

Changing Standards or Political Whim? Evaluating Changes in the Content of the US State Department Human Rights Reports*

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Abstract

Since the late 1970s, the US State Department's annual country reports on human rights practices have served as source of information for evaluating US diplomacy and aid decisions toward other states. They also represent one of the principal data sources for multiple widely used quantitative human rights measures. Despite the frequency with which these indicators are used, human rights scholars have rarely considered the extent to which the information included in the source data varies over time or across different administrations. In this paper, we therefore examine how changes in presidential administrations influence the content of the reports. Using automated text analysis techniques, we compare the content of each titled section (e.g. physical integrity rights, civil liberties, etc.) of the reports across each administration change between 1981 and 2017. Our results indicate that while the attention given to physical integrity rights varies little across administrations, attention to other human rights issues—particularly discrimination and societal abuse—varies substantially in response to changes in administration. Most concerning, we find that the transitions from Barack Obama to Donald Trump corresponds to a systematic decline in attention to multiple human rights issues.

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