

# The Use of Humanitarian Rhetoric to Avert Audience Costs



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# Introduction

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- This project seeks to analyze credible threats made by incumbent presidents, as well as the language utilized to make said threat, in the interest of understanding how reliance on humanitarian rhetoric to justify foreign intervention may impact domestic audience costs.



## Research Question

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- Can the belligerence cost be countered by claims to intervene in the interest of protecting human rights?



## Short Answer

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- Due to the wide range of factors which may shape audience costs, the balance between the power of humanitarian rhetoric and the belligerence component of audience costs is to be determined on a case-by-case basis.



## Literature Review

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Baum, Matthew A. “Going Private: Public Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the Domestic Politics of Audience Costs in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (October 2004): 603-631. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149812>

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Fearon, James D. “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994): 577-592. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2944796>.

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## Literature Review

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### Merits

- Link consistency in incumbent's behavior to satisfaction of domestic audiences.
- Highlight importance of country's reputation in global political sphere.
- Emphasize the domestic population's attentiveness as another variable contributing to the severity of audience costs paid by incumbents when making a threat.

### Shortcomings

- Do not dedicate space to highlighting a wide range of factors that dictate audience costs (i.e. constituency composition, nationally-recognized values, etc.)
- Do not consider how manner in which a threat is delivered may alter the belligerence cost



# Thesis

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- The wide range of factors to consider, which are variable to temporal, situational, and political contexts, make it theoretically irresponsible to concoct a generally applicable response.



# Research Design

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- Qualitative analysis
  - Case Study
    - Examining the Reagan administration's behavior in the realm of foreign policy relative to the cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador, as well as shifts in the incumbent's rhetoric as involvement in Central America became especially unpopular
  - Analysis of Survey Data
    - Aim to account for a number of measures (public attentiveness, public perceptions of the United States' role in international politics, and constituency composition) and gauge the public's satisfaction with the Reagan administration.



## Evidence - Case Study

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- With discontentment surrounding the U.S.'s role in Central America on the rise, it became apparent to members of the Reagan administration that an anti-Communist initiative alone was not enough to justify American insertion into the conflicts → Reagan “[embraces] the pro-democracy and human rights-driven stance.”
  - In both cases, however, the rhetoric surrounding newly-adopted human rights initiatives was relatively empty
    - The secrecy accompanying the protection against such gross violations of human rights abroad was reflective of the prioritization of Reagan’s reputation over the protection of human rights and democracy abroad.



## Evidence - Survey Data

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- ◉ National Values
  - Most Americans (61%) found the preservation of “values America stands for,” such as liberty and democracy as a goal that ought to be central to foreign policy, labeling it as “very, very important” or “very important.”
- ◉ Constituency Composition
  - Registered voters were relatively divided in their confidence of which party could better “protect traditional American values;” while 30% stored their confidence in Republicans solely, 34% felt that Democrats and Republicans were equally capable of safeguarding American principles.



## Evidence - Survey Data (2)

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- Public Attentiveness
  - In 1983, 92% of surveyed voters knew at least “a little” about the ideology-based power struggles occurring in the Central American region. No data indicated that the public was highly engaged in politics relative to these specific cases.
- Perception of the U.S.’s role in Central America
  - It is apparent that the large majority of Americans found the U.S.’s involvement in Central America to be largely unnecessary
    - By 1984, 74% of Americans opposed the provision of aid to the Salvadoran government.
    - By 1985 77% of those who declared themselves to be “knowledgeable” about the situation in Nicaragua were against deploying U.S. troops to Nicaragua.



# Evaluation

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- Foreign policy measures are more likely to be palatable to the domestic audience when understood as proliferating nationally-endorsed values.
  - In this case, however, the public also placed a high emphasis on alignment between spoken word and visible political action.
- Shifts in rhetoric toward the protection of human rights was ultimately ineffective in persuading the majority of Americans to amass behind the Administration's policies toward Central America.
  - In the long run, the belligerence cost was not offset in each case. Consistency matters!



# Conclusion

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- Relative to the considered cases, the application of humanitarian rhetoric did not alter audience costs for the better in the long-term.
- As a result of the wide range of potential determinants for audience costs, evaluation of the impact humanitarian rhetoric on the belligerence cost is best determined on a case-by-case basis.