

Legislative Activism in Foreign Policy: The Case of U.S. Economic Sanctions

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Abstract

Why does the U.S. insist on keeping certain economic sanctions in place? Recent studies have maintained that democracies are reluctant to engage in protracted and costly foreign policy actions. Interestingly, the U.S. has remained committed to the imposition of a number of long-standing sanctions despite the considerable toll they have taken on its economy. This paper suggests that Congressional activism in U.S. foreign policy partially explains this contradiction. Specifically, it argues that execution of U.S. economic sanctions through legislation makes their termination difficult. Two separate but interrelated explanations underpin this argument. First, the institutionalist explanation posits that legislated sanctions are more “vulnerable” to veto players who have an interest in the continuation of such sanctions than presidential sanctions. Second, the inability of Congress to effectively conduct interstate negotiations may prevent the U.S. and the target state from creating a feasible bargaining space to resolve their differences. Both explanations converge on the same expectation which is confirmed by my statistical analyses: Congressional sanctions last longer than presidential sanctions. Additional analyses render evidence in favor of the veto-player explanation.