

Human Rights and Public Support for War

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Abstract: One of the most important themes in international relations is the relationship between domestic politics and interstate conflict. In this article, we use experiments to study how the human rights practices of foreign adversaries affect domestic public support for war. Our experiments, embedded in surveys in the United States and the United Kingdom, reveal several important findings. First, citizens are much less willing to attack a country that respects human rights than a country that violates them, even when the dispute concerns military security rather than humanitarian intervention. Second, human rights affect support for war primarily by changing perceptions about threat and morality. Citizens are more likely to view human rights violators as threatening, and have fewer moral qualms about fighting such countries. Our findings shed new light on the politics of war in democracies, and may provide behavioral foundations for peace among human-rights-respecting states.

Keywords: human rights, public opinion, war, democracy, survey experiment

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One of the most important questions in the field of international relations is how domestic politics affect patterns of interstate conflict. Recent work has uncovered a strong association between upholding human rights at home and maintaining peaceful relations abroad (Caprioli and Trumbore 2003a, 2006; Sobek, Abouharb, and Ingram 2006; Peterson and Graham 2011; Mitchell and Trumbore 2014). Other factors equal, conflict is less likely among pairs of countries that respect human rights, than among pairs in which one or both countries violate the rights of their citizens.

In this article we investigate how the human rights records of potential adversaries affect public support for war. Especially in democracies, leaders rarely go to war without public backing (Reiter and Stam 2002). It is therefore important to understand whether and why citizens are more likely to endorse military action against foreign governments that abuse their own citizens, even when the disputes concern military security rather than humanitarian intervention.

To answer these questions, we administered a series of novel survey experiments to adults in the United States and the United Kingdom.¹ Our experiments described a country on the brink of developing nuclear weapons. We randomly and independently varied information about the country's human rights record and political regime, while holding other factors (including its alliance status, economic ties, and military power) constant. After describing the situation, we asked whether respondents would support or oppose attacking the country's nuclear facilities.

We found that both American and British citizens were much more willing to use military

¹ Studies have shown that citizens in democracies are averse to attacking other democracies (Johns and Davies 2012; Lacina and Lee 2013; Tomz and Weeks 2013), but have not investigated whether they are reluctant to attack countries that respect human rights.

force against a country that violated human rights than against an otherwise equivalent country that respected its citizens' rights. The effect of human rights was distinct from the effect of institutional democracy, and arose even when the interstate dispute concerned a security issue—nuclear proliferation—that ostensibly had nothing to do with the treatment of individuals. These findings also held when, in follow-up studies, we changed the nature of the military threat (conventional ballistic missiles instead of nuclear weapons), the geographic location of the potential adversary, and the military power of the country relative to the United States.

Our experiments also shed light on *why* these relationships exist. We found that information about human rights affected preferences about war primarily by changing perceptions of threat and morality. In our studies, respondents were more likely to view human rights violators as threatening, and they felt a stronger moral obligation to fight.

Our experiments advance the literature in three ways. First, by interviewing the public, we shed new light on the politics of war in democracies. Second, by using randomized experiments to address problems of endogeneity and confounding, we gain greater confidence that respect for human rights is an independent source of peace. Finally, by measuring how respect for human rights affects perceptions of mediating variables such as threat and morality, we uncover several mechanisms that could be driving the rights-peace relationship.

HOW HUMAN RIGHTS COULD AFFECT SUPPORT FOR WAR

It is now widely accepted that public opinion affects decisions to use military force, especially in democracies. Leaders know that foreign policy mistakes can have consequences at the ballot box (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007). Public opinion also affects whether leaders can overcome institutional hurdles to war (Morgan and Campbell 1991) and raise revenues for military operations (Hartley and Russett 1992; Flores-Macias and Kreps

2013). Furthermore, popular leaders are more likely to achieve domestic and international policy goals than unpopular leaders (Edwards 1997; Howell and Pevehouse 2007). Consistent with these arguments, countless studies have concluded that in decisions about using force, democratic leaders pay close attention to public opinion (Mueller 1973; Russett 1990; Foyle 1999; Sobel 2001; Reiter and Stam 2002; Baum 2004; Holsti 2004; Baum and Potter 2008, 2015; Chapman 2011).

We hypothesize that, other factors equal, citizens in democracies that respect human rights are more reluctant to wage war against countries that honor human rights than against otherwise equivalent countries that violate human rights. Previous research has established that citizens support military action to stop human rights abuses, such as the systematic massacre of women and children (Kreps and Maxey 2018).² We propose, however, that human rights violations increase public support for war, even when the conflict centers on security issues, such as nuclear proliferation, rather than alleviating human suffering.

Information about human rights could sway opinions about war by affecting four key considerations in the minds of citizens: the level of external *threat*, the *morality* of using force, the predicted likelihood of *success*, and the *costs* of using force. As a first step toward developing these hypotheses, we clarify how the concept of human rights is logically and empirically distinct from democracy, and should, therefore, be investigated as a potentially independent contributor to peace. We then explain how human rights could affect public support for war by shifting expectations about each of the four inputs into the war calculus.

² Studies also show that citizens support economic sanctions to address human rights abuses; see Putnam and Shapiro 2017.

The Concepts of Human Rights and Democracy. Human rights are entitlements that belong to all humans, regardless of gender, race, religion, political orientation, or other individual characteristics. Scholars and policymakers continue to debate which rights should be included, but most agree that all humans have rights to physical security. This idea is enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), which stipulates that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (Article 3) and that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (Article 5).

The same idea animates the most prominent academic measures of respect for human rights. One measure, the CIRI physical integrity index, contains annual information about torture, political imprisonment, extrajudicial killing, and disappearance in countries around the world (Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay 2014). Another measure, the Political Terror Scale (PTS), quantifies how often people are imprisoned, tortured, or murdered because of their views (Wood and Gibney 2010; Gibney et al. 2017).

Democracy is conceptually distinct from human rights.³ Although democracy is a contested concept, nearly all scholars would agree that modern democracy requires elections in which the people choose their leaders by voting. This simple idea underpins the two most widely used measures of democracy in political science. The first measure classifies a country as democratic primarily on the basis of whether it holds contested elections (e.g. Przeworski et al. 2000; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). The second measure, Polity, is more complicated, but achieves its highest value when a country has competitive elections for the chief executive

³ This fact has spawned a significant literature on the empirical relationship between democracy and human rights, e.g., Davenport and Armstrong 2004; Davenport 2007.

(Marshall, Gurr, and Jagers 2017).

Importantly, these databases do not treat democratic elections as necessary conditions for human rights, or vice-versa. Accordingly, one can find many examples of democracies that violate human rights, and of autocracies with relatively good human rights records. The appendix shows the observed relationship between human rights and democracy for nearly all countries in the world from 1981 through 2010, using two different measures of human rights and two different measures of democracy. A large percentage of countries are either democratic but score poorly on human rights, or autocratic but show respect for physical integrity rights.

In the remainder of this section, we consider how human rights could affect public support for war. Previous research has highlighted four factors affecting public preferences about military conflict: perceptions of threat, morality, success, and cost. While much has been written about how democracy could affect these inputs into attitudes about war, surprisingly little research has examined how respect for human rights could affect the same considerations.

Threat Perception. The first input into support for war is perception of threat, or whether another state intends hostile actions. When individuals perceive that their country is threatened, they may support using military force for self-preservation (Jervis 1978; Kydd 2005). While citizens do not always agree about what constitutes a threat to the national interest (Jentleson 1992), the public is more likely to support military intervention when the country's security is at stake (Larson 1996).

How a country treats its own citizens could influence perceptions of whether the country is threatening internationally. The idea that governments treat foreign countries the same way they treat domestic citizens has, for example, been advanced as a potential explanation for the democratic peace. In democracies, political actors follow norms of bounded competition, in

which conflict resolution remains nonviolent (Dixon 1994). When democracies confront other democracies, they expect norms of bounded competition to govern the international relationship as well. Democracies therefore trust other democracies to negotiate rather than fight, reducing perceptions of threat (Doyle 1986; Maoz and Russett 1993; Russett 1993; Dixon 1994; Owen 1994; Risse-Kappen 1995; Russett and Oneal 2001).

A similar logic could apply to human rights. Caprioli and Trumbore (2003a, 380) propose that human rights violators will apply their violent domestic norms to foreign relations. They write: the “transfer of domestic norms to the international arena may be an important causal mechanism linking ... domestic discrimination and repression and state aggression.”⁴ Sobek, Abouharb, and Ingram (2006, 519) similarly contend that when countries that respect human rights interact abroad, “their basic norms of behavior will remain and generate relatively peaceful interactions.” Peterson and Graham (2011, 248) refer to this idea as the “normative transfer thesis.”⁵

Building on these arguments, we hypothesize that a country’s human rights record will affect foreign perceptions of whether the country is threatening. Citizens in countries that respect human rights should view governments that violate human rights as more threatening than governments that uphold human rights, because they expect human rights violators to transfer their violent domestic norms to the international arena.

These perceptions of threat, in turn, could make the public more willing to use military force against human rights abusers than against human rights upholders. To our knowledge, previous

⁴ See also Caprioli 2003; Caprioli and Trumbore 2006; Hudson et al. 2008.

⁵ Peterson and Graham (2011) find evidence for the normative transfer thesis, but also show that dyads with similar human rights are more peaceful than countries with dissimilar human rights.

research has not tested whether individuals in countries that respect human rights see human rights-abusing countries as more threatening, or assessed how those beliefs affect support for war. Our experimental approach complements previous observational work by measuring individual perceptions of threat, and by tracing the links from human rights to threat perception and support for war.

Morality. A growing body of scholarship asserts that moral values affect how the public thinks about foreign policy.⁶ Moral beliefs shape public preferences about using military force (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Liberman 2006; Stein *forthcoming*; Kertzer et al. 2014), and individuals often cite morality when explaining their views on military intervention (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999). Moral concerns also shape *how* countries fight wars, including decisions about using biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons (Price 1995; Tannenwald 1999) or engaging in torture (Nincic and Ramos 2011).

Previous research has established that humanitarian intervention is in part motivated by the moral desire to alleviate suffering (Finnemore 2004; Kreps and Maxey 2018). Little research, however, has examined how the human rights records of potential targets affect beliefs about the morality of using force for reasons other than humanitarian intervention. We argue that a state's human rights practices could shape foreign opinion about the morality of attacking it, even when a dispute concerns an issue other than human rights.

Countries with poor human rights records could invite war by reducing moral qualms about military intervention. When a country violates human rights, foreigners might conclude that the country has forfeited its rights to noninterference by failing to “authentically represent” its citizens (Doyle 1996, 1162). Even more strongly, human rights violations might inspire a moral

⁶ On norms and *elite* decision-making, see e.g. Herrmann and Shannon 2001; and Busby 2010.

duty to intervene. People have powerful moral reactions to wrongdoing and suffering, whether the suffering is inflicted by individuals or by states, and often believe that retribution against evildoers is morally justified (Lieberman 2006; Stein 2015). When two states face a conflict of interest and citizens learn that a foreign government is abusing its own citizens, this could heighten perceptions that the regime deserves to be punished.

We therefore hypothesize that citizens in human rights-respecting countries have a moral aversion to using force against other countries that uphold human rights. Importantly, this hypothesis differs from the mechanism described earlier, in which the opponent's domestic norms affect perceptions about military threats.

The Likelihood of Success and the Costs of Fighting. Finally, when thinking about military ventures, citizens typically consider the likelihood of success (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006) and the human and economic costs of fighting (Mueller 1973; Nincic and Nincic 1995). While scholars have debated the relative importance of success and costs, a large body of research suggests that, all else equal, the public is more likely to support using military force when it is confident in victory, expects few casualties, and anticipates little financial burden (Jentleson 1992; Gartner and Segura 1998; Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Gartner 2008; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Johns and Davies 2014; Flores-Macias and Kreps 2015).

How might perceptions of human rights affect calculations of cost and success? We anticipate countervailing effects. On the one hand, observers might expect that countries that respect human rights would be reluctant and restrained adversaries because of their normative prohibitions against violence. This could lower the anticipated costs of fighting a country that upholds human rights, and raise expectations that striking the country would be successful. On the other hand, respect for human rights could raise perceptions of cost and lower expectations of

success: a government that respects human rights could, for example, enjoy widespread support from its own citizens, allowing it to fight more effectively (Reiter and Stam 2002), and striking a country that respects human rights could hurt relations with other countries and cause allies to defect. Our experiments measure the net effect of these countervailing possibilities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To study whether and why human rights affect public opinion about war, we administered a series of survey experiments. The first experiment was fielded by YouGov, an internet-based polling firm, to a nationally representative sample of 1,430 US adults in October 2012. We began by telling participants: “We are going to describe a situation the United States could face in the future. For scientific validity the situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. Please read the details very carefully.”

Respondents then received a vignette about a country that was developing nuclear weapons. We chose the topic of nuclear proliferation not only for comparability with previous research about the effect of democracy on preferences about war (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013), but also to see how human rights affect public preferences in a policy domain that is not directly related to the treatment of citizens.⁷

The vignette said: “A country is developing nuclear weapons and will have its first nuclear

⁷ Our nuclear scenario could be seen as a hard test for hypotheses about the effects of human rights. In anarchy, people often assume the worst about countries that are acquiring powerful weapons (Jervis 1978; Mearsheimer 2001). This would depress the effect of human rights on support for war, relative to scenarios with lower stakes.

bomb within six months. The country could then use its missiles to launch nuclear attacks against any country in the world.” Participants were told that the country did not have high levels of trade with the U.S, that the country had not signed a military alliance with the US, and that the country’s conventional military strength was half the US level. We mentioned these factors to prevent assumptions about alliances, trade, and power from confounding the effects of our randomized treatments.

We then randomly assigned information about the human rights practices of the potential adversary. We told some respondents that “The country does not violate human rights; it does not imprison or torture its citizens because of their beliefs,” while telling others that “The country violates human rights; it imprisons or tortures some of its citizens because of their beliefs.” Our descriptions emphasized physical integrity rights, not only because of their centrality in the political science literature, but also because of their logical relevance to norms about the use of military force.

We independently randomized the regime type of the potential adversary. Some respondents learned that “The country is a democracy. The president, the legislature, and local councils are elected by the people.” Others read “The country is not a democracy. The people do not have the power to choose the leader.” By presenting democracy as a system in which people elect their leaders, we maintained a distinction between human rights and democracy.

Our 2×2 design offers several advantages. By independently randomizing human rights and democracy, we can estimate how information about human rights affects support for war not only on average, but also when the target is democratic versus autocratic. We can also assess whether electoral democracy and respect for human rights interact to produce an especially peaceful environment, above and beyond adding the separate effects of the two factors.

The scenario concluded with several points that were identical for everyone. Respondents were told that “the country’s motives remain unclear, but if it builds nuclear weapons, it will have the power to blackmail or destroy other countries.” Additionally, they learned that the country had “refused all requests to stop its nuclear weapons program.” Finally, the scenario explained that “by attacking the country’s nuclear development sites now,” the US could “prevent the country from making any nuclear weapons.”

After presenting this information, we asked whether respondents would favor or oppose using the US armed forces to attack the nuclear development sites. We also included questions to measure perceptions of threat, morality, cost, and success, with the goal of shedding light on causal mechanisms. The text of the questionnaire is provided in the appendix.

FINDINGS

Effect of Human Rights on Support for War. To estimate the effect of human rights on US support for war, we expressed our key randomized treatment, *human rights*, as a dummy variable that was 1 if the country respected human rights and 0 if it did not. We confirmed that these two groups were balanced with respect to our other randomized treatment, democracy, as well as demographic and attitudinal variables that could affect support for war.⁸ Finally, we constructed

⁸ The appendix describes how we measured demographics (gender, race, age, and educational attainment) and attitudinal variables (militarism, internationalism, conservatism, ethnocentrism, and religiosity). For the attitudinal variables, we coded responses to relevant survey questions such that larger values indicated greater support for militarism, internationalism, conservatism, ethnocentrism, or religion; standardized each item to have a mean of zero and a variance of one; and took the average of the standardized items.

a binary dependent variable that was coded 100 if the respondent thought the US military should attack and 0 otherwise. This operationalization conveniently allows us to interpret the average treatment effect as the percentage change in public support for a military strike as a result of learning that the country respected human rights.

Table 1 presents estimates from three linear regression models.⁹ All three models show that information about human rights profoundly affected US support for war. Column 1 contains the results of a simple bivariate regression model. When the country in our scenario respected human rights, Americans were on average 16.9 percentage points less likely to support a military strike. This reflects a shift in support from 57% when the country violated human rights to 40% when the country respected its citizens.

Column 2 confirms that our conclusions did not change when we introduced control variables. Other factors equal, support for military strikes was higher among militaristic, internationalist, and ethnocentric respondents, but lower among white respondents and those with higher levels of education. Nevertheless, the effect of human rights remained approximately the same. Column 2 also reveals that democracy independently reduced support for military action (-14.1 points).¹⁰

⁹ We use linear regression for ease of interpretation. Our conclusions remained the same when we estimated probit regressions or modeled support for war as a five-point scale from strongly oppose to strongly support. See the appendix.

¹⁰ These estimates corroborate Tomz and Weeks (2013), who found that democracy reduced support for war by 11.4% in the U.S. and 13.3% in the U.K. The effects of democracy were smaller in Johns and Davies (2012), perhaps due to differences in scenarios and methodologies.

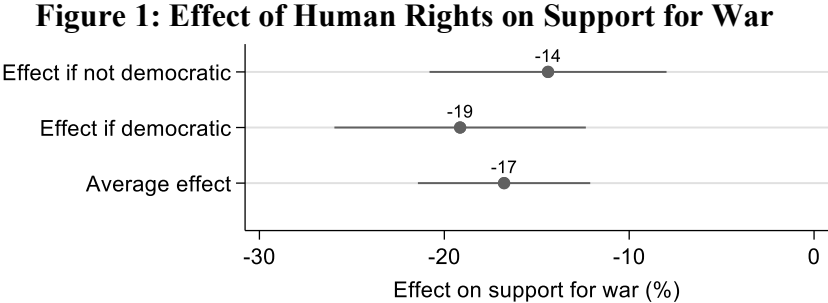
Table 1: Regression Estimates of Support for War

Variable	Model		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatments			
Human rights	-16.9 ** (2.6)	-16.7 ** (2.4)	-14.4 ** (3.3)
Democracy		-14.1 ** (2.4)	-11.9 ** (3.3)
Human rights × Democracy			-4.8 (4.8)
Controls			
Militarism		18.4 ** (2.2)	18.5 ** (2.2)
Internationalism		3.8 ** (1.3)	3.7 ** (1.3)
Conservatism		-1.6 (2.3)	-1.6 (2.3)
Ethnocentrism		11.5 ** (2.6)	11.6 ** (2.6)
Religiosity		1.1 (1.6)	1.1 (1.6)
Male		1.9 (2.5)	2.0 (2.5)
White		-6.7 * (3.1)	-6.8 * (3.1)
Age/100		-8.4 (8.0)	-8.5 (8.0)
Education		-12.0 ** (3.8)	-12.1 ** (3.8)
Intercept	57.2 ** (1.8)	77.5 ** (4.8)	76.5 ** (4.9)

Note: Estimated coefficients and robust standard errors. $N=1,430$. * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$.

Finally, to test whether the effect of human rights was conditional on the level of democracy, we introduced an interaction term in Column 3. The interaction was statistically insignificant, implying that human rights proved equally consequential whether or not the country featured democratic institutions. The additive effects of human rights and democracy were, however, substantial: support for attacking a non-democracy that violated human rights was 31 points higher than for striking a democracy that respected human rights.

Using the estimates from Column 3, we plotted the conditional and average effects of human rights, with 95% confidence intervals. Figure 1 shows that when the country was not a democracy, respect for human rights lowered support for war by approximately 14 percentage points. When the country was democratic, respect for human rights dampened support for war by about 19 points. The difference between these two effects was statistically insignificant. Thus, for the remainder of the analysis we focus on the average effect of human rights, which was about 17 percentage points.



In summary, our study provides strong experimental evidence about the effect of human rights on public attitudes toward war. Our data show that respecting human rights contributes to peace, regardless of regime type.

Effects of Human Rights on the Mediators. Why do human rights affect support for war? We measured four mediators that could contribute to the relationship: perceptions of threat, morality, success, and cost. To measure perceptions of threat, we asked respondents to rate the likelihood that each of the following four events would occur if the US did not attack: the country would threaten to use nuclear weapons against another country; threaten to use them against the US or a US ally; launch a nuclear attack against another country; and launch a nuclear attack against the US or a US ally. Respondents chose from five options: almost no chance, 25% chance, 50–50 chance, 75% chance, or nearly 100% certain. We scaled each response from 0 (almost no chance) to 100 (nearly certain) and computed the mean of all four.

We also measured beliefs about morality. Having presented the vignette, we asked respondents whether the US had a strong a moral obligation, a weak moral obligation, or no moral obligation to attack the country's nuclear development sites. We further inquired whether it would be morally wrong for the US military to attack. We combined both items into a morality index, which ranged from 0 (immoral to strike) to 100 (moral to strike).

We elicited beliefs about success by asking: if the US does attack, what are the chances that it will prevent the country from making nuclear weapons in the near future, and also in the long run? Our success index was the mean of these two items, each running from 0 (almost no chance) to 100 (nearly certain). Finally, we measured cost on a scale from 0 to 100 by averaging expectations that a US attack would prompt each of the following outcomes: the country would respond by attacking the US or US ally; the US military would suffer many casualties; the US economy would suffer; and US relations with other countries would suffer.

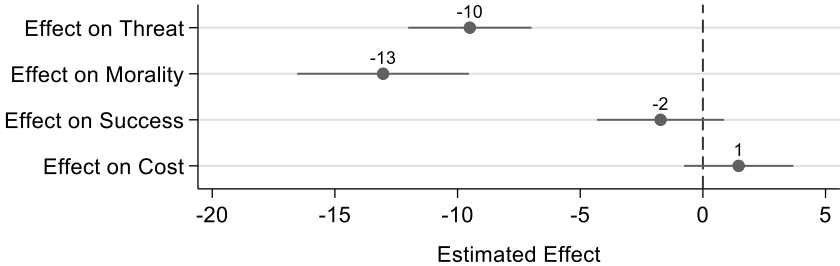
Figure 2 displays the average effect of respect for human rights on perceptions of threat, morality, success, and cost.¹¹ On average, countries that respected human rights were seen as markedly less threatening than countries that violated human rights. Human rights also affected perceptions of morality; Figure 2 shows that the perceived morality of military action was much lower when the country respected human rights than when it abused its citizens.

In contrast, information about human rights did not significantly affect perceptions of success and cost. Respondents were slightly less optimistic about the probability of success when the target respected human rights, and slightly more likely to anticipate that striking rights-abiding

¹¹ The focus on average effects is justified: human rights exerted a consistent effect on each mediator, regardless of whether the target was a democracy or an autocracy. See appendix.

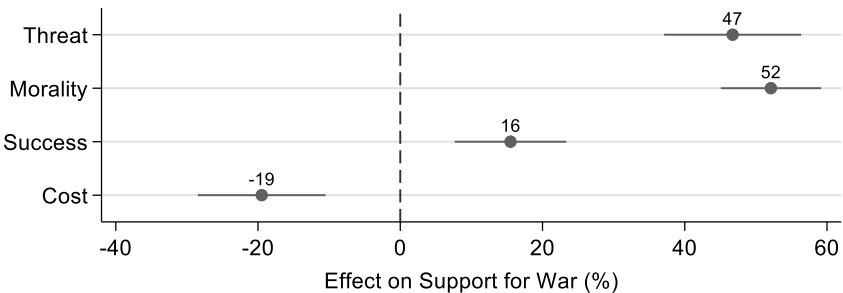
countries would entail higher costs, but the effects were small and statistically insignificant.

Figure 2: Effect of Human Rights on Four Mediators



Effects of the Mediators on Support for War. After estimating how human rights affected perceptions of threat, morality, success, and costs, we investigated how those four mediators affected support for war. Given that our survey asked about the mediators instead of randomizing them, we needed to control for variables that could confound the relationship between the mediators and support for war. Hence, we regressed support for a military attack on all four mediators, while controlling for the randomized treatments and myriad attributes of the respondent: militarism, internationalism, conservatism, ethnocentrism, religiosity, gender, race, age, and level of education. The appendix presents the regression. Here, we display the main findings graphically.

Figure 3: Effects of Four Mediators on Support for War

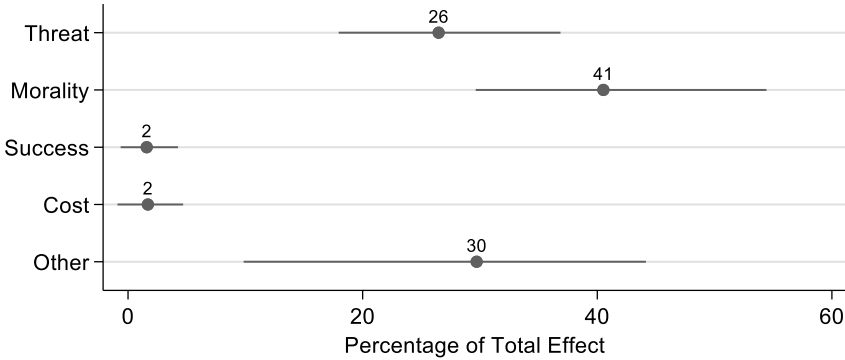


As Figure 3 shows, all four mediators were potent predictors of support for a military strike. To quantify the importance of each mediator, we calculated how support for war would change if

we increased each mediator from its minimum value of 0 to its maximum value of 100, holding other variables constant. The estimated effects of threat, morality, success, and cost were 47%, 52%, 16%, and -19%, respectively.

Estimated Causal Pathways. We have estimated the effects of human rights on each mediator, and the effect of each mediator on support for war. By joining these parts of the causal chain, we can see how perceptions of threat, morality, success, and cost mediated the relationship between our main experimental treatment—human rights—and public support for war. We calculated the strength of each pathway using the product of coefficients method.¹² To calculate the proportion of the treatment effect explained by each mediator, we multiplied the effect of the treatment on the mediator by the effect of the mediator on support for war, and then divided by the total treatment effect. Figure 4 shows the results of these calculations with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4: Causal Mechanisms as a Percentage of Total Effect of Human Rights



Recall that respect for human rights reduced support for a military strike by 17 percentage points, on average. Figure 4 shows that about 26% of that effect arose because human rights changed perceptions of threat, and another 41% arose because human rights altered perceptions

¹² Baron and Kenny 1986. The appendix shows that our conclusions remained the same when we instead applied the Imai et al. (2011) potential-outcomes framework to non-linear probit models.

of morality. The mediatory roles of cost and success were much weaker; each accounted for less than 2% of the total. Together, threat and morality mediated more than two-thirds of the total effect, whereas perceptions of cost and success played no significant role in the causal chain.¹³ To summarize, human rights promoted peace mainly by influencing beliefs about threat and morality, rather than changing perceptions about cost and success. One should not conclude, however, that citizens were insensitive to the costs of fighting and the probability of success. On the contrary, respondents were significantly less enthusiastic about military action when they believed that strikes would be costly or unsuccessful (Figure 3). The reason that cost and success did not mediate the effects of human rights is that respect for citizens had only a negligible effect on perceptions of costs and success (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION AND EXTENSIONS

Having found that Americans were less willing to attack countries that respect human rights, we now consider several questions about our findings.

Political Consequences. One set of questions involves the political significance of the effects we found. First, were the effects large enough to be politically consequential? We believe so. In our experiments, human rights reduced overall willingness to strike by about 17 percentage points. Shifts of that magnitude could change the nature of political debate, because leaders of democracies rarely go to war without public support (Reiter and Stam 2002).

The swings in opinion were even larger among the most politically engaged segments of the

¹³ The appendix shows that democracy affected support for war via the same mechanisms: by altering perceptions of threat and morality, rather than costs and success. These findings are consistent with prior experimental work about the effect of democracy (Tomz and Weeks 2013).

population. We examined the opinions of politically attentive citizens, who followed government and public affairs most of the time (57% of the sample). Within this group, human rights reduced enthusiasm for war by 19 percentage points, versus 14 points among citizens who were less politically aware. Human rights also mattered for citizens who engaged in concrete political acts such as attending meetings, putting up political signs, donating money, working for campaigns, or running for office. Among this group (45% of the sample), the effect of human rights was 19 points. Finally, upholding human rights mattered to voters. The pacifying effect of human rights was 17 points among respondents who said they voted in the 2008 election (81% of the sample). Thus, respect for citizens mattered for the people who were most likely to follow politics.

Public Beliefs about Human Rights. Our experiment revealed that information about a government’s behavior toward its citizens profoundly influenced support for a military strike. While support for war need not be based on accurate information, one might wonder what Americans currently believe about the human rights practices of countries, given that beliefs about human rights affect support for war.

We therefore designed a survey to gauge American perceptions of the human rights records of 57 countries.¹⁴ Survey Sampling International administered the survey in April 2017 to a diverse sample of 2,051 American adults. The survey began by telling subjects, “Some countries almost never kill, torture, or imprison their own citizens because of their beliefs. Other countries very often kill, torture, or imprison their own citizens because of their beliefs. And, of course, there are countries in between. On the next few pages, we would like your opinions about several

¹⁴ For details about how we chose these 57 countries and assigned them to respondents, see the appendix. We did not provide respondents with incentives for correct responses.

countries.... We will ask how often—in your opinion—the governments of those countries kill, torture, or imprison their own citizens because of their beliefs.”

Each subject rated 13 countries. For each country, we displayed a map of the country’s region and explained, “The map below shows the country of [Country], which is located in [Region]. Over the past 10 years, how often do you think the government of [Country] has killed, tortured, or imprisoned its own citizens because of their beliefs?” Respondents chose among four options: “Almost Never,” “Sometimes,” “Often,” and “Very Often.”

Figure 5 shows the correspondence between Americans’ perceptions and objective measures of human rights, as measured by each country’s Latent Human Rights Protection (LHRP) score, which combines information from 13 of the most prominent indicators of respect for physical integrity rights (Schnakenberg and Fariss 2014).¹⁵ The correlation between American perceptions and LHRP scores was an impressive .80. Moreover, the correlation proved strong whether a subject identified as a Democrat ($\rho=.81$), Republican ($\rho=.77$), or Independent ($\rho=.80$, see the appendix). Thus, on average, American beliefs about the human rights records of other countries closely paralleled expert measures.

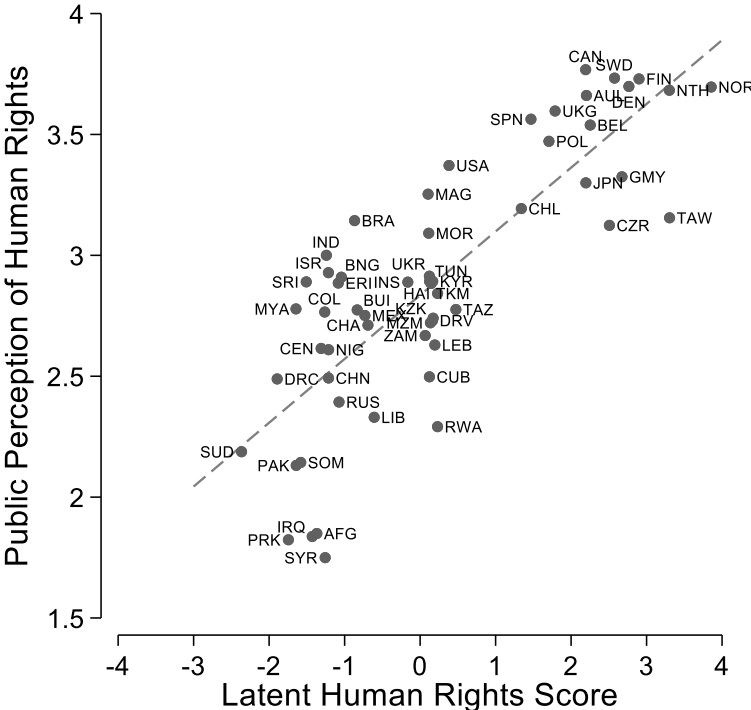
Despite the close link between American perceptions and true human rights records, it is possible that political elites might attempt to deceive the public in an effort to mobilize support for (or against) a military strike.¹⁶ A leader advocating war could try to portray a potential target as a human rights pariah, while a leader favoring peace might try to whitewash a country’s record of abuse. If leaders could dupe citizens in this way, this might weaken the link between a country’s

¹⁵ We used the average scores for the years 2006-2014 for comparability with our survey, which asked about perceptions of human rights in “the last ten years.” See appendix for further details.

¹⁶ On elite cues, see for example Berinsky 2009 and Gelpi 2010.

true human rights record and public support for military action.

Figure 5: American Perceptions of Human Rights



We are, however, skeptical that attempts to deceive would be effective enough to sever the connection between human rights and support for war. Our survey revealed that American beliefs about human rights closely tracked reality; our sample distinguished countries with strong human rights records from those that fail to honor physical integrity rights. These prior beliefs anchor public perceptions, making it difficult for elites to persuade citizens that a country that respects human rights is actually a human rights abuser, and vice versa.

Second, in democracies, free speech, freedom of the press, and political competition limit the extent to which leaders can get away with making fallacious claims about human rights in other nations. Non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch regularly report on human rights, and allegations of abuse are often publicized in the news. Moreover, domestic political opponents would have incentives to question the credibility

of leaders who try to deceive the public. Thus, while leaders might be able to influence public perceptions of human rights at the margins, it is unlikely that they could trick the public into thinking that governments that torture and imprison their own citizens are models of respect for human rights, and vice versa.

Real and Hypothetical Scenarios. Another set of questions concerns the hypothetical nature of our scenario. We told respondents, “For scientific validity the situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today.” We purposefully avoided naming countries because we wanted to learn about the general effects of human rights, rather than impressions of particular countries or leaders. Had we asked respondents to compare real countries, we would have lost experimental control, since countries differ on many dimensions other than our two randomized treatments, human rights and democracy.¹⁷

Although we had scientific reasons for keeping the scenario hypothetical, some readers might wonder whether people would have responded differently to situations involving real countries. Fortunately, previous research has gone a long way toward allaying these concerns. Scholars have found little difference in public reactions to hypothetical versus real scenarios, and to generic versus actual countries (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Gartner 2008; Berinsky 2009, 124; Horowitz and Levendusky 2011).

Other readers might worry that participants interpreted our hypothetical scenario as referring to Iran and North Korea. We therefore replicated our main experiment but stipulated that the country pursuing nuclear weapons was in Africa. We administered the Africa experiment in

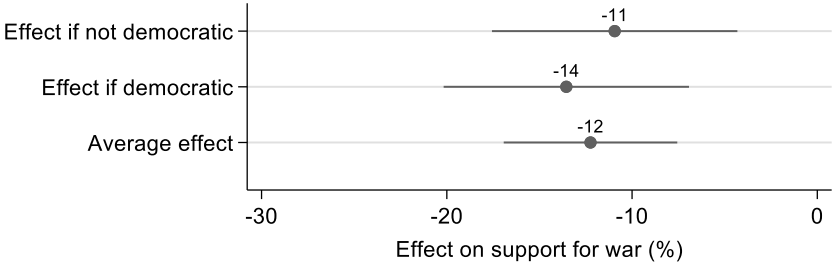
¹⁷ For this reason, nearly all experiments about audience costs have employed hypothetical scenarios. See Kertzer and Brutger 2016 for an overview of this large experimental literature.

October 2012 to a diverse sample of 763 US adults, whom we recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk. The appendix shows that, when the target was in Africa, human rights reduced public support for war by an average of 24 points. Moreover, as in our main study, the impact of human rights did not depend on democracy.

Effects in Other Countries. Finally, readers might wonder whether our findings would hold if we ran similar experiments in other countries. As a step toward answering this question, we replicated our original experiment in the United Kingdom, with minor wording changes to reflect the British context. The UK experiment was fielded in March 2014 to 1,450 adults, who were recruited by Survey Sampling International.

Figure 6 summarizes the effects of human rights on public opinion in the UK. When the country was not a democracy, human rights sapped British support for war by 11 points. When the country was a democracy, the effect was 14 points. On average, the human rights treatment reduced British support for war by 12 percentage points. Thus, in Britain as in the United States, we found strong micro-level evidence for a human rights peace.

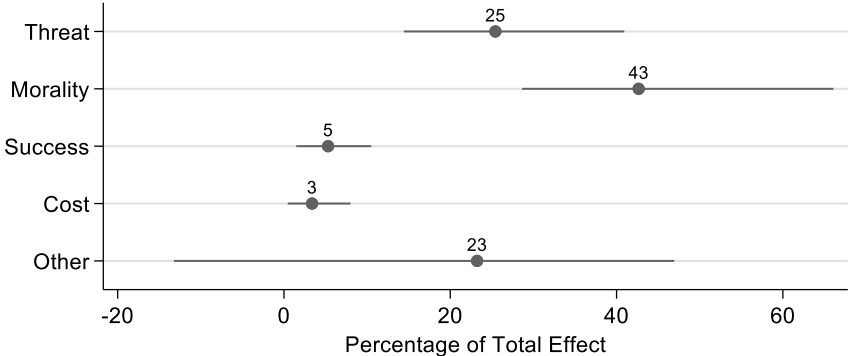
Figure 6: Effect of Human Rights on British Support for War



By what mechanisms did these effects arise? Using the same procedures we employed for the United States, we decomposed the effects of human rights into four mechanisms: threat, morality, success, and cost. As Figure 7 shows, human rights exerted 25% of its effect on British opinion by changing perceptions of threat, and an additional 43% by altering perceptions of

morality. Beliefs about success and cost played comparatively minor roles, each accounting for only 3-5% of the total. These patterns closely resemble what we uncovered in the United States.

Figure 7: Causal Mechanisms in the UK, as a Percentage of Total Effect



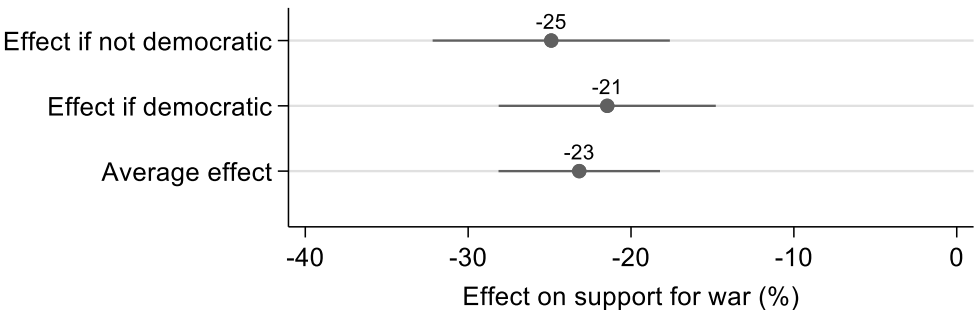
One might wonder whether findings from the US and the UK generalize to other democracies. For example, residents of other democracies might have different conceptions of human rights. Previous research allays this concern, however. An analysis of 55 countries found a consistently strong relationship between public perceptions about respect for human rights in their own country, and expert measures of physical integrity rights in those same countries (Carlson and Listhaug 2007). Thus, the perception that physical integrity rights constitute human rights violations is not unique to the US and the UK. Nevertheless, future research could apply our experimental approach to other countries, and to other types of human rights, including economic and social rights.

Effects in Other Contexts. Finally, to test the effects of human rights in other contexts, we developed a new experiment that differed from our previous ones in four ways. First, in place of nuclear weapons, we described a country that was developing conventional ballistic missiles that could strike other countries in its neighborhood. Second, we randomly located the country in a specific geographic region. Third, we lengthened the time to weapons acquisition from six months to one year. Finally, we portrayed the country as much weaker than the United States.

The new scenario said: “A country in [region] is developing ballistic missiles, which will become operational within a year. The missiles, which will carry conventional explosives, could be used to attack other countries in [region],” where region was Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or South America. We also explained that “The country’s military is much weaker than the U.S. military.” As in our earlier studies, we independently randomized human rights and democracy, and provided non-randomized information about military alliances and trade. We administered the experiment to 1,211 U.S. adults, who were recruited by Lucid in April 2018. We then analyzed the data using the same procedures we had employed for earlier experiments.¹⁸

Figure 8 summarizes the average effects of human rights. Support for military action was 23 percentage points lower when the country respected human rights than when it violated human rights. Moreover, the effect of human rights was similar, regardless of whether the country was democratic (21%) or not (25%). As the appendix shows, the effect of human rights did not vary significantly by region, either. Finally, when we tested for causal mechanisms, we found that human rights affected support for war by changing perceptions of threat and morality, but not by altering predictions about the cost of war or its likelihood of success (see the appendix).

Figure 8: Effect of Human Rights in the Ballistic Missile Scenario



¹⁸ For details about the sample and statistical analyses, see the appendix.

Thus, the ballistic missile experiment replicated the findings from our previous studies. Respect for human rights powerfully affected support for war, despite changes in the nature of the military threat, the geographic region, and the power of the potential adversary. In addition to boosting confidence in the generality of our findings, the experiment speaks to a growing literature about the spread of missile technologies. More than thirty countries have ballistic missiles, which exert important effects on interstate conflict (Mettler and Reiter 2013). We find that domestic audiences are far more willing to take military action to stop the spread of ballistic missiles when the country seeking missiles also violates human rights.

CONCLUSION

Is there a relationship between respect for human rights and public support for war, and if so, why? In this article, we used survey experiments to address these important questions. Our experiments revealed that citizens in the United States and the United Kingdom were substantially more willing to use military force against countries that violate human rights than against otherwise identical countries that respect their citizens. The effect of human rights was independent of the effect of institutional democracy.

Our experiments also revealed *why* human rights affect public support for war. People viewed the nuclear programs of human rights violators as more threatening than those of otherwise identical countries that respected human rights. They also had fewer moral objections to attacking human rights abusers and felt a greater moral obligation to intervene. Those perceptions, in turn, motivated support for war. Taken together, threat perception and moral considerations explained about two-thirds of the relationship between the target's human rights record and willingness to strike. Thus, our experiments helped distinguish between possible mechanisms, while highlighting the often-overlooked role of morality in international affairs.

These findings may provide behavioral foundations for the historical correlation between human rights and peace. By randomizing the human rights records of governments, we gain confidence that the apparent relationship is causal and arises partly because the human rights practices of countries affect perceptions about threat and morality. Our findings also imply that, in the run up to war, politicians have incentives to cite the adversary's human rights violations in an attempt to galvanize public support for military action (Tokdemir and Mark 2018).

Our results raise many questions about the relationship between human rights and international relations. We studied aggregate public responses to human rights, but reactions could vary across individuals. Scholars have documented real heterogeneity in individual support for human rights (McFarland 2015). Building on this foundation, future research could study how individual attitudes toward authoritarianism, social dominance, dispositional empathy, and cosmopolitanism moderate responses to the human rights record of a potential adversary.¹⁹

Second, our experiments focused on physical integrity rights, but scholars have found that other kinds of human rights violations could increase the risk of interstate violence (e.g. Caprioli and Trumbore 2003b; Hudson et al. 2008; Saiya 2015). Future research could assess whether citizens are more supportive of military strikes against foreign countries that discriminate on the grounds of ethnicity, race, gender, religion, or income.

Third, we explored the effects of human rights in the context of nuclear proliferation and conventional ballistic missiles, but nations quarrel over other issues, as well. Future research could investigate whether respect for human rights has a pacifying effect when nations disagree over other matters, such as territory, economic relations, or support for terrorist organizations.

Fourth, our research focused on the US and the UK, showing that the effect of human rights

¹⁹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

on public support for war was remarkably similar in these two countries. Scholars could assess whether the relationship differs in autocratic countries, nonwestern democracies, and democracies that regularly violate human rights, and whether other country-level characteristics moderate how the effect of human rights. Finally, future research could probe the mechanisms in more detail, by gathering additional evidence about threat perceptions and moral considerations.

Our findings also have important implications for policy. In recent years, scholars have found that tools such as international agreements can improve how states treat their citizens.²⁰ Moreover, pressure by nongovernmental organizations appears to reduce the abuse of citizens under some conditions (Murdie and Davis 2012). The evidence in this article suggests that promoting human rights may not only have direct humanitarian consequences, but may also have indirect consequences by being a force for international peace. Advocates of human rights could point to our finding that treating citizens justly can have significant national security benefits. Governments that protect human rights are met with greater international trust and restraint, even on a policy issue as fraught as nuclear proliferation. Importantly, human rights appear to matter whether or not the country also holds democratic elections. Thus, respecting human rights at home could be an important, and independent, path to peace abroad.

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²⁰ e.g. Hafner-Burton 2009; Simmons 2009; Conrad and Ritter 2013.

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