

INTERNATIONAL DISPUTES, MEDIA COVERAGE, AND BACKLASH AGAINST INTERNATIONAL LAW

Ryan Brutger* and Anton Strezhnev†

ABSTRACT: How international institutions and international law affect state behavior is a core question of international relations research. Since most international institutions lack independent enforcement, a broad range of theories argue that international institutions alter state behavior by mobilizing domestic audiences. This paper puts forth a theory explaining domestic backlash against international law and institutions by connecting media coverage – specifically the bias in the news media’s selection of international disputes – to public opinion formation towards international agreements. To test our theory, we examine both the content and effects of the media’s reporting on international disputes, focusing on the increasingly controversial form known as investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS). We find that newspaper outlets in both the United States and Canada have a bias in favor of covering disputes filed against their home country as opposed to those filed by home country firms. Using a survey experiment, we further find that the bias in news story selection has a strong negative effect on attitudes towards ISDS and related agreements.

*Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania, Department of Political Science, Email: brutger@sas.upenn.edu.
Web: <http://web.sas.upenn.edu/brutger/>.

†PhD Candidate, Harvard University, Department of Government, Email: astrezhnev@fas.harvard.edu. Web
<http://www.antonstrezhnev.com>