In defense of international sanctions.

How communication about sanctions can mitigate public backslash

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Abstract

Does communicating sanctions change how they are perceived by citizens in the target country? In this paper, we argue that not only sanction design, but also the framing of international sanctions and their endorsement by political actors can increase citizens' support for sanctions. We test this argument in the case of the European Union and using conjoint experiments in Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria. Our results show that both framing and cueing seem to matter in addition to the question of how sanctions are designed. While it is important for public support that procedural fairness is incorporated in designing the sanctions, framing sanctions in terms of protecting the rule of law and obtaining support from the domestic opposition seems to matter just as much.

Introduction

A central theme in the literature on international sanctions is the possible unintended consequences of sanctions on public opinion in the target country: the rally-around-the-flag effect (Galtung 1967) as governments subject to international sanctions typically rally for domestic support against outside interference (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014: 637; Grossman et al. 2018). By contrast, the senders of international sanctions such as regional organizations or state coalitions may seek to mitigate the risk of public backlash – in particular, if sanctions aim at destabilizing the target government. One potential way to do so is the design of "smart" sanctions, which are supposed to limit economic harm mostly to governing elites in the target state (Cortright and Lopez 2000; Brzoska 2003; Drezner 2011; Frye 2019). Another, less explored way of mitigating public backlash against sanctions is the focus of this article: public communication in defense of international sanctions.

Communicating and defending international sanctions vis-à-vis the affected people is challenging for several reasons. Target governments almost inevitably portray sanctions as an illegitimate attack on their country and people (Alexseev and Hale 2019: 345). Depending on the level of media censorship (Hellmeier 2021), political actors other than the targeted government have only limited opportunities to convey an alternative narrative in defense of international sanctions. Even under conditions of relative media freedom, however, political actors may have few incentives to openly support international sanctions: international actors may be reluctant to adopt and defend sanctions, precisely to avoid being perceived as stigmatizing entire peoples (Hellquist 2019; Pospieszna et al. 2023: 2); similarly, domestic opposition forces may avoid explicit support for sanctions against their governments for fear of being branded as "traitors" to the national interest (Jenne and Mudde 2012; Wonka et al. 2023). Without a counter-narrative, however, target governments can easily shift the blame for the negative effects of sanctions and denounce illegitimate outside interference. Thus, if nobody dares to speak out publicly and defend international sanctions vis-à-vis the affected people, the rally-around-the-flag effect might become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Against this background, we ask whether the way international sanctions are communicated and defended can mitigate the risk of public backlash. Does it matter for the acceptance of sanctions, whether and how actors other than the targeted government position themselves in public? To answer this question, we develop two sets of theoretical expectations regarding different i) framings and ii) endorsement cues (Druckman et al. 20010) in defense of international sanctions. First, we expect the framing of sanctions regarding different substantive

justifications to matter for their public acceptance (Sejersen 2021). Secondly, we hypothesize that citizens' attitudes are influenced by information on the endorsement of sanctions through other governments, domestic opposition parties, or civil society actors

We test these expectations using a conjoint survey experiment conducted in Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria in 2023. This approach allows us to investigate the potential influence of public communication on the acceptance of sanctions in a controlled and, at the same time, highly realistic way as the European Union (EU) had started to use sanctions against the Hungarian and Polish governments for the violation of rule-of-law principles in 2022 (whereas Bulgaria serves as a control case with EU sanctions being a possible, but hypothetical scenario).

The EU is often regarded as a political entity *sui generis* and findings from the EU do not travel easily to other international contexts. For our interest, however, the EU offers a crucial bordering case. EU sanctions were a salient matter of public debate in Hungary and Poland at the time when our survey experiment was implemented, and the public was exposed to government narratives discrediting the EU as an "imperial power", carrying out an "external attack" on national freedom and sovereignty (Csehi and Zgut 2021: 54, 62; Wonka et al. 2023). At the same time, if there was any chance that actors' endorsements and their justifications for international sanctions actually reach the affected public and influence public opinion, we should observe such effects in the EU. Even though democratic backsliding in the EU has led to severe cutbacks on liberal rights in the past decade, citizens in backsliding EU member states such as Hungary and Poland still enjoy a moderate degree of media freedom and political pluralism in global comparison.[1] Moreover, even without a truly European public sphere, domestic public spheres have become increasingly Europeanized during the integration process, i.e. a minimum level of public awareness about political developments at the European level and in other countries has been reached. Finally, the broader literature on the effectiveness of sanctions suggests that allied democracies are more likely to be sensitive to sanctions than distant autocracies (Hufbauer et al. 2007: 163ff.; Allen 2008; Grauvogel and von Soest 2014: 639).

If we do not find any of the expected effects under these EU circumstances, there is probably very little that can be done in terms of public communication to affect the acceptance of sanctions and to mitigate the risk of a rally-around-the-flag effect. Our findings, however, confirm that, indeed, there is some room for the EU to communicate sanctions. Not only do support levels of different sanction packages vary strongly depending on the way they are

[1] World Press Freedom Index (Hungary 72/180, Poland 57/180).

communicated, but individuals in both Hungary and Poland also react strongly to both the framing and endorsements of sanctions.

The article is structured as follows. In the next chapter, we review the public opinion literature on international sanctions as well as on framing and cueing to derive two sets of theoretical expectations. Subsequently, we describe and justify our research design. In the empirical part, we present the results of our conjoint experiments in Hungary and Poland. We further show that the results are robust in Bulgaria as a non-target country. We conclude the article by discussing the implications and generalizability of our findings.

International sanctions and public opinion

In this section, we locate our study within the literature on international sanctions and we develop two sets of expectations regarding the public acceptance of international sanctions in target countries.

Sanction effectiveness and public backlash

The effectiveness of international sanctions is the subject of a vast body of literature (Allen 2008, Hufbauer et al. 2007; Peksen 2019). The question of what determines the public acceptance of international action is distinct, but highly relevant also for debates on sanction effectiveness. The perceived legitimacy of international action may be a precondition for its effectiveness (Chapman and Chaudoin 2020: 1305; Sung and Park 2022: 2), for example, if sanctions aim at undermining regime support (Frye 2019: 968; Alexseev and Hale 2019) or at promoting democratic values (von Soest and Wahman 2014; Hellquist and Palestini 2021). By contrast, international sanctions may be even counter-productive if public backlash is their unintended effect. In particular, international sanctions may allow the targeted government to portray itself as the defender of the national interest against illegitimate outside interference and, thereby, to trigger a rally-around-the-flag effect (Galtung 1967).

Target governments' strategies to rally for domestic support against international sanctions are pervasive: "across all regime types, leaders are found to respond to sanctions by appealing to their own country's public opinion in efforts to counteract or reverse sanctions' intended impact" (Alexseev and Hale 2019: 345). These appeals to public opinion broadly come in two variants. First, sanctions mainly work by causing economic harm to their targets (Kaempfer and Lowenberg 1988; Lektzian and Souva 2007). As a counter-reaction, target governments may

shift the blame for economic hardship to external forces and invoke national endurance to rally for domestic support. Secondly, sanctions may work as signals (Lindsay 1986; Giumelli 2011), indicating disapproval (Grauvogel et al. 2017: 87) or ostracism (Hellquist 2019: 396) to their targets. In response, target governments may rally for domestic support by denouncing external stigmatization and claiming to defend a nation's honor, values, or sovereignty (Soyaltin-Colella 2020: 495).

Empirical research to date, however, shows that international sanctions do not always trigger a rally-around-the-flag effect. While some studies, such as Grossman et al. (2018), find strong evidence for a backlash effect of sanctions, others do not (Frye 2019). From the perspective of the senders of international sanctions, the question arises whether and how the risk of public backlash can be mitigated.

Mitigating backlash by sanction design: smart sanctions and fair procedures

Hitherto, discussions about how to mitigate the risk of public backlash mainly center on the *design* of international sanctions. Most prominently, an extensive debate revolves around the question whether "smart" or "targeted" sanctions are less likely to prompt public backlash (Cortright and Lopez 2000; Brzoska 2003; Drezner 2011; Frye 2019). In contrast to conventional sanctions, covering large parts of the population, smart sanctions mainly aim at political or economic elites (Drezner 2011). The argument underlying the use of more targeted sanctions, then, refers to the more confined economic harm, which should make public backlash less likely (Alexseev and Hale 2019). Again, existing research is somewhat inconclusive. For instance, Grossman et al. (2018) find strong evidence for a backlash effect of sanctions in Israel, regardless of whether they are targeted or comprehensive in character. By contrast, the study of Frye (2019) on targeted sanctions against Russia shows no rally-around-the-flag effect. Both, Seitz and Zazzaro (2020) and Alexseev and Hale (2019), go one step further and refine the argument on targeted versus comprehensive sanctions by arguing for a differential impact on public opinion depending on how much citizens are affected by these sanctions. Both studies show that those mostly affected by targeted sanctions are most likely to rally around the flag.

Furthermore, the design of sanctions may also differ in procedural terms and, thereby, affect their perception as procedurally (il)legitimate. For example, it has been argued that sanctions are more likely to be perceived as legitimate if they are based on clear ex-ante criteria, which are consistently applied to all potential targets rather than if they are adopted ad hoc and in a discriminatory way (Blauberger and van Hüllen 2021: 6). In a similar vein, international

sanctions may be perceived as more legitimate when they grant certain procedural rights to the targeted government, e.g., regarding the justification of its policies or the opportunity to appeal sanctions in court.

In summary, the design of sanctions seems to affect how the general public in the target country perceives the legitimacy of sanctions. However, the literature has so far not come up with a clear 'recipe' of how to design sanctions to mitigate public backlash leaving room for other ways to fill this void.

Mitigating backlash by communicating sanctions: frames and cues

In addition to the design of sanctions, we, therefore, ask whether and how communication in defense of international sanctions affects their public acceptance and can mitigate the risk of public backlash. If sanctions are not only understood as instruments to create economic pressure but also as signals to the targeted population (Giumelli 2011; Grauvogel et al. 2017; Hellquist 2019), their communication matters. So far, however, research mainly acknowledges the importance of communication with respect to target governments seeking to rally for domestic support, e.g. by portraying resistance against international sanctions as a "civic duty for 'good patriots'" (Hellmeier 2021: 455) and reframing even supposedly 'targeted sanctions' as an attack on the country as a whole (Jaeger 2016: 964). But what about the communication in defense of international sanctions by their senders, i.e. international organizations and state coalitions, or by other forces opposed to the target government?

Despite the challenges of defending international sanctions vis-à-vis the affected people, we see at least two reasons why communication can help mitigate public backlash. First, citizens may lack information about their governments' behavior triggering international sanctions. Thus, unless the target government fully controls the flow of information (Hellmeier 2021: 456), other information sources may also shape the evaluation of international sanctions. For example, when governments claim to merely "reform" the judiciary to enhance its efficiency, international actors or opposition forces may point to the erosion of judicial independence as the actual justification for international sanctions (Stiansen et al. 2024). Secondly, citizens may be undecided and seek guidance when evaluating international sanctions. Citizens strongly supporting or opposing the targeted government are likely to assess international sanctions in line with their preferences toward the government (Edwards and Swenson 1997). However, as long as the target society is not entirely polarized between government supporters and opponents, communication about sanctions may reach those in between (Oxley 2020: 8).

Arguably, these "moderates are the key audience for senders to convince in order to prevent the rally-around-the-flag effect" (Sejersen 2021: 2).

Uncertainty and the demand for guidance may be particularly high in times of democratic crisis (Bechtel et al. 2017: 884). As a consequence, when evaluating international sanctions, citizens may either rely on frames that emphasize different justifications or they may draw on endorsement cues as shortcuts to form their opinion on the proposed sanctions (Druckman et al. 2010). In the following, we discuss how both frames and cues can affect how citizens evaluate international sanctions.

Framing

The underlying idea of framing theory is that any political issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and the choice of perspective matters for opinion formation (Chong and Druckman 2007: 104). People are more likely to agree with political arguments that resonate with their own frames. Aware of these "framing effects" (Druckman et al. 2010), political actors can strategically construct their arguments in one way or another to reorient citizens' thinking about an issue. Framing, thus, constitutes one way to influence public opinion by means of communication. One recurrent finding from the framing literature is of particular relevance for the defense of international sanctions: framing effects are strongest when they are not countered and canceled out by competing frames (Oxley 2020: 7). Given that target governments will always try to frame international sanctions in terms of illegitimate outside interference, the challenge for the senders of international sanctions is precisely to provide a strong counter-frame to avoid a rally-around-the-flag effect.

Different frames can be used to justify international sanctions (Hellquist 2019: 394). Ideally, by framing sanctions in a convincing way, international actors can send a signal of support to opposition forces and help "winning hearts and minds" in the target state (Sejersen 2021: 2). In his study on US sanctions against Venezuela, Sejersen (2021: 6) found that sanctions, which were justified to enforce broadly accepted international norms such as fundamental human rights, were more likely to be perceived as legitimate and less likely to trigger a rally-around-the-flag effect compared to a scenario in which Venezuela was labeled a threat without any appeal to broadly shared norms. Against this background, the acceptance of international sanctions should be higher if citizens in the target state learn about them in a way that is framed in terms of broadly shared norms. For example, the European Union typically justifies its sanctions against member state democratic backsliding in terms of protecting the "rule of law", whereas autocratic

leaders seek to delegitimize them as an attempt to impose liberal Western values and to take revenge for restrictive migration or family policies (Wunsch and Chiru 2024). Framing might be particularly relevant for public opinion in such a setting, where sanctions are not triggered by a clearly identifiable event (such as the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Frye 2019), but rather respond to a continuous process of democratic decline.

Endorsement cues

Generally speaking, the term cue refers to a piece of information that is used to make a decision or evaluation without further in-depth knowledge (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Our focus here is on one of the most common types of cues containing information about a favorable actor's position toward the political object of interest: "endorsement cues" (Druckman et al. 2010: 137). The basic idea is that, rather than investing in gaining an in-depth understanding of a political issue themselves, citizens may use the information about which actors support or oppose the respective issue as a shortcut and align their own opinion accordingly. Depending on the reputation of the source of an endorsement, thus, citizens become more likely to evaluate a political issue positively. Conversely, if an endorsement cue stems from an actor enjoying low levels of trust and reputation, the opposite effect might occur and citizens evaluate the matter more negatively (Aaroe 2012).

A variety of actors can provide endorsement cues about international sanctions. Existing research lends some ex-ante plausibility to the expectation that these cues might matter for citizens' evaluation of international sanctions. First, the position of *other states* has been found to matter for public opinion on the legitimacy of international action more generally (Gray and Hicks 2014; Johns and Davies 2014; Spilker et al. 2018). International sanctions, it has been shown, send stronger signals to opposition forces when issued by multiple senders (Grauvogel et al. 2017) and are harder to discredit for target governments, when the senders are regional organizations (Hellquist and Palestini 2021) or governments of countries with strong linkages to the target society (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). Against this background, we expect a positive influence on the acceptance of international sanctions if they are communicated with broad support from international organizations and their member states. When adopting sanctions against a member of an international organization, the other governments may hide behind the decision of the international organization or support that decision more or less unitedly in public. No or mixed signals from other governments might undermine the perception that the adoption of sanctions was impartial and compelling and, thus, support the targeted governments'

repudiation of illegitimate outside interference. In contrast, unified backing by other governments is likely to strengthen the acceptance of sanctions, all the more if the other governments are considered traditional allies of the targeted country.

Secondly, turning to the domestic level, *opposition parties* may or may not support international sanctions and attribute blame to the targeted government. If opposition parties endorse international sanctions, they undermine the targeted governments' efforts to depict sanctions as an attack on the entire nation. Conversely, opposition parties may rather be concerned about their own reputation and refrain from endorsing international sanctions or even reject them in order not to be branded as traitors to the national interest (Wonka et al. 2023). Depending on whether opposition parties support or reject international sanctions, citizens are likely to be cued towards increased or decreased sanction acceptance.

Thirdly, domestic *civil society organization*s may also signal their endorsement of international sanctions. Civil society actors' support for international sanctions should be particularly relevant for citizens without strong partisan affiliations. For example, Schlipphak et al. (2023) found civil society actors to moderate the effect of governmental blame-shifting strategies in the EU.

In sum, understanding what explains the domestic acceptance (or rejection) of international sanctions is crucial for the broader debate on sanction effectiveness. Whereas most existing research in the field analyzes how the acceptance of sanctions may be influenced by their design, such as their targetedness and procedural legitimacy, our focus here is on how and by whom international sanctions are communicated. We expect systematic differences as to the acceptance of international sanctions depending on i) whether they are framed in a way that resonates with broadly shared norms, and ii) whether they are supported by a variety of political actors, thereby providing endorsement cues for citizens.

Research design and method

We test our theoretical expectations using a conjoint survey experiment. We rely on a conjoint experiment because by presenting the communication of sanctions in the form of a sanction package, we are able to accommodate the multitude of factors important for communicating sanctions without overburdening the cognitive abilities of respondents. **I**n addition to dealing with the multi-dimensionality of sanction communication, using conjoint analysis allows us to estimate the causal effect of each of the different attributes of sanction communication, the so-called average marginal component effect (Hainmueller et al. 2014). We, therefore, consider the

use of conjoint experiments the ideal combination of incorporating all relevant dimensions affecting sanction communication in a way that is easy to grasp for the average citizen while allowing for causal identification.

Case selection

We decided to conduct our experiment in three EU member countries: Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria. In each country, 2,000 respondents, aged 18 to 64, took part in our online survey, which is representative concerning age, gender, and region. The survey was conducted in March 2023 via the survey company Dynata.

The reason for including Poland and Hungary is that these countries are typically considered "paradigmatic cases of democratic backsliding" (Bakke and Sitter 2020: 22) in the EU. Since 2010 in the case of Hungary and since 2015 in Poland, governments in both countries have been accused of systematically removing political checks and balances, restricting opposition parties, judicial independence, media freedom, and civil society organizations, and, thus, of violating the EU's fundamental values. These developments have led to various EU counter-measures, which have long been criticized for their strong reliance on soft dialogue rather than enforcement (Kelemen 2023). In 2020, however, EU governments agreed – against the resistance of Hungary and Poland – to introduce a new sanctioning instrument, the conditionality regulation, according to which EU member states may lose funding in case of rule of law violations.[2] On this basis, EU governments agreed to freeze €6.3bn of regional funding for Hungary in December 2022. In addition, other funds were also withheld for Poland even though on a different legal basis (Detre et al. 2023). This implies that by choosing Hungary and Poland, we cover the one existing target of the conditionality regulation (Hungary) as well as a potential case (Poland).[3]

We are aware of the fact that citizens in these two states might have already been exposed to information regarding actual or potential sanctions against their countries, leading to potential polarization of public opinion around this issue. This makes it particularly challenging to avoid the possible impact of this pre-treatment environment on survey responses. Therefore,

[2] From a formal-legal perspective, the conditionality regulation does not "sanction" EU member states for rule of law violations, but it "protects" the EU budget against misuse (Detre et al. 2023: 8). This legal construction was necessary to ensure broad agreement and legal compatibility with EU Treaties, but from a political perspective (and also in terms of public perception) it nevertheless qualifies as a sanctioning instrument.

[3] Our survey took place well before the last Polish parliamentary election, which resulted in a change of government.

to investigate how much the perception of sanction communication is dependent on the actual sanction context and pre-existing knowledge, we decided to include Bulgaria as a control case in our experiment.

While citizens in Hungary and Poland have been exposed to a lot of communication on EU sanctions already, this is not the case for citizens in Bulgaria. At the same time, Bulgaria would be well 'qualified' to become a target of EU sanctions as it resembles Poland and Hungary in terms of the rule of law and democratic deficits. Concerning the state of liberal democracy in Bulgaria, the V-dem 2022 Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) indicates that Bulgaria scores 56, the third lowest in the EU, just behind Hungary and Poland (Boese et al. 2022). In addition, the Commission's 2022 Rule of Law report highlights growing concerns about the functioning of the Supreme Judicial Council and problems with the handling of high-level anti-corruption cases (European Commission 2022a), and the Commission's media pluralism ranking places Bulgaria in the third highest risk area for media pluralism in the EU, again just behind Poland and Hungary (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom 2022). In sum, Bulgaria differs from the other two cases in the sense that although the conditions are present for the adoption of the conditionality regulation, the discussions on the use of the regulation against Bulgaria are not yet widespread at the EU level. Therefore, we do not expect Bulgarian public opinion to be politicized around the issue yet.

Conjoint Experiment

Our conjoint experiment consisted of six attributes, each containing three attribute levels, which varied according to the different communication and design features of economic sanctions discussed in our theoretical framework. We opted for a fully randomized conjoint design, which means that all attributes and their levels varied throughout the experiment to avoid attribute order effects (Bansak et al. 2021, Hainmueller et al. 2014). Each respondent conducted five conjoint tasks, thus evaluating ten sanction communication profiles in total.[4]

Table 1 outlines our conjoint experiment by showing all attributes and the corresponding attribute levels. To ensure that respondents could meaningfully evaluate the different sanction profiles, we not only provided our respondents with the tabular overview of our conjoint task, as shown in Table 1 but also gave them the following background information on the instructions page:

[4] The experiment was pre-registered at: https://osf.io/3jpn6

The European Union (EU) is based on shared values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law, which all member states agreed to respect when they joined the EU. At present, however, the EU is accusing the [Your Country's] government of violating the EU's fundamental values and may soon adopt sanctions as a result.

On the next pages, we will show you pairs of scenarios under which [Your Country] might be sanctioned by the EU. These scenarios differ in various regards:

1. *What is the [Your government] accused of? On what basis?*
2. *How big are the proposed sanctions?*
3. *To what extent do other EU governments support these sanctions?*
4. *What is the position of [National] opposition parties on these sanctions?*
5. *What rights does the [Your government] have in this process?*

Since the current stage of implementation of the conditionality regulation was not the same in Poland and Hungary, we had to make some changes to the introduction of the Hungarian survey. In the case of Hungary, the Commission had already proposed financial sanctions when the experiment was fielded. This means that our experiment remained rather hypothetical in Poland, but partly corresponded to reality in Hungary. Thus, the Hungarian version of the experiment acknowledges this difference. Before moving on to the conjoint experiment, we informed our Hungarian respondents about the actual situation and then asked them how strongly they supported or opposed the proposed sanctions (i.e., cutting €6.3 billion from the Cohesion Fund). We then moved on to the same hypothetical scenarios as in the case of Poland, as displayed in Table 1.

This design choice might raise concerns regarding the possible anchoring of survey responses in our Hungarian experiment. In other words, providing information about the suspension of EU money to Hungary before conducting the conjoint experiment might have in some way conditioned respondents' attitudes. However, we do not expect this difference in the Hungarian version of the experiment to lead to significantly different response patterns. Since in both Hungary and Poland the pre-treatment environment was characterized by a high level of information on EU sanctions, a majority of respondents should have been aware of the current situation concerning (potential) sanctions anyway. Providing additional information for the Hungarian respondents, simply implied leveling any potential remaining information differentials. In addition, the inclusion of Bulgaria as a test case should work as a robustness check for our general findings.

Table 1: Conjoint Experiment Task

	Attribute	Attribute levels	Theory
1	[Your] government is accused of	1. misusing money from the EU budget. 2. undermining the independence of the judiciary. 3. discriminating against the LGBTQI community.	Framing
2	EU member state governments	1. support the sanctions with a qualified majority (15 out of 27) 2. support the sanctions with a large majority (20 out of 27) 3. support the sanctions with a supermajority (25 out of 27)	Cueing
3	Domestic opposition parties	1. support [Your] government against EU sanctions 2. support EU sanctions against [Your] government 3. are divided on the issue	
4	EU accusations are based on	1. complaints by civil society groups [in your country] 2. an annual report on all EU member states by the EU Commission 3. a country report on [your country] by the EU Commission	Procedure
5	[Your] government	1. will have a chance to justify its position before sanctions are adopted. 2. will have a chance to appeal EU sanctions in the European Court of Justice. 3. does not have a vote in the adoption of the sanction.	
6	EU funding shall be	1. suspended for projects, which misused EU money in the past. 2. reduced by 50% as long as violations of EU values persist. 3. suspended fully as long as violations of EU values persist.	Targetedness

When designing our conjoint experiment, we intended to keep the experiment as close as possible to reality while covering all our theoretically relevant factors. In addition to sanction communication, we strove to include additional aspects of sanction design that previous literature showed are relevant, such as the targetedness of sanctions as well as certain procedural aspects. The first attribute listed in Table 1 covers the framing aspect of sanction communication and varies between the misuse of EU money, undermining the rule of law, and discriminating against the LGBTQI community. Based on our theoretical argument above, we expect respondents to be more likely to support sanctions framed in line with broadly shared norms, such as the rule of law, in contrast to sanctions framed in terms of more contested norms, such as the non-discrimination of members of the LGBTQI community, or framed in rather technical terms regarding the protection of the EU budget.

The second and third attributes as well as the first level of attribute 4 ("EU accusations are based on") all refer to different endorsement cues. While the first attribute indicates how many of the other EU member states support the sanctions, the second attribute concerns the domestic opposition. We decided to include the civil society cue as part of the attribute that measures how sanctions came about. The other possibility would have been to include an additional dimension on civil society, similar to the domestic party support attribute, making the conjoint more complex. We, therefore, opted for less complexity while keeping our scenario as

realistic as possible.

As mentioned above, we generally expect that no or mixed cues about sanctions endorsement from domestic and international actors will likely decrease public support for such sanctions while univocal endorsement of sanctions by EU member states should positively affect their perceived legitimacy and thus acceptance. At the same time, we expect a more nuanced effect of endorsement cues at the domestic level since partisanship should moderate the effect. In particular, we expect government supporters to oppose sanctions regardless of the position of the domestic opposition. In contrast, opposition supporters should be more willing to accept EU sanctions if the opposition parties side with the EU. Concerning our last endorsement cue "complaints by civil society groups" we also expect a conditional effect. As theorized above, the support of civil society organizations should mainly matter to individuals without clear partisan affiliations. Since they are the ones without a strong prior opinion on the proposed sanction package, they should be most malleable by this type of information.

The other two attribute levels of attribute 4 – "annual report on all countries" versus "special report on the respective country" – indicate more broadly how the sanction process came about and the attribute level. They intend to differentiate between a regular, standardized procedure versus a more ad-hoc special investigation and thus cover one of two important procedural elements. The second procedural element is included in attribute 5, in which we vary the type of response allowed by the targeted government. In general, we expect that aspects of procedural fairness will lead to higher individual acceptance of sanctions. Specifically, sanctions based on equal monitoring of all EU member states through annual reports should indicate higher procedural fairness of their adoption process rather than a "pick and choose" approach. Similarly, a process in which the targeted Member State is provided with procedural as well as legal means not only to be heard but also to challenge the decision should lead to the perception of such a sanctioning process as fair and to a higher likelihood of accepting sanctions than if a targeted Member State is deprived of this opportunity.

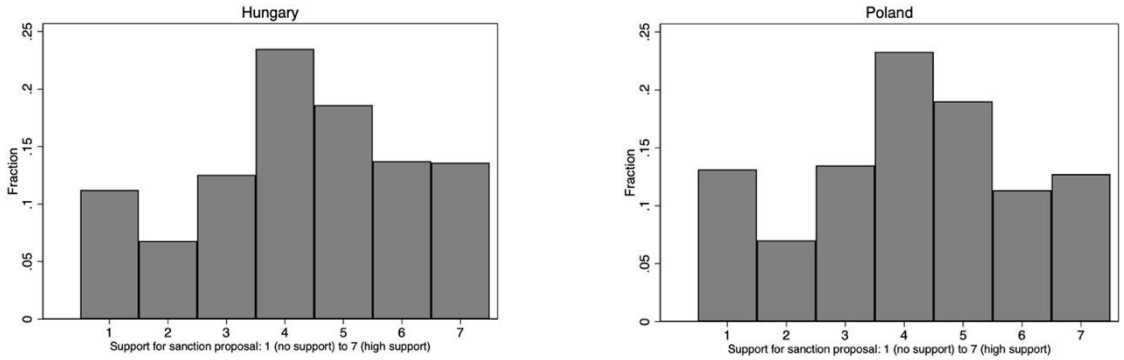
Finally, attribute 6 shows how comprehensive sanctions are and thus measures targetedness, reaching from targeted sanctions ("suspension of projects") to a medium-level of targetedness ("50% reduction of funds") to universal coverage ("full suspension"). Based on the findings of previous literature, we expect that sanctions with the most limited economic costs to the public, i.e., the suspension of EU funding for projects involved in corruption, will lead to the highest public acceptance, while the rest of the two alternatives will generate the relative degree of unfavourability among our respondents.

After each conjoint task, we asked respondents to a) choose between the two scenario profiles presented to them (forced choice) and b) rate each scenario profile on a 7-point scale to indicate how strongly they would oppose or support EU financial sanctions in each scenario.

Empirical analysis

In the following, we focus first on the case of Hungary and Poland and only later, in the robustness check section, investigate how well the findings align with the control case of Bulgaria. Before going into detail, concerning the effect of the different attributes of sanctions communication, Figure 1 shows the distribution of the general support for the different sanction packages in our conjoint analysis. Different from what pessimists concerning sanctions might expect, the general public in all three countries does not univocally reject sanctions. Rather the majority of citizens perceive the proposed sanction packages as neither very positive nor very negative, as the median response is the middle category 4. There is, however, also a substantive number of respondents who support the different sanction packages, i.e., who rate the proposals with a 5 or higher. This ranges from 43% in Poland to even 46% in Hungary. These descriptive findings are therefore a first indication that there seems to be some room for communicating sanctions.

Figure 1: Support for sanction communication using rating variable

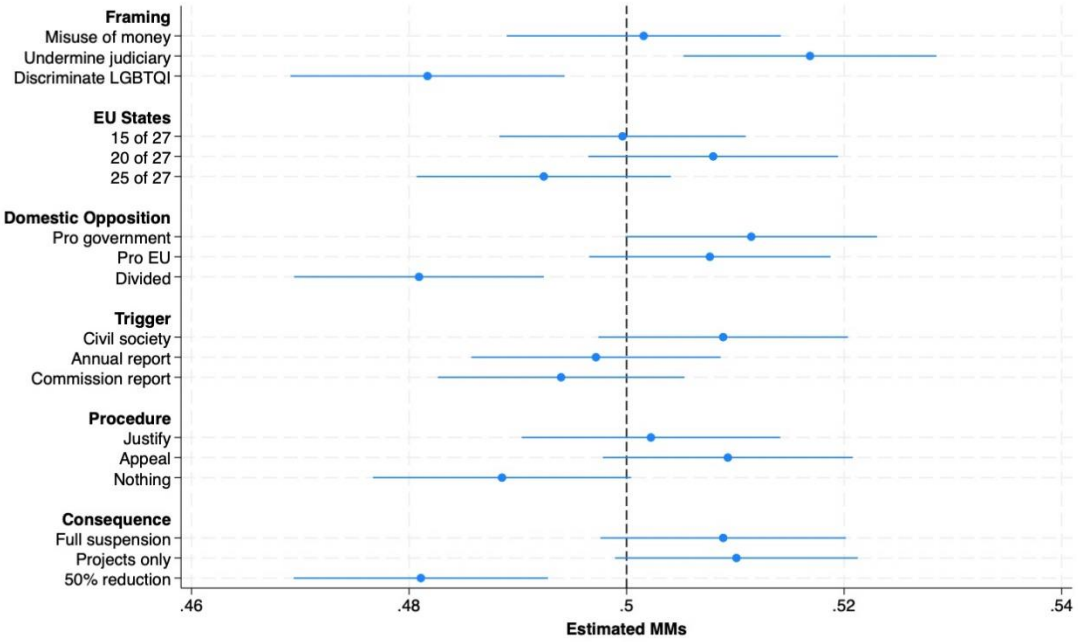


Moving on to the inferential findings from the conjoint analyses, Figures 2 and 3 display the general results for each country in the form of marginal means. While typically researchers display their conjoint results in the form of Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs), AMCEs have the disadvantage of being sensitive toward different evaluations of the respective baseline categories of attributes (Leeper et al. 2020). Since respondents in Hungary likely

evaluate some of the baseline categories differently from respondents in Poland, using marginal means is more conservative. Marginal means above 0.5, the dotted line in Figures 2 and 3 imply that a sanction package with this specific attribute level is more likely to be chosen and a profile with a marginal mean below 0.5 is less likely to be chosen compared to the other levels of this attribute. Figures A.1 and A.2 in the Appendix show the same results in the form of marginal means.

The results in Figures 2 and 3 show that first and foremost sanction communication seems much harder in Hungary compared to Poland. While in Poland across almost all attributes, the communication of sanctions makes a significant difference, i.e., the variation between the different attribute levels is large, this is less the case for Hungary. This might be due to the different stages in which the two countries are concerning actual sanction imposition. Still, one consistent finding across both countries pertains to respondents being significantly more likely to support sanctions if they are framed according to the rule of law (undermining the judiciary) in contrast to either misuse of EU money or discrimination of members of the LGBTQI community. This finding is in line with previous literature that shows that sanctions are perceived as more legitimate if they pertain to broadly shared instead of more contested values (Sejersen 2021: 2).

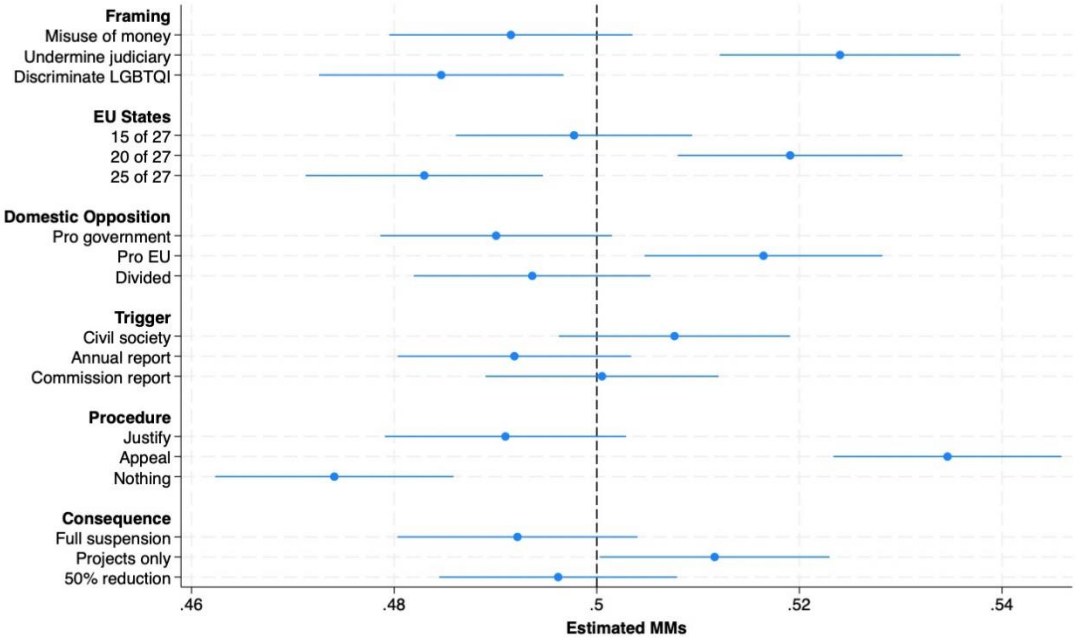
Figure 2: Results Hungary – Marginal Means



Turning to the cueing effects, we observe a striking similarity in the two countries, which partly

deviates, however, from our theoretical expectation. Respondents in both countries react most positively to the cue of 20 out of 27 EU member states supporting EU sanctions, though only significantly so in the case of Poland. We argued above that the support of more in contrast to less EU countries should signal that the adoption process was impartial and compelling. While we do see that the difference from 15 out of 27 in contrast to 20 out of 27 indeed seems to be perceived positively, this is not the case for the category 25 out of 27, which is the least preferred option in both countries. One potential explanation for this finding could be that respondents took this cue not as a heuristic of the sanction process being impartial and compelling but rather of their country being cornered (Gray and Hicks 2014).

Figure 3: Results Poland – Marginal Means



With regard to the cue on opposition parties, we see some differences in the two countries. While respondents in Poland react most strongly (and positively) to the cue of domestic opposition parties voicing their support for EU sanctions, it is the cue of a divided opposition that has the most strength in the case of Hungary, however, here in negative terms: Respondents evaluate sanction packages on which the opposition is divided as least acceptable. The final endorsement cue, the cue on civil society, works similarly again in both countries. Hungarian and Polish respondents are more likely to support sanction packages that have been triggered by a civil society report compared to either an annual report or a report by the EU Commission.

Moving on to the procedural elements, we can observe that they do not seem to matter

much in the case of Hungary, yet somewhat in the case of Poland. More precisely, in both countries, it does not change people's perception of the sanctions whether they were initiated by a regular annual country-level report or a special, more targeted Commission report. What does matter, at least in the case of Poland, is whether the country has the right to appeal the decision or not.

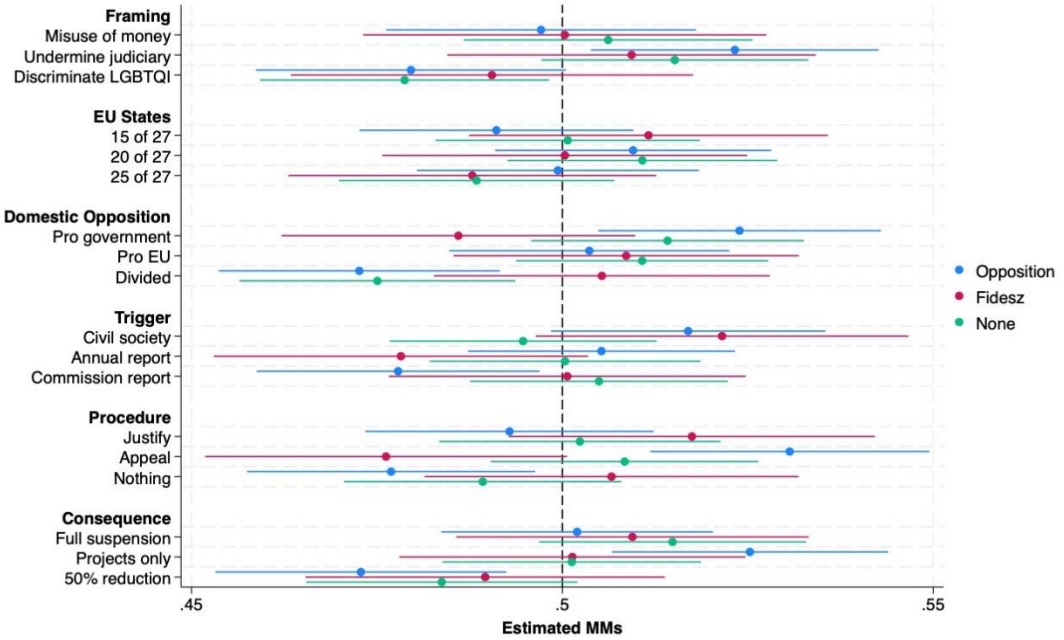
Finally, there is some, albeit weak, support for the targetedness argument. In Poland, the most preferred sanctions package is indeed the most targeted one, therefore, supporting the targetedness argument. Relative to full the suspension case, targeted sanctions such as suspension of funding only to projects involved in corruption cases, generate positive but statistically insignificant effects among both Polish and Hungarian respondents. On the other hand, medium-targeted sanctions (50% reduction of EU funding) are negatively perceived by both Polish and Hungarian respondents. Although, this effect is statistically significant only among Hungarian respondents.

Sub-group analysis by partisanship

In the following, we turn from the general to more specific results and show sub-group differences by partisanship. We argued above that especially the endorsement cues should work differently for government supporters, domestic opposition supporters, and people who are neither supporters nor opponents. In the case of government supporters, we expect that those individuals who support their government should react negatively to the domestic opposition cue while government opponents should react positively. Those individuals who identify with neither the opposition nor the government should most strongly react to the civil society cue as this comes from outside the political arena.

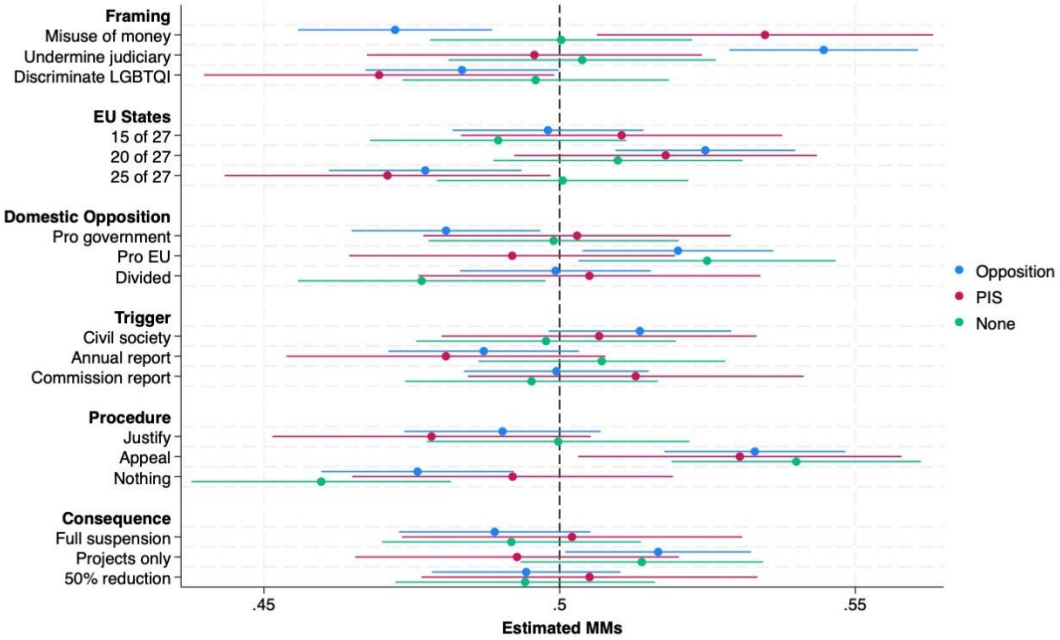
Figures 4 and 5, thus show the respective results if we distinguish by partisanship. As expected theoretically, the domestic opposition cue indeed elicits different reactions from different partisans. In particular, the cue on support by the opposition mainly matters for the opposition and the non-aligned respondents but not so much for government supporters. Interestingly, and completely in contrast to expectations the cue on civil society decreases instead of increases support for the non-aligned and in both Hungary and Poland. One potential explanation for this finding could be the common practice of backsliding governments to condemn civil society actors as foreign-funded agents (Enyedi 2020: 369), although the question remains why this negative depiction should impact particularly upon non-aligned respondents.

Figure 4: Results by Partisanship: Hungary



With regard to framing, government supporters in Poland distinguish mainly between misuse of money, which they see as the best of all bad frames, while respondents aligning with the opposition react most positively to undermining the judiciary. This difference is not as pronounced in Hungary, however. Overall, however, it does not seem to be the case that respondents react less distinctively when they are clear partisans. Rather individuals seem to have clear and differentiated opinions concerning the different sanction patterns, suggesting again that there is indeed room for designing and especially communicating sanctions.

Figure 5: Results by Partisanship: Poland



Potentially even more interesting, Table 2 shows the percentage of individuals blaming the EU, the government, or both for the sanctions; a question we asked directly after our conjoint experiment. We show the results by partisanship, which seems to matter strongly for respondents' perception. In particular, individuals who self-identify either with the opposition or are not aligned with either government or opposition are much more likely to blame their government while respondents aligned with the government put most blame on the EU. However, the latter group is much less clear in their pattern compared to the opposition group. In addition, Table 2 lists the percentage of government supporters vs. opponents and non-aligned. These numbers indicate that our results are not simply an artifact of not having enough respondents in either one of the groups as all three groups are well represented in our sample.

Table 2: Who is to blame for sanctions by partisanship

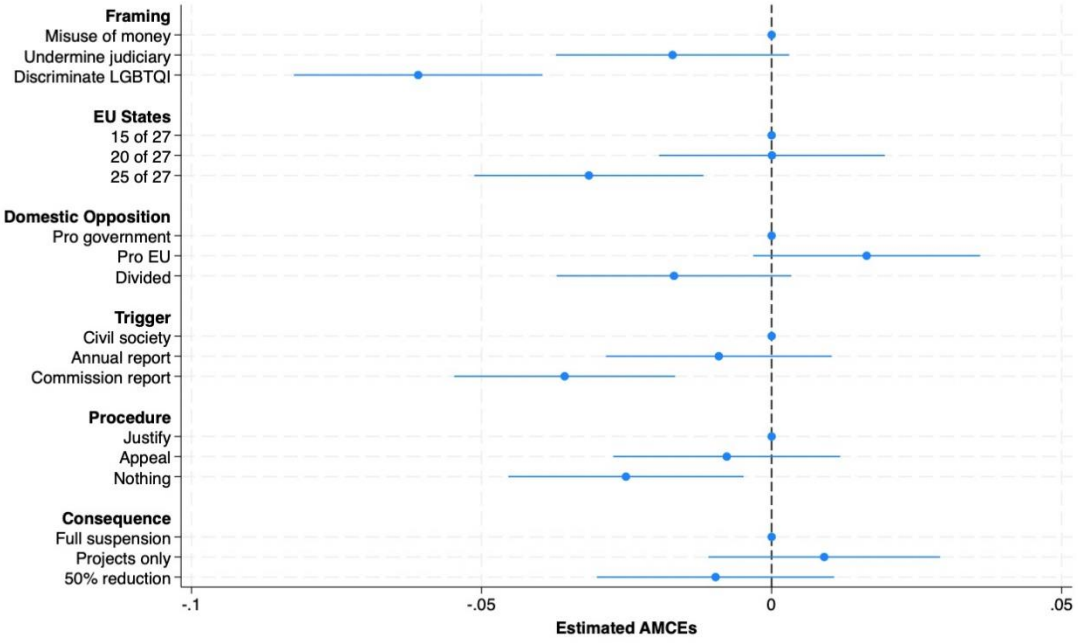
	Hungary		Poland	
Supporter of	**Who is to blame?**	**% of supporters**	**Who is to blame?**	**% of supporters**
Opposition	13% EU 62% Own Government 21% Both 4% Don't know	37%	10% EU 71% Own Government 15% Both 4% Don't know	53%
Government	56% EU 10% Own Government 28% Both 6% Don't know	22%	56% EU 12% Own Government 22% Both 10% Don't know	18%
Not aligned	8% EU 54% Own Government 27% Both 11% Don't know	41%	11% EU 47% Own Government 23% Both 18% Don't know	29%

The Appendix shows several additional sub-group effects, in particular in terms of gender, age, income, education, and urbanization. Overall, only a few sub-group effects seem noteworthy. One is that in both Poland and Hungary, men and older people tend to react more strongly to both the framing of sanctions and the domestic opposition cue. Also, people living in urban areas tend to react more pronounced to various aspects of our experiment compared to respondents in more rural areas.

The case of Bulgaria

As explained above, we ran the same conjoint analysis as we did in Poland also in Bulgaria, and at the same point in time, in order to have a control case without such a strong pre-treatment information environment. Figure 6 displays the corresponding results. Interestingly, while the results on cueing are almost identical to our findings in Hungary and Poland, the procedural design elements of sanctions do not seem to matter and the findings on framing are rather different. More precisely, it seems that respondents in Bulgaria are most positive about sanctions framed along the misuse of EU money. While similar to Poland and Hungary, respondents in Bulgaria dislike sanctions framed along discrimination issues the least, they do not support sanctions due to rule of law issues the most. This might have to do with respondents not having been subject to such intense public discussions about the issue as compared to Hungary and Poland, for which the rule of law issue is clearly the most important one.

Figure 6: Results Bulgaria – AMCE



Conclusion

The results of our experiment in Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria suggest that the way sanctions are communicated and by whom matters for the public acceptance of sanctions. In other words and different from media reports, we see that public opinion is not polarized between outright rejection or unambiguous acceptance of sanctions but is rather spread out on a support scale, i.e., there is some scope for public opinion to be influenced by different design and communication features of international sanctions. This suggests that sanctions do not necessarily backfire and that they can lead to public acceptance when not only designed but also communicated properly. Overall, a significant number of our respondents express support for EU sanctions.

The impact of these different features varies somewhat between our Polish and Hungarian respondents, but there are striking similarities between the countries. In particular, we find that framing sanctions in terms of protecting the rule of law (targeting judicial overhaul in a member state) increases public support for EU sanctions against member states. This effect stands out in Poland and Hungary, where public opinion is likely primed by extensive debates on the rule of law issue, but not in our test case, Bulgaria, where this issue is not yet prominent in public debates.

Cues from both internal and external actors also seem to influence public reactions to sanctions. Externally, vocal support from other EU member states for EU sanctions has a positive effect on respondents' perception of these sanctions and their ultimate support. However, it seems that unanimity also comes with some costs as supermajority support from external actors leads to a negative assessment of sanctions among our respondents, probably because of its potential cornering effect. Moreover, the positions of domestic actors other than the national government, i.e., opposition parties, also seem to influence public perceptions of sanctions. Here, while responses do indeed appear to be aligned with party affiliation, sanction characteristics seem to matter most to non-aligned respondents.

In line with existing research, we find that the process by which sanctions are imposed is also important for public perceptions of sanctions. Specifically, respondents are significantly more supportive of sanctions packages that are based on more equal than targeted treatment of a sanctioned member state, and in which the targeted member state has procedural guarantees not only to voice its concerns but also to legally challenge these sanctions if necessary. Finally, different levels of targeting of sanctions also lead to different levels of support for sanctions among our respondents. Overall, the most targeted sanctions are indeed the most preferred by our respondents. At the same time, we do not find evidence to support the argument that vulnerability to the negative effects of sanctions should lead to differential responses between social groups. In other words, targeting does not have a pronounced effect between respondents who live in rural areas or those who are less well off, who could potentially perceive themselves as more vulnerable to sanctions.

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Appendix

Figure A.1: AMCEs - Hungary

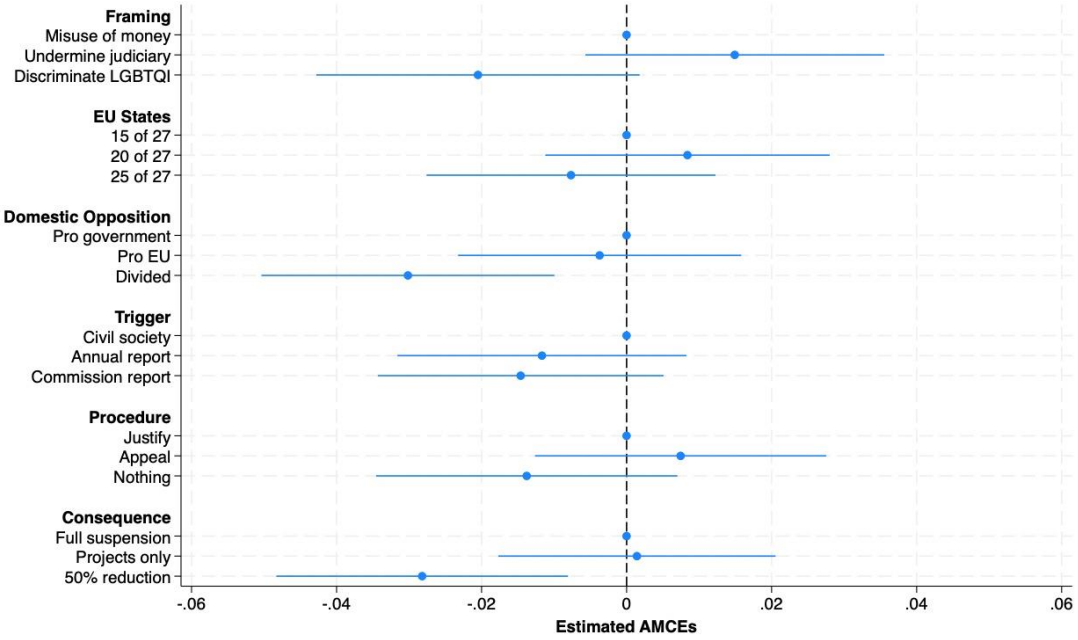

Figure A.2: AMCEs – Poland

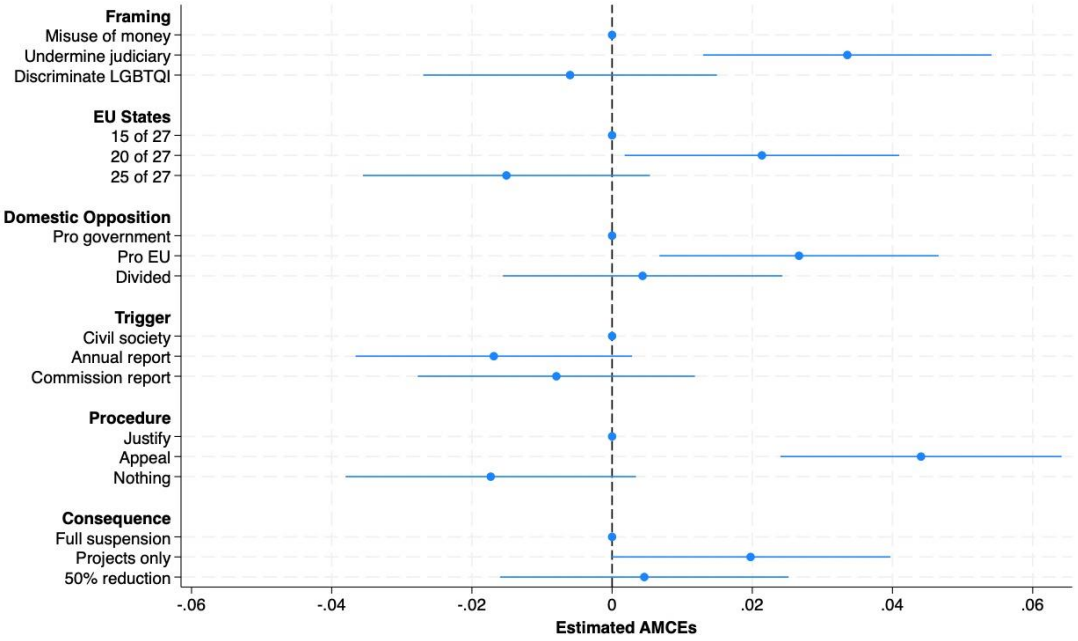

Figure A.3 Hungary Gender

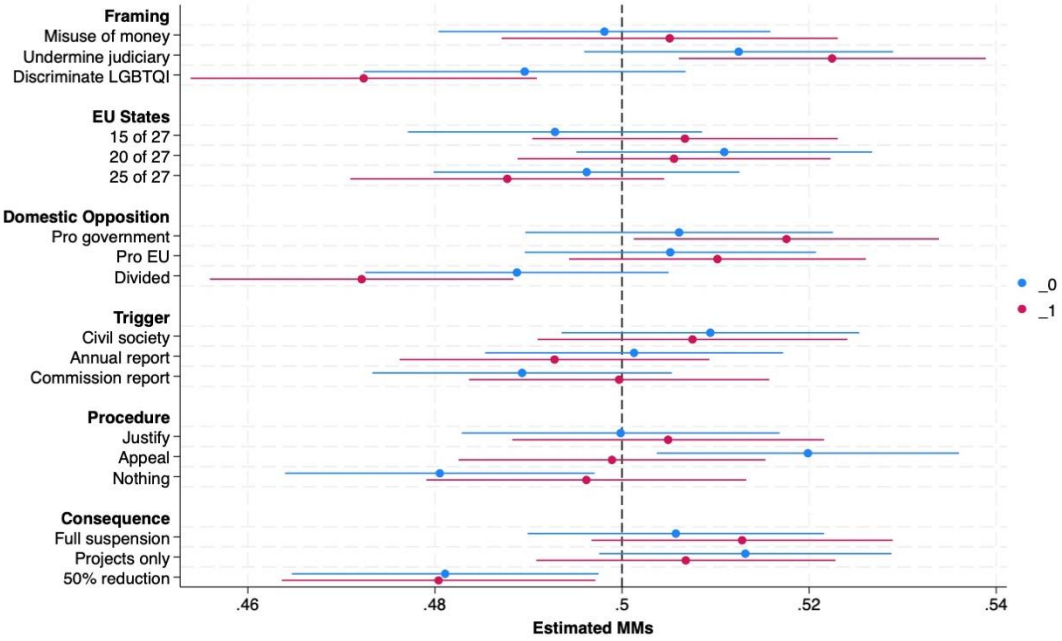

Figure A.4 Poland Gender

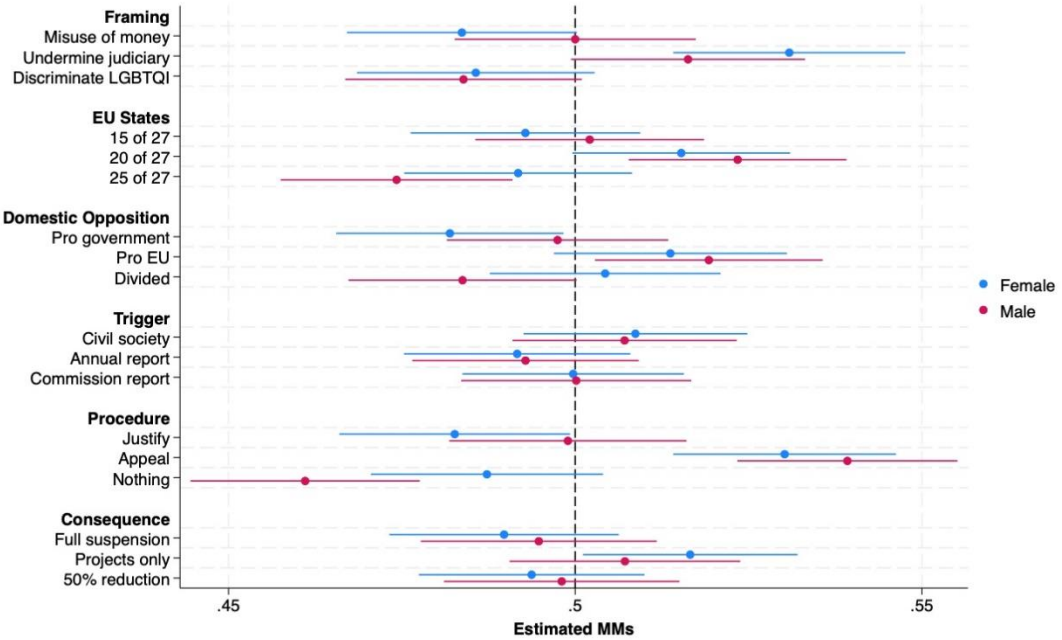

Figure A.5 Hungary Age

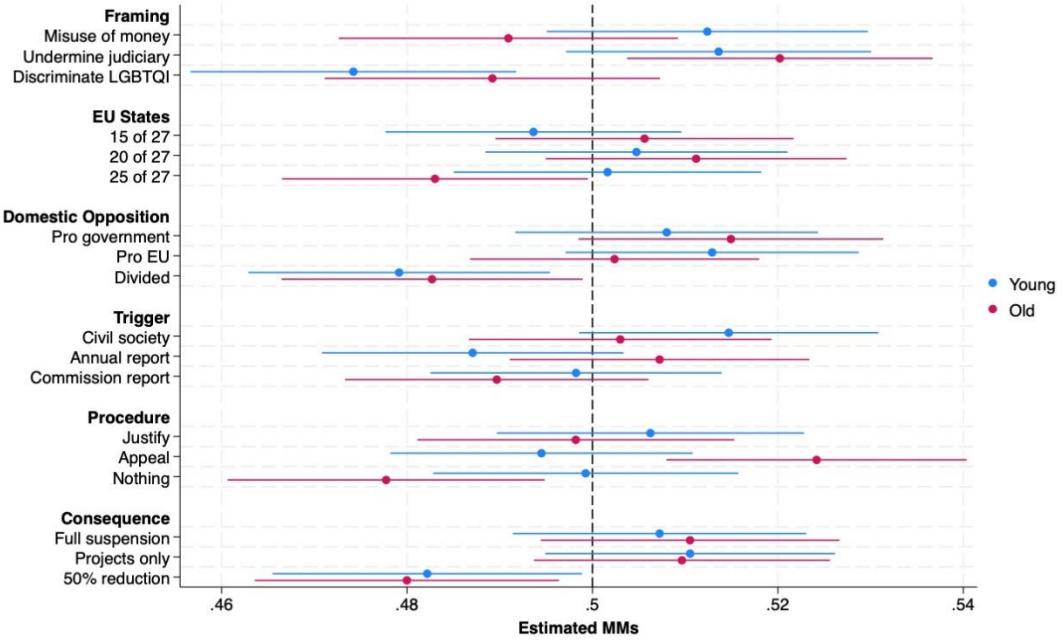

Figure A.6 Poland Age

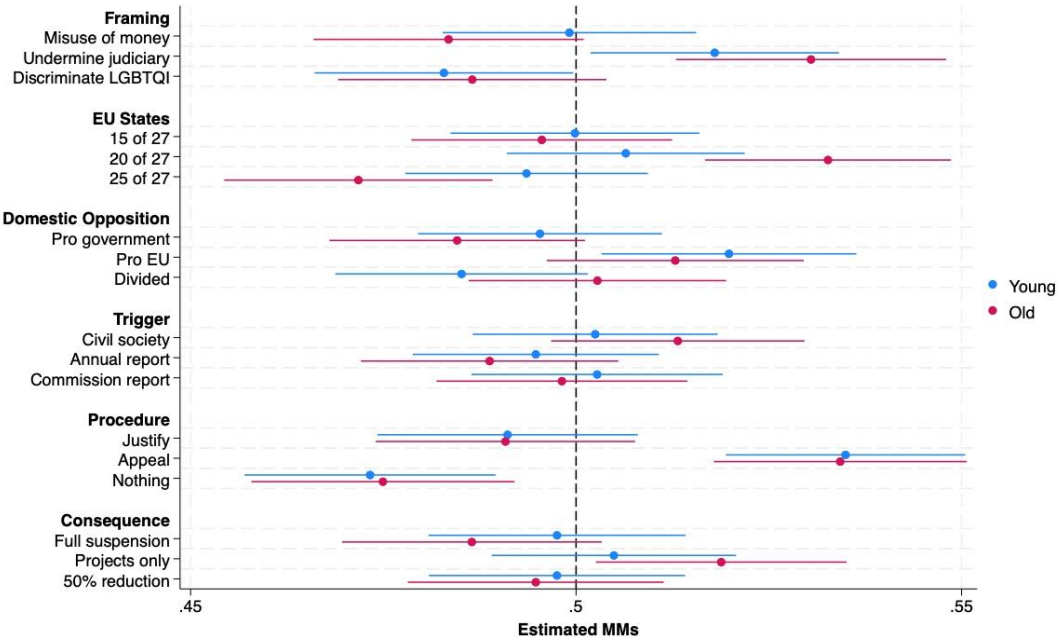

Figure A.7 Hungary Rural vs. Urban

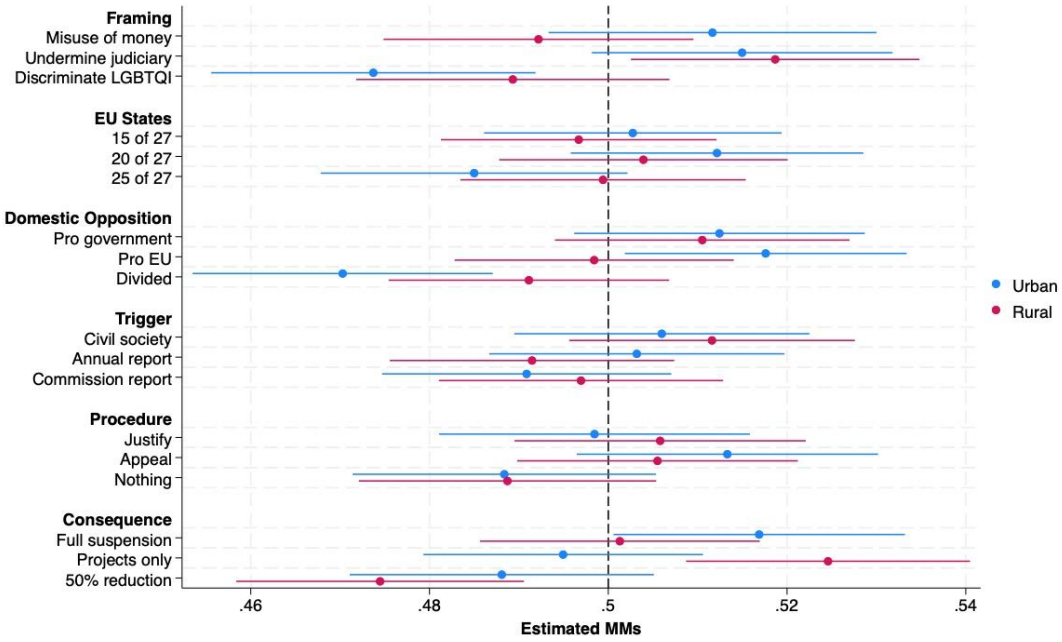

Figure A.8 Poland Rural vs. Urban

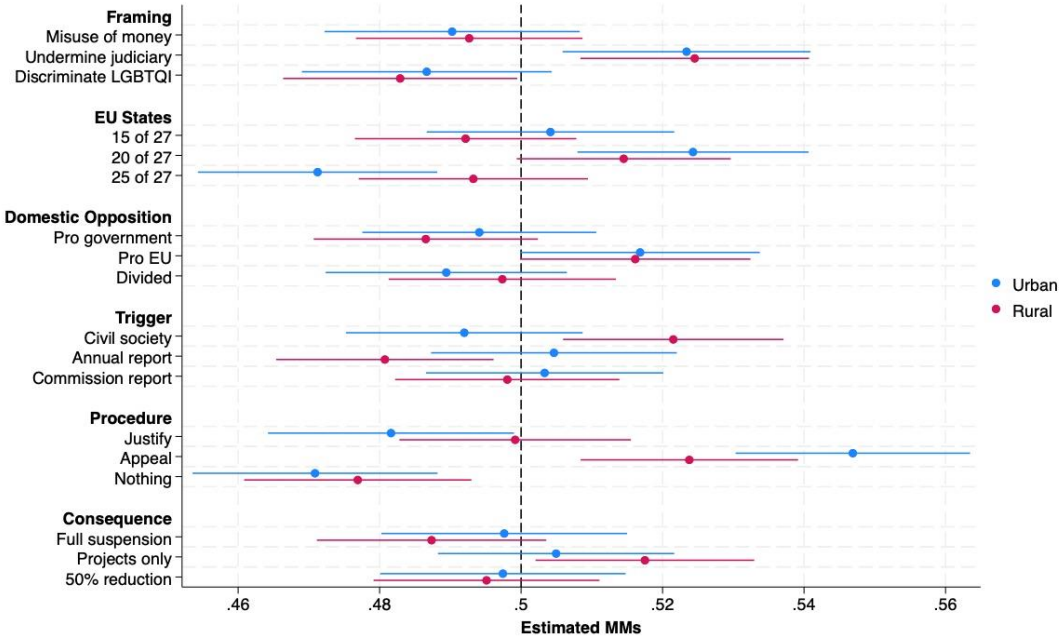

Figure A.9 Hungary Income

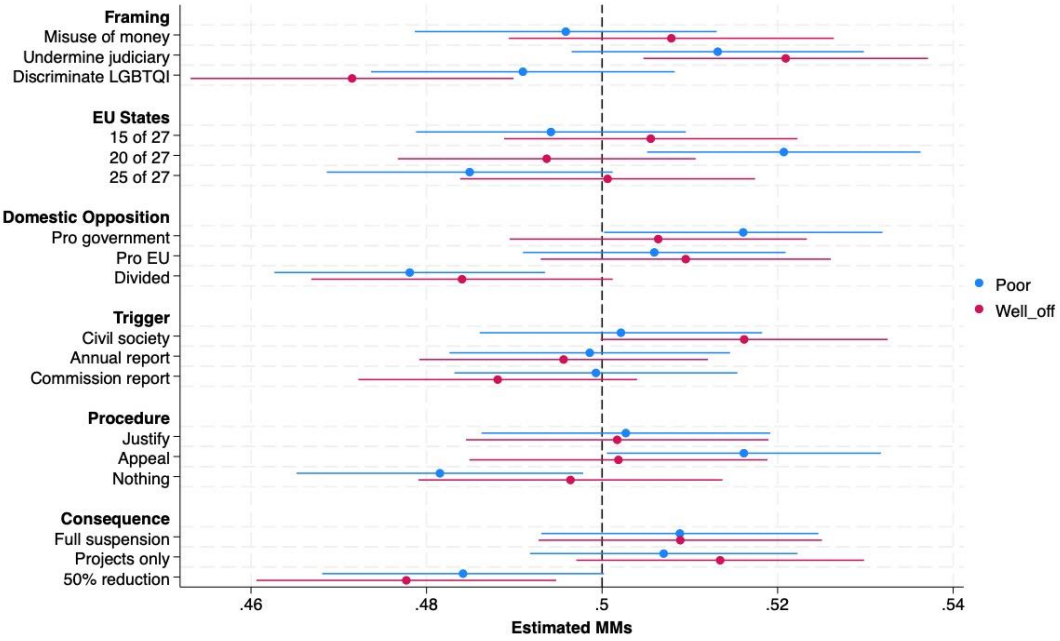

Figure A.10 Poland Income

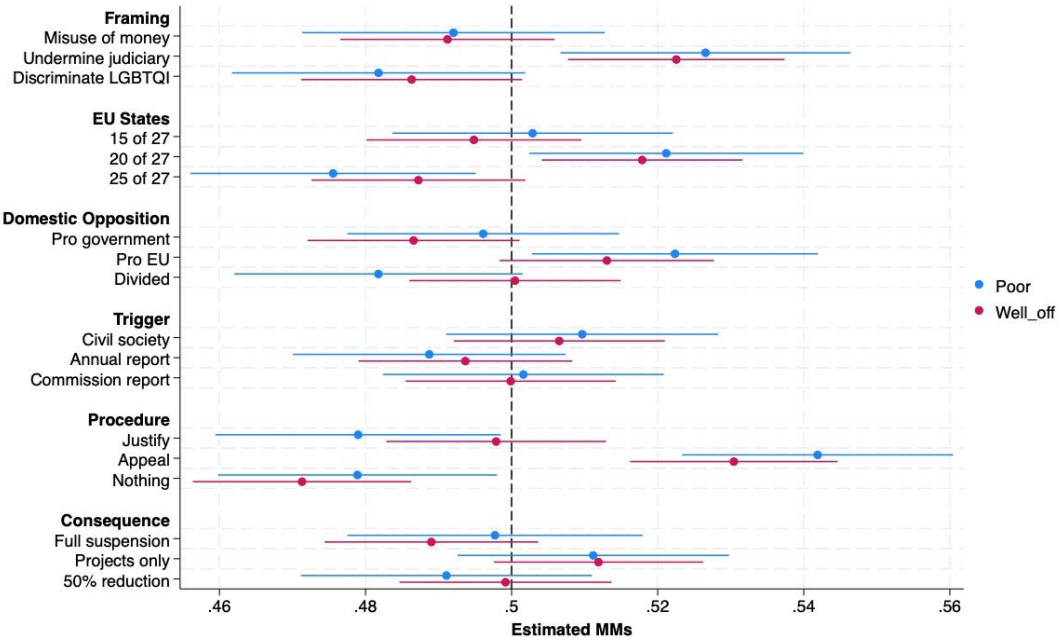

Figure A.11: Results by Education: Hungary

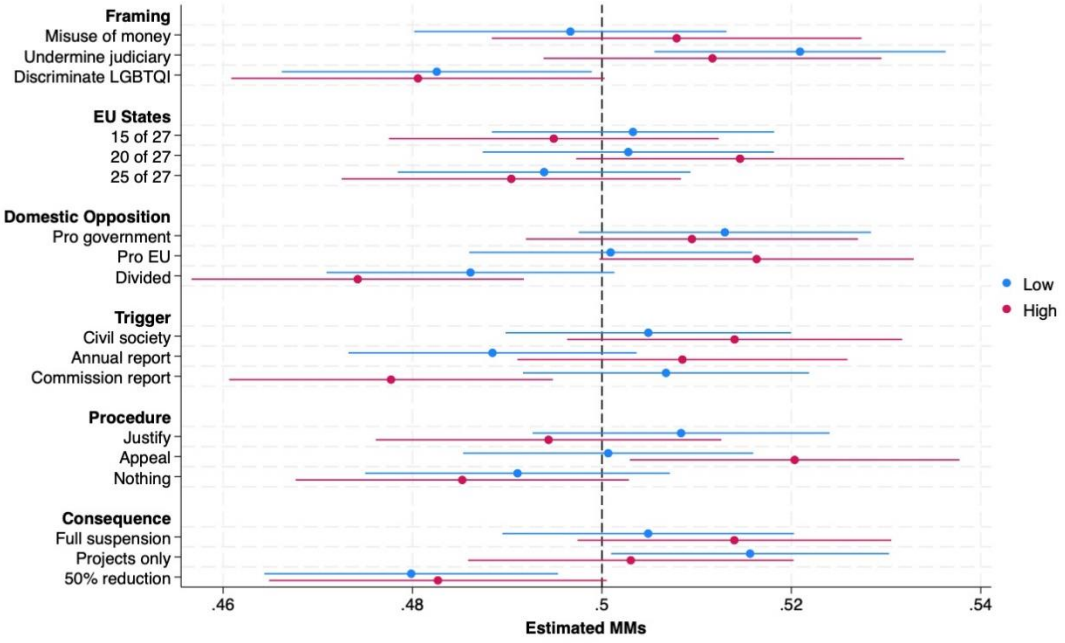

Figure A.12: Results by Education: Poland

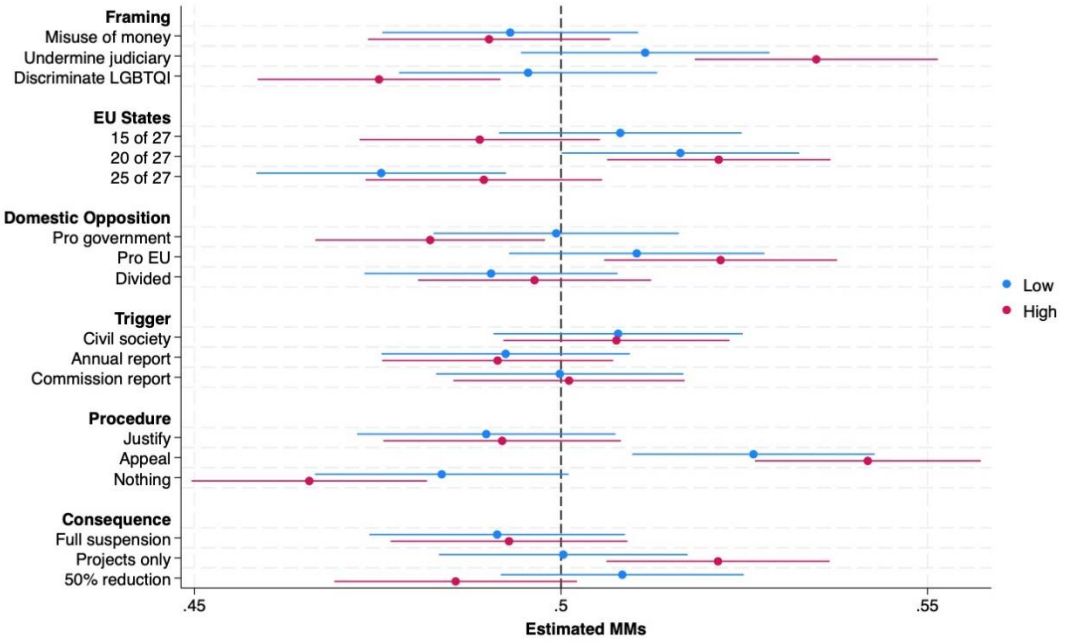

Figure A.13 Bulgaria – Marginal Means