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Research Note

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Political backlash of economic sanctions: evidence from Beijing's restriction on cross-strait tourism

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Abstract

How do economic sanctions affect the political attitudes of individuals working in targeted industries within sanctioned countries? More specifically, do economic sanctions diminish or bolster their political support for incumbent governments? Despite the significance of these questions for understanding the effectiveness of sanctions, existing evidence remains inconclusive. We argue that individuals targeted by sanctions tend to increase their political support for the incumbent through two mechanisms: the "rally-round-the-flag" effect and the "vote-buying" effects. Empirically, we leverage Beijing's abrupt restriction on cross-strait tourism as a natural experiment, providing observational evidence to quantify its political impact on Taiwanese tourism workers. Using quarterly surveys conducted from 2017 to 2019 in Taiwan, a difference-in-differences estimation and matching methods reveal that tourism workers exhibited increased support for the incumbent leader following the sanction. Notably, this effect is primarily driven by opponents, rather than supporters, of the incumbent, as well as tourism workers receiving more government subsidies. Similar patterns are observed in Beijing's sanction on Taiwan's agricultural products, further validating the findings.

Keywords sanction, cross-strait relations, political backlash, China

Introduction

Economic sanctions are not merely economic tools; they are designed to achieve political objectives, particularly by influencing the domestic politics of target states. Before the end of the Cold War, Lindsay (1986) documented 19 cases since 1932 in which sanctions were used to induce compliance or achieve subversion, yet few proved successful. Can sanctions effectively achieve their political aims, especially by reducing public support for incumbent governments?

The literature presents two competing views. Some argue that sanctions impose economic hardship and thereby weaken support for incumbents (Alexseev & Hale, 2020; Lektzian & Patterson, 2015; Marinov, 2005; Wood, 2008), while others contend that sanctions provoke political backlash and increase support for those in power (Frye, 2019; Grossman et al., 2018). However, most existing studies focus on the general population and overlook groups directly targeted by sanctions, mcend[1] structend namely individuals working in sanctioned sectors. These groups are likely to experience both the material consequences and the symbolic pressures of sanctions , leading to stronger political reactions. Their responses can also disproportionately shape public opinion by drawing attention to government aid and political messaging. Taken together, these dynamics make them central to the political effectiveness of sanctions. Yet few studies have examined how targeted groups respond in real-world settings, in part due to empirical challenges in isolating sanction effects when multiple sectors are affected simultaneously.

Focusing on individuals in sanctioned industries, we argue that sanctions can generate backlash effects that strengthen support for incumbents through two mechanisms. First, they trigger a *rally-round-the-flag* effect by mobilizing targeted groups, especially moderates and opposition supporters, to back the incumbent against perceived external threats (Baum, 2002; Galtung, 1967). Second, sanctions exacerbate economic dependency on government resources, resulting in a *vote-buying* effect that converts material aid into political support (Jones, 2015; Li, 2024).

We leverage Beijing's 2019 tourism sanctions on Taiwan as a natural experiment for two reasons. First, the sanctions exclusively targeted the tourism sector, minimizing confounding from bundled or multi-sector measures. Second, the timing of the sanctions coincided with Taiwan's electoral cycle, offering a unique

[1] With some exceptions such as Choi and Luo (2013) and Choi (2014).

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opportunity to examine their immediate political consequences. Empirically, we use quarterly surveys conducted in Taiwan from 2017 to 2019, which employed consistent sampling and design, to estimate the political responses of tourism workers. Difference-in-differences estimations show that the sanctions increased their political support for the incumbent government. Further analysis examines two potential mechanisms. First, consistent with the "rally-round-the-flag" effect, we find that psychological reactions were especially strong among opposition party supporters and emerged even before economic losses materialized. Second, using data on government subsidies, we find evidence of a "vote-buying" effect, in which state assistance translated into increased support for the incumbent.

This article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it examines the effects of economic sanctions on targeted groups—the real economic victims—showing that sanctions can sometimes strengthen, rather than weaken, support for incumbents (Baldwin & Pape, 1998; Drezner, 1999, 2011; Gordon, 2011). Second, it highlights the overlooked role of government responses: subsidies during sanction periods can reshape government–business relations and turn economic hardship into political leverage (Jones, 2015; Li, 2024). Finally, this article provides rare evidence on the political implications of Beijing's economic coercion and potential backlash (Guo & Jiang, 2021; Keng et al., 2017; Lai, 2021).

Political impact of economic sanctions

Existing literature offers two theoretical perspectives on the impact of economic sanctions on public opinion. On the one hand, the deprivation effect predicts that sanctions create economic hardship, leading citizens to withdraw support for the incumbent or demand policy change (Allen, 2008; Kirshner, 1997; Marinov, 2005; Shin et al., 2016). Targeted workers are expected to be particularly responsive, given the direct impact on their economic well-being (Lektzian & Patterson, 2015). On the other hand, scholars highlight a backlash effect in which sanctions generate political support for the incumbent (Galtung, 1967). Sanctions may be interpreted as illegitimate foreign interventions, prompting citizens to rally around the regime in defense of national sovereignty (Hellmeier, 2021; Pape, 1998). Psychological mechanisms such as nationalism, symbolic threat perception, and blame-shifting help explain why even opposition or moderate citizens may increase their support for the regime (Alexseev & Hale, 2020; Baum, 2002). Particularly, the incumbent's strategic framing of sanctions as external aggression can redirect domestic frustration toward the sanction senders (Frye, 2019; Kam & Ramos, 2008; Sejersen, 2021).

Regarding the targeted group, we argue that economic sanctions can generate political backlash among targeted groups through two distinct but complementary mechanisms. First, we expect a *rally-round-the-flag* effect, where targeted groups may increase support for the incumbent because they feel collectively attacked (Galtung, 1967). Regimes exploit this perception by framing sanctions as violations of national dignity or sovereignty, often portraying the sanctioning country as a hostile force seeking to undermine national unity (Alexseev & Hale, 2020; Kizilova & Norris, 2024; Sejersen, 2021). Compared to the general public, targeted groups experience sanctions not as distant macroeconomic disruptions but as immediate threats to their livelihoods. This proximity to harm makes nationalist and blame-shifting narratives more emotionally salient. The direct experience of hardship enhances the credibility of regime narratives that attribute suffering to external aggression rather than domestic policy failure (Frye, 2019). Political psychology studies show that individuals under threat tend to seek cohesion and solidarity, reinforcing support for political authority (Brader et al., 2008; Huddy et al., 2005).

The marginal effect of this framing is likely to be larger among moderates and opposition supporters (Baum, 2002; Kizilova & Norris, 2024). Having weaker prior attachments to the incumbent, they are more likely to update their political attitudes in response to elite cues that portray sanctions as attacks on the nation, whereas core supporters already exhibit high levels of support and thus leave less room for change. Recent evidence from survey experiments in Venezuela and South Korea shows that support for the incumbent can rise sharply among moderates and opposition-leaning individuals when sanctions are framed as hostile actions by a foreign power (Sejersen, 2021; Sung & Park, 2022). This rally effect is often observed even before material losses fully materialize, suggesting that symbolic threat perceptions alone can produce meaningful shifts in political alignment (Huddy et al., 2005).

Second, consistent with the deprivation logic, sanctions increase targeted groups' dependence on government support. This can generate a *vote-buying* effect, in which the government uses subsidies, procurement programs, or symbolic outreach to transform economic vulnerability into political compliance (McLean & Roblyer, 2017; Stokes, 2005). Especially under autocratic or resource-rich regimes, the redistribution of economic relief to sanction-hit groups can serve as a tool to retain loyalty and preempt unrest (Grauvogel et al., 2017; Li, 2024). For instance, Jones (2015) shows how the Iraqi and South African regimes used rationing and industrial support to reinforce political control, rather than reduce pressure. By concentrating assistance on visible and vocal groups, governments can maximize the political returns of redistribution while containing potential dissent (Ahn & Ludema, 2020).

This *vote-buying* effect is especially likely to occur among directly affected groups. These individuals experience the costs of sanctions firsthand and are thus more attuned to whether and how the government intervenes (Ahn & Ludema, 2020). The personal salience of economic loss increases both the psychological need for protection and the political weight of receiving aid. As their vulnerability intensifies, so does the perceived value of even modest assistance, reframing the incumbent as a caretaker rather than a cause of hardship (Frye, 2019). In contexts where sanctions are prolonged or recurring, this perception may evolve into a long-term dependence on the state, reinforcing political loyalty through repeated exchanges (Jones, 2015). In this way, economic pain becomes not just a source of grievance but a foundation for political alignment (Li, 2024).

These twin mechanisms may reinforce each other and produce lasting political loyalty among those most affected by sanctions. From this framework, we derive the testable hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Groups targeted by economic sanctions increase their political support for the incumbent, especially those who oppose the incumbent or receive government support.*

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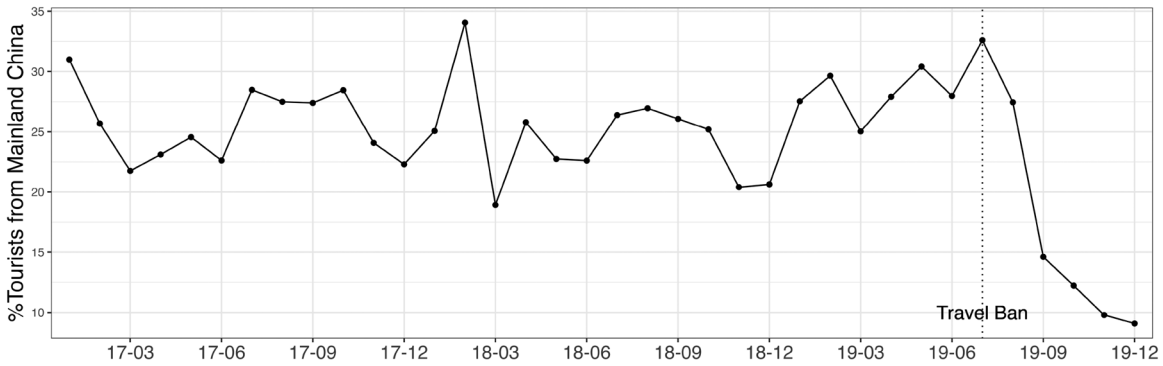


Figure 1 Beijing's travel restriction and cross-strait tourism.

Context: Beijing's sanction on Taiwan's tourism

Taiwan's tourism industry has long been highly dependent on mainland China, the largest source of tourists to Taiwan since 2011 and before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Taiwan's official stats, approximately 40% came from mainland China in 2015 alone. Beijing strategically uses its control over tourism to Taiwan for political leverage. During the Kuomintang (KMT) administration, the number of mainland Chinese tourists increased rapidly, from 289,000 in 2008 to over 4.14 million in 2015 (Guo & Jiang, 2021). Under the framework of the "1992 Consensus," friendly cross-strait relations facilitated this 13-fold growth in seven years, accounting for over 38% of all tourists to Taiwan.

However, Beijing adjusts its tourism policies in response to Taiwan's political landscape. With the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—which opposes the "1992 Consensus"—coming to power in 2016, Beijing significantly curtailed group tours to Taiwan. Consequently, the proportion of visitors from mainland China dropped to 25% in 2017, hitting a low of 18% in March 2018. These changes triggered protests from Taiwan's tourism-dependent business community (Lai, 2021). Following the 2018 local elections, where the KMT regained control in 15 counties and cities, the number of mainland Chinese tourists to Taiwan rebounded. In the first half of 2019, the number of visitors exceeded 1.67 million—nearly 30% more than the same period in the previous year. By July 2019, visitors from mainland China made up 32% of all tourists.

However, on July 31, 2019, Beijing announced the suspension of individual travel for mainland residents to Taiwan. The official statement cited "current cross-strait relations" as the reason for the suspension. The ban, effective August 1, affected 47 cities and was expected to reduce the number of Chinese tourists to Taiwan by 700,000 for the year (The Economist, 2019). Beijing's decision to suspend individual travel was likely driven by multiple factors. Foremost, the sanctions aimed to undermine Tsai Ing-wen's chances of reelection by exerting economic and political pressure. On August 1, 2019, the Chinese state-run Global Times criticized Tsai for "reinforcing its confrontational stance toward the Mainland" and serving as a "bargaining chip" for U.S. efforts to suppress China. Beijing was also likely provoked by Tsai's support for Hong Kong protests and the United States' approval of arms sales to Taiwan earlier that July (Kagotani & Wu, 2022).

Figure 1 shows the direct impact of Beijing's travel ban on tourists from mainland China to Taiwan. The share of mainland visitors declined from roughly 33% in July to 14% in September and then to 9% in December 2019.

Research design

Data source

We use data from the Taiwan Election and Democratization Study (TEDS), which comprises 19 waves of quarterly phone-based surveys conducted from March 2017 to March 2022, with subjects randomly sampled from Taiwanese residents aged 20 and older. Because Taiwan implemented mandatory quarantine policies in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we focus primarily on data from March 2017 to December 2019, treating the last two periods as post-treatment observations to analyze the reactions of tourism workers (N = 12,459). For robustness, we also present results from the full sample in the Appendix Table F1.

Additionally, we collected transaction-level data from the Tourism Development Fund managed by the Ministry of Transportation. Figure A1 in the Appendix reveal that the Tsai administration nearly doubled quarterly subsidies after Beijing's restrictions and total subsidies for tourism reached 5 billion NTD (approximately 160 million USD) by December 2019 (Liberty Times, 2019). For our analysis, we aggregate the subsidy amounts at the quarterly and city levels.

Measurement of political support

The outcome of interest is political support for Tsai In-Wen, the incumbent president seeking reelection in 2020. We construct the outcome variable, *Political Support*, with the principal factor analysis based on participants' responses to three specific questions: *Satisfaction*, "Are you satisfied with the overall performance of her presidency?" (4-point scale ranging from "very satisfied to "very dissatisfied."); *Leadership*, "On a scale where 0 indicates very poor leadership and 10 indicates excellent leadership, how would you rate Tsai Ing-wen?" (0–10 index); and *Trust* "On a scale where 0 indicates no trust at all and 10 indicates complete trust, how would you rate your trust in President Tsai Ing-wen?" (0–10 index). After standardization, the principal factor analysis returns a comprehensive indicator, *Political Support* ranging from 0 to 100 with an average of 54.95 and a standard error of 29.10. The result reports a mostly equal loading (.92, .95, .94 for the first dimension) and

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contribution (32%, 34%, 33%) of each factor in the principal factor analysis, suggesting these three factors are suitable to construct a latent variable.

Difference-in-difference estimator

We use a difference-in-differences estimator drawing on two sources of variation. First is the difference between tourism and others. The dataset categorizes respondents into 41 occupational groups based on a three-digit code. We classify category 401, which includes "service and hospitality personnel (encompassing street vendors, personal service providers, and taxi drivers) 服務、餐旅人員 (含攤販、個人服務、計程車司機)", as labor associated with the tourism industry. Two contextualized factors justify this categorization: first, although the category encompasses "services," it specifically refers to services related to dining and tourism, such as tour guiding, while other professional services (e.g., accounting, legal, education) are covered under different categories; second, in Taiwan's tourism context, night markets are pivotal attractions, and chartered transportation is a primary travel method, making street vendors and drivers particularly vulnerable to the sanction. Across different survey waves, the average number of individuals in the *Tourism* group is 35 and ranges from 30 to 57, accounting for 3% to 6% of the survey sample. The distribution of *Tourism* is shown in Figures A2 and A3 and the categories for other industries can be found in Table B1 in the Appendix.

The second source of variation is the timing. We utilize August 2019, the point after which Beijing ceased individual travel permit applications to Taiwan, as a temporal node to construct a time dummy variable, *TravelBan*, where 1 represents surveys conducted post this juncture. A generalized difference-in-differences approach is employed, focusing on the interaction coefficient between *Tourism* and *TravelBan* for causal inference. This interaction is treated as exogenous, assuming that without the travel ban, differences between the tourism sector and other industries would have continued unchanged. If a significant change in this differential is observed post-treatment, it is interpreted as the tourism sector experiencing specific impacts, as opposed to variations solely attributable to inter-industry differences or specific time-related disturbances. Specifically, we estimate the following model:

$$Support_{it} = \beta_1 Tourism_i * TravelBan_t + \beta X_{it} + \epsilon_i + \mu_t + \delta_{it}$$

where *Political Support*$_{it}$ is the support level of respondent i surveyed at wave t, and $Tourism_i$ is a binary indicator, where 1 stands for subjects working in tourism. For *TravalBan*, 1 stands for surveys conducted after August 2019. We include a rich set of control variables (Qi & Lin, 2021): gender, education level, age, ethnicity (based on respondents' fathers' origin: Minnan, Hakka, or Mainlander). We also control two relatively stable subjective variables, including *Identity* (whether they identify themselves as Taiwanese, Chinese or both) and *Independence Preferences* (6 categories, ranging from *Taiwan should get independent as soon as possible* to *Taiwan should seek unification as soon as possible*).

In further analysis, we identify *Oppositions* of the incumbent based on voting experience in 2016 (*VoteTsai*) and partisan identity (supporters of DPP and other pro-independence parties). Industry, wave, and city fixed effects are controlled, and robust standard errors are clustered at the industry level. Table B2 in the Appendix displays the descriptive statistics.

Empirical results

Table 1 presents the reduced form of estimation results and Table C1 in the Appendix present the full results. Model 1 includes only the difference-in-differences estimator, Model 2 adds fixed effects, and Model 3 adds both control variables and fixed effects. The results indicate that after Beijing issued the travel restriction, Taiwanese tourism practitioners demonstrated increased support for the incumbent compared to other industries. On average, with all covariates held constant, the travel ban raised tourism workers' political support for Tsai by approximately 7%. This finding suggests that the travel ban did not lead to public disappointment with the incumbent but rather resulted in a distributional backlash, where the targeted group turned to support the incumbent.

How should we interpret the effect size of 7%? The data show that the primary drivers of public support among the Taiwanese population are their Taiwanese identity and independence preferences. Individuals identifying as Taiwanese exhibit 17% to 26% higher support compared to other groups. Similarly, relative to those supporting immediate unification, individuals advocating for immediate or eventual independence demonstrate approximately 21% and 22% higher support, respectively. Beyond these subjective variables, the magnitude of the difference-in-differences (DID) estimator is the most prominent among other objective indicators. Notably, the 7% effect of the travel ban exceeds the effects of age, education, and ethnicity, key factors highlighted in studies on Taiwanese politics (Qi & Lin, 2021).

We conduct two further analysis for robustness. First, we incorporate respondent weights from each survey wave to ensure representativeness in Model 4. Table C2 in the Appendix shows that the weighted estimations remain consistent across all specifications. Second, we apply propensity score matching to create control groups of comparable size. Specifically, using propensity scores generated through logit estimation with covariates, this method selects the most similar observation from the control group for each treated observation (covariate balance before and after matching is reported in Table B3 in the Appendix). Model 5 uses the matched sample to re-estimate the difference-in-differences (DID) estimator, and the results are consistent with the main findings. Additionally, Models 6–8 use *Trust* (0–10), *Leadership* (0–10), and *Satisfaction* (1–4), previously used as factors in the PCA, as separate outcomes. The results indicate that tourism workers reported higher levels of political trust, a more favorable perception of Tsai's leadership, and increased satisfaction levels following Beijing's travel ban.

We show the difference in political support between tourism and other industries over time in Figure 2. The baseline is the difference in the survey conducted in June 2019. The trend suggests that the differences between these two groups only became significant after the treatment in August 2019. Even during the period of local elections in December 2018, the difference between tourism workers and other industries remained insignificant, supporting the parallel trend assumption for the difference-in-differences method. This figure also shows that the effect of the sanctions was stronger in December 2019 compared to September 2019, consistent with the trend of a gradual decrease in tourists from mainland China. In other words, support for Tsai Ing-wen among tourism operators grew stronger as the effects of the sanctions became more pronounced.

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Table 1 Tourism restriction and support for Tsai.

Dependent Variables:	**Support**					**Trust**	**Leadership**	**Satisfaction**
Sample:	**Full Sample**			**Weighted**	**Matching**	**Full Sample**		
Model:	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**	**(6)**	**(7)**	**(8)**
Variables								
Tourism1 × TravelBan1	4.94***	5.63***	6.97***	5.43***	6.66*	0.602***	0.732***	0.227***
	(0.665)	(1.01)	(0.933)	(1.40)	(2.77)	(0.082)	(0.103)	(0.042)
Control	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed-effects								
Sector		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
City		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics								
Observations	10,369	10,304	9,682	9,682	773	9,682	9,682	9,682
Squared Correlation	0.02590	0.07117	0.30958	0.30840	0.35074	0.27629	0.24735	0.29900

Note. Clustered (Sector) standard-errors in parentheses.
Signif. Codes: ***: 0.001, **: 0.01, *: 0.05, †: 0.1.

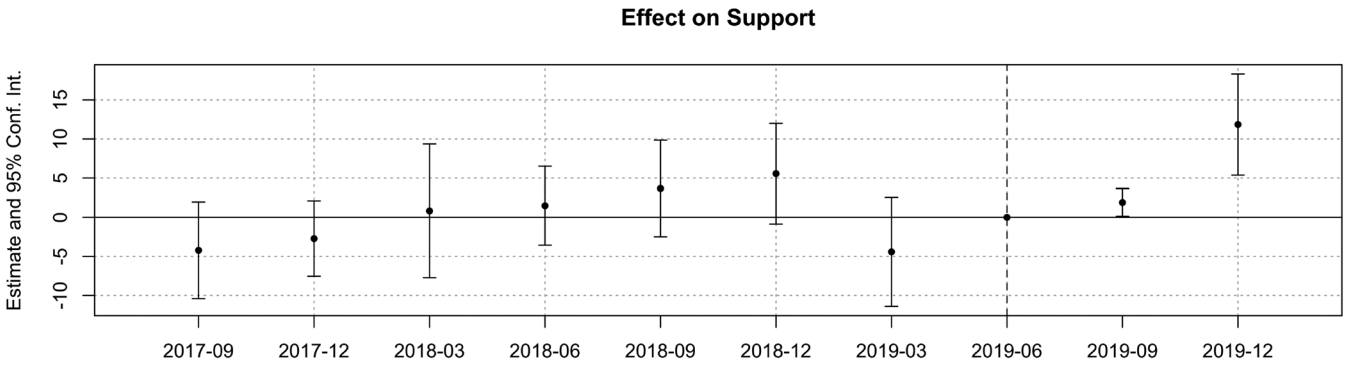


Figure 2 Dynamic treatment effects (ref = June 2019).

Overall, the results demonstrate a backlash effect among the targeted groups and provide supporting evidence for the first hypothesis. Specifically, after Beijing sanctioned Taiwan's tourism industry in August 2019, tourism workers increased their support for Tsai.

Mechanisms

To test this mechanism, we compare supporters of the incumbent with opposition and independent voters. Empirically, we code respondents as oppositions if they either did not vote for Tsai Ing-wen in the last election or do not identify as supporters of the DPP or the pan-green camp. In the sample, 46% of respondents are coded as supporters, while 54% are coded as oppositions, closely matching poll results from July 2019 before Beijing issued the tourism restriction (Now News, 2024).

To test this, we use a manually collected database of Taiwan Tourism Development Fund distributions managed by the central government, aggregated at the quarter-city level (logged). The theoretical expectation is that targeted groups in cities receiving more subsidies are more likely to increase their support for the incumbent. Additionally, Beijing's tourism restriction prevented mainland residents from applying for visas for individual trips to Taiwan, while previously approved visas remained valid for 60 days. This means the actual decline in mainland tourist numbers only became apparent in the fourth quarter of 2019, consistent with the statistics presented in Figure 1. Consequently, the effects are expected to be more salient in the December 2019 survey compared to September 2019.

We add a triple interaction term to capture the effects of oppositions and subsidies. The reduced-form estimation results are reported in Table 2, and the full regression results are provided in Table C3 in the Appendix. Model 1 includes only the difference-in-differences (DID) indicators and their interaction with oppositions, while Model 2 incorporates control variables and fixed effects. The results suggest that the effects are primarily driven by opposition voters, with positive but insignificant effects observed for incumbent supporters. Model 3 distinguishes the impacts in September and December 2019, showing that the effect mainly appears in the September survey, just one month after the tourism restriction was implemented, when actual economic hardship had not yet materialized. This short-term increase indicates that the result is largely an immediate psychological reaction.

Models 4 and 5 estimate the effects of government subsidies, with and without control variables and fixed effects.

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Table 2 Mechanism: rally-around-flag and government compensation.

Dependent Variable:	**Support**					
Model:	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**	**(6)**
Variables						
Tourism1 × TravelBan1	2.17	4.23†		−9.65*	−8.94	
	(2.34)	(2.24)		(4.43)	(6.54)	
Tourism1 × TravelBan1 × Opposition	10.7**	7.25**				
	(3.76)	(2.11)				
Tourism1 × TravelBan1 × Subsidy				4.11***	4.44*	
				(1.11)	(1.66)	
Tourism1 × TravelBan September × Opposition			13.5**			
			(4.35)			
Tourism1 × TravelBan September × Subsidy						2.31
						(1.58)
Tourism1 × TravelBan December × Opposition			2.35			
			(2.25)			
Tourism1 × TravelBan December × Subsidy						11.6***
						(3.14)
Control	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Fixed-effects						
Sector		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Wave		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
City		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Fit statistics						
Observations	10,369	9,682	9,682	10,369	9,682	9,682
Squared Correlation	0.34446	0.44140	0.44173	0.02970	0.31001	0.31019

Note. Clustered (Sector) standard-errors in parentheses.
Signif. Codes: ***: 0.001, **: 0.01, *: 0.05, †: 0.1.

The coefficient of the triple interaction term suggests that tourism respondents in cities receiving more government subsidies report higher levels of support for the incumbent after the sanctions. Meanwhile, the original DID estimator becomes negative, indicating that respondents from cities receiving no subsidies actually lowered their evaluation of the incumbent after the tourism restrictions. Model 6 distinguishes between short- and long-term effects, finding that government subsidies only become significant in December 2019, when Taiwanese tourism businesses faced real economic losses as mainland tourist numbers declined.

Overall, this section provides evidence for both the "rally-round-the-flag" and "vote-buying" mechanisms by revealing heterogeneous effects among opposition and incumbent supporters, as well as the impact of government subsidies. Particularly, we find larger rally effects among opposition voters, especially in the short term, and stronger effects for tourism respondents in cities receiving more government subsidies when facing the actual economic impact of sanctions.

Robustness

External validity

To examine whether the findings extend beyond this case, we replicate the analysis using agricultural workers affected by China's 2021 fruit import bans in Appendix D1. Results show similar patterns, suggesting the backlash effect may generalize to other directly targeted groups. These results demonstrate that the observed political backlash is not limited to the tourism sector or a single policy episode. The consistency across sectors and events enhances confidence in the generalizability of the proposed mechanisms.

Alternative explanations

Some may question whether the observed effects are driven by contemporaneous political events, such as the 2019 Hong Kong protests. To rule out alternative explanations, we conduct three analyses in Appendix E. First, we show that tourism workers and other respondents did not differ significantly in their attitudes toward the Hong Kong protesters. Second, we account for the broader international context by including a monthly measure of Taiwan's geopolitical risk from Caldara and Iacoviello (2022); the results remain robust. Finally, we also conduct a placebo test using agricultural workers as a placebo group. The treatment effect is null, reinforcing that the observed backlash is specific to tourism sectors.

Sample size

Some may question whether the results are driven by the small size of the treated group. We address this concern in three ways. First, we estimate models without controls or fixed effects to maximize degrees of freedom (Model 1 in Table 1, Models 1 and 4 in Table 2). Second, we test alternative time frames and

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double the sample size (N = 18,745) by including the COVID-19 period (Appendix F1). Third, we apply Bayesian estimation with weakly informative priors that partially pool estimates in order to improve inference and reduce overfitting in small or unbalanced samples (Appendix G). The Bayesian models replicate the main patterns across specifications, with posterior probabilities exceeding 0.8 in most cases. They also provide strong evidence for the vote-buying mechanism, with posterior probabilities above 0.94 and credible intervals that exclude zero. Across all these tests, the results of both the difference-in-differences and triple-differences estimators remain highly robust. These strategies reinforce the credibility of the estimated treatment effects under varying sample sizes and specifications.

Estimation uncertainty

We conduct three analyses to address estimation uncertainty. First, a Bayesian Model Averaging (BMA) analysis shows that *Tourism* × *TravelBan* consistently ranks among the most predictive variables across model space (Appendix H), suggesting that the treatment effect is not an artifact of a particular model specification. Second, we use the *sensemakr* framework (Cinelli & Hazlett, 2020) to assess the robustness of the treatment effect to omitted variable bias. Appendix I demonstrates that even confounders as strong as key covariates (Minnan ethnicity and dual identity) would not overturn the main result. Finally, we verify that the results are robust to alternative clustering strategies (Appendix J). Overall, these checks suggest that the core findings are not dependent on specific modeling choices, omitted variables, or assumptions about error structure.

Conclusion

To summarize, we find political backlash from core groups targeted by economic sanctions in the case of Beijing's sanction on Taiwanese tourism in 2019. Drawing on 19 waves of quarterly surveys, the difference-in-differences estimation shows that Beijing's sanctions on Taiwanese tourism promote mass support for the anti-Beijing leader. Particularly, the effect is lasting and more pronounced in the opponents but not supporters of the party in power, and policy resources offered by the sanctioned government help to turn the crisis into an opportunity for political campaigns.

Although this study focuses on cross-strait relations, its findings have generalizable applications. The governments being sanctioned are never mere policy takers; they always respond with certain policies, even if purely symbolic. Such policy responses are common among sanctioned entities, although they are often overlooked in existing research (Jones, 2015; Li, 2024). That said, we caution the reader about the generalizability of these findings. The political backlash observed in this case may depend on heightened cross-Strait tensions and may not be comparable to other cases where the relationship between the sanction sender and receiver is less adversarial.

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Author contributions

Shengqiao Lin (Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing), Dongtao Qi (Conceptualization, Writing—review & editing), Suixin Zhang (Conceptualization, Writing—review & editing).

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

The dataset and scripts for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available at https://www.prio.org/journals/jpr/replicationdata. All analyses were conducted in R.

Declaration of AI usage

We used AI tools for preliminary language polishing and for guidance on R code implementation.

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