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Theories of Commitment

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Perhaps the most interesting finding of this chapter is the extent to which governments apparently take cues from the decisions of other governments in their region. This is a central and increasingly important dynamic of the international human rights legal regime. It is startling the extent to which regional effects surface in practically every measure of commitment – from ratification to reservation-making, to the acceptance of optional protocols. Even some *types* of reservations made have strong regional counterparts. This is very likely to reflect the self-conscious coordination of human rights activities on the part of many countries for the reasons discussed in this chapter. Governments appear to time their ratifications – even coordinate their reservations – largely to keep in step with their regional peers. Especially telling are the conditions under which regional emulation is likely to take place. With only a few exceptions, regional emulation was strongest before 1989, in regions with few regional rights commitments, and in countries with government controlled presses. These are precisely the conditions under which it might make sense to ratify a universal agreement strategically, simply to avoid the criticism of being an outlier: when information on true intentions is thinnest and enforcement least likely to be forthcoming. These strategic opportunities are likely to produce at least some false-positives as rights-oriented countries pull their less enamored neighbors along in their wakes.

This chapter has provided evidence that governments ratify human rights treaties for both sincere and for strategic reasons. They calculate the costs versus the benefits in the context of their values, region, national institutions, and time horizons.