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CAN HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY RATIFICATIONS INFLUENCE NEIGHBORING COUNTRY PRACTICES?

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In assessing the effects of international human rights treaties (HRTs) on state practice, most research looks only to the practices of ratifying states. The present study seeks to examine the effect one state's HRT ratifications can have on human rights practices of other states within its network. Ratifications are expected to influence foreign government practices through two causal mechanisms. First, rights-affirming states are theorized to ratify HRTs as a signal to their neighbors of future intent to prioritize human rights concerns in other areas of foreign policy, and to impose material costs for poor human rights practices. The credibility of the signal derives from the ex-ante costs of ratification, and the ex-post costs of failing to act in accordance with international human rights concerns following ratification. Second, in much the same way that a country's own ratification of human rights treaties can prompt domestic groups to mobilize to demand compliance, those same groups are expected to mobilize in response to ratifications among neighboring governments.

Using time-series cross-sectional data from 1976-2015, each country-year's network ratification rate is calculated as the average portion of available HRTs ratified by neighboring countries, weighted according to various connectivity criteria. The relationship between that rate and a country's subsequent human rights practice, as measured by the Political Terror Scale, is tested. Separate analyses are conducted across the U.N's core human rights treaties and their optional provisions allowing for stronger reporting mechanisms, and across networks of trade, defense alliances, arms transfers, geography, shared language, and shared religion. The results are mostly inconclusive, with some model specifications producing the anticipated effects and others yielding results to the contrary. Implications of these findings for future research are discussed.