

# **Constraining Compliance? Reconsidering The Effect of Veto Players on Sanctions Success**

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# **Constraining Compliance? Reconsidering The Effect of Veto Players on Sanctions Success**

What effect do domestic political and institutional constraints such as veto players have on the success of international sanctions which their countries have been subjected to? Do they facilitate or constrain compliance with them? Although in the literature on sanctions success the role of domestic factors has received extensive attention, a typically public-policy concept such as veto players has remained largely underexplored. The potential of its application to the literature of sanctions was just recently uncovered by sanction scholars who found empirical support to the hypothesis that the larger the size of veto players in a country under sanctions the higher the probability of compliance. Contrary to their findings, this article theorises a negative causal mechanism whereby a growing divergence in the relevant policy-area preferences of veto players prevents the targeted country from complying with sanctions-related demands. An empirical reassessment of this relationship with George Tsebelis' original policy-area-specific veto player data confirms this negative effect.

Keywords: economic sanctions, foreign policy, sanctions success, political institutions, veto players

7,976 words

## **Introduction**

In today's world, international sanctions are one of the most used instruments of foreign policy (Felbermayr et al. 2021). In an anarchical environment, states and supra-national state organisations resort to 'politically motivated penalties' (Giumelli 2011) against one or more targets in order to influence a conduct of theirs that violates international standards or more specific codes of behaviour identified by the sender.<sup>1</sup> Their use has increased especially since the 1990s when, for better or for worse (Cortright and Lopez 2000), a series of factors including the end of the Cold War superpowers' vetoes, the growing interconnections of a more

globalized world, and the progress of some processes of regional integration, contributed to a season of extensive use of sanctions, above all by the United Nations (Biersteker et al 2018), the United States (O'Sullivan 2003), and the European Union (Giumelli, Hoffmann, and Książczaková 2021). As a consequence of its rising use in foreign policymaking, also the scholarly attention to this instrument in the broad literature of International Relations (IR) has recently grown (Scopus 2021), especially with regard to the examination of the factors which make sanctions effective for the partial or complete satisfaction of the demands attached by senders to them.

The study of the effectiveness of sanctions has been approached in many different ways in the literature (Peksen 2019a), one of them being from the point of view of the sanctioned countries and their individuals. This has become the predominant focus of a domestic-politics branch of the literature on sanctions, where sanction scholars examine how, and which, domestic characteristics of the countries targeted by sanctions mediate the impact of international sanctions on their calculations and behaviour (Morgan and Schwebach 1995; Kirschner 1997; Brooks 2002; Marinov 2005; Lektzian and Souva 2007; Allen 2008; Grauvogel and Von Soest 2014). Among the various elements inside a targeted country which scholars have focused on, a quite recent addition was the study of veto players, namely those actors in a country who hold veto authority against a policy decision (Tsebelis 2002). In the literature of sanctions, research on whether and how the size of domestic veto players in a target country can affect the success of sanctions had remained underexplored until a first, and so-far only, study by sanctions scholars Jim Mun Jeong and Dursun Peksen (2017) found empirical support to their hypothesis that the larger the size of veto players in the target country, the more likely it complies with sanctions. This research, however, did not investigate the policy-area specificity of veto players' preferences. A rigorous application of the notion of veto players, fully aligned with the original definition given by the scholar who first formalised the veto

player theory itself, George Tsebelis, and which distinguishes the size of veto players' constraints on the basis of the policy area at stake, suggests that the behaviour of veto players in a country targeted by sanctions is more complex and explained by a negative 'constraining' causal mechanism instead.

Against this background, the objective of this article is to reconsider the effect of the presence of veto players in a target country on the effectiveness of sanctions in light of a new theoretical framework and more fine-grained data. Do veto players facilitate or constrain compliance? To answer this research question, the article develops as follows. First, it provides a brief overview of the theory of veto players to clarify some conceptualisation and measurement issues related to the use of this typically public-policy concept in non-conventional applications such as research on international sanctions. A subsequent section moves onto its application to the literature of sanctions and presents the hypothesis, data, and models used to test the effect that the size of veto players in the targeted countries has on sanctions effectiveness. The models employed in this article are similar to those used in the literature (i.e., Jeong and Peksen 2017) to facilitate comparisons but, differently from previous works, they use a different source for the veto variable, namely the original dataset created by Tsebelis himself, instead of the Polcon dataset (Henisz 2000) used in other studies. The analysis performed in this article with Tsebelis' data finds a statistically significant negative effect which confirms the 'constraining' causal mechanism put forward in the theoretical section, reversing the expectations held to date

### **Sanctions and the Role of Domestic Factors**

In the domestic-politics branch of the literature on sanctions, which looks inside states to explain the success of international sanctions, scholars have predominantly focused on regime types and their within-type classifications (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010; Peksen 2019b), as

well as on the *leader's* political features as explanatory variables (Blanchard and Ripsman 1999; Marinov 2005; Solingen 2012; Grauvogel and Von Soest 2014). To date, the role of those domestic players endowed with veto authority on policy decisions *beyond* the leader, namely 'veto players' (Tsebelis 2002), has been left largely unaddressed.

In the broader literature of international relations, which sanction studies are largely considered being part of, so far little has been known about the role played by these domestic politico-institutional constraints in affecting policy decisions such as reactions to global crises and the onset or settlement of militarised disputes (Oppermann and Brummer 2018). Veto player approaches have generally been applied in public-policy research rather than international relations and foreign policy analysis. Exceptional empirical applications of veto players in the latter include MacIntyre's (2001), Cunningham's (2006), Choi's (2010) studies among few others.<sup>2</sup> Between the two fields, methodological and conceptual differences do exist (Brummer et al 2019). However, there are no sound theoretical reasons to invalidate a priori the transferability of the application of the veto players approach also to foreign policy works. While it is true that, differently from conventional public-policy processes, foreign policy relies less on formal legislative acts and more on non-conventional, ad-hoc procedures, the same logic of veto player analysis can still be applied with regard to sanctions-related policy responses once the possibly different policy-relevant players and procedures have been thoroughly identified. Foreign policy has in fact become less and less the exclusive domain of a leader insulated from domestic political contestation for the sake of the 'national interest', so the lenses of veto player analysis can hold rather remarkable promise also in their application to foreign policy analysis, including to sanctions compliance.

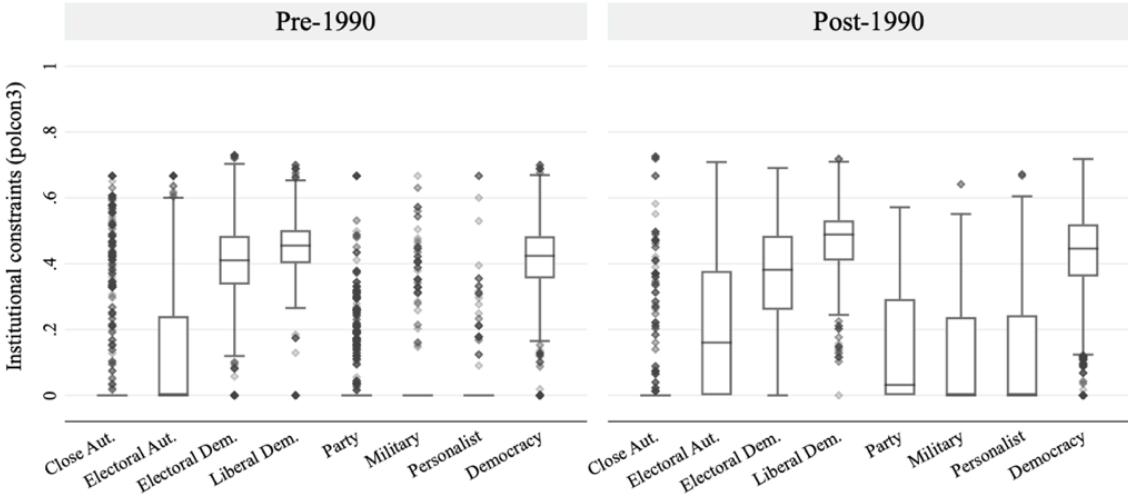
That of veto players is not such an old entry in the realm of political studies, especially for comparative politics research. As the first publications on the term 'veto player' date back as late as the 1990s (Tsebelis 1995; 2002) – shortly after similar concepts had just been

introduced such as ‘veto points’ (Immergut 1990; Huber, Ragin, and Stephens 1993) – the concept of veto players has received growing scholarly attention only in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The most prominent approach to veto players is George Tsebelis’, who first coined the term and developed a theory which systematically connects veto players to the potential for policy change and allows for comparisons of policy outcomes across different political systems. According to the parsimonious definition given by Tsebelis, ‘a veto player is an individual or collective actor whose agreement is required for policy decisions’ (1995). Veto players can be distinguished as ‘institutional’ when their role in changing or blocking the status quo is constitutionally required, while they are instead called ‘partisan’ when their role is defined by the political system (i.e., political parties in government coalitions).

The veto players’ theory can be applied to explore any political system, including authoritarian regimes, because the size of veto players is ‘not a fundamental difference between democratic and nondemocratic regimes’ (Tsebelis 2002, 90). The fundamental difference between them emerges mostly in the way these political systems select their veto players, and thus in their identity, but not in the presence or absence of them. Although, on average, liberal democracies are expected to feature bigger politico-institutional constraints than autocracies, especially with regard to *legislative* constraints (see **Figure 1** using the veto variable *polcon3*), not all autocracies are veto players-free, driven by a single unconstrained ruler. A wide range of autocracies do have institutional constraints, including legislative ones in the case of some *electoral* autocracies. While these legislative constraints can hardly limit the executive branch in *close* autocracies, which generally do not have working legislative institutions, other actors can, such as the military or religious authorities. The key is in ‘identifying which actors are in a position to block changes to the political status quo. This will vary across countries, across time, and potentially across policy areas’ (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2013, 719). This view is supported by recent research on the growing institutionalization of autocratic regimes after

1990 (Meng 2020), namely the growing size of institutional constraints that tie autocratic leaders' hands especially at the cabinet level (constrains to the executive in the form of power-sharing with other elites within the ruling coalition; Magaloni 2008; Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng 2021) if not in legislative chambers.

**Figure 1. Institutional constraints and regime types**



**Notes.** Veto players' values (Henisz's polcon3 2017 data) per regime type (VDem and GWF classifications), distinguishing pre- and post-1990 regimes. The box plots identify for each GWF (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014) and VDem (Coppedge et al 2021) regime category the variation of institutional constraints: more specifically, the boxes identify the interquartile range (50% middle distribution) of each category with a horizontal line for the median value, while the whiskers indicate the maximum and minimum values excluding the outliers. The same graph cannot be displayed with Tsebelis' data due to his predominant focus on democratic regimes only.

**Theoretical Expectations about Veto Players' Effect on Sanctions Success**

The core argument behind Tsebelis' theory is that by knowing veto players' number, policy congruence (namely the distance between their policy preferences), and internal cohesion (in case of collective players), it is possible to predict the stability of a status-quo policy because the probability of a policy change will be lower when the number and distance of veto players grow. Introducing the absorption rule, Tsebelis further clarified that the constraining capability of veto players depends not much by the absolute number of veto players per se, but more by the ideological distances between their policy preferences. Specifically relevant for sanctions

compliance and policy responses to external shocks, a veto players lens can be argued to be more suitable than regime types to illuminate on the inner workings of targeted countries' policy response to sanctions as it captures specifically the degree of stability or ease 'with which the political status quo in a country [including the very status-quo conduct targeted by sanctions] can be changed' (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2013, 674). In this specific sanction context, the veto players are those individuals or collective actors (such as a legislative chamber or a coalition government made up of different parties) whose agreement is necessary to change the status quo policy targeted by sanctions.

Regarding the effect of these veto players on sanctions success, Jeong and Peksen (2017) argued that 'the larger the size of veto players in target states, the more likely economic sanctions are to succeed' (Jeong and Peksen 2017, 8). They developed this hypothesis by assuming a trade-centred perspective on sanctions, whereby trade relations are partially or fully restrained by the sender in order to cause enough economic damage on the target that forces its change of conduct. As a result, if a country has numerous and distant veto players, it is more difficult to agree on alternative trade and investment partners to evade the material costs of economic sanctions and, as a result of this inability, they are more likely to accept to comply with sanctions-related demands.

Compliance, however, does not occur by inaction. To distinguish it from a stalemate, compliance generally refers to those situations in which the targeted country's decision makers agree on a policy change that is partially or totally aligned to the one demanded by the sender. In other words, this decision is not an automatic reaction to the imposition of sanctions and a specific decision is required. Following the core propositions of the veto player theory mentioned above, if there are divergent preferences among those actors endowed with veto power on the decision to change the policy issue at stake, generally because there is at least one who deeply cares about that issue, it is less likely to reach an agreement on a policy change and

the ‘targeted’ status-quo policy continues. Because trade or non-trade restrictions can sometimes succeed in reducing the funds available to the target country to sustain this policy, how does the policy continue? First, it is inaccurate to assume that sanctions always reduce the target’s fiscal space dramatically, not only because different kinds of sanctions exist (Giumelli 2011) but also because a full enforcement of sanctions is not always effectively in place giving way to sanction evasion attempts (Early 2015). Second, even when it is, the economic impact may not be as significant as desired to affect the political views and calculations of the targeted entities (Portela and Van Laer 2022). Third, some of the measures generally devised to mitigate this impact, such as export deflection to evade trade restrictions, are devised and designed by individual companies, ‘smuggling entrepreneurs’ (Andreas 2005), not by state institutions. The targeted country’s executive and legislative bodies do not control trade directly with aggregate country-level policies, they can only indirectly sponsor these activities, at most through incentives and budget-related decisions (Tsebelis 2002, 187-206). In this regard, countries may have different budget procedures. Yet, overall, according to the veto player theory, the effect of multiple and distant veto players is that of causing policy stability also with regard to decisions related to budget composition and deficits. As a result, the budget structure, and with it the decision to stop funding the status-quo policy under dispute, will change more in countries with fewer or less distant veto players. Countries with more diverse players will instead lead to more inertia. To address the reduction of the fiscal space, these countries will make higher deficits, even more so if they were already accustomed to high levels of debt, according to the theory. Because numerous veto players find it more difficult to change the size of the deficit and stabilise it, the distributional struggle about who needs to bear the cuts in the budget spending slows down the pace of adjustments even if they agree that the current status quo requires them. An agreement can be found with regard to those budget items on which there is

veto players' congruence or no vetoes at all (such as low politics issues), but regarding those with large divergences budget changes are unlikely.

Against this background drawn from Tsebelis' original veto player theory, this article hypothesises a 'negative' causal mechanism inside a country targeted by sanctions. In a targeted country, the decision to comply or not with sanctions needs to be agreed upon by all the players endowed with veto power in the relevant decision-making process. What matters in order to measure the incongruence of these players is the distance of their *policy-area-specific preferences* more than their alignment on the standard left-right dimension. When the policy-area-specific preferences of these players are distant, it is more difficult for them to agree on what to do with regard to the very policy issue targeted by sanctions. As a result of this inability to agree on a policy change in relation to the conduct under dispute, their incongruence is theoretically expected to cause policy stability and inertia, thus continuing with the status quo policy. Although sanctions may successfully attach high economic costs on the continuation of this policy, if only few veto players are hit by them so as to change their calculations, those who are not and who support the conduct at stake will likely veto any policy change. They would keep funding the policy with their own sources, if unaffected (i.e., the case of most IRGC-affiliated companies in Iran – Wehrey et al 2009), or by defending their current allocations when discussing the new budget composition (i.e., Iranian members of the parliament's budget committee voting to increase the defence budget against the reduction proposed by President Rouhani in 2019, despite continued US sanctions – RadioFarda 2019). In this way, the targeted country does not comply with the sanction-related demands of policy change. A leader's decision to comply, instead, is more likely to be achieved when the executive is unrestrained or when the size of the constraint, namely the distance on the relevant policy-area preferences among the veto players, is small enough for the former to moderate its proposed change and sway those veto players' not-too distant policy preferences towards the policy change. Finally,

because there are no propositions in the veto player theory that suggest a different causal direction exists across different regimes, this logic is expected to work both in democracies and autocracies. What can change across these regimes may be the size (i.e., bigger in democracies, smaller in autocracies – also see Figure 1) and identity (i.e., military constraints in some autocracies) of the constraints, but not the direction of the mechanism.

In light of this ‘negative’ causal mechanism, then, the article formulates the following hypothesis:

*H: In countries targeted by sanctions, the larger the size of veto players, namely their ability to constrain proposed policy changes, the more unlikely sanctions compliance.*

### **Veto Players Who? Conceptualisation and Operationalisation Issues**

Having clarified the causal mechanism, there are some further conceptual and operational issues that need to be addressed before proceeding with an empirical application, related to the identity of veto players and preference measurement. In actual practice, who are the players who have the power to veto sanctions-related policy responses in a country targeted by sanctions? Traditional research based on veto player analysis, including Tsebelis himself, has focused predominantly on Western democracies and public policy (König, Debus, and Tsebelis 2011), that is on the party composition of the executive and legislative branches. Yet, it is useful to recall that other actors can be endowed with veto authority too, especially when foreign policy and security issues are involved, even more so in non-democratic regimes where legislative actors are generally more marginalised. The lesser role of *legislative* constraints here does not invariably mean that autocratic leaders have unique power on security and foreign policy decision-making, free from the political checks of other institutions such as the military or religious authorities (i.e., in Islamic governments) at a time of strong remilitarisation across the

world (Basedau 2020; Sharpf 2020). Potential constraints to policy changes, including those in reaction to sanctions, can also come from international actors (Jahn 2011) and the civil society (Cassani 2021). An example of the former may well be the constraints exerted by Cold War superpowers on their allies but also those exerted by external patrons on weak developing countries in more recent years. The latter may instead refer not only to the role of voters in elections and constitutional referenda, but also to people's role in demonstrations, rallying around or against the executive's flag.

Even when focusing on the same kind of institutional veto players (i.e., the executive and legislative branches), different conceptualisations exist regarding the policy-area specificity vs universality of the size of veto players constraints. That is, does the distance between them remain the same across different policy areas or does it change depending on the policy area at stake? Tsebelis' theory suggests the latter (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2013, 719). Yet, not all the existing veto player datasets conceptualise and operationalise veto players in this way. The major datasets on veto players are Henisz' (2000) and Tsebelis' (2002), although also Cruz et al's Database of Political Institutions (DPI) (2020) and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) (2020) can be used in some cases. Their operationalisation of veto players' ability to constrain policy changes differs on both identity and measurement strategies. Regarding the identity issue, only the BTI maps also non-conventional veto players beyond the three classic governmental branches, such as the military. The other three mainly focus on executive and legislative constraints instead. But this similarity aside, across them some major differences still exist regarding preferences measurement and geographic coverage.

Henisz' *polcon3*, which covers a total of 234 countries (some no more existent) in 1800-2016, operationalises the notion of veto players with a continuous variable (ranging from 0 to 1, 1 indicating the highest constraint) which captures the 'extent to which a given political actor is constrained in his or her choice of future policies' (Henisz 2000). Operationally, it focuses

only on the extent of alignment between executive and legislative, and is computed using data on the party composition of these two branches along the standard left-right dimension. On the contrary, Tsebelis' data, covering 21 countries over the period 1945-2000, operationalises the veto variable as a continuous variable measuring the ideological distance, as derived from expert judgements (Laver and Hunt 1992), between the two most opposite actors participating in a government or in a parliamentary coalition depending on the institutional system (respectively parliamentary or presidential). Most importantly, different veto variables are calculated for different policy dimensions (i.e., foreign policy, economy, ...). Other veto datasets such as the DPI differ from both by adopting an operationalization strategy which is more similar to that of veto points rather than veto players (Immergut 1990) and thus less suitable for these empirical applications. The DPI's veto variable *checks*, which covers the entire world since 1975 until the present time, is an ordinal variable which increments discrete points in case of ideological opposition between these branches (Cruz et al. 2021, 19). By counting veto players and adjusting the count for whether they are independent of each other, adding points in case they are not, the DPI assumes a linear relationship between the number of veto players and the degree of constraints on policy change in a way that contradicts Tsebelis' original theory, which on the contrary expects diminishing marginal returns to the addition of veto players.

Against this background, Tsebelis' dataset is the only one which contains multi-dimensional empirical measures of veto players' preferences, other than the general left-right scale alone. This feature seems particularly relevant for sanctions-related applications especially in light of recent findings in the broader literature of international relations and foreign policy analysis which investigate the role of domestic factors in foreign and security policies (Thérien and Noel 2000; Wagner et al. 2017). In that broad literature, an ever-growing number of studies has shown especially how classic left-right domestic divides are not always

relevant in explaining domestic actors' foreign policy positions and actions. Party preferences about peace and security operations abroad but also, by extension, other foreign policy issues (including those frequently targeted by sanctions such as terrorism support, nuclear enrichment, arms proliferation) can rather follow curvilinear distributions along the left-right axis (Coticchia and Vignoli 2020; Curini and Vignoli 2021; Onderco and Joosen 2021). As a result, area-specific measures of preferences are crucial. On this front, to date, no existing dataset offers this but Tsebelis'.

### **Data and Methods**

To test the theoretical framework and the related hypothesis mentioned above, this article uses a series of Probit models in which the dependent variable is a binary measure of sanctions success sourced from the TIES sanctions dataset (Morgan, Bapat, and Kobayashi 2014). In order to facilitate the comparison of the results with the findings emerged from previous studies (notably Jeong and Peksen 2017), this article uses their same TIES sanction dataset to get sanction-related data and their same controls. But differently from that study, this article intends to use an alternative source for the key explanatory variable (the veto variable), precisely the dataset compiled by Tsebelis himself. The reason lies in the conceptualisation and measurement issues in relation to Henisz' data and Tsebelis' theory mentioned above and further described below. Because the limited sample size of Tsebelis' dataset may create issues in statistical analysis, in this regard appropriate model specifications will be introduced for robustness checks. The other veto variable drawn from Henisz' dataset and used in Jeong and Peksen's study is still presented below for comparative purposes.

### ***Key Explanatory Variable***

The fact that Tsebelis' dataset takes into consideration various policy dimensions different from the standard left-right dimension makes it the most appropriate dataset to use when trying to understand the effect that veto players produce on a targeted country's attempt to respond to something that is policy-area specific such as international sanctions. Sanctions are imposed to address different policy issues, ranging from foreign affairs and democracy promotion to environmental or also economic issues. Veto players' preferences vary across these different policy domains. This was clear to Tsebelis too, hence the need for him to provide measures of this policy-area variation through different policy domains. In his dataset, he calculated *LH1range* to capture the divergence in veto players' economic preferences, proxied through their favourability to raising taxes to increase public service; *LH2range* referred instead to foreign policy positions while *LH3range* to public ownership of business and industry, all measured on the respective policy scales used in the Laver-Hunt (LH) expert surveys (1992, 234-239).

For this empirical analysis, the veto variables selected from Tsebelis' dataset are the following. *LH1* is the normalised version (0-1 range) of *LH1range* as a measure of veto players' economic preferences. As a result, it is applied only to TIES sanctions cases in which the policy issue at stake is economic (i.e., TIES issue 13, 14, or 15) (Model 2). *LH2*, instead, is the normalized (0-1) version of *LH2range* as a measure of veto players' foreign policy preferences. Given that the variable was created on veto players' alignment to the Soviet Union/Russia in Laver and Hunt surveys, this means it is compatible either with cases imposed on foreign and security issues (i.e., TIES issues 1 to 11)<sup>3</sup> or with cases imposed before 1989 (irrespective of the issue), assuming that *LH2range* can also be used as a proxy for preferences related to any policy area during the highly polarized Cold War era. Finally, in order to increase the number of observations in the analysis, *LH12* is created to put together *LH1* and *LH2* measures, each applied in relation to their own policy-area specific cases. In the analysis, just like in Jeong and

Peksen (2017), for each sanction episode the veto variables are calculated as an average of values through the years which make up a sanction episode in the TIES dataset.

The more limited coverage of Tsebelis' data collection should not prevent its use outright but nonetheless should be taken into account in the model specifications as shown below. Although Tsebelis once said that 'Henisz's [variable] is conceptually very closely correlated with [my notion of] veto players, and covers an overwhelming number of countries' he also added that 'however, the empirical correlation between political constraints and either the number or the distances among veto players is questionable' (Tsebelis 2002, 205). Jahn further added that '[a]nalyzes in which Henisz' indicator is applied and in which results are interpreted according to Tsebelis' theory are flawed' (Jahn 2011, 65). A statistical verification of the degree of correlation between the two veto players indices eventually confirms Jahn's claim (64; see more below). This is because only Tsebelis calculated empirical area-specific preferences instead of relying on general estimations of left-right positions. The practical implications of these measurement differences emerge strongly from the empirical analysis on international sanctions below.

### ***Dependent Variable: How to Measure Sanctions Success?***

Measuring sanctions success is no less problematic (Nooruddin 2002; Van Bergeijk and Siddiquee 2017). Various sanction datasets exist with distinct criteria for the evaluation of the outcome. Having chosen to use the TIES dataset to ensure the comparability of this article findings with previous research, TIES measures are also used to operationalise sanctions success. Drawing on one of the dependent variables present also in Jeong and Peksen (2017), with *successfcn* the article codes as 1 the cases in which the target fully complied with the sender demands and/or reached a settlement with the sender. All the other cases of partial compliance or failure are coded as 0. It does not code alternative dependent variables which

exclude negotiated settlement from the definition of success because their exclusion would downplay if not overlook precisely those cases in which the executive negotiated an agreement for compliance with the sender following the pressure of institutional actors at home, in a sort of two-level game (Putnam 1988). On the contrary, by using *successfcn*, the notion of sanction success used in this article more appropriately captures as successful also those cases in which the target and sender did not achieve compliance *outright* but negotiated it through a settlement, while it excludes as instances of failure those cases in which the executive either whimsically decided not to comply because compliance would be less favourable than the status quo and he had no constraints limiting such a decision, or because he was prevented from complying by veto players.

### ***Control Variables and Additional Model Specifications***

All the models include a series of control variables commonly used in sanctions studies (Hufbauer et al. 2009; Jeong and Peksen 2017) which are sourced either from the TIES sanction dataset or from the World Bank. Those from TIES are: *international institutions*, which dichotomously refers to the presence of international organisations among the senders; *sanction costs*, assessing the extent of the economic damage with a three-level ordered categorical variable, treated as continuous in the analyses; *major political issues*, checking dichotomously whether the issue under dispute concerns a top international security issue; *threat*, indicating the presence of a prior threat stage before imposition. The other controls, still drawn from the literature as plausible alternative explanations for sanctions effectiveness, but sourced from the World Bank, are *trade dependence*, which is calculated as the target's total trade with the sender as a percentage of the target's gross domestic product and accounts for the strength of their linkage, whereas *target GDP per capita* refers to the target's economic strength in terms of GDP per capita.

In the models using Tsebelis' variables or cases (Models 1, 2, 3, 4) the sample size is smaller because of the more limited geographical scope of the veto dataset used. To address this issue together with the skewed distribution of the outcome (with much fewer cases of compliance than defiance), Firth's penalised maximum likelihood is also used as robustness checks of the Probit findings (Firth 1993; Williams 2019). Additionally, all the Probit models are clustered at the target level to account for country-specific effects and include an *imposition year* variable to account for time-specific factors related to the year sanctions were imposed and for possible temporal dependence. Finally, the article also checks some interaction effects with regime-type variables in Model 5, after sourcing the democratic status of the target country from Geddes et al.'s dataset (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014) and dichotomously coding as 1 the democratic targeted regimes.

### **Empirical Analysis and Discussion**

The results of the empirical analysis of veto players' effects on the probability of sanctions compliance are presented in **Table 1**. Models 1-6 differ on the basis of the veto variable used, thus the number of cases used to test each can vary depending on the scope of the related veto dataset. Models 1-3 test veto players' area-specific policy preferences provided by Tsebelis' dataset (*LHI2*, *LHI*, *LH2*). First, in Model 1, Tsebelis-based *LHI2* variable is applied to all the cases. Then, Tsebelis' variables are applied on two subsets, each focusing either on economic policy issues only (Model 2, with *LHI*) or foreign policy issues only (Model 3, with *LH2*) cases. In all these models, the major result is that Tsebelis' conceptualisation of politico-institutional constraints offers support to the article's 'negative' causal mechanism, overturning previous research's findings. The bigger the size of the constraints the lower the probability to reach full

outright or negotiated compliance with sanctions. These findings are confirmed also by Firth logit models.

One may speculate that the different coefficient sign between previous studies (based on Henisz' data) and this one is due to the different set of countries they are tested on, more specifically to the fact that Tsebelis' dataset is predominantly made up of democracies. To check whether the different sign is due to the democratic status of Tsebelis' sample, first Model 4 tests Henisz' *polcon3* on the same cases as in Model 1. Then, Model 5 tests an interaction effect between Henisz' variable and the democratic status of the target. In Model 4, the effect of Henisz' *polcon3* becomes insignificant when applied to Tsebelis' predominantly democratic countries, but remains positively signed. In Model 5, the interaction is also not significant (confirming Jeong and Peksen's findings, who already tested this interaction and found regime types do not significantly change the direction of the effect). The same result is obtained sourcing the democracy dummy from the Varieties of Democracy Project (Coppedge et al 2021), dichotomously coding the presence of liberal democracies. As explained in Tsebelis' theory itself, no significantly different behaviour should be expected by veto players across different regime types. Having exhausted these plausible alternatives, the explanation of the different coefficient signs between Tsebelis-based models (1-3) and Henisz-based ones (4-5) needs to be grounded on the different conceptualisations and operationalisations of the veto variables, more specifically their area specificity. Veto players' preferences can change across different policy areas and so does the distance between them, which operationally captures the size of the constraint on the agenda setter. A pairwise correlation of Tsebelis' variables with Henisz' *polcon3* by policy issue types shows how taking into account the policy domain is indeed crucial. None of Tsebelis' variables is significantly correlated with *polcon3*, but while the one between Tsebelis' economic preferences and *polcon3* shows a positive sign (0.45), the one between Tsebelis' foreign policy preferences and *polcon3* shows a negative sign (-0.05),

thus explaining why the coefficients have opposite signs when foreign policy cases are included in the models. Assuming *polcon3* can be taken more as a proxy of economic preferences (the higher and positive correlation with Tsebelis' *LHI* suggests so), Model 6 tests Henisz' *polcon3* on TIES' economic-policy-issue cases only. The same negative sign as in Model 2 is eventually found. The different modes of estimation used in the two veto datasets (hypothetical in Henisz', expert surveys in Tsebelis' – see Jahn 2011, 57) however lead to different results regarding the statistical significance of the effect (not significant to standard levels in Henisz-data model 6). Albeit positive, the correlation between *LHI* and Henisz' variable remains in fact very weak (0.45).

The negative causal mechanism put forward in this article is further supported by the behaviour of the control variable *sanctions costs*. Its effect is statistically insignificant across all models, as was also in Jeong and Peksen (2017), suggesting that the size of material costs imposed on the target does not play a significant direct role in pushing the target towards compliance. As a result, economic considerations, such as trade and investments adjustments to mitigate the impact of sanctions, should not be given exclusive relevance when hypothesising the behaviour of veto players under sanctions. What matters primarily is the distance in the preferences related to the policy issue under dispute across the players endowed with veto authority. Because Tsebelis' theory does not distinguish between regime types, the same mechanism should in principle be expected across any regime type. Although the limited number of cases used to test the empirical validity of this mechanism recommends further empirical research on the topic, these results do effectively challenge the expectations held to date and rekindle the debate about the role of veto players in sanctions compliance and broader IR applications.

**Table 1.** Regression table

Dependent variable: sanctions success ( <i>successfcn</i> )	(1) Tsebelis countries, all TIES cases	(2) Tsebelis countries, TIES EP cases	(3) Tsebelis countries, TIES FP cases	(4) Same countries and cases as (1)	(5) Henisz countries, all TIES cases	(6) Henisz countries, TIES EP cases
Tsebelis' <i>LH12</i> (area-specific pref.)	-1.577*** (0.577)					
Tsebelis' <i>LH1</i> (econ. pref. only)		-1.867*** (0.684)				
Tsebelis' <i>LH2</i> (FP pref. only)			-3.380*** (0.955)			
Henisz' <i>polcon3</i> (L-R pref.)				2.103 (1.440)	1.679** (0.702)	-0.257 (0.839)
International institutions	0.316 (0.400)	0.542 (0.743)	1.115 (0.953)	0.313 (0.358)	0.540*** (0.142)	1.012*** (0.214)
Sanction costs	0.878* (0.492)	- -	0.552 (0.836)	0.786 (0.536)	0.131 (0.118)	-0.204 (0.445)
Trade dependence	0.502 (1.546)	-0.0919 (1.708)	9.071** (3.546)	1.277 (1.715)	0.483 (0.701)	-0.0475 (0.963)
Target GDP per capita	-0.00493 (0.0425)	0.0208 (0.0571)	-0.140 (0.0947)	-0.0140 (0.0501)	-0.0129* (0.00780)	-0.0111 (0.0109)
Major political issue	-0.397 (0.307)	- -	0.224 (0.335)	-0.299 (0.350)	-0.103 (0.153)	- -
Threat	-0.348 (0.215)	-0.772** (0.383)	-0.250 (0.446)	-0.314 (0.201)	-0.141 (0.137)	-0.338* (0.196)
Imposition year	-0.0210 (0.0260)	-0.00348 (0.0217)	-1.00e-04 (0.0437)	-0.0244 (0.0252)	-0.0135*** (0.00492)	-0.00740 (0.00669)
Democratic regimes					0.453 (0.379)	
Veto $\times$ Democratic regimes					-1.650 (1.039)	
Constant	40.90 (51.12)	6.816 (42.33)	1.561 (86.00)	46.72 (49.57)	26.14*** (9.709)	15.01 (13.08)
Observations	76	48	49	76	445	199

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1. Probit models with robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the level of targeted states. Models 1, 2, 3, 6 are re-estimated also with Firth Logit models which confirm these results. Tsebelis' variables were normalised 0-1 to facilitate comparability with *polcon3*. With economic sanctions cases only, *sanctions costs* and *major political issue* are omitted. EP means economic policies, FP means foreign policies

## Conclusions

This article sought to explain the success of international sanctions by focusing on the effect politico-institutional constraints such as veto players have on the targeted countries' choice between compliance and defiance. It did so by building on, and to some extent challenging, previous works on the topic which argued that a positive relationship is in place between the size of the constraint and compliance. It argued instead that a negative causal mechanism between institutional constraints and sanctions success exists, whereby the target country's agenda setter surrounded by politico-institutional actors with distant preferences on the policy issue at stake is constrained in its ability to propose a policy change. As a result, the status-quo policy continues, including by making higher deficits. This article's findings confirm this mechanism. Once we acknowledge that veto players' preferences are policy-area-specific rather than universal, empirical evidence indeed provides support to the hypothesis that the bigger the size of veto players the lower the probability of sanctions compliance. This hypothesis was tested using the original dataset on veto players by George Tsebelis, who measured the size of their constraints along different policy areas. This policy-area-specific lens was missing in previous works, which only examined the effect with Henisz' area-insensitive *polcon3* variable, but has a substantive impact on the research, as Tsebelis-based findings even reverse previous expectations. Overall, this article offers new insights for sanctions scholars interested in the domestic politics of sanctions compliance but should also be seen as a cautionary tale pointing to the importance of conceptualisation and measurement strategies in this research field. Non-conventional empirical applications of veto player theory in international relations issues, including in the sanctions literature, face major obstacles, not least the shortage of data collections available to scholars. More disaggregated, policy-area-specific data are needed to capture differences across policy areas, following the example and suggestions of Tsebelis

(2002), Jahn (2011), and Clark et al (2013), and to move this underexplored branch of research further ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article and in the literature of sanctions, ‘sender’ refers to one or more states or international state organizations that impose restrictive measures such as sanctions, while ‘target’ refers to another state(s), its entities and/or individuals who have been subjected to those measures.

<sup>2</sup> EU compliance literature is not part of this literature, given that it concerns a non-anarchical environment such as intra-EU politics, cf. Treib 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In TIES, issue 12 refers to environmental issues and is excluded from this analysis.

### **Note on the author**

Tiziana Corda, PhD is teaching fellow at the University of Milan (Italy). Her publications and areas of research include economic sanctions; foreign policy analysis; international relations; political elites and violence.

## **Constraining Compliance?**

### **Reconsidering the Effect of Veto Players on Sanctions Success**

## **Online Appendix**

These supplementary materials are organized as follows. The first section offers descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix of the variables used in the empirical analysis of the paper. Second, I discuss the predicted values and the marginal effects of veto player variables on the likelihood of sanctions compliance across the main models, presenting the plots and tables with margins. Finally, a diagnostics paragraph concludes the appendix.

## Descriptive Statistics

**Table A1.** List and descriptive statistics of all variables:

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<b>Dependent variable</b>					
<i>successfcn</i>	983	.244	.43	0	1
<b>Veto variables</b>					
<i>LH12</i>	83	0.220	0.234	0	1
<i>LH1</i>	88	0.262	0.272	0	1
<i>LH2</i>	88	0.192	0.238	0	1
<i>impospolconiii*</i>	506	.262	.205	0	.708
<b>Control variables</b>					
<i>institution</i>	1052	.273	.446	0	1
<i>targetcosts</i>	487	1.31	.578	1	3
<i>imposeddyadtradegdp</i>	526	.035	.071	0	.573
<i>imposedtargetgdp1000</i>	526	10.336	10.223	.288	42.535
<i>politicalissue</i>	1064	.356	.479	0	1
<i>startyear</i>	1064	1984	16.446	1945	2005
<i>threat</i>	1064	.799	.401	0	1

\* Name given in Jeong and Peksen's article to *polcon3*. Also the names of the control variables used in this paper are the same as those in their paper to facilitate comparisons.

**Table A2.** Correlation matrix for the veto variables

	<i>LH1</i>	<i>polcon3</i>
<i>LH1</i>	1.0000 (54)	
<i>polcon3</i>	0.454754 (88)	1.0000 (219)

If applied to economic policy sanctions cases. In parenthesis the number of observations.

	<i>LH2</i>	<i>polcon3</i>
<i>LH2</i>	1.0000 (29)	
<i>polcon3</i>	-0.0502 (29)	1.0000 (267)

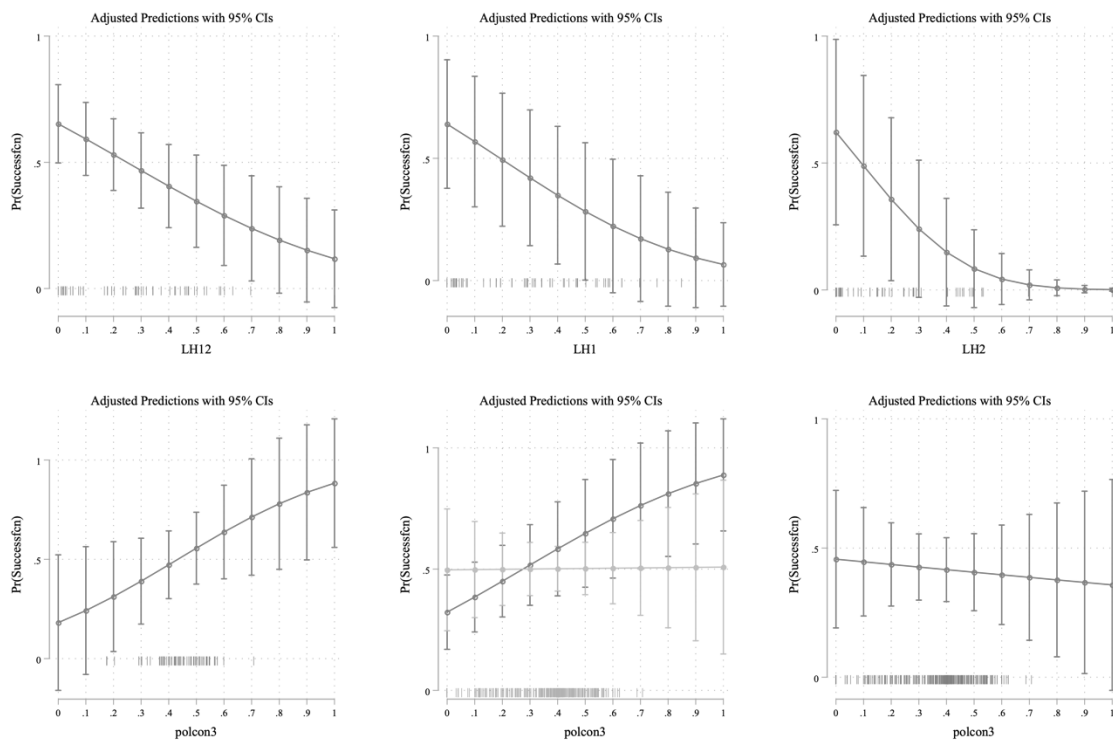
If applied to foreign policy sanctions cases. In parenthesis the number of observations.

	<i>LH12</i>	<i>polcon3</i>
<i>LH12</i>	1.0000 (83)	
<i>polcon3</i>	0.2972 (83)	1.0000 (506)

If applied to all cases. In parenthesis the number of observations.

## Predicted values and margins

**Figure A1.** Predicted values (Models 1-6)



**Table A3.** Margin effects for the veto variables in models 1-3

Model 1 (LH12)

_at	dy/dx	Std. Err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
0	-.540599	.1974202	-2.74	0.006	-.9275354	-.1536625
0.1	-.5327979	.198347	-2.69	0.007	-.921551	-.1440449
0.2	-.5156171	.189489	-2.72	0.007	-.8870088	-.1442254
0.3	-.4903106	.1724538	-2.84	0.004	-.8283139	-.1523073
0.4	-.4584686	.1495003	-3.07	0.002	-.7514837	-.1654535
0.5	-.421854	.1232405	-3.42	0.001	-.663401	-.1803071
0.6	-.3822459	.0964349	-3.96	0.000	-.5712548	-.193237
0.7	-.3413077	.072003	-4.74	0.000	-.482431	-.2001844
0.8	-.3004926	.053355	-5.63	0.000	-.4050664	-.1959188
0.9	-.2609888	.0442262	-5.90	0.000	-.3476706	-.1743071
1	-.2237015	.0450665	-4.96	0.000	-.3120302	-.1353728

### Model 2 (LH1)

_at	dy/dx	Std. Err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
0	-.6882695	.2575365	-2.67	0.008	-1.193032	-.1835072
0.1	-.6615168	.2521764	-2.62	0.009	-1.155773	-.1672601
0.2	-.6170723	.2294818	-2.69	0.007	-1.066848	-.1672963
0.3	-.5587663	.1948812	-2.87	0.004	-.9407264	-.1768062
0.4	-.4912482	.1558798	-3.15	0.002	-.796767	-.1857294
0.5	-.4193881	.121083	-3.46	0.001	-.6567064	-.1820698
0.6	-.3477227	.0983724	-3.53	0.000	-.540529	-.1549163
0.7	-.2800261	.0900922	-3.11	0.002	-.4566036	-.1034487
0.8	-.2190529	.0900134	-2.43	0.015	-.3954759	-.0426299
0.9	-.1664604	.0901587	-1.85	0.065	-.3431682	.0102474
1	-.1228856	.086578	-1.42	0.156	-.2925754	.0468042

### Model 3 (LH2)

_at	dy/dx	Std. Err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
0	-.8970863	.2876468	-3.12	0.002	-1.460864	-.333309
0.1	-.9169462	.322072	-2.85	0.004	-1.548196	-.2856967
0.2	-.8916182	.3088906	-2.89	0.004	-1.497033	-.2862037
0.3	-.8287858	.2583709	-3.21	0.001	-1.335184	-.3223881
0.4	-.7388413	.1858975	-3.97	0.000	-1.103194	-.3744888
0.5	-.6320507	.1088469	-5.81	0.000	-.8453867	-.4187146
0.6	-.5174763	.0582556	-8.88	0.000	-.6316553	-.4032973
0.7	-.4032559	.0795771	-5.07	0.000	-.5592241	-.2472877
0.8	-.2969455	.1154664	-2.57	0.010	-.5232554	-.0706355
0.9	-.2050254	.131821	-1.56	0.120	-.4633898	.053339
1	-.1317574	.1259362	-1.05	0.295	-.3785879	.115073

## Diagnostics

I test several assumptions regarding the fit of probit models. In particular, I test the overall model, which proves significantly better than the null model, making for an acceptable goodness of fit, through the Estat command in STATA. The Hosmer-Lemeshow's chi-squared test tells whether the two distributions – observed and expected – are the same or not. The null hypothesis assumes that there is no significant difference between the observed and the expected value. Regarding Model 2, the test shows the correctly predicted observations are 75% and the P-value is not significant, so the null is not rejected, meaning the model is a good fit. Regarding Model 3, the correctly predicted observations are only 62%, still with a high p-

value, though. Regarding Model 4, the correctly predicted observations are 65%, with a 0 p-value suggesting that the null hypothesis is rejected and the model is not a good fit. Second, relying on the Linktest command in STATA, I further test the specification of the three models. In all of them, `_hat` is significant while `_hatsq` is not, respectively suggesting that that the model is meaningful and there are no specification errors, under the most common interpretation of the output.