

# Respect for human rights is improving

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By ignoring how the collection of data on political repression changes over time, human rights watchers may be misjudging reports that seem to show respect for human rights has not been improving, according to a Penn State political scientist.

Many political scientists and sociologists believe that allegations of [human rights](#) abuses drawn from sources such as the U.S. State Department and Amnesty International over the past few decades show that attention to human rights is stagnating, said Christopher Fariss, assistant professor of political science. However, a new measurement model of the data, which recognizes the changes in how that information is collected and categorized, indicates that the human rights climate is actually improving.

"By allowing the standard of accountability to vary with time, a new picture emerges of improving respect for human rights over time," Fariss said. Since the end of the Cold War there are not only more [human rights groups](#), but these human rights monitors are allowed better access to countries and areas that were previously off-limits, Fariss said. As more groups were granted access, the representatives could gather more information about alleged abuses.

The reports also contain larger quantities of information. For example, the word count of the torture section for the country of Guatemala went from 329 words in 1981 to 3,669 in 2001, according to Fariss, who reports his findings in the current online version of *American Political Science Review*. The classification of data that researchers collect has

also changed. Before, monitors were concerned with collecting data on serious abuses, such as large-scale mass killings and disappearances, Fariss said. However, monitors are now including other forms of repression, such as police brutality and the use of the death penalty, in their assessments.

"It's very difficult to compare the types of repression that were recorded in previous decades with what the monitors are collecting today," said Fariss. "For instance, we weren't talking about police brutality in these reports a few decades ago."

Fariss said a better way to measure political oppression is to use a new measurement model, which accounts for and modifies the standards of accountability over time, rather than the current model, which does not reflect any changes in accountability.

The failure to account for these variations when gathering information over time can lead to problems with making effective policies to counter repression.

Based on the current method of analyzing human rights statistics, for example, policy makers could make the assumption that acceptance of the UN Convention Against Torture, a policy that attempts to prevent torture and inhuman punishment around the world, did not curb repression. However, data from the new measurement model shows that it has been effective, Fariss said.

"The numbers would seem to show that the treaty has had no effect, or a negative one and is acting as a cover for regimes that are engaging in abuse," Fariss said. "However, data from the new model, show that countries that ratified the treaty are doing better than countries that haven't."

Over the last decade, political scientists have debated whether or not human rights practices have been stagnating, as the uncorrected data seem to indicate.

"Many researchers take the fact that there is a stagnating respect for human rights as a given," Fariss said. "Qualitative researchers, though, for the most part, have been more skeptical that respect for human rights has declined and the data from the new measurement model corroborates this alternative view."

Despite the good news on human rights respect, more work needs to be done.

"Though respect for human rights have been improving on average, it's important to recognize that improvements across countries are uneven," said Fariss. "There is a still a lot of critical work that needs to be done in order to improve human rights on the ground in places like Sri Lanka, Egypt, Ukraine, Venezuela and overlooked areas of the globe such as Western Sahara and Dagestan."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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