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Abstract

A dominant argument in the literature is that leaders tend to initiate military disputes in periods plagued by economic distress. This article revisits the diversionary theory and adapts it to the use of economic sanctions in the United States, contending that their use follows a similar diversionary logic. Using a novel dataset on US sanctions from 1989 to 2015, I find that presidents are more likely to use sanctions when unemployment is high and the president's party power in Congress is weak. I show that when doing so presidents opt for sanctions that inflict little harm on the US economy.

KEYWORDS
diversion, economic coercion, sanctions, US politics

1 | INTRODUCTION

In January 2009 President Barack Obama entered the White House with a Democratic-controlled Congress. His administration, especially during his first term in office, faced pressing domestic economic challenges. Until the midterm elections of 2010, President Obama mainly relied on the legislative process to advance domestic policies. After the 2010 elections, which saw Democrats lose their majority in Congress, President Obama increasingly relied on his executive power to initiate policies. This also applied to his administration's shift to foreign affairs (Nelson, 2017) and the significant increase of economic sanctions that put countries such as Iran and North Korea—whose policies have long been at odds with the US—in focus. This increased activity in foreign affairs affected nearly all regions of the world, with sanctions imposed against countries

like Guinea-Bissau and Mali to Myanmar and North Korea, and raises the question of whether domestic conditions affect the use of economic sanctions by the US—as the world's leading sanctions sender (Morgan et al., 2014).

Hostile foreign policies have been shown to be a product of leaders' decisions rather than the result of unavoidable situational and historical factors (Morgan & Bickers, 1992). Leaders choose whether and how to respond to international events, as they are often the ones who are subject to the pressures of the international system (Milner & Tingley, 2015). There is convincing evidence that domestic factors influence leaders' foreign policy decisions, with diversionary tactics one potential explanation here. The diversionary argument posits that state leaders initiate armed conflicts when they face domestic problems. The popularity of the diversionary use of force argument is not least due to the broad empirical support for its key arguments that hostile foreign policy action signals presidential competence and diverts public attention away from domestic issues (Brulé, 2006; Brulé & Hwang, 2010; Morgan & Bickers, 1992). Various studies have suggested that such diversionary strategies pay off, evidencing a surge in presidential approval ratings following the decision to initiate force in support of foreign policy goals (Brody & Page, 1975; MacKuen, 1983; Mueller, 1970). Yet, this diversionary theory has not been tested for the other foreign policy tools falling short of the use of force that are also at the executive's disposal.

In this article, I revisit the diversionary theory, adapting it to the use of economic sanctions by US presidents. For some time now, scholars have looked into the influence of domestic conditions on the initiation of sanctions (Drury, 2001, 2005; Kustra, 2022; Tama, 2020). They provide us with mixed findings on the link between the domestic economy and sanctions onset: While early studies showed that higher levels of unemployment are associated with a greater likelihood of sanctions imposition (Drury, 2001), later research pointed in the opposite direction, demonstrating that a weak economy constrains the president from using sanctions (Drury, 2005). In this article, I revisit this relationship and argue that the effect of a poor domestic economy on sanctions initiation is conditional on the president's legislative potential for policy change. More precisely, I posit that legislative constraints on presidential responses to domestic economic problems can incentivize presidents to use sanctions, a policy with relatively low domestic political costs where they can initiate decisions largely on their own as a way to demonstrate competence, leadership skills, and to secure the public's approval (on US uses of force, see Brulé, 2006; on public approval, see Whang, 2011). Yet, I also assert that presidents would then strategically opt for the least costly measures at their disposal. This explains why sanctions can be applied even in times of economic downturn.

Using a novel dataset on US sanctions initiated from 1989 to 2015 (Weber & Schneider, 2022), I run a series of count models that probe my argument. The results show that only when leaders are unable to respond to domestic problems will they have the incentive to pursue sanctions as a diversionary tool. This relationship holds only for sanctions measures that do not harm the US economy itself.

This article makes two contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it adapts the diversionary argument to the use of economic sanctions. I contend that US presidents have a list of foreign policy tools at their disposal that can be susceptible to different types of domestic environments. Such domestic conditions in turn can shape when presidents resort to sanctions for diversionary purposes. The presented theoretical argument posits that, under certain conditions, sanctions offer a cheap foreign policy tool to use when the executive is constrained from issuing policies domestically.

Empirically, the article examines the act of sanctions imposition to explain when the US employs economic coercion as a reaction of choice. This aspect is of particular importance to

the scholarship, as we have little knowledge regarding the use of sanctions in the 21st century. The article complements the novel EUSANCT dataset (Weber & Schneider, 2022) with new information on gradual sanctions imposition. It also replicates data provided by Howell and Pevehouse (2005) on presidential party power to cover the time period from 1989 to 2015.

2 | CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIVERSIONARY ARGUMENT

Scholars of international relations have long sought to understand the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy decisions. In their efforts to do so, they delineate various ways in which a state's domestic conditions affect leaders' foreign policy choices. A reoccurring feature in the literature is the diversionary use of force argument, which asserts that state leaders, to divert the public's attention away from domestic problems, pursue particular foreign policy measures—more specifically, the use of force (DeRouen Jr, 1995; Fordham, 1998; Haas & Whiting, 1956; Ostrom & Job, 1986). The conventional argument centers around two rationales for the diversionary use of force: namely, the "incentive-based" and the "policy availability" explanations, respectively. This section will review these two rationales to the diversionary theory and point to an existing gap in the literature: that is, how the diversionary argument has to date not been widely tested for hostile foreign policy tools of lower magnitude than the use of force.

2.1 | Incentive-based explanation

The first explanation stipulates that poor conditions at home provide sufficient incentive for leaders to use force abroad (DeRouen Jr, 1995; James & Oneal, 1991; Ostrom & Job, 1986), as economic conditions tend to drive leaders' approval ratings (MacKuen, 1983; Miller, 1995). Leaders are assumed to be office-seeking, as their goal is to be reelected. They know that one thing the electorate cares about—and a driving factor in presidential approval ratings—is competence. When domestic conditions are poor, a leader's competence is questioned. In such instances, leaders have an incentive to counter domestic problems with action that diverts attention away from the latter and demonstrates their competence and leadership skills (Morgan & Bickers, 1992). In sum, the conventional understanding of the incentive-based argument centers around the assumption that a leader believes using force against a foreign country will divert attention away from poor economic conditions at home (Brulé & Williams, 2009) and boost their approval ratings. However, the effects of such choices on public opinion are known to be short-lived and uncertain (Brulé, 2008; Morgan & Bickers, 1992). Thus, it does not necessarily offer sufficient incentive for leaders to initiate a foreign policy decision as costly as militarized action when facing a poor economy at home (Brody & Shapiro, 1989; Brulé, 2008; Lian & Oneal, 1993).

2.2 | Policy availability explanation

The second explanation complements the incentive-based one and resolves some of the aforementioned weaknesses by disentangling the conditions under which leaders turn to foreign policy when facing economic problems at home. Brulé's, 2008 take on the policy availability

explanation accounts for presidential-congressional relations and shows how armed disputes are initiated when leaders are unable to adopt policies that directly address domestic issues (see also, Gelpi, 1997; Miller, 1995). Leaders face varying institutional constraints, such as government composition and the separation of powers. The former—denoting whether the government is united and controlled by one party or divided and the control of different government branches is split between multiple parties instead—determines the limitations presidents face when advancing domestic social and economic policies. Thus, in comparison to unified governments, divided ones represent institutional constraints for leaders and determine the set of policies available to respond to weak economic conditions at home (Brulé, 2006; Gelpi, 1997).

In the US, institutional constraints vary over time and determine the president's ability to shape domestic policies—in other words, the president's party power. In times of unitary government, presidents enjoy strong support from Congress enabling them to advance domestic policy proposals, while periods of divided government make any domestic policy proposal from the executive unlikely to proceed (Bond & Fleisher, 1990). Higher institutional constraints being imposed by Congress often makes the executive unable to engage with the most appropriate policy instruments to hand (Milner & Tingley, 2015). Thus, institutional constraints—meaning weak presidential party power in Congress—often push presidents in consequence toward alternative policy-making channels where they have more leeway, such as the use of force, for diversionary purposes (Brulé, 2006; Brulé & Williams, 2009).[1]

The diversionary argument is supported by empirical findings indicating a boost in a leader's approval ratings following the use of force in pursuit of foreign policy goals (Brody & Page, 1975; MacKuen, 1983; Mueller, 1970). The argument is widely applied to the use of force and has been tested for decisions on armed disputes (Brulé, 2006, 2008; Brulé & Hwang, 2010; DeRouen Jr, 1995; Fordham, 1998; Haas & Whiting, 1956; Ostrom & Job, 1986) and threats of armed disputes (Morgan & Bickers, 1992). The diversionary tactic potentially being used for other foreign policy actions that are less risky, less costly, and that may attract much lower levels of domestic dissension when compared to the act of war has enjoyed less scholarly attention. In response, this article applies the diversionary argument to sanctions, another foreign policy tool at the leader's disposal. It tests the conditions under which sanctions are used for diversionary purposes—a matter especially relevant given that the political benefits of sanctions have been shown to surpass their utility as measures of economic statecraft (Whang, 2011).

3 | THE DIVERSIONARY USE OF SANCTIONS

3.1 | US sanctions policy

Sanctions are coercive economic measures that are led by a sender government to promote political objectives vis-à-vis a target country, its entities, and leadership. They are a hostile foreign policy tool that can be used by leaders in their efforts to construct a record of policies and to demonstrate an image of strength to the public (Galtung, 1967; Wallensteen, 1968). Sanctions allow leaders to respond to and weigh in on international issues without engaging in military interventions, making their use a potential tool to "play the home crowd" (Whang, 2011, p. 1), demonstrate that they are "doing something" on international issues (Tama, 2020, p. 400), and to divert attention away from domestic issues (Allen, 2005; Ang & Peksen, 2007; Lindsay, 1986). Thus, while the effectiveness of sanctions has attracted more scholarly attention, for state leaders the initiation of sanctions is more important than their success (Allen, 2005, p. 118).

Similar to the use of force, the use of sanctions offers an attractive feature to US presidents: they can be imposed without prior congressional approval. Sanctions are a tool of economic statecraft constitutionally entrusted to Congress. Congress, however, has acknowledged the advantages of giving US presidents, who are also the country's top diplomats, flexibility and freedom on the matter. Consequently, the imposition of sanctions was delegated to the president by Congress first with the passage of the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917 (US Congress, 1917) and later through the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 (US Congress, 1977), both acts enabling presidents and their affiliated branches to impose sanctions against foreign countries without prior congressional approval. In that framework, US presidents have the mandate to impose sanctions directly by executive order in declaring a national emergency.

Scholars have thus studied the separation of powers in the US sanctions domain. On the one hand, Tama (2020) perceives sanctions to be a policy area of both strong presidential and also congressional power, arguing that presidents are often constrained politically by Congress. On the other hand, Milner and Tingley (2015) see sanctions as an area of only strong presidential power, contending that congressional constraints may incentivize presidents to turn to the sanctions domain, where they are stronger and more flexible relative to Congress, to issue policies. Overall, there is broad consensus in the literature that presidents have the formal authority needed to exercise great power on sanctions.

The president's sanctions toolbox contains a variety of measures taking different forms, ranging from individual travel bans to comprehensive trade embargoes. These different measures inflict varying costs on the sanctions sender that are determined by the potential economic harm of the measure of choice. The direct costs of sanctions to state leaders can take two forms: First, these costs can be diplomatic, as leaders are tasked with preserving relations with foreign nations and sanctions strain such ties. Second, and relatedly, sanctions can hurt the sender's domestic economy, as they affect jobs, directly harm specific industries, and have the potential to inflict costs on the overall welfare of the sender country (Congressional Budget Office, 1999; Hatipoglu, 2014).[2] Therefore, the executive's decision to impose sanctions depends on both the benefits that the president expects to reap from such a response to a given crisis and the costs of the action to their own country. This makes leaders sensitive to periods of poor economic performance (Tama, 2020).

A limited number of studies have explored the link between the economic health of the sanctions sender and the decision to impose such measures. They provide us with mixed findings. On the one hand, they show that higher levels of unemployment are associated with a greater likelihood of sanctions imposition (Drury, 2001). This discovery came as a surprise, as scholars had long argued that sanctions are costly (Drury, 2000; Hufbauer et al., 1997) and should be avoided in times of economic distress. On the other hand, later findings by Drury (2005) pointed in the opposite direction, showing that a weak economy constrains the president's use of sanctions. The results offer some hints as to how domestic factors affect leaders' decision-making, but a systematic analysis of the diversionary use of sanctions remains absent.

3.2 | Using sanctions to demonstrate competence and leadership

Instead of arguing that presidents routinely turn to or avoid sanctions in periods of high unemployment, I contend their costly nature simply makes the president more likely to

impose sanctions under a specific confluence of domestic circumstances: namely, when unemployment is high and the president is unable to respond. Here, presidents will initiate sanctions that do not have the potential to harm the US economy. When facing domestic problems such as high unemployment, US presidents have a range of policy alternatives that they can use to demonstrate competence (Richards et al., 1993)—for example, they can actively work on combating unemployment by proposing legislation that expands fiscal policy.

To achieve this objective of introducing domestic policies, however, the president needs to persuade Congress to support their proposals. Such endeavors usually face institutional constraints when the president's party power is weak, making presidential initiatives unlikely to pass (Bond & Fleisher, 1990; Edwards & Andrew, 2000). Legislative constraints have been largely attributed to the opposition's desire to both thwart presidential action and have the public hold the leader accountable for domestic failures in the next elections (Spiliotes & Spilhaus, 2002).

Thus, I posit that presidents with poor prospects of legislative success will increase their use of sanctions in periods of high unemployment. Such limited legislative prospects prevent presidents from responding to domestic economic problems. Leaders know that their tenure is viewed more favorably when the economy is thriving. As they want to remain in office and leave behind a good policy record (Brulé, 2006, 2008; Gelpi, 1997; Miller, 1995), leaders increase their use of sanctions—as an alternative policy platform where they can project their leadership skills and focus on important issues.

Yet, I anticipate that this use of sanctions for diversionary purposes will be restricted to measures with little potential economic cost to the sender, to avoid exacerbating domestic grievances or harming one's own electoral fortunes. Costly sanctions, such as banning the import and export of certain commodities or military equipment, directly impact the US market. They create losses for businesses that depend on the banned goods and may lead companies in the sender country to seek alternative channels for acquiring the same goods but at higher prices. Furthermore, export restrictions also have direct implications for the US employment sector, as they create job losses and generally reduce the amount of well-paid positions in the export sector, which Hufbauer et al. (1997) early on highlighted as a "heavy cost" for sanctions senders. This makes the use of costly sanctions a political liability (Tama, 2020). Thus, I expect that presidents will choose non-costly measures—the "cheapest" instrument available (Milner & Tingley, 2015, p. 74)—when reverting to sanctions for diversionary purposes. The lack of domestic costs ensuing from such sanctions measures would explain their extensive use for symbolic purposes (Ang & Peksen, 2007).

This cost-saving strategy sheds light on the most important quality of economic sanctions: namely, their "expressive" attributes (Galtung, 1967; Wallensteen, 1968). Sanctions enable leaders to produce domestic-audience benefits without worrying about the ultimate success of the imposed measures (Whang, 2011, p. 787). For example, the president is able to send a strong signal of their country's disapproval of Venezuela's behavior by imposing travel bans and asset freezes on senior members of the latter's government without worrying about such sanctions' economic impact on the US public itself.

> **Hypothesis.** Presidents are more likely to impose non-costly sanctions when the level of unemployment is high and their presidential party power is low.

While leaders may find it difficult to engage in hostile action unless there is a bilateral issue at stake, it is reasonable to argue that US presidents do not face the same level of constraints and

have plenty of opportunities to join in on international issues given they are engaged with almost every country in the world (Drury, 2005).[3]

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To empirically test the formulated hypothesis, I investigate the link between economic downturn, institutional constraints, and the use of sanctions as a foreign policy tool by US presidents.

4.1 | Economic sanctions

For information on my dependent variable, I use novel data on US sanctions provided by the EUSANCT project (Weber & Schneider, 2022). The EUSANCT project complements and updates extant data sources to offer information on sanctions imposed between 1989 and 2015. A major advantage of this dataset is that it provides information on the exact entity within the US initiating the coercive measures in question. This allows me to filter sanctions that have the executive branch listed as the imposing entity and to exclude those imposed by Congress alone.[4]

I make, however, two significant changes to this dataset. First, the EUSANCT project documents only the start and end dates of a sanctions case. I thus complement their coding with all sanctions decisions made by the US executive during the entire sanctions case to hand.[5] Second, a single sanctions decision by the US executive may target a large number of countries. As I perform a time-series analysis and not a dyadic one, I recode the data to treat such decisions as one sanctions case in the respective year quarter (see the robustness checks for alternative model specifications). For example, the sanctions by the George W. Bush administration over the International Criminal Court were imposed against a large number of countries in particular year quarters. I recoded the data and treated the ICC sanctions as one sanctions case in the respective quarters.

Next, to test my hypothesis, I follow the classifications by Drury (2005) and split all coded sanctions cases into "costly" and "non-costly" sanctions decisions. The first category contains costly measures that directly impact the US market and includes all sanctions decisions establishing commodity, arms, as well as trade and oil embargoes between the sender and target. The second category contains the least costly measures available to the president that primarily harm the target and impose little to no economic cost on the US economy itself. These include sanctions cases that only consist of restrictions on aid, financing, and loans, asset freezes, as well as travel bans. Using this information, I create three count variables that respectively capture the total count of sanctions, the count of non-costly sanctions, and the count of costly sanctions imposed in every year quarter. This allows me to conduct a time-series analysis that accounts for varying economic and political dynamics within the US. The count data also permits variation in my dependent variable, as on average US presidents initiate more than one sanctions decision per quarter and approximately 80% of the time-series dataset reports the imposition of such measures at least once.

4.2 | Independent variables

In this article, I test one account of the policy availability argument and expect US sanctions initiation to be affected by the level of unemployment and the president's party power in Congress.

For the first, I use data on US unemployment rates provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022). For the second, following Howell and Pevehouse (2005), I measure the president's party power in each chamber of Congress as a product of party size and cohesion: [(size of president's party in percent) * (president's party cohesion)]−[(size of opposition's party in percent) * (opposition's party cohesion)].

Seeing as there are no available datasets that cover the chosen timeframe, I construct the variable for each chamber of Congress using data on all roll-call votes in the U.S. House of Representatives and in the Senate, respectively (Voteview, 2015). I start by first calculating party-cohesion scores for each roll-call vote of the chamber in question.[6] Then I use the newly calculated party-cohesion score and information on party size (The Center for Legislative Archives, 2019) to calculate the president's party-power score. Following Hurley et al. (1977), as well as Brulé and Hwang (2010), I take the score of the chamber exhibiting lower presidential party power as an indicator of the president's party power in the respective quarter, as it measures the president's "legislative potential for policy change." The expectation is that a Congress with weak presidential party power would thwart domestic policy initiatives by the president (Bond & Fleisher, 1990), especially during periods of economic decline, pushing the latter toward the foreign policy domain.

4.3 | Control variables

Seeing as a leader's decision to impose sanctions is unlikely to be caused by a single factor, I draw on earlier research and control for other domestic conditions that might serve as competing explanations for my dependent variable. First, I include a variable that counts the time till the next presidential elections measured in year quarters. Drury (2001) posits that sanctions can be used by the president as a strategy to appear more active during non-election years. Second, I control for the president's approval ratings (American Presidency Project, 2019). Presidential decisions are also known to be driven by approval ratings, which, as noted earlier, have been shown to spur leaders to initiate hostile foreign policy decisions in an effort to boost their public support at home (on the initiation of interstate military disputes, see Brulé, 2008; James & Hristoulas, 1994; Ostrom & Job, 1986; Tir, 2010).

I also control for other external confounding factors, such as the demand for sanctions, to strengthen the robustness of the results. I include a dummy variable that accounts for EU sanctions activity in the same quarter as an indicator for the demand for sanctions. The imposition of EU sanctions in the same quarter would provide some initial evidence that sanctions are being imposed in response to the target's policies rather than for domestic purposes. I rely here on the EUSANCT project (Weber & Schneider, 2022), while additionally conducting own research to identify the presence of gradual EU sanctions decisions.[7] Given my data structure, the "sanctions demand" measure is conservative as it allows me to control for EU sanctions only if US measures against the same target are present in the same quarter; it does not account for EU sanctions in the absence of US sanctions.

4.4 | Model selection

For the statistical analysis, I opt for using count models as my main dependent variables capture the count of sanctions imposed in every year quarter from 1989 to 2015. More precisely, I rely on a

TABLE 1   Descriptive statistics of variables

	N	Mean	Sd	Median	Min.	Max.
Quarterly count of sanctions	108	1.97	1.68	2.00	.00	8.00
Quarterly count of non-costly sanctions	108	1.35	1.35	1.00	.00	6.00
Quarterly count of costly sanctions	108	.62	.79	.00	.00	4.00
Unemployment level (in %)	108	6.06	1.56	5.63	3.67	10.40
President party power	108	−4.60	11.63	−7.61	−21.52	17.92
Presidential approval	108	.52	.12	.50	.28	.86
Time until next election (in quarters)	108	8.72	4.56	9.00	1.00	16.00
EU sanctions	108	.37	.49	.00	.00	1.00
EU costly sanctions	108	.20	.40	.00	.00	1.00

series of Poisson regressions to estimate the onset of sanctions as I find no significant evidence of overdispersion in my models (Cameron & Trivedi, 2013).[8] All Poisson regressions include a lagged dependent variable to account for the sanctions imposed in the previous year quarter. Moreover, I lag all independent and control variables—with the two exceptions I outline in the following—to hedge against reverse causality. The first exception is the institutional constraints measure, which captures the president's party power in a 2-year Congress and thus should not be lagged. This is a common strategy in the literature (Brulé, 2006, 2008; Brulé & Hwang, 2010). The second exception is the measure capturing the imposition of EU sanctions. Given that the variable is coded to capture the demand for sanctions in response to violations by the target—and senders tend to respond to the latter's transgressions around the same time—lagging the variable by 1 year quarter would prevent me from capturing this dynamic (see section A2 in the Appendix for the full equation of the regression model).

5 | EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

I start by providing descriptive statistics on the use of sanctions by US presidents. I then proceed by presenting the results of the statistical analysis that estimates the imposition of all sanctions. Finally, I distinguish between the imposition of non-costly and costly sanctions by US presidents from 1989 to 2015.

5.1 | Descriptives

Looking at the data, I find that from 1989 to 2015 US presidents imposed sanctions 213 times.[9] Of these, 146 cases entailed the imposition of non-costly sanctions while costly sanctions were imposed only 67 times (see Table 1 for the descriptive summary of all variables). More than 70% of the data show the imposition of non-costly sanctions at least once and around 36% of the included year quarters reveal their imposition more than once (see Figure 1). By contrast, I observe more quarters without the imposition of costly sanctions than with them. Less than 50% of my data indicates the imposition of costly sanctions at least once while less than 12% thereof shows their imposition more than once in the same year quarter.
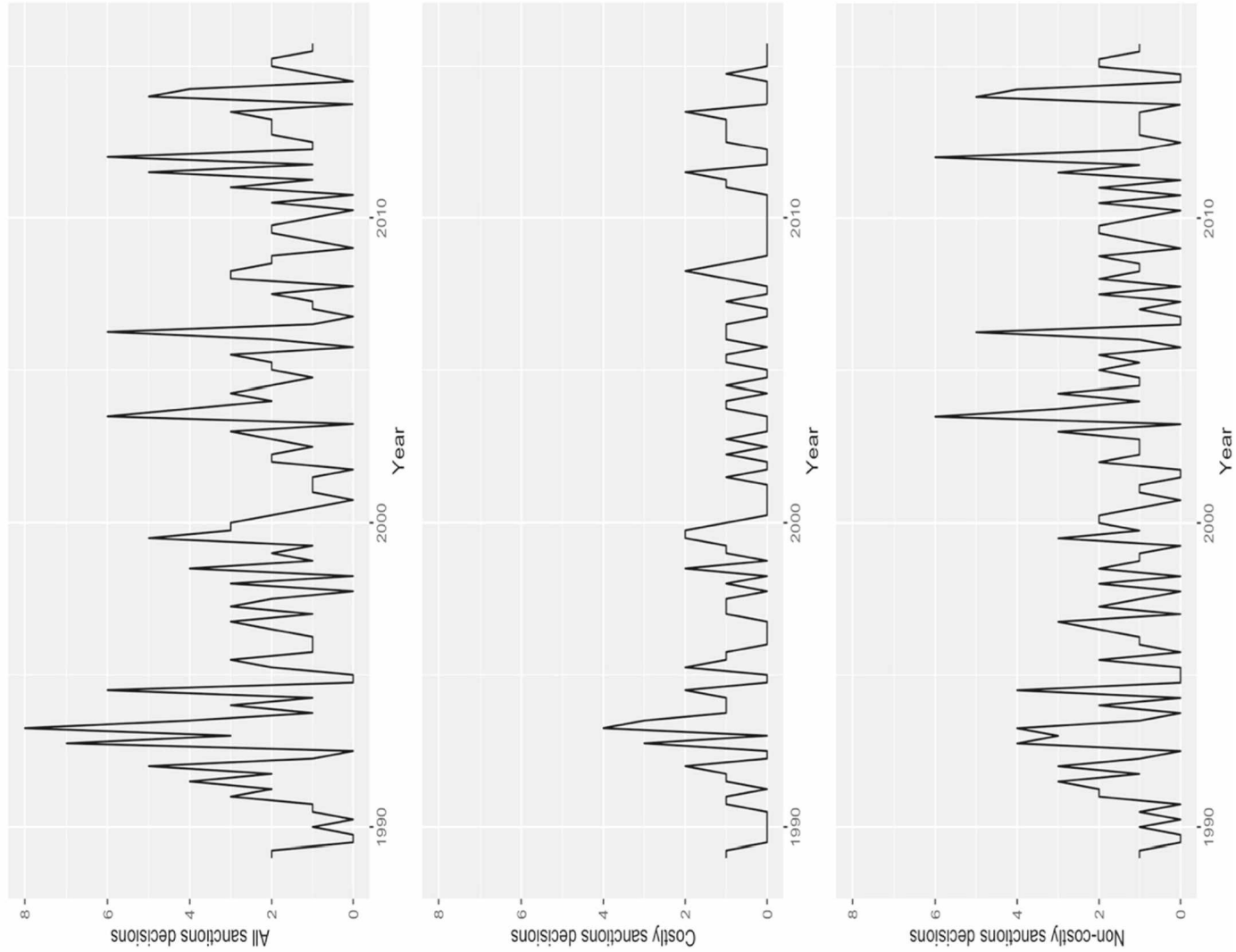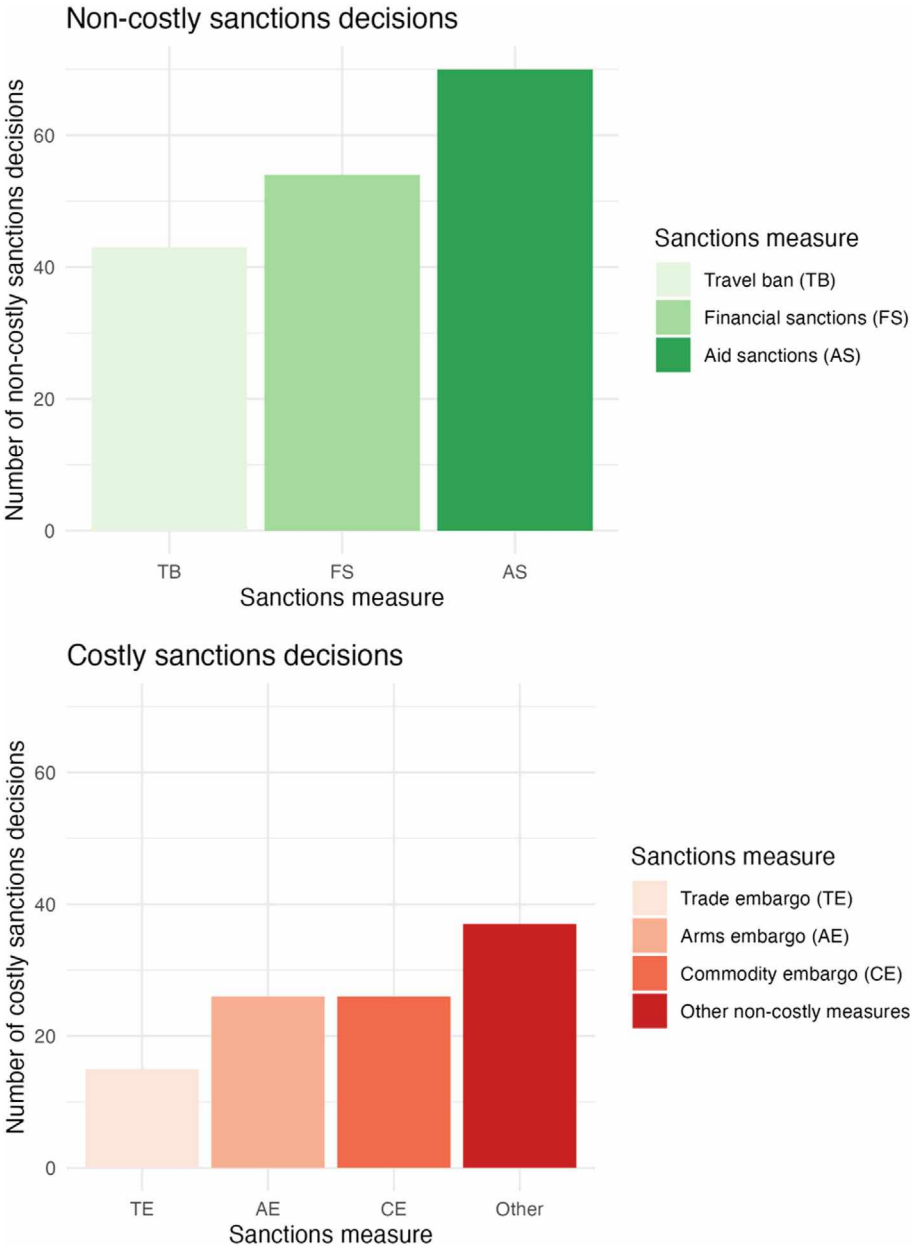
FIGURE 1 US executive sanctions by quarter (1989–2015)

FIGURE 2 US executive sanctions decisions by type (1989–2015) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The imposition of non-costly sanctions most commonly consisted of suspending military or economic assistance to the target (Figure 2). This was followed by the imposition of financial sanctions—for example, freezing the target's assets—and travel bans on the target entering the sender country. In contrast, the imposition of costly sanctions mostly consisted of the imposition of embargoes on arms and commodities. Comprehensive trade embargoes are the least common sanctions imposed by the executive.

TABLE 2 Poisson models estimating the count of sanctions

Variables	All sanctions (1)	Non-costly sanctions (2)	Costly sanctions (3)	(4)
Lagged all sanctions	−.058			
	(.044)			
Lagged non-costly sanctions		−.150**		
		(.074)		
Lagged costly sanctions			.092	.169
			(.142)	(.150)
Lagged unemployment (in %)	−.006	.015	−.039	−.066
	(.047)	(.056)	(.093)	(.096)
President party power (PPP)	.108***	.109***	.112**	.101*
	(.029)	(.034)	(.056)	(.055)
Lagged unemployment * PPP	−.014***	−.013***	−.017**	−.014*
	(.004)	(.005)	(.008)	(.008)
Lagged presidential approval	.152	.422	−.229	−.536
	(.625)	(.755)	(1.143)	(1.132)
Time until next election	−.033*	−.054**	.003	.008
	(.018)	(.022)	(.032)	(.032)
EU sanctions	.646***	.511***	.793***	
	(.147)	(.182)	(.259)	
EU costly				.828***
				(.299)
Constant	.851*	.539	−.522	−.141
	(.480)	(.571)	(.885)	(.896)
Observations	107	107	107	107
Pearson $\chi2$	108.860	115.841	89.043	89.066
Log Likelihood	−173.937	−151.682	−102.269	−103.396
Aikaike Inf. Crit.	363.87	319.36	220.54	222.79

Note: All models report the results of Poisson regressions. Standard errors in parentheses. ***$p < .01$, **$p < .05$, *$p < .1$.

5.2 | Regression results

I start my analysis with a series of Poisson models that, respectively, investigate the use of all, non-costly, and costly sanctions by the US executive. Model 1 in Table 2 below estimates the count of all sanctions as a function of presidential party power, the domestic economy, as well as the domestic controls and the indicator for sanctions demand to account for competing explanations regarding my dependent variable. Model 2 estimates the count of non-costly sanctions, while Models 3 and 4 estimate the count of costly sanctions. Overall, the fit of each model is good and allows for the rejection of the null hypothesis that the coefficients included in each model are jointly 0.

5.2.1 | General use of sanctions

Looking at the results of Model 1 in Table 2 above, it is observable that the president's party power is positively and significantly correlated with the number of sanctions, whereas domestic levels of unemployment do not significantly affect the imposition of the very same measures. Of more importance is the significant conditional effect detected in Model 1 that may clarify the mixed findings in the scholarship as regards how the US domestic economy affects the initiation of sanctions. I find that the president's party power significantly affects the imposition of sanctions and that this effect is conditional on the level of unemployment. Presidents facing institutional constraints in Congress are more likely to issue sanctions when unemployment levels are high (Figure A2-1 in the Appendix). This conditional effect holds after I control for other domestic and international factors, providing some initial support for the aforementioned policy availability explanation regarding the diversionary use of sanctions. As for the control variables, I find that the presence of EU activity in the same year quarter significantly increases the likelihood of US sanctions imposition. To test my formulated hypothesis, namely, whether presidents account for sanctions' potential economic costs domestically when resorting to them, I proceed by splitting the sample into non-costly and costly sanctions decisions.

5.2.2 | Distinguishing between non-costly and costly sanctions

Thus far I have shown that sanctions are a foreign policy tool that the president can resort to as a reaction of choice, and that decisions on their use are affected by specific domestic conditions. In order to investigate the proposed hypothesis, which probes the rationale of the US executive when pivoting to the sanctions domain, I differentiate between the types of sanctions that are at the president's disposal. I dive deeper into the latter's sanctions toolbox and run separate regressions that investigate the likelihood of non-costly sanctions imposition (Model 2 in Table 2) and costly sanctions imposition (Models 3 and 4 in Table 2) by the US executive from 1989 to 2015.

The imposition of non-costly sanctions
The results for the imposition of non-costly sanctions are similar to the findings for the general use of sanctions. Looking at Models 2 in Table 2, I find that the significant positive effect of the president's party power on non-costly sanctions initiation is conditional on the state of the domestic economy. For ease of interpretation regarding the Poisson regression output, I visualize the marginal effect of the interaction term (Figure 3). I find that during periods of economic distress, presidents with strong party power are less likely to impose sanctions. Presumably, presidents with such high political capital would be more likely to focus on advancing domestic policies during periods of domestic distress and take fewer sanctions decisions. In contrast, presidents constrained from advancing domestic policies in times of poor economic performance at home are more likely to turn to the foreign policy domain, initiating non-costly sanctions as levels of unemployment increase. The results indicate that in being deprived of legislative success, presidents have an incentive to turn to a policy domain, where they are relatively unconstrained, can respond to international issues, and are able to initiate related policies (for a visualization using alternative threshold values for presidential party power, see Figure A2-2 in the Appendix).

An additional test using the coefficients from Model 2 in Table 2 provides further support for the formulated hypothesis (Table 3). The predicted count of non-costly sanctions for a president
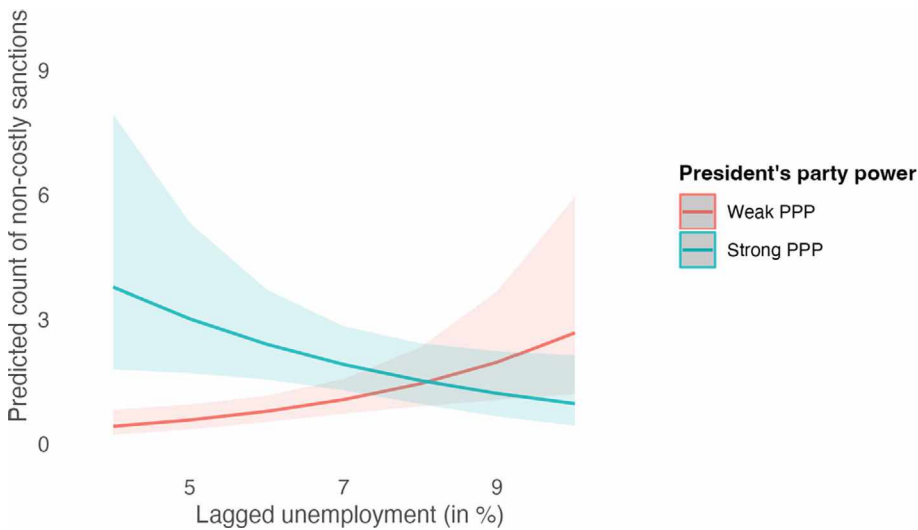
FIGURE 3 Marginal effect of interaction term on the imposition of non-costly sanctions. Graphs generated using Model 2 in Table 2. To generate the marginal effect, I use the minimum (low) and maximum (high) values of presidential party power. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 3 Marginal effect of interaction term on the predicted count of non-costly sanctions

Conditioning variable (Z) president party power	Change in E(Y)
Model 2	
PPP low (minimum)	+61%***
PPP low (10% percentile)	+59%***
PPP low (25% percentile)	+32%**
PPP high (75% percentile)	−9%
PPP high (90% percentile)	−22%*
PPP high (maximum)	−30%**

Note: Using Model 2 from Table 2, I display the change in the expected count of non-costly sanctions initiations for presidents with low and high presidential party power respectively when the level of unemployment is increased by one standard deviation from its mean value, while holding all other variables at baseline values (continuous variables are held at the mean value and categorical/dichotomous variables are held at the median value): [Pr(mean + sd)−Pr(mean)/Pr(mean)]. ***$p < .01$, **$p < .05$, *$p < .1$.

with low presidential party power rises by 61% when the level of unemployment is increased by one standard deviation from its mean, while holding all other variables at baseline values.[10] In contrast, the predicted count of non-costly sanctions for a president with high presidential party power decreases by 30% when the level of unemployment is increased by one standard deviation from its mean, while holding all other variables at baseline values. If I take the 90th percentile value for strong and 10th percentile value for weak presidential party power, I find that the predicted count of sanctions increases by 59% for the former and decreases by 22% for the latter when the level of unemployment is increased by one standard deviation from its mean, while holding all other variables at baseline values.

As for the controls, I find an increase the use of non-costly sanctions as elections move closer. Similar to the findings on these measures' general use, EU sanctions activity also increases the predicted count of non-costly sanctions by 67%. This is intuitive and fits well with the article's presented argument: namely, that the US executive does not manufacture issues to impose sanctions and rather has plenty of opportunities to join in on international matters. In other words, sanctions decisions seem to be a product of leaders' choices on when and how to respond to international events.

The results indicate that non-costly sanctions decisions are not only affected by international factors but are also more likely under certain domestic conditions. The Obama administration serves as an illustrative example here: While there was surely a demand for sanctions in the quarters following the 2010 midterm elections—for example, increasing domestic pressure on President Obama to deal with Iran—increased sanctions activity also came at a time when his proposed domestic policies at home were being blocked by Congress. In his first 2 years in office, President Obama and his Democratic allies in Congress oversaw a substantial record of policy accomplishments on domestic issues, such as economic stimuli, universal healthcare, and financial regulations (Galston, 2010). However, the 2010 midterm elections saw Democrats lose their majority in Congress. With the US economy still suffering, economic policy initiatives by the Obama administration were being thwarted by an "increasingly dysfunctional Congress" (The White House, 2011).

It was no coincidence that legislative constraints pushed President Obama to rely on his executive power to issue policies. With a majority in Congress, Republicans were now more interested in domestic policies than in foreign policy, whereas the Obama administration was increasingly focused on the latter (Nelson, 2017). This was shown by the administration's increased focus on international issues such as the acceleration of US troop withdrawals and deeper engagement in matters of international peace and security. This prioritization resulted in the greater use of economic sanctions against countries such as Iran and North Korea—whose policies have long been at odds with US interests. This increased activity in foreign affairs affected, as noted earlier, nearly all regions of the world.

The imposition of costly sanctions

The models investigating the onset of costly US sanctions tell a slightly different story. Looking at Model 3 in Table 2, I find that the imposition of costly sanctions is significantly influenced by domestic conditions. Similar to the models estimating the imposition of non-costly sanctions, presidents are shown to be more likely to impose costly ones when unemployment levels are high and their party power is low. However, once I control for the imposition of costly EU sanctions—a measure that captures the international demand for costly punitive action against the target—I find only weak support for the effect of the interaction term on the executive's decision to impose these costly measures both in terms of statistical significance and substantive effect (Model 4 in Table 2 and Figure 4). Moreover, other domestic factors that have been shown to influence the imposition of non-costly sanctions, such as the time until next election, are shown to not significantly affect the imposition of costly coercive measures either.

Mirroring the estimation strategy for non-costly sanctions imposition (Table 3), I conduct an additional hypothesis test that calculates the expected count of costly sanctions initiations for presidents with low and high presidential party power, respectively, when the level of unemployment is increased by one standard deviation from its mean value, while holding all other variables
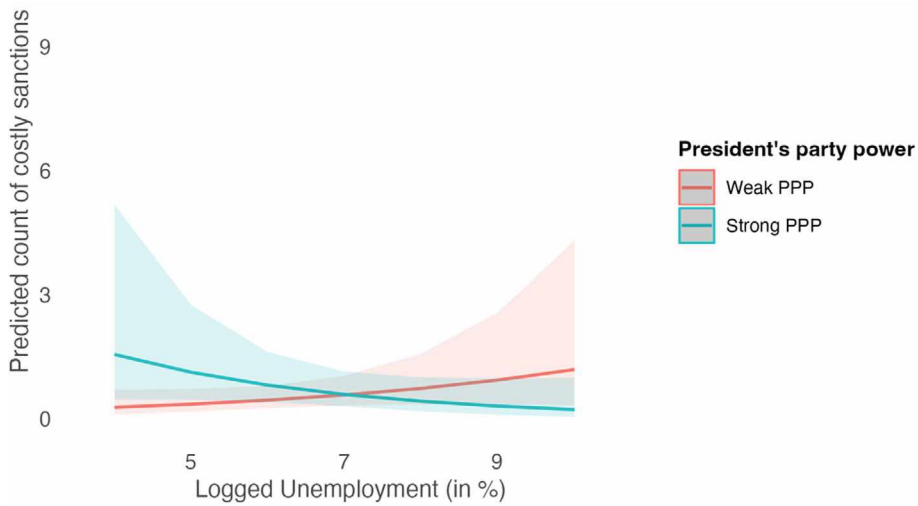
FIGURE 4 Marginal effect of interaction term on the imposition of costly sanctions. Graphs generated using Model 4 in Table 2. To generate the marginal effect, I use the minimum (low) and maximum (high) values of presidential party power. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 4 Marginal effect of interaction term on the predicted count of costly sanctions

Conditioning variable (Z) president party power	Change in E(Y)
Model 4	
PPP low (minimum)	+46%
PPP low (10% percentile)	+43%
PPP low (25% percentile)	+18%
PPP high (75% percentile)	−20%
PPP high (90% percentile)	−33%
PPP high (maximum)	−40%

Note: Using Model 4 from Table 2, I display the change in the expected count of costly sanctions initiations for presidents with low and high presidential party power respectively when the level of unemployment is increased by one standard deviation from its mean value, while holding all other variables at baseline values (continuous variables are held at the mean value and categorical/dichotomous variables are held at the median value): [Pr(mean + sd)−Pr(mean)/Pr(mean)]. ***$p < .01$, **$p < .05$, *$p < .1$.

at baseline values (Table 4). Looking at Table 4, I find that the marginal effect of the interaction term is significantly smaller for low levels of presidential party power when compared to the marginal effects presented in Table 3 on non-costly sanctions initiation. More importantly, the interaction term fails to reach statistical significance on the 10% level for all different levels of presidential party power (Table 4), indicating that domestic factors do not seem to significantly explain the imposition of costly sanctions.

Turning to the controls, in contrast to the imposition of non-costly sanctions, the US executive is less likely to impose costly sanctions—that have the potential to harm the US economy—as elections come closer. This effect, however, fails to be statistically significant. Instead, the imposition of costly sanctions is shown to be driven by a demand for such costly

coercive action. Costly sanctions decisions are only significantly correlated with the initiation of equivalent sanctions by the EU on the 5% level. More precisely, the predicted count of costly US sanctions increases by 129% when costly EU measures are imposed in the same year quarter. A prominent example here is when, in November 2002, the US together with countries of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization imposed a suspension on heavy-fuels deliveries to North Korea due to concerns over its nuclear arsenal. Similarly, the US arms embargo against Nigeria in 1995 and commodity embargo on Bashar al-Assad's Syria in 2011 were imposed after costly EU sanctions were implemented to punish these same countries. The findings indicate that US leaders tend to initiate costly foreign policy decisions when the target's policies lead to international demand for such costly punitive action being taken.

6 | ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

I run a series of additional tests to further probe the robustness of the findings reported in the main analysis. The robustness checks can be divided into two sections: First, I employ alternative model specifications to account for—among other things—potential overdispersion and serial correlation. Second, I run a dyadic analysis to control for target dynamics and probe whether my results hold in a different data set-up.

6.1 | Alternative model specifications

First, I employ Negative Binomial regressions to account for potential overdispersion (Table A2-1 in the Appendix). Second, I run an autoregressive Poisson model to account for potential auto-correlation in the quarterly count of sanctions (Table A3.1–1 in the Appendix). Third, I exclude sanctions decisions against countries that are not prominent in the US public discourse as such nations may not be well-known to the domestic audience and thus decisions concerning them are less likely to be used for diversionary purposes. To account for the varying promi-nence of sanctions targets in the US public discourse, I collect data on the annual count of country mentions in the New York Times (NYT). [11] In the first round, I exclude countries that score below the 25th percentile; in the second, I exclude countries below the 50th per-centile (Tables A3.2–1 and A3.2–2 and Figures A3.2–1 to A3.2–4 in the Appendix). Fourth, I include a control variable that captures the president's partisanship, as Republican presidents are deemed to have a more hawkish approach to foreign policy compared to their Democratic peers (Table A3.3–1 in the Appendix). Fifth, I cluster the standard errors on the US adminis-tration level, to deal with presidential-level heterogeneity (Table A3.4–1 in the Appendix). The results of the five tests show that US presidents revert to non-costly sanctions when levels of unemployment are high and their legislative potential for policy change is low. The results indicate that presidents with strong party power tend to be more active in the foreign policy domain when economic conditions at home are good. As the domestic economy's performance worsens, their activity on foreign issues seems to decrease. In contrast, evidence for the diver-sionary use of costly sanctions is substantively weaker and does not hold across the different models. Instead, the imposition of such costly measures—which have the potential to also harm the US economy—is consistently shown to be driven by an international demand for such costly action.

6.2 | Target dynamics

This article employed a time-series count analysis, due to the formulated research question on the frequency of sanctions use and the data-generation process. The results show that sanctions are not only initiated in response to international demand but are also affected by domestic conditions in the US. To further control for the effect of international factors and target dynamics on sanctions decision-making, such as target behavior, economic vulnerability, and the current state of bilateral relations between the US and the target, I run a dyadic analysis using a series of Logit models for a last round of robustness checks. This allows me to see whether my findings hold when using a different setup to test my hypothesis. It is important to note that the focus in such a setup is not on the cumulative count of sanctions imposed by leaders over time but on individual decisions regarding whether to impose sanctions against a given foreign country or not. The dyadic test supports the findings of the main analysis (Tables A3.5–1 to A3.5–3 and Figures A3.5–2 to A3.5–3 in the Appendix).

7 | CONCLUSION

This article has tested diversion theory's policy availability explanation for a foreign policy tool less costly than the use of force: economic sanctions. The article's goal is not to claim that sanctions are routinely levied by country leaders when domestic conditions are poor but rather to highlight that the decision-making behind US presidents' use of sanctions is also affected by circumstances at home. Its main arguments center around sanctions being a foreign policy tool less risky than using force and that can be mobilized by leaders in times of internal distress to demonstrate competence, leadership skills, and secure public approval. Thus, sanctions can be viewed as a double-edged sword: they may be used by leaders in the sender country for diversionary purposes but, at the same time, also by sanctions targets to produce a narrative that garners greater domestic support (see, for example, Mazaheri, 2010 on Iraq sanctions). [12]

The empirical findings show that the likelihood of sanctions initiation simply increases under specific conditions: when the leader's party power is weak and the domestic economy is doing poorly. The empirical findings stress that lumping all sanctions together prevents us from detecting how domestic factors affect the two identified types differently (Drury, 2005). They link nicely to earlier empirical findings showing that US presidents experience a surge in popular support following the use of these coercive measures (Whang, 2011).

I provide support for the view that US presidents behave strategically, given that the evidence for the diversionary use of sanctions seems to be robust and substantively stronger for the less economically costly measures. In contrast, I find substantively weaker and less robust support for the influence of domestic factors on the imposition of costly measures that have the potential to aggravate poor domestic performance. The imposition hereof seems to be driven by external factors—more precisely, by a strong demand for costly punitive action. This is often triggered by grave violations by foreign governments that lead to punishment from the international community. It seems that the US executive is rational and accounts for the costs of the available foreign policy measures to the domestic economy. The results highlight the diversity of sanctions as a foreign policy tool, one giving leaders the choice between a cost-savvy or more symbolic message and susceptible to different domestic environments.

The findings underline that US presidents may overly rely on sanctions, a relatively "cheap" instrument, as they have more control over sanctions decisions than other domestic policy

domains. These discoveries relate to earlier work finding sanctions to be an area of strong presidential power when compared to other foreign policy arenas (Milner & Tingley, 2015). This raises the question whether sanctions constitute substitutes or complements to the use of force. The results suggest that non-costly sanctions could be substitutes for the use of force, which the traditional literature on the diversionary argument has studied. Yet, if this were the case one should observe fewer incidents of US uses of force than one actually observes. Future research could build on this article's findings and investigate the complementary or substitutionary function of sanctions.

This article tested the influence of deteriorating levels of unemployment on the diversionary use of sanctions for theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, trade-related sanctions have been shown to directly affect unemployment levels in the sender country as they impact specific industries, especially the export and import sector, in a negative way (Hufbauer et al., 1997). More importantly, unemployment is an aspect of the economy that is visible to the public and that the public cares about and reacts to. Empirically, previous studies that have investigated the diversionary use of force argument have also looked at the effects of unemployment levels (see for example, Brulé & Hwang, 2010; Fordham, 1998; Ostrom & Job, 1986). This allows me to compare my findings to theirs and test the plausibility of the argument. At the same time, the economic voting literature shows that the public seems to react differently to different macroeconomic conditions (Powell & Whitten, 1993). Future studies can build on this article to hypothesize and test the effect of other domestic economic conditions on sanctions imposition.

Testing the argument for the case of the US has several advantages to it. First, the North American country is the world's leading sanctions sender, imposing more than half of all sanctions captured by the TIES dataset (Morgan et al., 2014) and more than two-thirds of those found in the EUSANCT dataset (Weber & Schneider, 2022). The implications of the article's findings help us understand better when the world's leading sanctioner imposes sanctions. Second, the availability of data on sanctions, government compositions, and roll-call votes for the entire timeframe of 1989 to 2015 allowed for a time-series analysis. Third, the diversionary argument has been widely tested vis-à-vis the US before. This allowed me to contribute to existing research while simultaneously enabling comparisons therewith, to determine the plausibility of the article's findings.

Nevertheless, the investigation of a single country case does not readily allow for generalizations. It is unclear how the argument applies to other presidential or semi-presidential democracies, or to nondemocracies (Brulé, 2006). While the US is unique in its extensive use of sanctions (Morgan et al., 2014; Weber & Schneider, 2022), recent years have shown that the pool of senders that actively impose these coercive measures has diversified. Authoritarian countries such as China and Russia are increasingly imposing sanctions and counter-sanctions as a foreign policy tool (Jadoon et al., 2020). Anecdotal evidence suggests that these measures often also serve symbolic purposes as their economic impact on targets, such as the US and EU, is minimal. Yet, the use of sanctions by autocracies may be driven by rationales other than the ones presented in this article, as autocratic leaders have different tools at their disposal that they can use to generate domestic gains. For example, in comparison to democracies, they are not as dependent on the public's approval and can revert to repression rather than issuing hostile foreign policies for domestic gains. Future research is needed, then, to determine the applicability of the argument beyond just the case of the US.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication data and files for this study are openly available on the Harvard Dataverse at https:// doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DTS2XB.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In their role as US commander-in-chief, the president can initiate force against a foreign nation without ex ante legislative constraints.

[2] For instance, the grain embargo imposed by the US on the Soviet Union inflicted hardship on the North American country's farmers and, in consequence, Ronald Reagan made reversing the sanctions policy a campaign promise (Doxey, 1987).

[3] The idea here is that there are numerous international issues and crises occurring in and between foreign countries that the US engages with. Especially as, "for over 60 years, every president has agreed on the fundamental decision to remain deeply engaged in the world" (Brooks et al., 2013, p. 130). Hence, I do not argue that the White House might manufacture issues, but rather suggest that it has the option to choose when and where to engage.

[4] Some US sanctions have both the executive and Congress listed as the imposing entity. I conduct further research to determine whether the US executive was active on the matter: if not, the case is excluded. For example, if a president only signs congressional sanctions legislation into law then this action is excluded from my sample as sanctions legislation garners bipartisan support and is thus often signed into law despite being considered "misguided" by US presidents (Tama, 2020, 398). Sanctions that stem from legislation—such as the Child Soldiers Prevention Act, which cuts economic or military support to foreign nations if they fail to meet recommendations spelled out by the DoS—are included in my analysis. While this type of sanction may appear to occur automatically, the legislation requires that the executive branch issue annual certifications on the matter that are far from a given. As such, in effect, these joint sanctions entail the same decision-making process as other coercive measures imposed by the executive (Drury, 2001).

[5] I use EUSANCT's "gradualism" variable to identify all US sanctions cases in which measures are imposed gradually and also conduct my own research to code all executive sanctions decisions issued within the respective

sanctions case. Prominent examples that involve multiple sanctions decisions are Cuba and Iran. I exclude listings by the Office of Foreign Assets Control or the DoS if they only add single entities or persons to already-issued executive sanctions decisions against the same country.

[6] Party cohesion is calculated by subtracting the number of party members voting against a particular piece of legislation from those voting for it (Cooper & Young, 2002).

[7] I rely on EUSANCT's gradualism variable to identify EU sanctions cases imposed over time. Similar to the coding of gradual US sanctions decisions, I exclude those instances where only single individuals or entities are added to existing EU Council decisions.

[8] I report the results of the overdispersion statistics for each model that I present in the empirical analysis below. I also report the results of the Negative Binomial regressions in the robustness checks.

[9] This statistic counts different sanctions imposition decisions per quarter and not the total count of ongoing sanctions present in the individual quarters.

[10] The predicted count of non-costly sanctions is calculated for strong and weak presidential party power respectively when the level of unemployment is increased by one standard deviation from its mean value, while holding all other variables at baseline values (continuous variables are held at the mean value and categorical/dichotomous variables at the median value): $[Pr(mean + sd) - Pr(mean)/Pr(mean)]$.

[11] The data is collected using R. I use the *NYT* API and set a filter for *NYT* articles only. See section A.3.2 in the Appendix for the full list of search terms used.

[12] The government of Saddam Hussein used sanctions as a means to shift blame and justify the population's economic hardships, while also mobilizing public support for their government (Mazaheri, 2010).

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