateral senders because of our decision to go with realistic scenarios: we need to be careful to consider the possibility that individual characteristics of a selected country can affect our findings. Hence, we identified two plausible senders that are sufficiently different in their characteristics (e.g., distance to India, political regime type, foreign policy similarity with India) to see if our survey yields different results.

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<sup>3</sup> In the survey experiment, respondents were asked how friendly they think the US and China, respectively. We confirmed that the respondents generally consider the US a relatively more friendly country: 76% of the respondents said the US is friendly. In comparison, only 56% of the respondents think China is friendly.

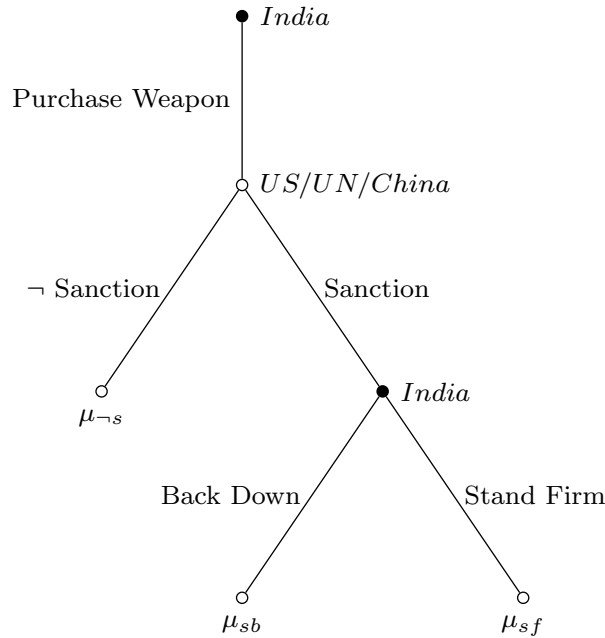


Figure 1: Sanction Interaction between the Target (India) and the Sender

Broadly, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions – (i) the no-sanction condition in which sanctions were not imposed (denoted  $\mu_{\neg s}$ ), (ii) the back-down condition in which the Indian government revoked its decision to purchase the military systems due to the sanctions (denoted  $\mu_{sb}$ ), and (iii) the stand-firm condition in which the Indian government decided to complete its purchase of the military systems despite the sanctions (denoted  $\mu_{sf}$ ). For the no-sanction condition, which serves as a control condition in the analysis, no further information about other external actors’ decisions was provided. For the back-down and stand-firm conditions, we state that either the UN, US, or China imposed sanctions against India due to the weapon purchase and provide information about substantial sanctions costs after the brief description of the Indian government’s weapon purchase. Specifically, the vignettes include the following text:

“The purchase has led to a dispute with [the United Nations / the United States / China], which passed a law that any country purchasing such military equipment could face sanctions. [The United Nations / The United States / China] strongly opposes India’s purchase of the missile systems and threatened to impose sanctions if India does not cancel the deal. The Indian government did not revoke the decision to purchase the air defense systems. In response, [the United Nations / the United States / China] imposed economic restrictions against India. Experts estimate that sanctions are costly for India, reducing its per capita Gross Domestic Product by 5% and significantly increasing inflation and unemployment. An average Indian household can expect to lose more than 1,300 Indian Rupees per month due to sanctions.”

Then, the respondents assigned to the back-down conditions read that “the Indian government decides to back down in the face of [the United Nations’ / the United States’ / China’s] costly sanctions. India’s Prime Minister announces that his government will cancel the contract to purchase the missile systems.” In contrast, those in the stand-firm condition saw the following text: “the Indian government decides to stand firm in the face of [the United Nations’ / the United States’ / China’s] costly sanctions. India’s Prime Minister announces that his government will not change the decision to purchase the missile systems.”

In short, we manipulate the information about (i) the imposition of sanctions, (ii) the Indian government’s reactions, and (iii) the identity of the sanctioners. To check whether the random assignment was properly implemented, we calculated standardized mean differences in basic demographic characteristics between each experimental group. As Table A2 provided in the Appendix shows, the standardized mean differences are below 0.1 in almost all comparisons, suggesting that the groups are well-balanced.

After receiving an experimental condition, respondents were asked to evaluate how much they supported or opposed the Indian government’s decision to purchase defensive surface-to-air missile systems described on a 5-point scale that ran from “strongly oppose (1)” to “strongly support (5).”

Based on this experimental setup, we seek to estimate the following three quantities of interest – sanction effects, back-down effects, and stand-firm effects. We define the sanction effects as the difference between the average of the mean responses in the back-down and stand-firm conditions ( $(\mu_{sb} + \mu_{sf})/2$ ) and the mean response in the no-sanction conditions ( $\mu_{-s}$ ). Moreover, we estimate the back-down and stand-firm effects by subtracting  $\mu_{-s}$  from  $\mu_{sb}$  and  $\mu_{sf}$ , respectively. To do so, we estimate a regression model with indicators for the conditions that we experimentally manipulate. In the estimations, we control for a series of pre-treatment covariates (e.g., gender, age, employment status, education, etc.) to obtain precise estimates. We confirm that the omission of the covariates does not substantively change the results.

## **Discussion of Results**

The first set of our analyses evaluates the effects of sanctions on public support for the target government’s policy. Figure 2 summarizes the effects of sanctions imposed by three different senders: the UN, the US, and China. We compare the target public’s approval at the baseline level (i.e., in the no-sanction scenario) with the mean approval level from the back-down and stand-firm treatments for each sender. Our results indicate that public support for the government’s decision declines when a multilateral organization, such as the UN, imposes sanctions against the country. The estimated difference in public support is negative and statistically significant at conventional levels under institutionalized sanctions. In contrast, unilateral sanctions do not produce a

statistically significant effect on public approval of the government's policy, regardless of the sender's identity. We find that estimated support levels are not distinguishable from 0 when the sanction initiator is either a more friendly nation (i.e., the US) or a less friendly country (i.e., China).

These findings are consistent with existing research, pointing out that multilateral sanctions tend to have a higher success rate in extracting concessions from the target government (Bapat and Morgan 2009). Since the target government recognizes a deterioration in public approval of its disputed policy, the government targeted by multilateral sanctions has stronger incentives to back down on its policy. Unilateral sanctions do not significantly erode public support for the policy at stake; hence, the target government does not bear a political cost and will be more reluctant to concede.

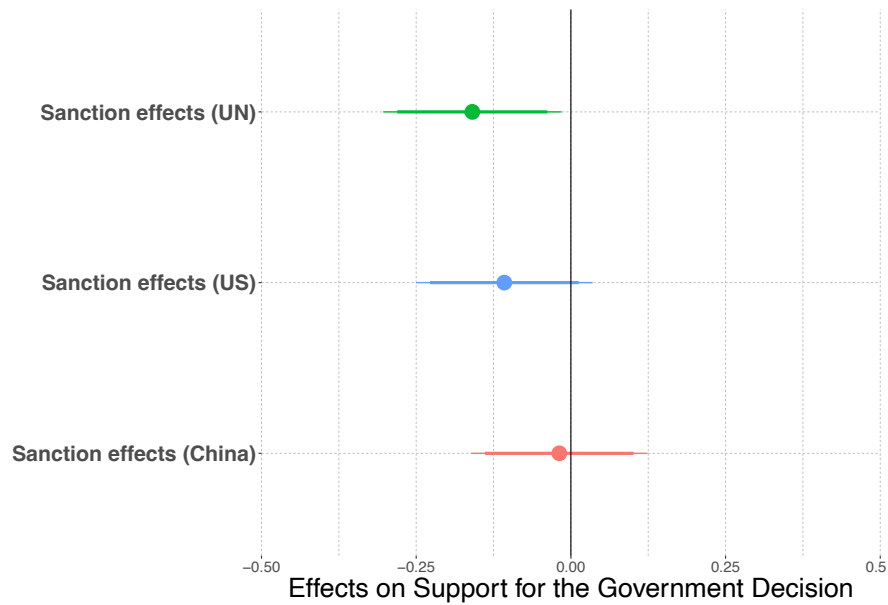


Figure 2. Effects of Sanction Imposition on Public Support for Government Policy

Next, we investigate whether government responses to economic coercion can help explain changes in public support levels. To do so, we report estimates of public approval in the sanction scenarios when the target government chooses to stand firm or back down by offering concessions on its controversial policy. Figure 3 shows that target government responses can in fact alter how the public reacts to economic coercion, but only in the case of institutionalized sanctions. When the target government chooses to stand firm against UN-imposed sanctions, public approval for the disputed policy experiences a statistically significant decline from the level in the baseline, no-sanction case. We also find that, if the government decides to back down under sanctions, public approval declines, but this change is not statistically significant. These two results suggest that the adverse effect of UN sanctions on public support is largely linked to the public's dislike of the government's resistance in the face of institutionalized coercion; however, the government can

mitigate the public's dissatisfaction by offering concessions, paving the way for sanctions termination.

In the case of unilateral sanctions, government responses do not sway public opinion, regardless of the sender's identity. The target government does not face public backlash – or receive greater support – when it opts for resistance or concessions. Public support levels remain statistically indistinguishable from the baseline no-sanction scenario when the target government stands firm or backs down in a dispute with China or the US. This suggests that, while the public reacts to institutionalized sanctions and their government's response to these sanctions, other sanctions do not influence public opinion, regardless of the sender country identity.

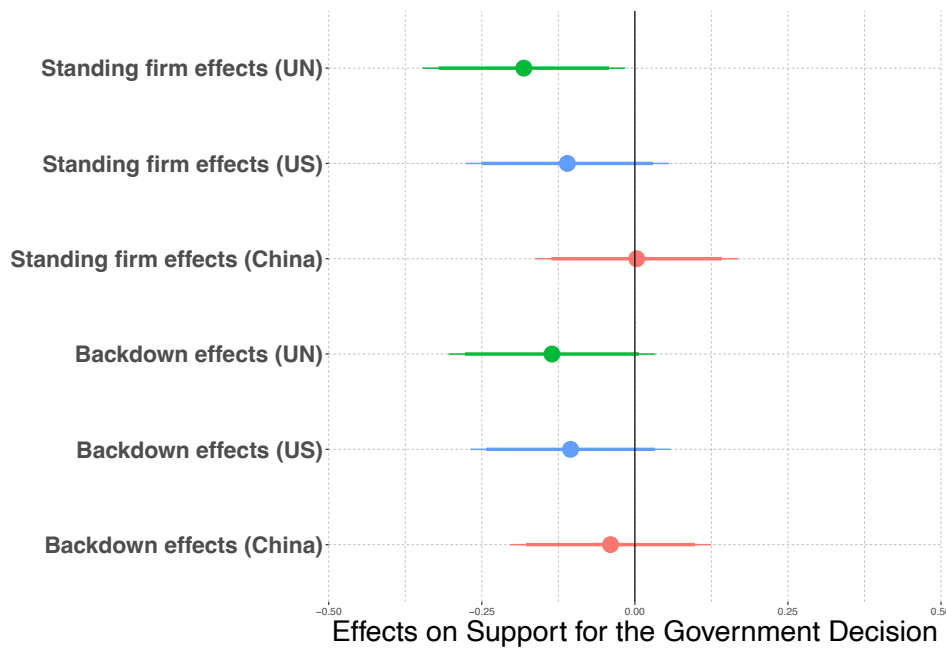


Figure 3. Effects of Target Government's Sanction Responses on Public Support for Government Policy

### Exploring Mechanisms Generating the UN Sanction Effects

Why does public support decline significantly in the target country when sanctions are imposed by the international organization, particularly when the target government decides to stand firm despite the sanctions? In this section, we examine three potential mechanisms behind the public's approval of their government's decisions to stand firm or back down after the institutionalized sanctions as specified in the theory section: the costs, legitimacy, and reputational effects.

First, we explore whether concerns about economic or reputational costs are systematically greater when the respondents were exposed to the UN sanction scenario. In the experiment, we asked a series of questions about the reasons behind the respondents' support for the government decisions after presenting the scenario. Specifically, the respondents were asked whether (i) personal economic costs, (ii) national economic costs, or (iii) the country's reputation and future credibility would explain their decisions to support or oppose the government decision.<sup>4</sup> Then, we created binary indicators for these three possible reasons to estimate the probability of selecting each reason when the target government either stands firm or backs down in the face of the UN-led sanctions.<sup>5</sup>

Second, we check the legitimacy mechanism by asking respondents if the government policy to purchase the military systems was not the right policy in the first place. We investigate whether the respondents who received the UN sanction condition are more likely to consider the government policy illegitimate.<sup>6</sup> We expect that if the legitimacy mechanism dominates, the respondents who read the scenario in which the target government stands firm against UN-imposed sanctions would be less supportive of the government's policy that resulted in the UN sanctions.

Figure 4 displays the results of regressions in which we show how the cost, legitimacy, and reputation effects of UN sanctions shape public approval after the target government's choice to stand firm or back down. Specifically, the difference between treatment (e.g.,  $\mu_{sf}$  or the UN sanctions followed by the stand-firm response condition) and control groups (e.g.,  $\mu_{-s}$  or the no-sanction condition) is regressed on each mechanism. These analyses suggest that the cost effect dominates among the three mechanisms. Those assigned to the UN sanctions/stand-firm condition in panel (a) are more likely to consider personal economic costs when evaluating the government decision than those in the control condition. The coefficient for the UN sanctions/stand-firm condition is positive and statistically significant at .1, as we would expect if the cost effect dominates. Thus, we can infer that the respondents disapproved of the government's choice to stand firm against UN sanctions because the respondents' primary concern centered on personal economic costs. In contrast, such costs did not significantly affect views of those assigned to the UN sanctions/back-down condition. The cost effect does not explain the public preference for their government's decision to back-down in response to UN sanctions. Furthermore, we find null effects of national economic costs in the case of both the UN sanctions/stand-firm and the UN sanctions/back-down conditions, as panel (b) of Figure 4 demonstrates. Together, these results show that personal, rather than national, economic costs serve as a mechanism that explains public disapproval of the target government's responses to the UN sanctions.

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<sup>4</sup> In the questionnaire, the respondents could also choose 'other' as an answer.

<sup>5</sup> We estimate the same regression models as our main analysis but use binary indicators as dependent variables. The results for other treatment conditions are presented in the Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> We constructed a binary variable coded as 1 for those who chose 'yes' for the question -"would you think that the policy to purchase military equipment was wrong in the first place? - and 0 otherwise. Then, we used this binary variable as the dependent variable.

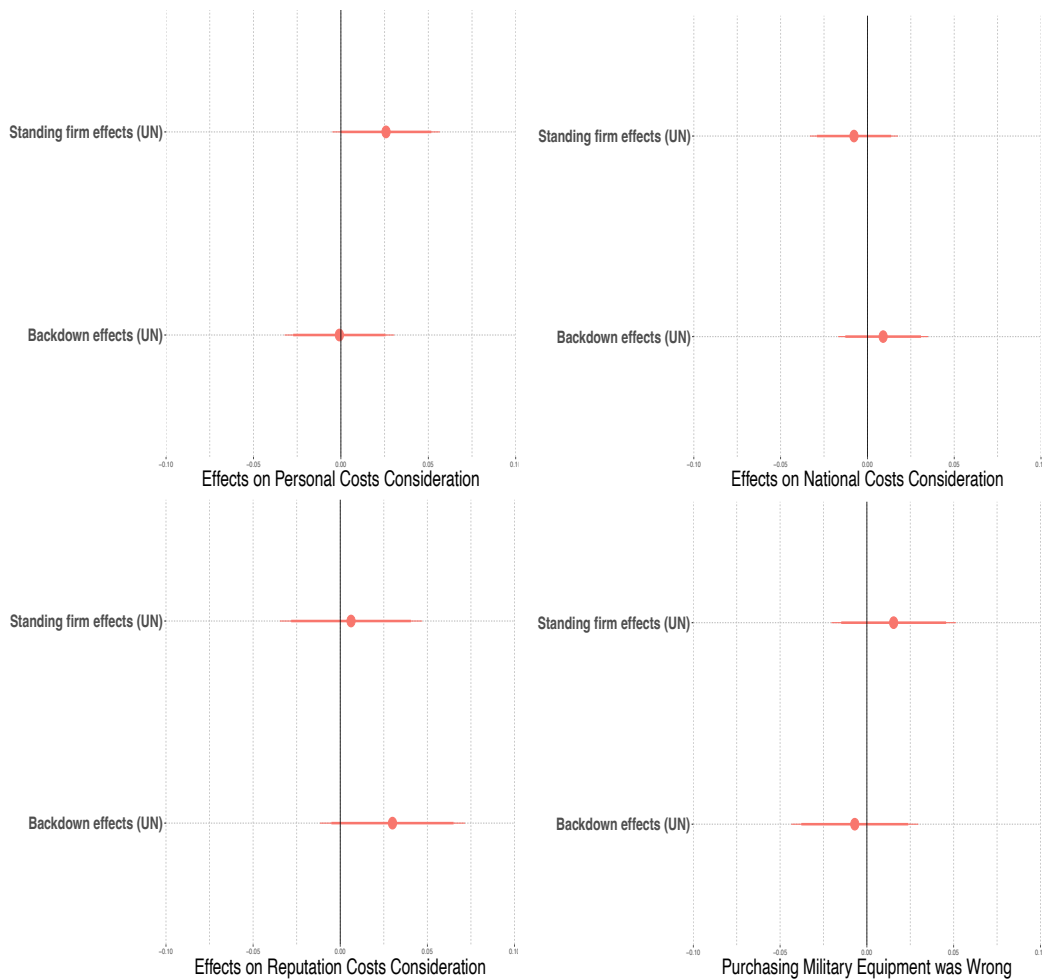


Figure 4: Public Support for Government for UN Sanctions

On the other hand, we do not find evidence of two other effects, i.e., the reputation and legitimacy effects of the UN sanctions. First, panel (c) of Figure 4 shows that the UN sanctions/stand-firm and back-down treatments are not systematically related to individuals' concerns about reputational costs: the estimated coefficients are not statistically significant. Second, we cannot reject the null hypothesis in the test evaluating the legitimacy mechanism in panel (d). Respondents presented with the UN sanction conditions, whether the Indian government stands firm or backs down, are not statistically different from those in the no-sanction group in their assessments of the disputed policy: i.e., in their responses to the question of whether the policy to purchase the military equipment was the wrong thing to do in the first place.



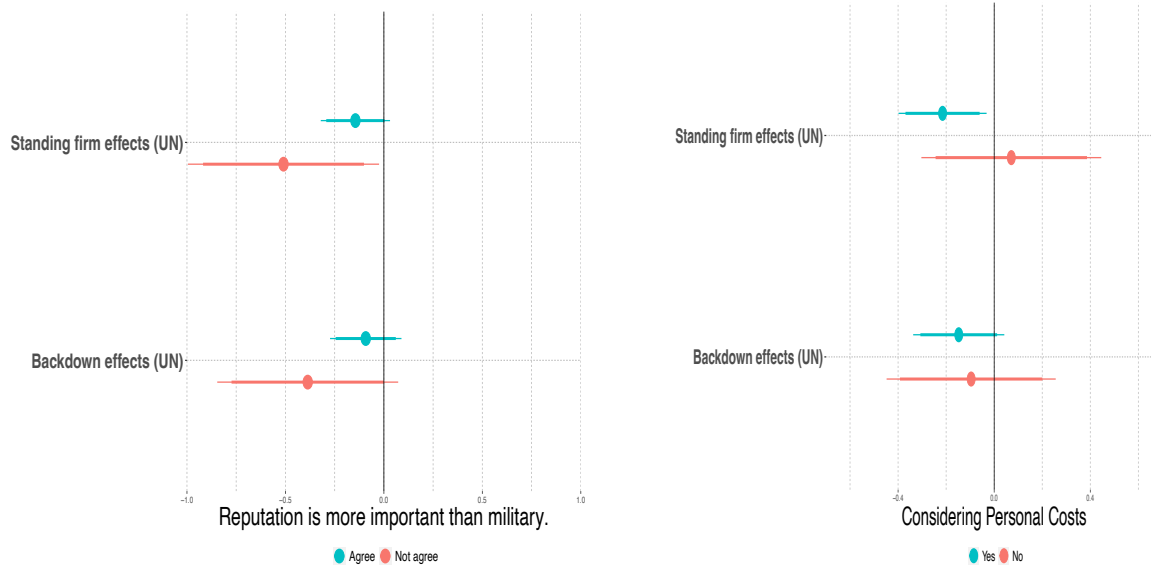


Figure 5: Public Support for the Government under UN Sanctions

In Figure 5, we report additional estimation results to shed more light on the potential mechanisms driving public support. First, we probe the reputation mechanism by utilizing an individual-level positional variable capturing respondents’ views on the importance of a country’s reputation in international relations.<sup>7</sup> As presented in panel (a) of Figure 5, respondents’ opinions about the government decision do not vary with their views on international reputation. While the estimated effects of the UN sanction/stand-firm and UN sanction/back-down conditions are greater for those who believe that the military strength is more important than the reputation, the confidence intervals around these estimates are much larger than the intervals around the estimates for the other group, making the differences in the effects between the subsamples statistically indistinguishable.

In addition, panel (b) shows that respondents with greater sensitivity for personal economic costs drive the UN sanctions/stand-firm effects that we have identified. We further examine the individual cost mechanism by utilizing responses to the question asking whether the respondents would change their decisions if they had to pay severe economic costs. The results show that the UN sanctions/stand-firm effects are notably different between respondents who replied ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to this question. For the group of respondents who said ‘yes’, we identify a negative and statistically significant effect of the UN sanctions/stand-firm treatment. However, we find no comparable effect for those who said they would not change their decisions despite severe costs. Hence, the UN sanctions/back-down treatment does not produce heterogeneous effects across the

<sup>7</sup> The respondents are asked how much they agree or disagree with the following statement – “in resolving problems with other countries, a good reputation is more important than a strong military.” We estimate the same regression model used in the main analysis by splitting the samples on whether the respondent agrees or disagrees with the statement.

two cost sensitivity categories since individuals' concerns about severe costs would be mitigated if the government concedes. In sum, the additional analyses in Figures 4 and 5 conducted with data from a set of dispositional questions provide suggestive evidence that the cost mechanism plays a crucial role in explaining the UN sanctions/stand-firm effects, while we fail to find evidence consistent with the legitimacy and reputation mechanisms.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusions

Does the public in a sanctioned country support the target government's decisions to resist sanctions or back down from its original policy that led to sanctions? While an increasing number of studies explore whether and how the target country's public opinion shifts in response to economic coercion, little is known about how the target public responds to sanctions led by international institutions. We address this research question by conducting a survey experiment in India where we presented respondents with information about hypothetical sanctions imposed over a costly security issue. Importantly, we exposed the respondents to scenarios with the UN as the institutional sender and China or the US as unilateral senders. Our research focus included the respondents' approval of the target government's policies as well as the respondents' motivations for their expressed positions, in light of sanctions.

Our analyses suggest that institutionalized sanctions lead to backlash from the public when the target government chooses to stand firm. Because we find no apparent support or opposition from the public when the target concedes, we conclude that, on average, public approval for sanctions is significantly lower than the baseline approval level under the status quo, i.e., when sanctions are not imposed. In addition, we find no evidence of a rally-round-the-flag effect resulting from unilateral sanctions, in contrast to the case of institutionalized sanctions. In sum, the target country public tends to disapprove of its government when sanctioned by international institutions, but does not change its views on the leader's policies under unilateral sanctions. We also turn to the why question, attempting to pinpoint the mechanism that drives such public disapproval linked to institutionalized sanctions. Among three possible mechanisms, i.e., the cost, legitimacy, and reputation effects, our results indicate that the (personal) cost effect explains why the public disapproves of the government's decision to resist institutionalized sanctions. We do not find evidence for the other two effects.

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<sup>8</sup> We also estimate average causal mediation models (ACMEs) (Imai et al., 2011) to check the extent to which the treatment effects are mediated by the different causal mechanisms discussed in our paper. However, the estimated ACMEs are not robust to the violation of the sequential ignorability assumption: the sensitivity analysis proposed by Imai et al. (2011) shows that the estimated ACME passes zero and flips signs across different values of the correlation between error terms in the mediation and outcome models. Therefore, we do not report the results from the mediation analysis as a main result from the mechanism tests.

Our findings shed light on the role of international institutions in the coercive politics of sanctions. In addition to previous explanations of international institutions' influence through monitoring and enforcement, reduced decision-making costs, and enhanced legitimacy of coercive measures, we highlight another channel that increases sanctions effectiveness. The target government experiences a backlash from the target's domestic audience regarding the government's decision to resist sanctions, which can pressure the government to make concessions. Moreover, our results suggest that shifts in the target country's public opinion are nuanced and vary with the sender's identity. Note that our study focuses on sanctions imposed over a security dispute; further research is necessary to investigate how the public's opinion reacts to sanctions imposed in different issue areas.

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1. Descriptive and Balance Statistics**

Attributes	(1) Control (N=731)		(2) UN standing firm (N=720)		(3) UN backdown (N=669)		(4) US standing firm (N=715)		(5) US backdown (N=759)		(6) China standing firm (N=724)		(7) China backdown (N=749)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Female	0.44	(0.50)	0.43	(0.50)	0.44	(0.50)	0.45	(0.50)	0.47	(0.50)	0.44	(0.50)	0.44	(0.50)
Employed	0.83	(0.37)	0.84	(0.37)	0.82	(0.38)	0.85	(0.35)	0.82	(0.38)	0.85	(0.36)	0.84	(0.37)
Education	1.9	(0.93)	1.84	(0.90)	1.96	(0.91)	1.85	(0.95)	1.87	(0.90)	1.87	(0.96)	1.92	(0.94)
Age	37.91	(12.36)	39.82	(13.56)	38.66	(13.30)	39.98	(13.48)	38.97	(13.20)	39.01	(12.89)	38.14	(12.73)

Attributes	Standardized mean differences					
	(1)-(2)	(1)-(3)	(1)-(4)	(1)-(5)	(1)-(6)	(1)-(7)
Female	0.015	<0.001	0.037	0.071	0.017	0.001
Employed	0.012	0.029	0.063	0.025	0.048	0.014
Education	0.067	0.067	0.06	0.035	0.035	0.017
Age	0.147	0.058	0.16	0.083	0.087	0.018

**Table A2. Regression Output**

	Dependent Variable - Support for the government's decision:			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Sanction effects (Overall)	-0.099 (0.065)	-0.094 (0.064)		
Sanction effects (UN)			-0.163** (0.074)	-0.159** (0.074)
Sanction effects (US)			-0.118 (0.074)	-0.108 (0.073)
Sanction effects (China)			-0.020 (0.074)	-0.019 (0.073)
Female		-0.053 (0.046)		-0.053 (0.046)
Employed		0.010		0.008

		(0.063)		(0.063)
Education		0.287***		0.287***
		(0.025)		(0.025)
Age		0.0004		0.001
		(0.002)		(0.002)
Observations	5,066	5,054	5,066	5,054
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0005	0.028	0.002	0.029
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.0003	0.027	0.001	0.027

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01  
Standard errors are in parentheses.  
Religion dummies are included in all models.

	Dependent Variable - Support for the government's decision:	
	(1)	(2)
Standing firm effects (UN)	-0.195** (0.086)	-0.181** (0.084)
Standing firm effects (US)	-0.128 (0.086)	-0.110 (0.085)
Standing firm effects (China)	-0.003 (0.085)	0.003 (0.084)
Backdown effects (UN)	-0.129 (0.087)	-0.135 (0.086)
Backdown effects (US)	-0.109 (0.084)	-0.105 (0.083)
Backdown effects (China)	-0.036 (0.085)	-0.040 (0.084)
Female		-0.053 (0.047)
Employed		0.008 (0.063)
Education		0.287*** (0.025)
Age		0.001 (0.002)

Observations	5,066	5,054
R <sup>2</sup>	0.002	0.030
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.001	0.027

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*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Standard errors are in parentheses.

Religion dummies are included in all models.

### **Ethics statement**

The University of Buffalo, State University of New York, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the survey experiment described in this article. We have also registered a pre-analysis plan (PAP).

### **Data / Code availability**

The data sets and replication code for this study will be available in the Harvard Dataverse repository (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/>), once it is published.