

Objectives: To examine how human rights treaties impact state behavior.

1 Key terms

- internal vs. external punishment
- selection bias

2 Key ideas

Question: Does grim trigger “work” for human rights treaties?

Answer: Grim trigger is unlikely to generate compliance in the human rights setting. Suppose the two actions states have are respect HR or torture. The credibility of enforcing grim trigger (diverting to torture on one’s *own* population) is diminished because punishing one’s own population is not only morally reprehensible but it also probably won’t generate outrage in the violating state.

Question: What does a HR treaty do to a leader’s calculation to repress/torture their citizens?

Answer: HRTs increase the costs of repression/torture by making more likely foreign punishment and domestic dissent. HRTs make punishment more likely via (1) changing people’s preferences in favor of punishing violations, (2) generating audience costs to reneging from the treaty, and (3) focusing international attention on specific HR issues.

Question: What potential threat to inference do studies assessing the impact of HRTs face?

Answer: Studies on the impact of HRTs like to see whether treaty ratification increases “good behavior” on the part of the state. A potential concern, though, is that states that sign treaties (i.e., states that receive “treatment”) are special. States that have selected into treaties may already have a good HR record and already face high levels of domestic opposition to HR violations. So, if we observe a positive effect of HRT ratification on state respect for HR, it might not be the treaty generating compliance per se.

3 Additional review questions

- What is the empirical evidence on respect for HRTs?
- What are the internal vs. external punishment mechanisms of the Convention Against Torture?