

Introduction

The term “human rights” implies a universality of fundamental human dignities, but we know that this is not the case. Perceptions of human rights vary across countries, time, and demographics.

There is some literature on the gap between concepts and its application. According to the principle-implementation gap, peoples’ attitudes towards abstract principles are more favorable than towards specific policies (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007). If this is true, then we should see a decrease in support for the human rights when they are asked about in terms of specific policy as compared to in the abstract. If we do see different levels of support for human rights, we want to know what causes it.

In the United States, citizens’ attitudes are heavily influenced by ideology. While conservatives believe that private citizens are the most effective vehicles of growth and innovation, despite whatever social inequalities they might produce, liberals believe that federal government is an instrument that should be used to achieve a standard of equality (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). Historically, conservative views have aligned with the Republican Party and liberal views with the Democratic Party. So while the principle-implementation gap may explain why members of both parties may agree on a fundamental human right in the abstract, when it comes to specific policy, partisanship may prove to be a significant force in determining shifts in attitude.

Question & Hypothesis

- Does partisanship impact willingness to support human rights in terms of specific policy in addition to human rights in the abstract?
- Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to change their minds between human rights in the abstract and human rights in terms of specific policy.

References

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Acknowledgments

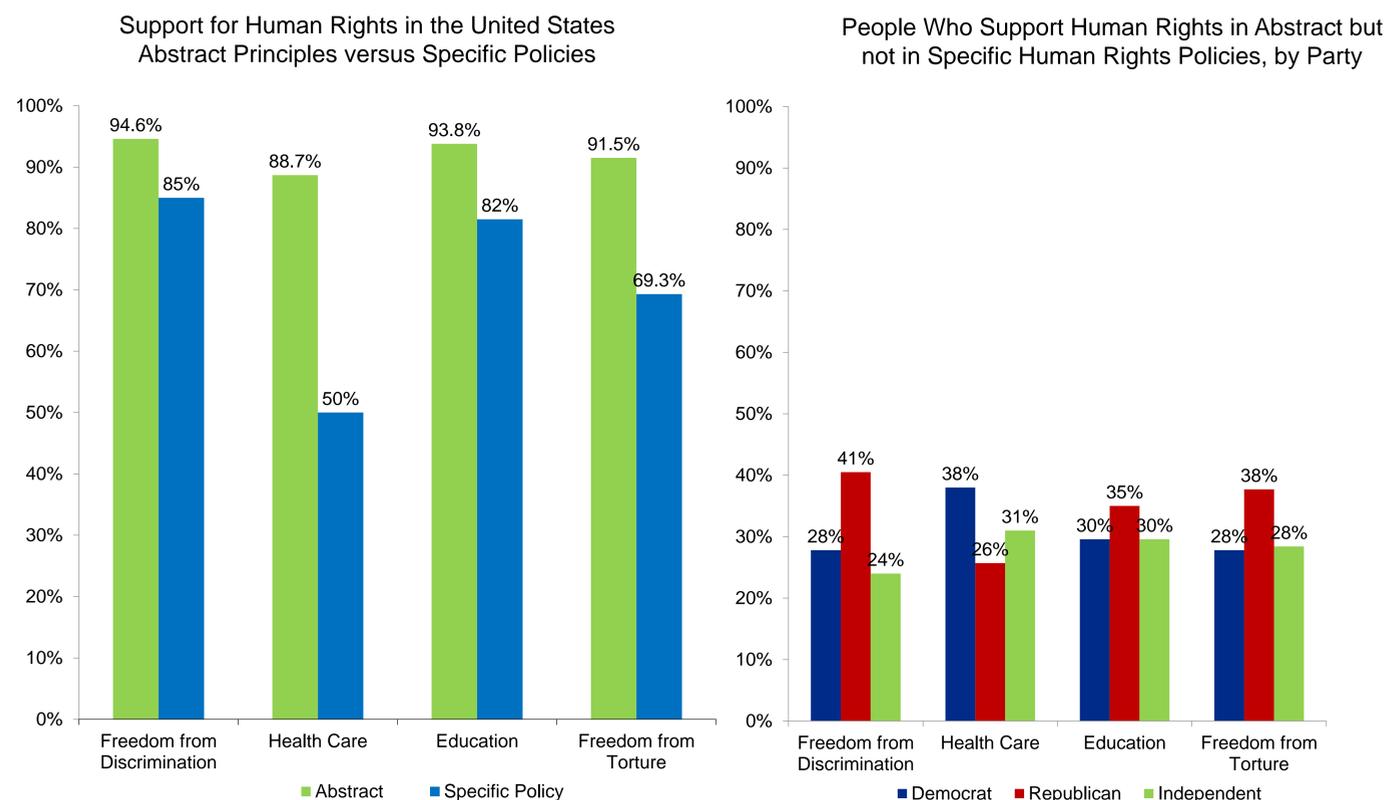
Dr. Paul Herrson, Kathleen Weldon, Malaena Taylor, and the Alan R. Bennet Fund.

Data and Methods

Using the Roper Center for Public Opinion archive, the data for this project came from the Opportunity Agenda Poll “Human Rights in the United States” (June, 2007). Surveyed a national adult sample of 1,633 with an oversampling of Asian Americans over the telephone, and was weighed for representativeness.

| Abstract | Specific Policy |
|---|--|
| Should equal opportunities regardless of race be considered a human right or not? | When the police stop and search people solely based on their race or ethnicity they are violating their human rights. Agree/Disagree |
| Should access to health care be considered a human right or not? | The human rights of illegal immigrants in the U.S are violated when they are denied access to medical care. Agree/Disagree |
| Should equal access to quality public education be considered a human right or not? | Lack of quality education for children in poor communities is a violation of the human right to education. Agree/Disagree |
| Should freedom from torture or abuse by law enforcement be considered a human right or not? | The U.S torturing prisoners suspected of terrorism is a violation of the prisoners’ human rights. Agree/Disagree |

- Created two discrete variables as response options-- support or oppose
- Created one new variable for each right that included support/opposition for the right in the abstract and for specific policy
- Ran crosstabs of each new variable by ideology
 - People fell into 1 of 4 categories: Support the right in both the abstract and specific, support the right only in the abstract, oppose the right only in the abstract, and oppose the right in both the abstract and specific.



Results

The data showed less support for human rights in terms of specific policy as compared to support for human rights in the abstract across every right, regardless of partisanship. The extent of this difference varied, however, depending on the right. The largest difference in support was among freedom from torture and access to health care as human rights where 22.2% and 38.7% fewer people believed that each should be a human right in terms of specific policy, respectively. This is relatively high compared to the difference in support for freedom from discrimination based on race (9%) and access to basic education (11.8%).

When analyzing which political party accounted for the greatest proportion of the differences in support, the data showed that it was Republicans across every right except for the right of access to health care. Republicans accounted for 13% more of the difference in support for freedom from discrimination during stop & search than Democrats, 5% more for access to basic education for poor children, and 10% more for freedom from torture. For health care, where Democrats accounted for more of the difference, 12% more of the people who answered differently about specific policy were Democrats.

Conclusions

The findings generally supported the principle-implementation gap theory as seen by the consistent difference in support for a human right when it was phrased in terms of a specific policy. This may be a result of two things: either respondents simply did not make the connection between a human right in the abstract and its specific policy counterpart, or respondents changed their minds in the case of specific policies and feel like it is justifiable to infringe on human rights in some cases. Since the questions were not explicitly asked in such a way that gave the respondents an opportunity to answer the abstract question a second time, it is impossible to tell from the data which explanation accounts for the lower levels of support for human rights in specific policy compared to higher levels of support for human rights in the abstract.

The use of controversial groups in the specific policies may explain the different sizes of variation among the rights. For health care, it was illegal immigrants and for torture, it was suspected terrorists. While theoretically a human right should extend to every human regardless of citizenship or crime, it is possible that biases towards these groups impacted support for policies that protected their human rights. In contrast, the groups that would benefit from the specific policies for education and freedom from discrimination were far less controversial—children and people of all races and ethnicities.

In terms of partisanship, long-standing, fundamental ideological differences can explain why Republicans were more likely to shift support away from human rights when put in terms of specific, government-regulated policies. The definition of something as a right implies a federal responsibility to protect it, and this government intervention is fundamentally in conflict with Republican ideals.