

International Norms, Sanctioning, and Prisoners' Rights: A Field Experiment with Foreign Missions

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Abstract

How do international norms and the prospect of sanctioning affect state respect for human rights? To examine this, we conducted a field experiment with foreign missions. Our experiment involved emailing 984 foreign diplomatic missions in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom with requests to contact domestic prisoners. This right is acknowledged by the United Nations. While we kept the content of our request largely the same, we randomly varied (1) whether we remind embassies about the existence of an international norm permitting prisoner contact and (2) whether the putative email sender is associated with a fictitious HRO and, thereby, has the potential capacity to sanction missions for non-response. We expected that recipients who received emails that contained either treatment would be more responsive but that responsiveness would be highest when both treatments are provided. We find that while the norms cue increases responsiveness, the sanctioning cue alone and the sanctioning cue combined with the norm cue have no effects. Our findings have clear policy implications for states and HROs seeking to enforce human rights norms.

Research Question

How do international norms and sanctions affect state respect for human rights?

- Do norms increase compliance?
- Does the threat of possible sanctions increase compliance?

Previous Research

- Large literature suggests that norms, sanctions, or both can improve rights observance.
 - Claims often lack rigorous support.
 - To our knowledge, no existing support for a *causal* effect.

Research Design

- We emailed a sample of foreign missions with a request related to prisoners' rights.
- Kept the request constant but randomly assigned emails one of several different treatment combinations.
 - Used a fully crossed 2x2 design with 4 total treatments.

Participants

- 975 foreign missions operating in United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.
 - Includes missions from 183 countries.



Email Text

Text in <> represents randomly assigned elements.

Hello,

My name is <male name>. <no sanctioning cue / sanctioning cue>, and I have a long-standing interest in prisoner well-being. I would like to write to some prisoners in <country name>. <international norms cue / no international norms cue>. How can I do this?

<separator>

<valediction>,

<separator>

<name>

Treatments

- The treatments manipulate whether an international norms cue or a sanctioning cue (or some combination thereof) appear in the email text.
 - International norms—indicated by language that reminds the recipient of the acknowledged right that prisoners have to communicate with the outside world. The idea here is that reminding recipients of this norm might increase norm compliance.
 - Sanctioning—indicated by whether the putative sender works as a social sciences teacher of for a fictional human rights advocacy group. The idea here is that an advocacy group has a greater ability to highlight, and possibly punish, a recipient's unhelpfulness than a sender in some other line of work, such as a teacher.

Control Condition

I'm a social studies teacher who teaches about human rights advocacy, and I have a long-standing interest in prisoner well-being.

Norms Treatment

Rule 37 of the United Nation's' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners' suggests that this is possible.

Sanctioning Treatment

I'm a research officer with a human rights advocacy group, and I have a long-standing interest in prisoner well-being.

Norms and Sanctioning Treatment

Rule 37 of the United Nation's' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners' suggests that this is possible. . . . I'm a research officer with a human rights advocacy group, and I have a long-standing interest in prisoner well-being.

Outcome Measures

- Email response (yes/no).
 - 30% response rate.
- Email helpfulness (helpful/not helpful).

Results

- Linear probability models.
 - Robust standard errors with Bell-McCaffrey adjustment.
 - Models include fixed effects for email identity, email wave, foreign mission location (i.e. United States, Canada, United Kingdom), and type of mission (i.e. embassy, consulate).
- Studentized permutation tests.
 - *p*-values consistent with LPM results.

Email Response Outcome

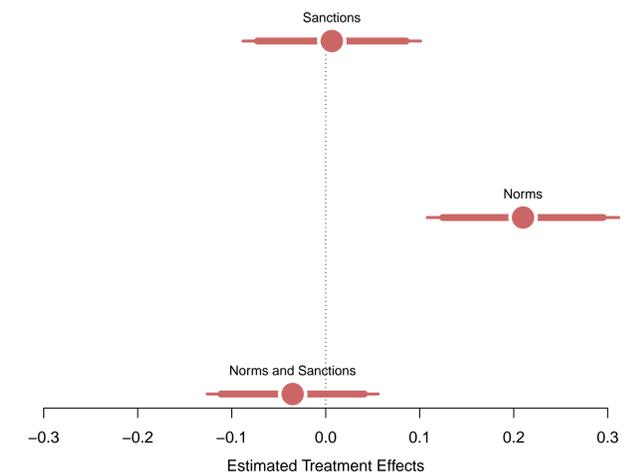


Figure 1: The plot displays results from LPM model with treatment indicators and various fixed effects.

The norms cue increases the probability of compliance **by 20%**.

Email Helpfulness Outcome

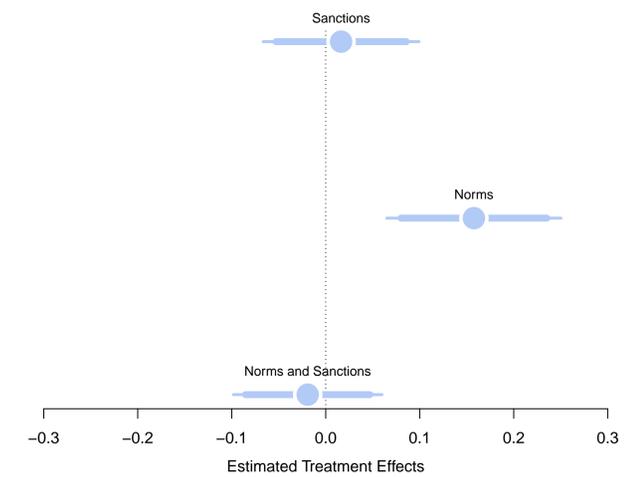


Figure 2: The plot displays results from LPM model with treatment indicators and various fixed effects.

The norms cue increases the probability of receiving a helpful reply **by 15%**.

Treatment Effect Heterogeneity

- No evidence that treatment effects are moderated by regime type or prior human rights performance.
- This suggests that very different states respond similarly to our treatments.

Summary

- Strong evidence that reminding foreign missions about norms increase compliance.
- Little evidence that sanctions influence compliance.
- The threat of sanctions might undermine the effect of norms.