

Changing Standard of Accountability or the Decline in Violence?*

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Abstract

Recent analyses suggest that state respect for human rights has shown marked improvement over recent decades (e.g. Fariss 2014). Similarly, there is evidence that the incidence and severity of political violence has declined globally (e.g. Pinker 2011). In this manuscript we investigate the inter-related nature of these trends. We first argue that improving respect for human rights is largely driven by the global decline in large-scale political violence in recent decades. We also note the role that general improvements in state respect for human rights plays in this trend. Most importantly, however, we note that global improvements in human rights are primarily driven by countries that are not exposed to violent internal conflicts and political stability. Using a Bayesian latent variable approach, we show that in recent decades the governments of politically stable countries that enjoy protracted periods of peace demonstrate significant improvements in human rights practices over time. By contrast, states that frequently experience political instability and episodes of internal conflict see no significant change in their human rights practices. Our results help us to develop a new line of argument that links the fog of war with the quality of information available to assess state human rights practices. As the fog of war lifts, it becomes easier to observe human rights abuses, which helps explain the puzzling finding that human rights practices have remained stagnant as the number and severity of conflicts declined.

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