

Responding to criticism: Autocratic states and treaty reservation withdrawal

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Abstract

Autocracies, like democracies, use reservations to adjust their treaty commitments. But autocracies receive far greater pressure to withdraw reservations. To what extent is this pressure effective? We show through statistical analyses and case illustrations that autocracies respond to international pressure differently than democracies. Autocracies are more likely to withdraw reservations when facing treaty body reviews and less likely to withdraw reservations in response to peer state objections. We propose explanations for this difference. Autocracies may be more responsive to periodic reviews because they are conducted by technical experts from diverse countries, regions, and political regimes, rather than by states' political representatives. Periodic review is an iterative process that gives autocracies time to address domestic opposition to withdrawing reservations. Yet, autocracies may be less likely to withdraw reservations in response to state objections because they see objections, which primarily originate with Western democracies, as biased, hypocritical, and possibly even neocolonial. Objections are also only filed once and may not have the sustained impact necessary to prompt reservation withdrawal. Our research improves scholarly understanding of autocratic states' engagement with international law and international organizations, and reveals the conditional effects of the international community's efforts to change state behavior within treaty regimes.

Introduction

On December 9, 2005, Kuwait notified the UN Secretary General that it was withdrawing its reservation against Article 7(a) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which requires states to eliminate discrimination against women in public and political life, and guarantee women the same right to vote and run for office as men. When Kuwait joined CEDAW in 1994, its reservation indicated that Article 7(a) “conflict[ed] with the Kuwaiti Electoral Act, under which the right to be eligible for election and to vote is restricted to males.” Kuwait therefore reserved against the provision, ratifying the treaty while not accepting it in full.

In 2004, the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, an independent group of experts charged with evaluating states parties' compliance with CEDAW, urged Kuwait “to take all necessary steps, as a matter of the utmost urgency ... to amend the discriminatory provisions of the Electoral Law ... to ensure compliance with the Convention” (UN General Assembly, 2004, p. 17).¹ The committee also directed Kuwait to withdraw the reservation to Article 7(a). When Kuwait withdrew the reservation the following year, the committee expressed “satisfaction.” One member called the country's decision “a landmark achievement for women worldwide, as well as Kuwaiti women” (OHCHR, 2011).

The CEDAW Committee's 2004 periodic review was not the first time Kuwait had been criticized for reserving against Article 7(a). Throughout 1995 and 1996, a number of countries—including Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Belgium—submitted formal objections to Kuwait's reservation. Why did Kuwait not withdraw its reservation when fellow treaty members objected in 1995 and 1996, but did so after its first CEDAW periodic review in 2004?

Kuwait's behavior raises a broader question: What leads autocracies to withdraw their treaty reservations? Autocratic states' behavior in the international human rights regime is puzzling (e.g., see von Stein, 2013). There seem to be obvious domestic benefits for democracies to commit to human rights

(Simmons, 2009) and, in fact, democracies withdraw their reservations more frequently than autocracies (Boyes et al., 2024). But autocracies also withdraw reservations, thereby improving their treaty commitments. What explains this behavior?

We use illustrative cases and statistical analyses to reveal important nuance in the story of why countries withdraw treaty reservations. Although one might expect that autocracies resist pressure from the human rights treaty regime, our findings indicate otherwise. Although autocracies are less likely than democracies to withdraw reservations in response to state objections, they are more likely than democracies to withdraw reservations when facing treaty committee reviews.

We propose that the difference in how autocracies respond to external pressure is rooted in their relationships with external actors and whether they perceive said actors to be biased or neutral. Treaty committee reviews are conducted by technical experts from diverse countries, regions, and political regimes, not by states' political representatives. This means treaty committee recommendations may be received as more politically neutral and may thus be more palatable to autocratic leaders. Perceptions of treaty bodies' neutrality may help leaders balance domestic interest groups and public opinion, making otherwise politically infeasible changes possible. Treaty committee reviews also constitute an iterative process that allows pro-human rights groups to mobilize and, again, helps leaders address domestic opposition over time.

In contrast, autocracies may be less likely to withdraw reservations in response to state objections because they see objections as biased, hypocritical, or even neocolonial.² Objections represent a type of naming and shaming, which research shows is most effective when coming from strategic allies rather than from other actors (Terman, 2023; Terman & Voeten, 2018). But objections are almost exclusively lodged by democracies that may have weaker relationships with autocracies. Objections also occur soon after reservations (within 12 months) and may not have the sustained impact needed to compel autocracies to withdraw.

Our research builds on a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand the distinct behavior of autocracies in the international human rights regime. The primary contribution of this article is the finding that different forms of international social pressure affect autocratic regimes differently: Treaty committee reviews are more effective than state objections in inducing autocracies to withdraw reservations. This finding improves scholarly understanding of autocratic states' engagement with international law and international organizations, and reveals the conditional effects of the international community's efforts to change state behavior within treaty regimes.

Distinct behaviors in the international human rights regime

There is growing evidence that autocracies interact with human rights institutions in fundamentally different ways than their democratic counterparts (Comstock & Vilán, 2024; Gillooly et al., 2024; Ginsburg, 2020). Extant research typically considers autocracies' propensity to join human rights agreements and their level of compliance. For instance, research has found that autocracies are less likely to commit to and comply with human rights treaties than are democracies (Hathaway, 2003, 2007; Simmons, 2009), especially when agreements are more demanding (Mulesky et al., 2024). But overlooking important treaty behaviors besides ratification and compliance risks missing insight into autocratic commitments (Comstock & Vilán, 2024).

We highlight three other important behaviors: reserving against treaty provisions, objecting to reservations, and withdrawing reservations. First, reservations are a tool states can use to make their treaty commitments more flexible (Hill, 2016; McKibben & Western, 2020; Neumayer, 2007; Zvobgo et al., 2020).³ Second, objections are unilateral statements that signal a state's dissatisfaction with fellow treaty members' reservations (Eldredge & Shannon, 2022).⁴ Third, reservation withdrawal improves treaty participation as a state rescinds limits that it had previously placed on its treaty commitments (Boyes et al., 2024; Edry, 2020).⁵

Given their different propensities to commit to and comply with treaties, it is reasonable to assume that autocracies and democracies behave differently when it comes to reservations, objections, and reservation

withdrawals. For instance, because autocracies have a lower propensity to join human rights treaties, we might expect that they are *more likely* to enter reservations when they do ratify or accede to treaties. Although reservations are fairly uncommon, autocracies are *just as likely* as democracies to enter reservations against treaty provisions (Zvobgo et al., 2020). Interestingly, we find that autocracies make *significantly fewer* reservations against *demanding* treaty obligations than democracies.⁶

Autocracies and democracies differ in two other important respects that have received little scholarly attention until now. First, autocracies are less likely than democracies to object to other states' reservations, suggesting that autocracies care little about their peers' human rights commitments. With the exception of a few cases, it is democracies that typically object to fellow treaty members' reservations.⁷ Second, autocracies are more likely to receive objections from democracies than from fellow autocracies, and democracies are more likely to object to autocracies than to democracies. The overall number of democratic objections to autocracies (465 objections) is higher than democracies (243 objections; see Boyes et al., 2024).

To summarize, autocracies make reservations at similar rates as democracies, make significantly fewer reservations to consequential (demanding) treaty provisions, and object less to their peers' reservations. Yet autocracies receive more objections. Setting this apparent double standard aside, it may be that democracies simply believe they must object more to autocratic states' reservations; they may "pile on" objections in order to change their peers' treaty commitments. But is this strategy effective? Democratic states must think so, if they object so heavily to autocracies' reservations. Also, when facing objections themselves, democratic states often withdraw their reservations (Boyes et al., 2024). Do autocratic states behave similarly? If not, what is the best way for international actors to encourage autocracies to withdraw reservations and improve their treaty commitments?

Autocracies and treaty reservation withdrawal

Why might autocracies withdraw treaty reservations? Research first suggests that international social pressure motivates states to withdraw reservations. Periodic review by treaty committees and formal objections from fellow treaty members (Boyes et al., 2024; Eldredge & Shannon, 2022) are particularly influential. But we know little about whether and how treaty committee review and formal objections distinctly encourage countries with different regime types to withdraw reservations.

Boyes et al. (2024) stopped short of exploring how different forms of international social pressure may affect autocracies and democracies differently, although several of their adjunct findings are consistent with this possibility. First, political regime type is a significant determinant of reservation withdrawal: As states become more democratic, they are increasingly likely to rescind their reservations. Second, periodic review and state objections both increase the likelihood of reservation withdrawal. This result, however, is presented only for states with a political regime type valued at the population mean. Boyes et al. (2024) did not tease out the influence of objections and periodic review on states that are either strongly autocratic or strongly democratic. Preliminary evidence suggests that periodic review is uniquely effective in compelling autocracies to withdraw reservations to CEDAW (Edry, 2020). This article expands on Edry's study to explore if and how social pressure encourages autocracies to withdraw reservations across the nine UN human rights treaties that make up the "core" of the international human rights regime.

A second possible source of pressure on autocracies is domestic, although this possibility does not, on its face, seem to apply well to autocratic behavior. Certainly, autocratic leaders are accountable to a selectorate, but this constituency is unlikely to include human rights proponents advocating for increased international legal commitment. And yet, research reveals domestic benefits for autocrats who commit to human rights, whether those are tactical benefits (Gillooly et al., 2024; Vreeland, 2008) or good press (von Stein, 2013). The promise of these benefits may induce autocracies to withdraw reservations. It is also possible that autocracies withdraw reservations because the cost of complying with the reserved provision(s) has declined or, at least, is no longer prohibitive. Finally, for international pressure to be effective, it is likely that a domestic constituency also encourages reservation withdrawal.

Conditional effects of international social pressure

How then might domestic and international forms of pressure interact to induce autocratic reservation withdrawal? Consider a major source of such pressure: human rights treaty committees' periodic reviews. Each of the major international human rights treaties has an associated committee, or body of experts, that helps monitor treaty implementation and compliance (Reiners, 2022; Schoner, 2024, 2025; Ullmann, 2024; Ullmann & von Staden, 2024). To facilitate the review, treaty members periodically submit reports detailing their human rights practices. At the same time, domestic and international civil society actors often submit "shadow reports," which also provide information on treaty members' practices. Treaty committees encourage civil society to submit shadow reports and frequently refer to the information in the reports when questioning state representatives (Creamer & Simmons, 2019). The process of self-reporting and subsequent periodic review has been shown to further galvanize domestic actors by increasing media coverage and dialogue in legislative bodies (Creamer & Simmons, 2019).

Treaty committees review information submitted by states and issue reports that contain specific recommendations to improve treaty compliance. One recommendation that treaty committees frequently make is for treaty members to withdraw their reservations. Even though committees' recommendations are not binding, state parties are "encouraged and obligated" to respond to them (Creamer & Simmons, 2020), and research finds that this iterative practice can change states' behavior (Carraro, 2019; Creamer & Simmons, 2020; O'Flaherty, 2006). At the international level, periodic review puts fellow treaty members on notice. They can then work diplomatically and behind the scenes to encourage reserving states to withdraw reservations.

Treaty committee reviews also galvanize civil society actors to put pressure on states to withdraw reservations. Amnesty International, for instance, created a report targeting reservations to CEDAW as part of the Stop Violence Against Women Campaign. The report focused on Middle Eastern and North African countries and included specific recommendations, for example, "lifting all reservations to the Convention, particularly those that are clearly incompatible with their fundamental obligations under the treaty" (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 11). The report also included the CEDAW Committee's recommendations about each state's reservations, suggesting many of them be lifted (Amnesty International 2004). This example indicates that treaty bodies and human rights organizations can combine their efforts to encourage states to rescind their reservations.

Now consider state objections, another form of social pressure that has been shown to induce states to withdraw reservations (Boyes et al., 2024; Eldredge & Shannon, 2022). Objections call attention to a state's weakened commitment to a treaty, and states apply diplomatic pressure on reserving states as they lodge objections. But in thinking about how objections work, they are likely less effective in encouraging autocratic reservation withdrawal. One reason objections may be less effective is that they are a form of naming and shaming, and research shows that this strategy is more persuasive coming from allies (Terman, 2023; Terman & Voeten, 2018). As noted, autocracies are as likely to enter reservations as democracies (and less likely to reserve against demanding obligations), yet autocracies attract a greater proportion of objections from democracies. Democracies may not have sufficient strategic connections to autocracies to effectively change their human rights treaty participation via objections.

Autocracies may also view objections by democracies as biased, political, and hypocritical. Relatedly, autocracies—which are concentrated in the Global South—may view human rights criticism by democracies—which are concentrated in the Global West—as paternalistic and even neocolonial (Zvobgo & Chaudoin, 2025). They may see objections as an effort by Western actors to impose universal human rights standards on societies that do not share those priorities (Namli, 2018; Rajagopal, 2003). As a result, autocracies may balk at efforts by democracies to judge the quality of their commitments.

In addition, objections occur relatively early, as states have up to one year to object after fellow treaty members make reservations. When countries object to reservations, they may initially create some diplomatic pressure for the regime to withdraw them, but it is unlikely that objecting states consistently maintain this pressure over the life of a reservation. And yet, it takes time for countries to make changes at home that would allow for the increased compliance expected when reservations are lifted, whether it be

through passing domestic legislation or enacting judicial reforms. These changes may be particularly slow in autocracies, although they can and do happen.

By contrast, treaty committee reviews have greater impartiality and independence than state objections. Treaty members elect experts to the committee, and no state dominates or dictates the committee's composition. Treaty bodies are also autonomous and do not operate under other actors' supervision. The autonomy and neutrality of treaty bodies may make them more legitimate actors in the eyes of autocracies, and give them greater leverage in encouraging reservation withdrawal than state objectors.

Moreover, the regularity of reviews may allow autocracies to mollify domestic opposition to withdrawal. Periodic review has sustained impact on domestic discourse within treaty member countries, even in the years following review (Creamer & Simmons, 2019). Given that periodic review occurs roughly every four years, this provides many opportunities and pressure points for autocracies to reconsider their reservations over several years. It also gives autocratic leaders time between reviews to work with domestic opponents. And civil society groups in autocracies can use the periodic review process as a touchstone for calling on governments to withdraw reservations. For example, in the lead-up to Jordan's 2024 CEDAW periodic review, civil society actors organized a consultation meeting in Russeifa with the goal of enhancing their impact (*Jordan Times*, 2023).

Case illustrations of autocratic reservation withdrawal

As an illustration of how periodic review is more effective in encouraging autocratic reservation withdrawal than state objections, we return to the example of Kuwait. The country ratified CEDAW in 1994 by decree of the emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, whose goal was to give women the right to vote and run for office by 1999. However, the government faced opposition from conservatives in the National Assembly and could not meet the goal right away. But domestic political forces continued to push for women's suffrage, and scholars credit CEDAW with helping to frame and mobilize these grassroots efforts (e.g., George, 2020, p. 54). One of the CEDAW Committee's efforts was a 2004 periodic review report recommendation for Kuwait to withdraw its reservations.

Kuwait withdrew its reservation to Article 7(a) in 2005 and, at the same time, passed domestic legislation granting women the right to vote and run for office in parliamentary and local elections. This suggests that Kuwait withdrew the reservation because it intended to comply with the previously reserved provision and that domestic politics had changed to allow for compliance. Although the objections to Kuwait's reservations by "human rights steward" countries like Norway may have been initially helpful, sustained engagement with the CEDAW Committee seems to have done more to influence reservation withdrawal 11 years after ratification.

As another illustration, Jordan ratified CEDAW in 1992 with a reservation to Article 15(4), which stipulates, "States Parties shall accord to men and women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons and the freedom to choose their residence and domicile." Sweden objected in 1993, but Jordan maintained the reservation. Since ratification, the Jordanian National Commission for Women has monitored participation and compliance with CEDAW, and women's rights groups have continually pressured the government to remove all reservations (Husseini, 2010). The CEDAW Committee issued reports in 2000 and 2007, and a group of women's rights organizations submitted a shadow report in 2007, all of them expressing concern about Jordan's reservations and calling on the government to withdraw them. In 2009, Jordan withdrew its reservation to Article 15(4).

Still, Jordan maintains reservations to Article 9(2) (equal rights as men with respect to nationality of children) and parts of Article 16(1) (equal rights in marriage and family relations), and its sixth periodic report to the CEDAW Committee in 2015 indicates that domestic opposition has prevented the country from withdrawing the reservations. In the report, Jordan noted a backlash against women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Jordan also noted resistance from the Islamic Scholars League, a body of Muslim theologians, which specifically asked the Jordanian legislature to maintain the country's reservations to CEDAW. Jordan's report argued that "the issue of lifting the reservations has to be dealt with very sensitively and gradually, in a manner that balances the promotion of women's human rights with the

obligation to reject whatever contradicts the provisions of Islamic Shariah” (Jordanian National Commission for Women, 2015, p. 46). This suggests sincere behavior by Jordan in maintaining its reservations to CEDAW; it is not withdrawing reservations because it cannot comply with the reserved provisions.

Although neither Jordan nor Kuwait have withdrawn all reservations to CEDAW, periodic review continues to draw domestic and international attention to both countries’ treaty participation. Jordan has undergone two periodic reviews since withdrawing the reservation to Article 15(4), and both reviews expressed concern about the remaining reservations (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2012, 2017a). Civil society organizations also filed 15 shadow reports between 2011 and 2023 concerning Jordan’s engagement with CEDAW (UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies Database, 2025).

Similarly, Kuwait has undergone two periodic reviews since withdrawing the reservation to Article 7(a), both of which expressed concern about remaining reservations (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2011; 2017b). Civil society organizations also filed 21 shadow reports between 2011 and 2023 reviewing Kuwait’s engagement with CEDAW (UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies Database, 2025). The sustained process of periodic review may ultimately help Kuwait and Jordan withdraw their remaining reservations, provided that the respective governments assuage domestic opposition.

As a third example, Tunisia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992, with reservations to Articles 2, 7, and 40. Germany and Ireland objected to the reservations. In its initial periodic review in 1995, the CRC Committee expressed concern about the reservations and encouraged Tunisia to withdraw them. In March 2002, shortly before its second periodic review, Tunisia withdrew its reservation to Article 40 (regarding the applicability of penal law to children). In May 2002, the CRC Committee applauded Tunisia’s withdrawal of the reservation to Article 40.

At the same time, the committee stated that it “remains concerned about the extent of reservations and declarations made to the Convention by the State party. In particular, the Committee reiterates that the reservation relating to the application of article 2 appears to be incompatible with the object and purpose of the Convention” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2002, p. 3). Six years later, Tunisia withdrew the reservations to Article 2 (protection from discrimination) and Article 7 (right to a nationality).

This example illustrates the impact of a sustained and iterative process involving state self-reporting and treaty committee review. Two objections by human rights steward countries occurred shortly after Tunisia’s reservation, but they did not seem to affect Tunisia’s behavior. Yet in the lead-up to its second periodic review, Tunisia withdrew one reservation and, following its third periodic review, withdrew the remaining ones.

More broadly, these case illustrations indicate that reservation withdrawal by autocracies occurs when there is a domestic shift that makes compliance with the reserved terms of a treaty less costly and/or there is significant domestic pressure that encourages withdrawal. The domestic forces are bolstered by treaty committees’ periodic review processes, which help frame domestic discourse surrounding human rights and mobilize civil society groups. State objections are apparently less effective in encouraging autocracies to withdraw reservations. We suspect this is because objections are seen as more biased than treaty body reviews, are less sustained than periodic review, and do less to mobilize domestic advocates.

Given the foregoing theory—as well as insights derived from the experiences of Kuwait, Jordan, and Tunisia—we expect that periodic review is more effective than state objections at encouraging autocracies to withdraw treaty reservations.

Analysis of autocratic reservation withdrawal

The previous section presented a theory and case illustrations of how periodic review is more effective at encouraging autocracies to withdraw reservations than state objections. To further explore the possibility that periodic review more effectively encourages autocratic reservation withdrawal, we use data from Zvobgo et al. (2020) that capture withdrawals at the provision (treaty-article-paragraph) level across nine

major human rights treaties.⁸ We restrict the sample to provisions that create obligations for states, limiting the analysis to the most consequential category of reservations.

Our interest in autocratic reservation withdrawal presented an empirical challenge because not all states file reservations. To account for possible bias arising from this type of selection, we follow Edry (2020) and Boyes et al. (2024) in adopting a two-stage censored probit model (Heckman, 1979; von Stein, 2005). This approach specifies an initial model that explains whether a state files a reservation, and uses those estimates to account for possible bias in a second-stage model that explains whether a state rescinds a reservation.

Variables in the first-stage model

To explain state reservation behavior in the first-stage model, we replicate Zvobgo et al.'s (2020, p. 795) primary model. The dependent variable, *Reservation*, takes a value of 1 if a state enters a reservation against a given provision or a 0 otherwise. The model also accounts for the costs of compliance by including the binary variables *Demanding treaty provision* and *Nonderogable treaty provision*. Zvobgo et al. (2020) found that demanding treaty provisions—those that create strong and precise obligations that require domestic action—are more likely to attract reservations.

We include *Judicial independence*, as captured on a scale ranging from 0, indicating the lowest levels of independence, to 4, indicating the highest level (Coppedge et al., 2018). Existing scholarship suggests that states in which the judiciary is more independent confront greater compliance costs because courts are more likely to hold governments accountable for treaty violations (Hill, 2016; Powell & Staton, 2009). Thus, greater judicial independence incentivizes executives to lodge reservations to insulate themselves from potentially higher compliance costs.

For similar reasons, we include *Democracy*, as measured by the 21-point *polity2* variable.⁹ We also include an index variable, *Strong NHRI*, which captures the powers of national human rights institutions, bureaucracies that have been shown to influence state reservation behavior (Conrad et al., 2013; Zvobgo et al., 2020, p. 793). Further, we include *Treaties equal or superior*, which takes on a value of 1 if treaties are equal to or superior to domestic law; otherwise, 0 (Elkins, Ginsburg, & Melton, 2009). These data were drawn from the World Bank's WDI database. We also use Fariss's (2014) latent measure of respect for human rights, in which higher values indicate greater levels of respect, labeled *Basic rights respected*, alongside variables capturing other important domestic country attributes, including *GDP per capita* (logged) and *Population* (logged).

Finally, we follow Edry (2020) and Boyes et al. (2024) in using a state's legal system as the instrumental variable in the first-stage equation. Multiple analysts have identified a state's legal system as a key determinant of lodging reservations. Simmons (2009) and McKibben and Western (2020), for instance, proposed that states with common law and Islamic law systems are more likely to enter reservations due to incompatibilities between their domestic laws and treaty law. Boyes et al. (2024) argued that a state's legal system satisfies the exclusion restriction insofar as it is only likely to influence the reservation withdrawal through the path of making a reservation, thus making it an appropriate choice for exclusion from the second-stage model. We adopt the same approach and incorporate the four-part classification of a state's legal tradition proposed by Mitchell and Powell (2009). This variable categorizes a state as having one of the following legal systems: common law, civil law, Islamic law, or mixed.

Variables in the second-stage model

The dependent variable in the second-stage model, *Reservation withdrawal*, takes a value of 1 if a state rescinds a reservation against a given provision or a 0 otherwise. To explain reservation withdrawal, we include the two key measures of international social pressure: *State objections* and *Periodic review*. *State objections* captures all objections a reservation has received in its lifetime. This variable ranges from 0 to 23. *Periodic review* takes a value of 1 if a reservation was withdrawn during the year a state was undergoing periodic review; otherwise, 0. Although periodic review may exert influence over autocratic states in the

period leading up to and immediately following the review, we expect this mechanism's most significant impact to be during review.

To explore the possible moderating effects of political regime type, we interact each social pressure variable with *Democracy*. In the set of models focused on the effect of objections, we include the constituent variables alongside the interaction term. In the models focused on periodic review, we exclude the binary periodic review constituent variable from the estimates due to collinearity with *Democracy* and the *Periodic review x democracy* interaction term.

In addition, we include variables intended to capture important aspects of both the treaty provisions themselves and characteristics of the reserving states that may influence reservation withdrawal. Regarding the former, we follow Zvobgo et al. (2020) and Boyes et al. (2024) in including *Demanding treaty provision* and *Nonderogable treaty provision*. Regarding state-level characteristics, we include *Judicial independence* and *Treaties equal or superior*. We anticipate that states with higher levels of judicial independence and states in which treaties are equal or superior to domestic law will be less likely to rescind reservations because doing so would expose them to more human rights accountability.

Statistical analysis

Table 1 presents a series of models that explore the moderating effect of political regime type on two key forms of international social pressure to withdraw human rights treaty reservations. Models 1–4 estimate the relationship between objections and political regime type and their effects on the likelihood of reservation withdrawal, whereas Models 5–8 explain reservation withdrawal as a function of periodic review and political regime type. Model 1 includes only *State objections*, *Democracy*, and their interaction in the second-stage model. Model 2 builds on Model 1, introducing variables that capture key characteristics of the treaty provisions in the second stage, including whether they are demanding and/or nonderogable. Model 3 builds on Model 1, incorporating relevant domestic characteristics of the reserving state, including judicial independence and the domestic legal status of treaties. Model 4, the most restrictive specification, incorporates all of these covariates in addition to *State objections*, *Democracy*, and their interaction. Models 5–8 follow the same conventions. Broadly, the coefficient estimates suggest that the outcome models' results are robust to alternate specifications, even when accounting for possible selection bias.

Table 1. Explaining Reservation Withdrawal in Nine Human Rights Treaties

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Outcome Model: Explaining Reservation Withdrawal								
State Objections	0.033* (0.014)	0.035* (0.014)	0.021 (0.014)	0.023 (0.014)	.	.	.	.
Democracy	-0.026* (0.009)	-0.024* (0.009)	-0.015 (0.012)	-0.012 (0.012)	-0.045* (0.010)	-0.044* (0.010)	-0.025* (0.012)	-0.024 (0.012)
State Objections X Democracy	0.008* (0.002)	0.007* (0.002)	0.009* (0.002)	0.008* (0.002)	.	.	.	.
Periodic Review X Democracy	.	.	.	.	0.077* (0.016)	0.076* (0.016)	0.071* (0.017)	0.071* (0.017)
Demanding Treaty Provision	.	0.228* (0.108)	.	0.215 (0.115)	.	0.265* (0.114)	.	0.249* (0.119)
Non-derogable Treaty Provision	.	0.389 (0.231)	.	0.436 (0.243)	.	0.355 (0.238)	.	0.429 (0.248)
Judicial Independence	.	.	-0.130* (0.055)	-0.134* (0.054)	.	.	-0.139* (0.055)	-0.145* (0.055)
Treaties Equal or Superior	.	.	-0.497* (0.144)	-0.467* (0.144)	.	.	-0.404* (0.142)	-0.383* (0.142)
Constant	-1.230* (0.342)	-1.626* (0.330)	-0.794 (0.406)	-1.210* (0.407)	-0.846* (0.391)	-1.329* (0.388)	-0.464 (0.434)	-0.959* (0.451)
Selection Model: Explaining Reservations								
Civil Legal System	-0.520* (0.043)	-0.521* (0.043)	-0.517* (0.043)	-0.520* (0.043)	-0.516* (0.044)	-0.520* (0.044)	-0.510* (0.044)	-0.517* (0.044)
Islamic Legal System	0.048 (0.056)	0.044 (0.055)	0.055 (0.056)	0.050 (0.056)	0.057 (0.056)	0.049 (0.056)	0.065 (0.056)	0.056 (0.056)
Mixed Legal System	-0.380* (0.066)	-0.381* (0.065)	-0.378* (0.066)	-0.381* (0.066)	-0.376* (0.066)	-0.379* (0.066)	-0.374* (0.066)	-0.378* (0.066)
Democracy	0.010* (0.004)	0.009* (0.004)	0.010* (0.004)	0.010* (0.004)	0.010* (0.004)	0.010* (0.004)	0.011* (0.004)	0.010* (0.004)
Strong NHRI	-0.053* (0.004)	-0.053* (0.004)	-0.053* (0.004)	-0.053* (0.004)	-0.053* (0.004)	-0.053* (0.004)	-0.054* (0.004)	-0.053* (0.004)
Demanding Treaty Provision	0.205* (0.034)	0.210* (0.034)	0.207* (0.034)	0.210* (0.034)	0.207* (0.034)	0.210* (0.034)	0.209* (0.034)	0.210* (0.034)
Non-derogable Treaty Provision	-0.026 (0.085)	-0.013 (0.084)	-0.023 (0.085)	-0.014 (0.084)	-0.021 (0.085)	-0.014 (0.084)	-0.018 (0.085)	-0.015 (0.084)
Judicial Independence	0.011 (0.018)	0.012 (0.018)	0.008 (0.018)	0.007 (0.018)	0.009 (0.018)	0.010 (0.018)	0.009 (0.018)	0.007 (0.018)
Treaties Equal or Superior	0.137* (0.041)	0.141* (0.041)	0.126* (0.041)	0.127* (0.041)	0.130* (0.042)	0.135* (0.041)	0.124* (0.041)	0.126* (0.041)
Basic Rights Respected	0.047* (0.022)	0.047* (0.022)	0.047* (0.022)	0.048* (0.022)	0.048* (0.022)	0.049* (0.022)	0.046* (0.022)	0.048* (0.022)
GDP/cap (ln)	0.129* (0.015)	0.129* (0.015)	0.127* (0.015)	0.128* (0.015)	0.127* (0.015)	0.128* (0.015)	0.126* (0.015)	0.127* (0.015)
Population (ln)	0.143* (0.012)	0.142* (0.012)	0.143* (0.012)	0.143* (0.012)	0.143* (0.013)	0.142* (0.013)	0.144* (0.013)	0.143* (0.013)
Constant	-5.345* (0.211)	-5.343* (0.211)	-5.341* (0.212)	-5.337* (0.212)	-5.340* (0.212)	-5.330* (0.212)	-5.346* (0.212)	-5.336* (0.212)
Rho parameter	0.284 (0.161)	0.411* (0.165)	0.161 (0.173)	0.283 (0.178)	0.132 (0.168)	0.281 (0.174)	0.013 (0.178)	0.160 (0.186)
Observations	48,415	48,415	48,415	48,415	48,415	48,415	48,415	48,415
Selected Observations	629	629	629	629	629	629	629	629
Non-selected Observations	47,786	47,786	47,786	47,786	47,786	47,786	47,786	47,786

* = p<.05; Standard errors in parentheses.

To determine whether the effects of each mechanism of social pressure depend on a state's political regime, we calculated the marginal effects of both *State objections* and *Periodic review* on the probability of reservation withdrawal at different levels of *Democracy*. Figure 1 presents the marginal effects of the mean value of *State objections* on reservation withdrawal across levels of *Democracy* using estimates from Models 1–4. The results consistently show that the effect of state objections on reservation withdrawal diminishes as states become more autocratic. Across specifications, the estimated marginal effects are statistically indistinguishable from 0 at all levels of democracy below 0, suggesting the relative ineffectiveness of objections for compelling autocracies to withdraw reservations. In contrast, the marginal effects are statistically significant ($p < .05$) for values of *Democracy* from 1 to 10 in Models 1 and 3, and they are significant ($p < .10$) for Models 2 and 4, indicating that this form of external pressure becomes more effective as states become more democratic.

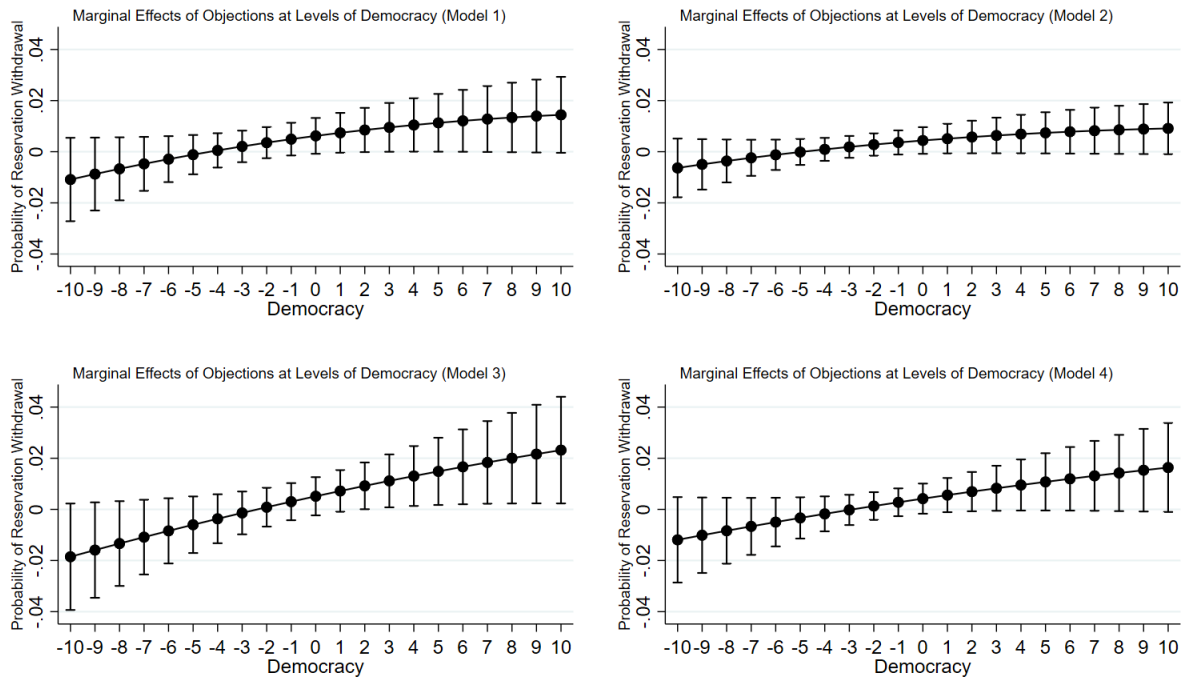


Figure 1. Marginal effects of state objections on reservation withdrawal, Models 1–4.

Figure 2 presents marginal effects derived from Model 4, the most restrictive specification, while varying the number of objections. In addition to corroborating the earlier finding that democracies are more responsive to objections than autocracies, the figure suggests that the number of objections matters as well: The magnitude of the effect size increases as the number of objections rises, although these effects are only statistically significant for states with a *polity2* score of approximately -1 or higher. This trend becomes more pronounced as *Democracy* rises. As with the preceding results, autocracies are largely unresponsive to objections from their peers, an effect that persists regardless of the number of objections that they receive.

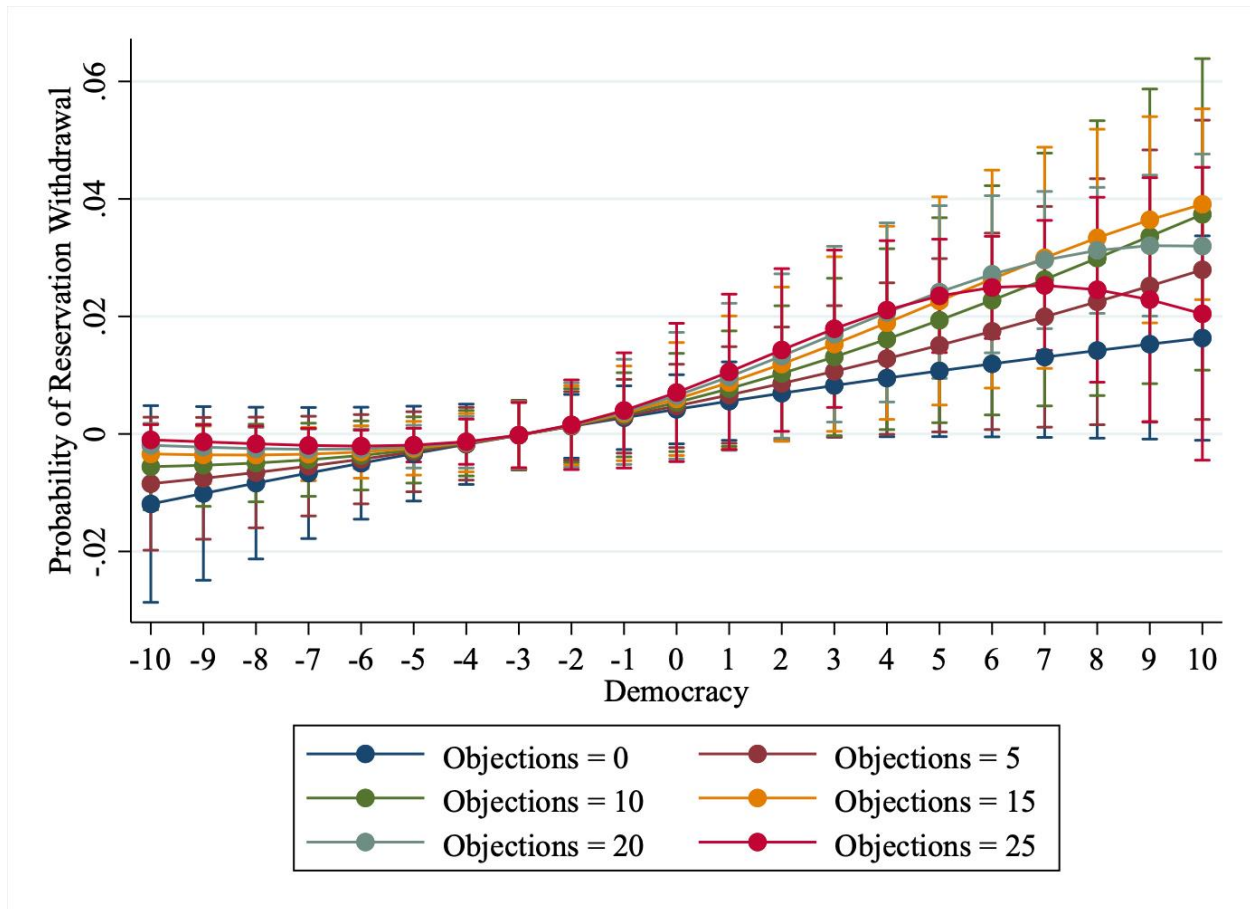


Figure 2. Marginal effects of objections on reservation withdrawal at varying levels of *Democracy* of the reserving state.

Figure 3 draws on estimates from Model 8 and presents the marginal effects of *Periodic review* on reservation withdrawal at different levels of *Democracy*. In contrast to state objections, the estimates suggest that autocratic states are the most responsive to this mechanism of social pressure. As states become more democratic, the effect of periodic review on reservation withdrawal attenuates, suggesting that more democratic states are less responsive to periodic review. Conversely, autocratic states are more influenced to withdraw reservations in the time surrounding periodic review. Of additional note, the effect size grows as states become more autocratic.

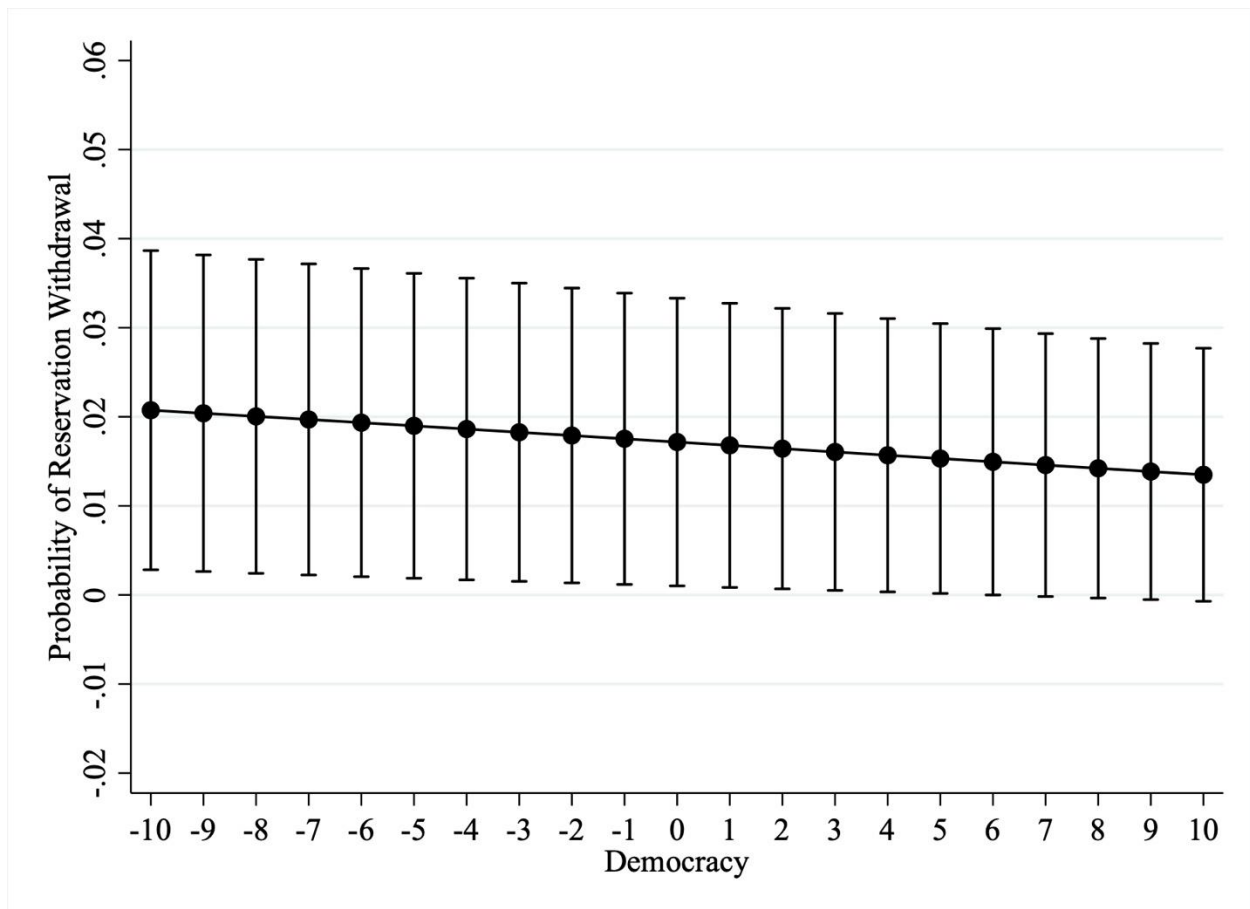


Figure 3. Marginal effects of periodic review on reservation withdrawal at varying levels of *Democracy* of the reserving state.

Controlling for a number of domestic factors such as regime type and the strength of NHRIs, the analyses show that periodic review better compels autocracies to withdraw reservations. These results corroborate the previous case illustrations, which suggest that periodic review largely works by helping domestic actors frame their arguments and advocate for improved treaty commitments. One might question whether periodic reviews or domestic actors are doing most of the work in encouraging reservation withdrawal. To be sure, periodic review is more readily observable than efforts by domestic advocates and civil society, so it is possible to overstate the effects of periodic review while underestimating the effects of domestic mobilization. Future work might do more to disentangle their respective effects, although the case illustrations presented suggest that domestic forces and periodic review work hand in hand.

Conclusion and future directions

This article has illustrated the effect of international social pressure in driving autocracies to withdraw human rights treaty reservations. We showed that human rights treaty committee review is more effective than peer state objections in compelling autocracies to withdraw reservations. This finding suggests that autocracies are more responsive to sustained review by an independent international body than to one-off, possibly short-lived instances of naming and shaming from other states.

Although states use reservations in the human rights treaty regime more than in any other (Neumayer, 2007), our findings shed light on how the international community can facilitate more meaningful treaty participation among autocracies, not just in the human rights regime but in other regimes as well. We can speculate that state objections may have a minimal, if nonexistent, impact on inducing autocracies to embrace fuller participation in treaties across issue areas. This may be particularly consequential for multilateral treaties in areas that do not typically incorporate periodic review as a monitoring and enforcement mechanism. Although our theory is agnostic about alternate models of monitoring and enforcement like arbitration or formal dispute settlement processes, one implication of our findings is that parties may be well served by incorporating periodic review into agreement language.

Our findings also open the door for further inquiry into autocratic and democratic regimes' engagements with human rights treaties. First, how do civil society groups and domestic actors leverage the periodic review process? Although there is some preliminary research into the impact of specific sets of civil society actors on specific treaties (Kreutzer, n.d.), we are not aware of any attempts to assess civil society's impact across treaties and regime types.

Second, what effect does reservation withdrawal have on state compliance? Although the case illustrations indicate that autocracies carefully withdraw treaty reservations, and that they do so with the intention to comply with the previously reserved provisions, research has not yet uncovered whether and how reservation withdrawal improves compliance. Exploring this would extend scholarship that is beginning to link reservations to compliance (Kreutzer & Mitchell, 2024). It would also provide insight into the sincerity of reservation withdrawal, as well as illuminate how treaty participation is connected to human rights practices more broadly, particularly in autocracies.

Finally, how does democratic backsliding affect reservation withdrawal? For instance, if backsliding countries oppose targeted naming and shaming of human rights abuse (Meyerrose & Nooruddin, 2025), one might conclude that backsliders are also less likely to withdraw reservations. Given the rise in backsliding in recent years, future work might be able to leverage more extensive data to understand the relationship between democratic erosion and decline and human rights treaty participation.

Notes

1. "While welcoming the State party's stated intention to introduce legislation during the current legislative period that is expected to create the conditions for the withdrawal of the reservation to article 7 (a), the Committee is concerned at the failure of the State party to ensure that women have, on equal terms with men, the right to vote in all elections and public referendums, and to be eligible for election to all publicly

elected bodies. The Committee considers the lack of political rights of women a very serious limitation of their rights, which also has a significant negative impact on women's enjoyment of other rights protected under the Convention" (UN General Assembly, 2004).

2. See, for example, Zvobgo and Chaudoin (2025) on Global South countries' critiques of how international human rights law is unevenly applied.
3. A reservation is a statement that a state can make to modify or release itself from being legally bound by specific treaty provisions (Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 1969, Article 2[1][d]). Unless a treaty specifies otherwise, reservations must be filed prior to or at the time of a state's ratification of or accession to a treaty. In some cases, however, reservations can be filed late if all treaty members agree.
4. The purpose of an objection to a reservation is to preclude it from having its intended impact on the reservation filer's obligations under the treaty. Objections can be formulated by states or international organizations that are contracting parties to a treaty, or by any state or organization that is eligible to become a contracting party to a treaty; although in the latter case, the objection only enters into force when the objecting party becomes a contracting party to the treaty (International Law Commission, 2011). Objections must be filed within 12 months of the objecting state receiving notification of the reservation's filing.
5. Unless otherwise specified in a treaty, both reservations and objections can be partially or completely withdrawn at any time (International Law Commission, 2011).
6. Demanding treaty provisions are those that are strong, precise, and stipulate domestic action (Zvobgo et al., 2020). A simple chi-2 test indicates that democracies are more likely to make reservations to demanding provisions than autocracies. The finding that democracies make more reservations to demanding provisions potentially resolves conflicting results in previous scholarship suggesting that democracies are more likely (Neumeyer 2007) and less likely (Simmons, 2009) to enter reservations. All told, democracies seem to take their human rights treaty commitments more seriously than autocracies.
7. Treaty members can object to reservations on multiple substantive grounds, including that a reservation is vague, violates the treaty's goals, or sets a dangerous precedent. For example, in 2001, Finland objected to Qatar's reservations on the Convention against Torture (CAT), arguing they were based on religious law (i.e., *Sharia*) and domestic law, and therefore violated the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969).
8. The treaties are CERD, ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, CAT, CRC, CRMW, CED, and CRPD.
9. In the Appendix, we present estimates that replicate this approach using the V-Dem "polyarchy" index variable as an alternative operationalization of political regime type (Coppedge et al., 2018).

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