

The International Politics of Human Rights

POSC 1020 – Introduction to International Relations

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Puzzle(s) for Today

Why do states care about human rights outside their borders? Why have these concerns not been more successful?

Human Rights

We use “human rights” as shorthand for various Western ideals.

- Primary unit of concern is individual and not the community.
 - Think: juxtaposition to socialism and “Asian values.”
- Freedom is higher priority than other values
- Focus on political and economic rights

Treatment is heavily indebted to John Locke’s notions of natural rights.

Human Rights

Milestone: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

- Defines a “common standard of achievement for all people.”
- Heavily indebted to then-current events of the Holocaust (see also: Genocide Convention)

Two separate conventions followed around 20 years later:

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)

Curiously: the U.S. supported but did not ratify them as treaties.

- Waited to 1992 to ratify the ICCPR as “not self-executing.”
- Has still not ratified the ICESCR.

So Why Is This Controversial?

States are self-interested and will promote rights they respect (and fight ones they don't).

- Consider U.S. lip service to “human rights” as derivative of Cold War.
- Non-Western states also see this as increasing Western influence.
- Interpretations may differ on implementation (certainly on social spending on health care and education).

Why Do States Violate Human Rights?

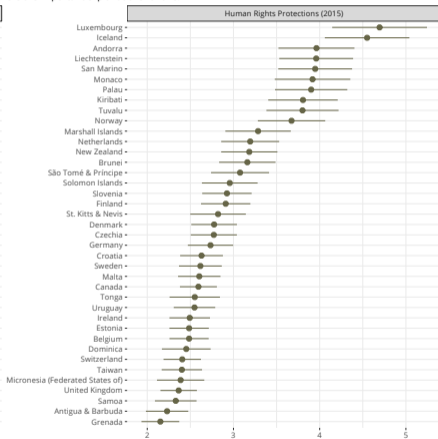
There are any number of reasons for human rights abuses.

- Lack of state capacity
- External threats
- Sovereignty concerns
- Human rights may enfranchise regime dissidents, threaten power.

No state is a saint on the human rights frontier, whether it's the U.S. or China.

The World's Leaders in Human Rights Protections are in Europe or Clustered in Oceania

The U.S. is conspicuous by how low it scores in both data sets, though there are important explanations for this.



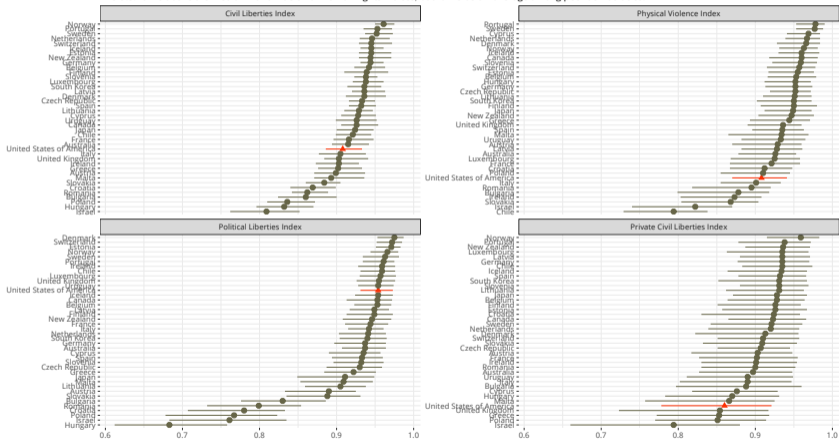
Data: Varieties of Democracy (v. 9); Fariss' (2019) Latent Human Rights Protection Scores (v. forthcoming).

Table 1: U.S. Human Rights Ranks Across Various Vdem Metrics, 2018

Category	Rank
Civil Liberties Index	30
Physical Violence Index	48
Political Civil Liberties Index	13
Private Civil Liberties Index	63
Freedom of Religion	52
Freedom of Academic/Cultural Expression	9
Freedom from Torture	68
Freedom from Political Killings	10
Freedom of Foreign Movement	80
Transparent Laws/Predictable Enforcement	23
Impartial Public Administration	27

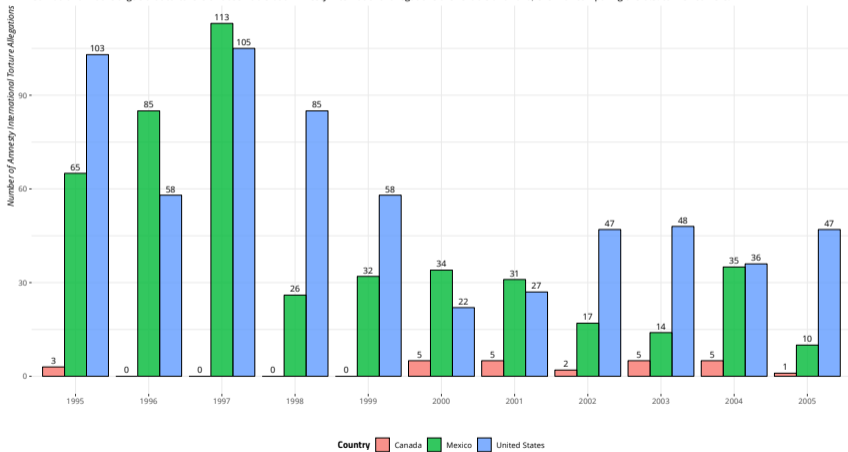
U.S. Human Rights Performances Against Select Democracies, 2018

The U.S. ranks above the median worldwide on all human rights indices, but ranks below average among peer democracies.



The U.S. Experiences About Twice the Allegations of Ill-Treatment and Torture in a Given Year Compared to Its Neighbors

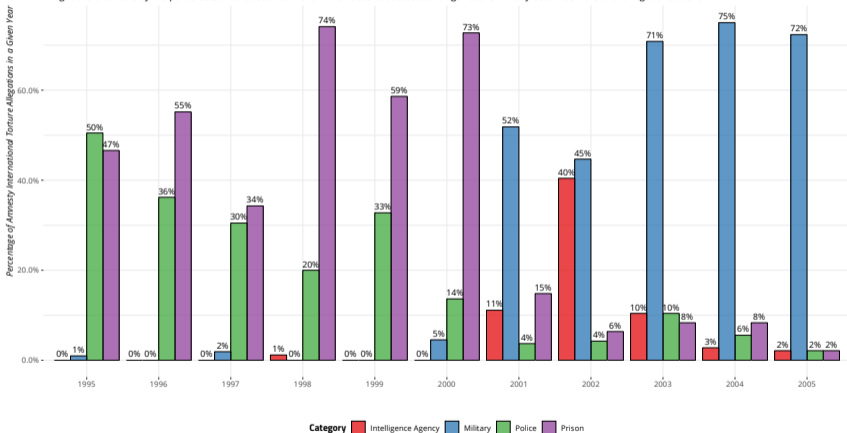
Conrad and Moore argue that torture is unobservable but Amnesty International allegations are reliable and valid, even for comparing the U.S. to Mexico here.



Data: Conrad and Moore's Ill-Treatment & Torture (ITT) Data Collection Project (v. 2.1)

Allegations of Ill-Treatment and Torture in the U.S. Used to Focus on Police and Prisons. Now They Focus on the Military.

Allegations of torture by the police bottomed out to near zero in the 2000s but accusations against the military became 3/4ths of all allegations after 9/11.



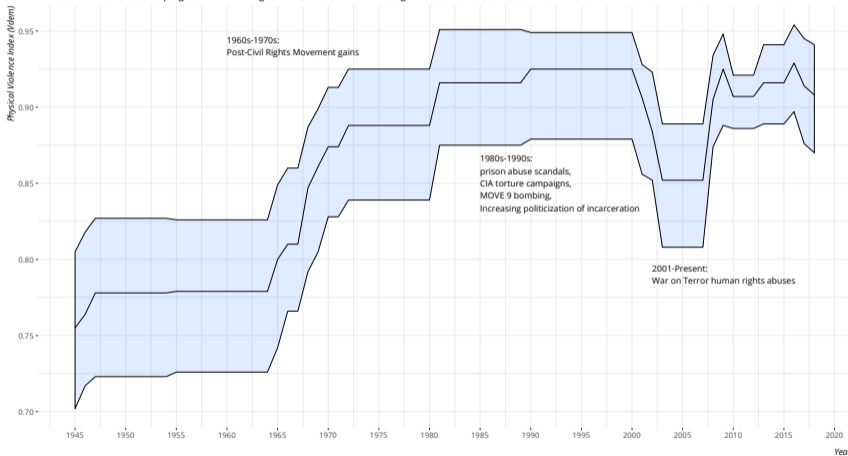
Data: Conrad and Moore's Ill-Treatment & Torture (ITT) Data Collection Project (v. 2.1).

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, so an allegation can count for both the police and prisons, for example.

Data omit allegations against unstated actors and against immigration services. 31% of all allegations in 1997 were against immigration services and around 10-20% in a given year are against unstated actors.

The Physical Violence Index of the United States, 1945-2018

The U.S. made considerable progress on human rights in the 1960s and 1970s. Stagnation started in the 1980s and sunk after the War on Terror started.



Data: Varieties of Democracy (v. 9). Note: 1980s human rights abuses annotated to explain downward turns in the Fariss (2019) data (and FHAI reports).

If states have tenuous commitments to human rights, why do they sign these treaties?

Why Sign Human Rights Treaties?

Several reasons, but peer effects seem most persuasive.

- New democracies sign them to “lock in” commitments to human rights.
- New democracies sign them to be “like” other, more established democracies.
- Autocracies sign them when they want some kind of respect.
- Autocracies will also sign them as quid pro quo for other deals (e.g. trade).

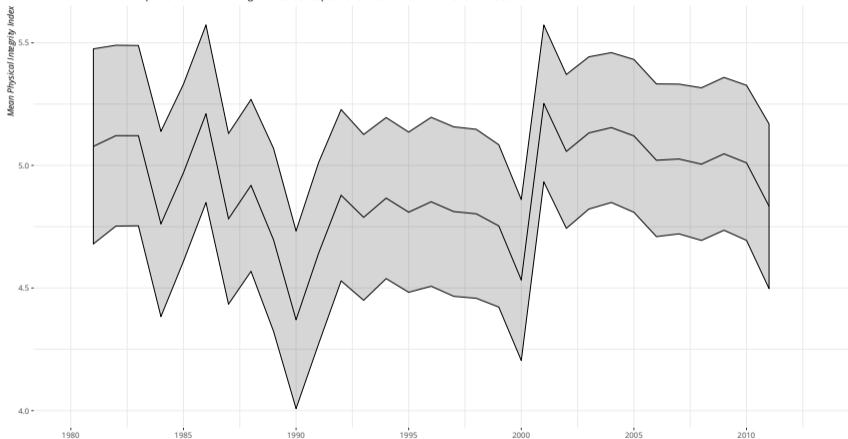
Why Sign Human Rights Treaties?

There are other reasons as well, largely from perspective of other states.

- Security motivations and a concern for contagion.
- “Moral” concerns and an empathy for fellow humans.
- Domestic pressure from TANS and interest groups

Conventional Wisdom Holds Human Rights Records Have Stagnated Over Time

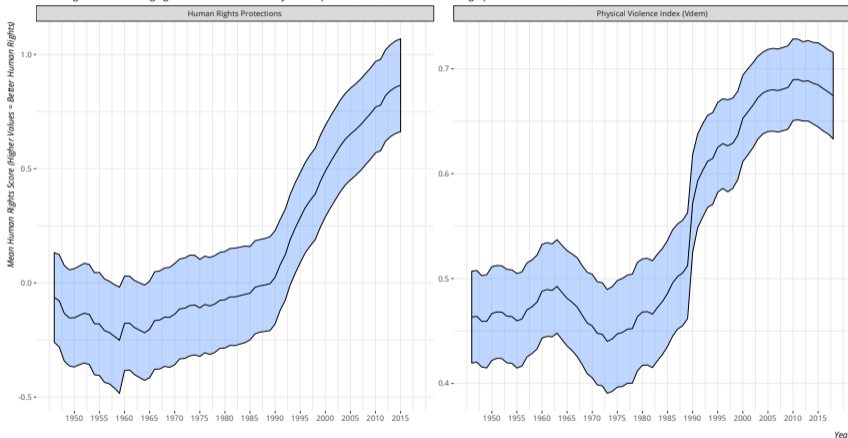
CIRI data show no real improvement in human rights records despite concerted efforts from NGOs and IGOs.



Data: CIRI's Additive Physical Integrity Index via Fariss' Latent Human Rights Protection Scores (v. 2.04)

Human Rights Records Have Actually Improved Over Time

Fariss argues that a "changing standard of accountability" can explain the difference between this graph and the conventional wisdom.



Data: Fariss' Latent Human Rights Protection Scores (*vs. forthcoming*), Varieties of Democracy (*vs. 9*).
Note: One possible interpretation for these trends, in light of conventional wisdom, is how rare mass killings are. Mass killings play a large role in Fariss' "changing standard" model while political killings are a big component of the physical violence index.

Enforcement Problems

Enforcement of human rights is tricky. Generally:

- The benefits from cooperation are small at best
- The costs of enforcement could be exceedingly high.

How do we explain this?

Enforcement Problems

A few explanations for enforcement problems:

- Interests: states violating laws have little interest in handcuffing themselves.
- Motives for enforcement may be weak.
 - Naming and shaming may provoke target.
 - Reduces bargaining leverage on other issues.
 - Sanctions impose costs on target as well sanctioning state.

Enforcement Problems

When are states likely to enforce human rights?

- When TANs are active and persistent (see: anti-apartheid movement)
- Actions against human rights abusers serve larger political interests
- Actions conform to norms of sovereignty and noninterference.

Will Protection Improve?

Several innovations provide some promise.

- Transitional justice and the problem of amnesty
- Individual petition to supranational courts
- The International Criminal Court (ICC)
- Material inducements

Conclusion

Why protect human rights?

- Pressure from TANS and domestic interest groups
- Empathy for common humanity
- Material interests

Conclusion

But what's the problem?

- Material benefits are small relative to costs of enforcement.
- Violators are generally highly motivated
- Human rights might, at the most, be a secondary concern.

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