

What Matters When Writing Wrongs: Evolution of the U.S. State Department Human Rights Reports

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Abstract

The State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices have been published for nearly every country in the world since 1976, however, the reports from then differ drastically from the reports being published more recently. Reports have expanded not only in detail of the abuses covered but also in the breadth of topics and subject matter. While older reports focused almost exclusively on state-sponsored violence, the reports have evolved to include deprivation of rights by non-state actors through violence such as hate crimes or domestic violence. This paper argues that the presence and length of sections relating to specific societal groups, as well as the level of detail and length of the reports overall, are shaped by a combination of differing foreign policy goals of presidential administrations and political parties, shifts in funding to the State Department, and changing international human rights norms. Evidence is found that all three of these factors have influenced the content of the reports and explain changes from year to year.

1. Introduction

In early 2018, it was revealed that the Trump Administration had ordered the State Department to pare back language relating to racial, ethnic, and sexual discrimination in the department's yearly Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, as well as stripping sections relating to family planning.¹ While these sections are considered a staple in more recent reports, they were not always included in the reports. In fact, the earliest reports had little to say on the topic of any societal groups, instead focusing entirely on the political rights in a country and human rights violations perpetrated by state actors. While the Trump administration's changes came with substantial backlash and news coverage, it is unclear whether such changes are simply par for the course and consistent with other shifts in the reports from administration to administration or if something different is at play.

First established in 1976, the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices have evolved over the years into comprehensive reports on the human rights practices of countries and territories. The reports now not only cover state-sponsored violence but also deprivation of rights by societal actors through violence such as hate crimes or domestic violence. This being said, the reports can vary greatly in detail and content from year to year. Looking at the report for a country in 1977 and comparing it to a report from 2018, the differences are substantial. More recent reports have a much larger focus on violence carried out by non-state actors such as hate crimes against minority populations or domestic violence, taking these abuses into account for an overall picture of the human rights situation in a country. The reports also go in-depth on topics such as press freedoms, prison conditions, and workers' rights. In particular, entirely new sections of the report have evolved over the years, creating more permanent placeholders for information on populations such as LGBTI persons, racial or ethnic minorities, or persons with HIV/AIDS for example. A question arises as to how these sections, now to be expected in every report, came to be, when they began to appear in the reports, and what the possible motivations for the initial introduction of each section was. Was there a larger international push for increased recognition of abuses against specific vulnerable populations, or were there domestic factors influencing how the United States wished to signal its human rights focuses to the rest of the world? Overall,

I seek to answer this question: How have the State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices changed since first issued in 1977, and why did these changes occur?

This question is extremely important not only for the implications on supposedly consistent human rights overviews in the reports themselves, but also for the implications that changes may then have on measures that utilize the reports to assess states' human rights practices. As I will discuss in my review of the literature, a number of different projects use the State Department's human rights reports in order to produce quantitative measures of human rights. If the reports are changing significantly over time and the same rules are being used on to code reports from 1977 to 2017, then changes in structure, content, and detail of the reports would need to be taken into account to avoid higher scores arising from an increase of information rather than an increase in human rights violations.

In this paper, I begin by briefly exploring the history of the reports and reviewing the current literature on the reports and human rights measurement arising from them, and then run a series of regressions to determine whether my concepts of interest can explain major changes to the reports. I argue that a combination of differing foreign policy goals, changes in State Department budget, and shifting international norms are causes of significant changes to the reports over the years. I find that budget and changing international norms are positively correlated to the length and content of the reports. Administration and party effects on the content of the reports vary.

2. Background on the Human Rights Reports

The U.S. State Department Reports on Human Rights Practices were first established through a 1976 amendment to section 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, with the initial reports for 1976 being published in 1977. Intended to be objective evaluations of the human rights situations in countries receiving U.S. aid, Congress tasked the State Department with creating the yearly reports. An evaluation of the first years of reporting by Howard Warshawsky in 1980 reveals that the initial response of the State Department to the reporting requirements was not necessarily positive. Instead, the requirements were seen as “useless, inappropriate, time consuming, and possibly disruptive of good relations with states that would become targets of human rights advocates.”² A lack of clear instruction from Congress on what exactly was to be included in the reports and an initial lack of an adequate data base made the first reports disappointingly briefer than had been expected.³ The result was the creation of the Country Reports Project Office, consisting of a foreign service officer, an intern, and a secretary. This office was tasked with overseeing the process of producing the reports and creating a clearer set of guidelines for style, content, and deadlines. Although the office lasted only through the production of the 1977 reports, the reporting process became much more efficient following the establishment of specific guidelines and a clearer understanding of the topics intended to be covered.⁴

By the late 1980s, questions were raised of whether the reports issued by the State Department were, in fact, unbiased, and whether they were being prepared accurately. The General Accounting Office (now the Government Accountability Office), directed by Congress, then examined the human rights reporting practices being used, and concluded that the reports for El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Philippines during this time had “excused these governments from responsibility for abuses based on their promises of corrective action.”⁵ A 2001 paper by Poe, Carey, and Vazquez also found evidence of bias in the reports, including reports that favored U.S. allies and trading partners.⁶ In addition, they concluded that based on their data, there is the possibility that the ideologies of presidents may have influenced the information in the reports through the bureaucracies under their administration.

In the following years, the reports continued to grow, both through the expansion of information being covered within the reports and the offices tasked with producing them. While there were a total of twenty professional human rights staff in the State Department by the end of the Carter Administration in 1980, this number grew to more than 100 staff in the Human Rights Bureau in the next twenty years. With this increase in staff came an increased capacity and level of resources that is clearly reflected in later reports.⁷ The reports expanded in their degree of coverage, expanding from the original limited number of countries covered in 1976 to cover nearly all UN member countries by 1980. They also expanded to cover a much greater range of internationally recognized human rights beyond the right to the physical integrity of the person, such as women's rights and labor rights.⁸

3. Literature Review

A number of studies in recent years have sought to determine whether changes to the production of the reports as outlined above were creating bias in scores for standards-based measurements such as the Political Terror Scale (PTS) and Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Data Project (CIRI). These studies also seek to explain why human rights

practices have remained stagnant, despite the spread of practices and monitoring that would seem to indicate otherwise. A 2014 paper by Christopher Fariss uses an analysis of the State Department reports and Amnesty International reports to argue that it is a changing standard of accountability that is biasing the reports, as “monitors look harder for abuse, look in more places for abuse, and classify more acts as abuse.”⁹ As a result, year to year comparison of the reports brings about the appearance of worsening human rights standards due to the inclusion of new abuses and a greater availability of data that was not included in past reports. Similarly, Ann Marie Clark and Kathryn Sikkink use the same reports to argue that changes in the quality and availability of information can make it appear that conditions are actually worsening rather than improving.¹⁰ For example, the definition of what may be considered torture within the reports has expanded over the years, resulting in more content in the reports but not necessarily any more abuses than there were previously. Additionally, in 2018, Kristine Eck and Christopher Fariss note that the transparency of governments can greatly influence the information that is provided for monitoring agencies, making it much more difficult to compare the resulting reports across countries.¹¹ Governments that are more transparent ultimately end up with more information on abuses to be reported, while less transparent governments are not necessarily committing fewer abuses but are simply not revealing them to the same degree.

In response to these critiques, David Richards argues that the use of word counts and total report lengths are not appropriate measures for an aggregated physical integrity rights index, as they take into account the entire report rather than the sections pertinent to the measure.¹² Specifically, when looking at CIRI scores, Richards finds that the scores were actually declining in recent years in conjunction with longer State Department reports, rather than the higher scores that would be expected from the conclusions of previous studies. He also concludes that the variance in the length of full country entries is not the result of substantial additions in the sections used for CIRI, but rather the incorporation of new sections addressing new human rights concerns such as “Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity” and “HIV and AIDS Social Stigma.”

A working paper by Peter Haschke, Mark Gibney, and Daniel Arnon also finds that from 1999 to 2015 State Department reports have actually changed very little in terms of length, both with respect to the full reports, as well as Section 1, “Respect for the Physical Integrity of the Person”, specifically.¹³ While China's report could clearly be distinguished from Liechtenstein's based on word count, the same could not be said for distinguishing reports for the same country over multiple years. While aggregate report length is a strong predictor for PTS scores and has remained consistently so over the time period being studied, marginal variations in report length on a country basis from year to year do not have a strong effect on the scores given, with a 1,000 word increase in full report length having only an average of a 0.09 increase of the PTS score on a 1 to 5 scale.

Given that the reports have seen the addition of numerous sections over the years, there is also the question of the significance of these sections for human rights measures in the context of this debate. With the development of newer sections in the reports focusing on vulnerable populations such as women and children, another measure has also been created by Linda Cornett, Peter Haschke, and Mark Gibney, the Societal Violence Scale (SVS).¹⁴ The SVS also uses the State Department reports, focusing on physical integrity abuses by non-state actors including individuals, corporate actors, and armed groups. Initial data from the project appears to show that the majority of countries reported on in the human rights reports have serious problems with violence against women and children by both individual and corporate perpetrators. Moreover, the data suggest that “the neglect of societal violence in measures of human rights abuses grossly underestimates the degree of human insecurity worldwide and deprives us of the tools to address these abuses.”¹⁵ Although the sections predominately addressing violence by societal actors are not the focus of studies such as those mentioned previously, their concerns about information effects and changing standards of accountability could still prove important for measures such as the SVS relying on different sections of the reports.

4. Factors Influencing the Human Rights Reports

There are a number of factors that could be influencing the presence of sections relating to various populations, as well as the level of detail and length of the reports overall and of individual sections. A multitude of influences come into play over the years when considering the composition of the reports and the circumstances they were produced under. Three influences that I will be considering are changing international human rights norms, different presidential administrations with differing foreign policy goals, and the funding allotted to the State Department in each fiscal year budget. I argue that a combination of these factors from year to year could have a profound effect on the consistency of the reports.

4.1. Presidential Administrations and Foreign Policy Goals

Different presidential administrations, and thus the State Department under the administration's direction, will have different foreign policy goals that they are focusing on, resulting in varying degrees of attention to issues of human rights. Poe, Carey, and Vazquez conclude that it is possible that the ideological orientation of presidents influenced the information included in the reports.¹⁶ While the reports are intended to be a consistent account of the human rights situations in countries, it is entirely possible that political motives and policy whims may have a hand in the production of the reports. An example of this is the apparent influence of the Trump administration on the reports published in 2017, which shortened sections dealing with discrimination against women and reproductive rights, and racial, ethnic, and sexual discrimination.¹⁷ While it is now considered normal, even expected, for states to pursue human rights issues as part of their foreign policy, “the questions have become what should be included in a country's human rights foreign policy, where should it be pursued, and how aggressively.”¹⁸ Different administrations could have varying answers to these types of questions, which would in turn color the type of content that is then directed, either publicly or privately, to be included or not included in reports for any given year.

While human rights as a consideration of foreign policy became largely institutionalized during the Carter administration, less can be said for the sections of the report that appeared after.¹⁹ Subsections such as those in Section 6 of more recent reports, titled “Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons” developed over numerous years and multiple administrations, suggesting decisions along the way by different administrations on what new issues should be given consideration. Where there are differences in length and level of detail between reports produced during different administrations, we can expect to see variation largely originating from sections addressing the human rights situations of particular populations such as women, children, or minority groups. Significant differences in the reports from administration to administration would indicate an underlying political influence in reports, whether it be through the addition of new information or the removal of such.

***Hypothesis 1:** Although reports will stay relatively similar from year to year, we will see variation in the reports from administration to administration due to differing foreign policy goals of presidential administrations.*

4.2. Resources Available for Producing the Reports

The early beginnings of the Human Rights Reports showed how a lack of resources and manpower had a significantly detrimental effect on the department's ability to create satisfactory reports. Especially at the start, when the office tasked with producing the reports was exceptionally understaffed for the task at hand, the office was barely able to keep up with congressional initiatives regarding human rights, let alone dream up their own initiatives beyond what was explicitly directed.²⁰ In particular, Clark and Sikkink note that “personnel, available sources, and resources devoted to any given country from time to time” create variation in the resulting coverage of the reports, variations that are especially apparent in the earlier reports.²¹

If funding is cut from the State Department for any given fiscal year, it follows that the department may then have trouble producing the reports to the same standards of previous years, or keeping up with the pace of development if the reports show to increase in detail from year to year. With less funding comes less manpower available to produce the reports and collect the vast amounts of data and information required for each individual report. Even when prior reports can be used as templates and connections are in place with existing NGOs and government sources in order to collect the data, limiting the resources available for producing the reports can still impact the result. The same could also be said for any increases in funding from one year to another--if more resources are available, those tasked with producing the reports may be able to expand on the reports in terms of detail and topics covered, allowing the reports to evolve at a faster pace. The sheer resources available will then determine how much detail and information overall will be included in the reports.

***Hypothesis 2:** When there is a decrease in funding to the State Department, significant positive changes in the reports will be less likely and the reports will be less detailed than in years where funding increases or remains the same.*

4.3. Changing International Human Rights Norms

Over the years, the human rights reports have evolved both in the types of human rights violations that are counted as well as what these violations entail. For example, the concept of “political killings” has expanded from the large-scale killing of political opponents to excessive lethal force by police, or killings of political opponents by private actors

with impunity, resulting from changing international norms on what “political killings” actually means.²² Similarly, we can expect that as international human rights norms relating to other concepts change, these changes will also be reflected in the content of the reports. One possible way to measure shifting international human rights norms, particularly as relating to newer sections in the human rights reports such as women and children, is by looking at the introduction of new international human rights treaties addressing these populations. As new international human rights norms develop in forms such as new treaties, monitors could be pushed to further look for information related to such treaties and then include this information in their reports. For example, although the United States has signed but not ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it is worth looking into whether this treaty had an effect on the reports. Evolution of the types of abuses that staff are seeking to include in the reports will, in turn, represent an increase in reports overall, even if reporting in previously established subsections remains the same.

***Hypothesis 3:** As support for an international human rights treaty pertaining to a particular population increases, indicating shifting international norms, then information pertaining to these groups will become more prevalent in the reports.*

5. Research Approach

In order to test these hypotheses, I will be looking at all individual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, from 1977 to 2017. This amounts to a total of 7467 observations. Since I will be looking at each report that has been published, my unit of analysis is the report-year.ⁱ For example, a single unit of observation would be Australia's report for 1984. While I am ultimately looking at the aggregate data for years of reports, there is variation even within years themselves. A report for China likely varies drastically from a report for Saint Lucia in the same year. The same also goes for variation from year to year even for the same country, dependent on what has happened during any given year. While some variables such as presidential administration or State Department funding may stay relatively constant over years, others such information pertaining to specific word counts or frequency of particular terms in the reports vary from country to country and year to year.

Table 1: Aggregate Summary Statistics for Overall Word Counts

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Std.Dev.
Words in Full Report	7467	276	42661	6407.7	4934	5023.7

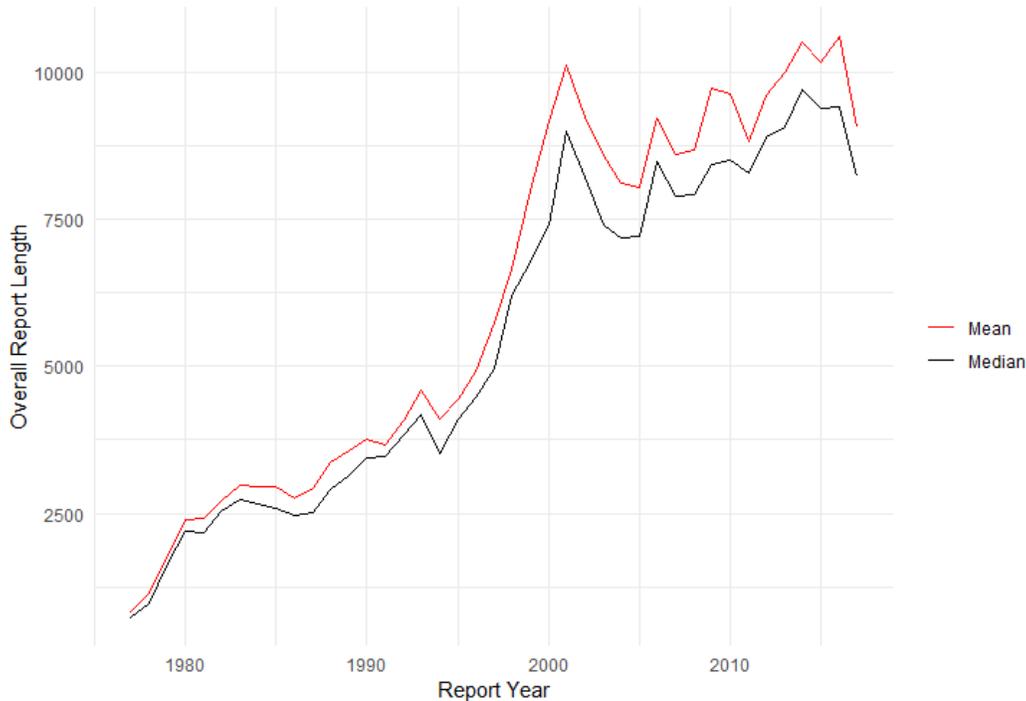


Figure 1: Mean and Median Overall Report Length in Words for Each Year

Figure 1: This figure shows the progression of the mean and median overall report length from year to year.

Table 1 shows the summary statistics for the full report word counts, including the number of observations considered. While the shortest report was a mere 276 words long, the longest was a staggering 42,661 words long. Additionally, the mean report length was 6,408 words, however, the standard deviation was 5024, likely a result of the large difference between the lengths of earlier reports compared to current reports. Figure 1 then shows the mean and median overall report length in words for each reporting year.

5.1. Level of Detail and Information in the Reports

The level of detail given on human rights violations in the reports varies from year to year. More description and examples of abuses would create a more comprehensive report. While political killings may have been considered in previous years, if the report provides more detail and explicit examples of such for a country, then reports would be longer as a result of the extra information, but the level of abuses would not necessarily have changed.²³ The length of the reports can in this way serve as an indicator of the level of detail that is being included in the report, and measure one aspect of the way that the reports are changing. The way that I will be measuring the changes in length for each of the reports will be through the overall word counts of individual report-year observations.

5.2. Breadth of Information in the Reports

In order to truly account for other possible changes occurring from the independent variables, I will be also looking at the breadth of the information that is being covered. While length can serve as an indicator of shifts in how the reports are produced, the level of detail in the reports is only one aspect of what this is measuring. New topics or sections being introduced to the reports would also result in an increase in the length of the reports and needs to be accounted for. The breadth of the reports can be best measured through the new topics that have been added to the reports that were not included previously. The addition of new sections and abuses of interest to the reports will expand the reports overall but will not necessarily indicate a greater level of attention to previously considered abuses. The addition of sections pertaining to abuses against women, for example, would be expanding the breadth of abuses the report is covering. If numerous different sections and topics have been standardized and added to the reports year after

year, then it follows that of course the reports would appear longer than ever before. In order to capture the expanding breadth of the reports, I will be using the length in word count of the section pertaining predominantly to societal abuses (“Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons” in the more recent reports) for each report-year observation. Although the name of this section in the reports varies from year to year, I will be referring to such sections as the “societal section” throughout the rest of this paper. Table 2 shows the summary statistics of these societal section word counts, which range from 0, where not present at all in the earliest reports, to 12,109 words. I will also be looking at the frequencies of the terms “Women”, “Children”, and “Disabilities” in the reports. These terms all correspond then to the three specific core international human rights conventions I am considering for changing human rights norms. The progression of mean frequency of these terms in the reports over the years can be seen in Figure 2.

Table 2: Aggregate Summary Statistics for Societal Section Word Counts

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Std.Dev.
Words in Societal Section	7261	0	12109	1508.8	1056	1413.4

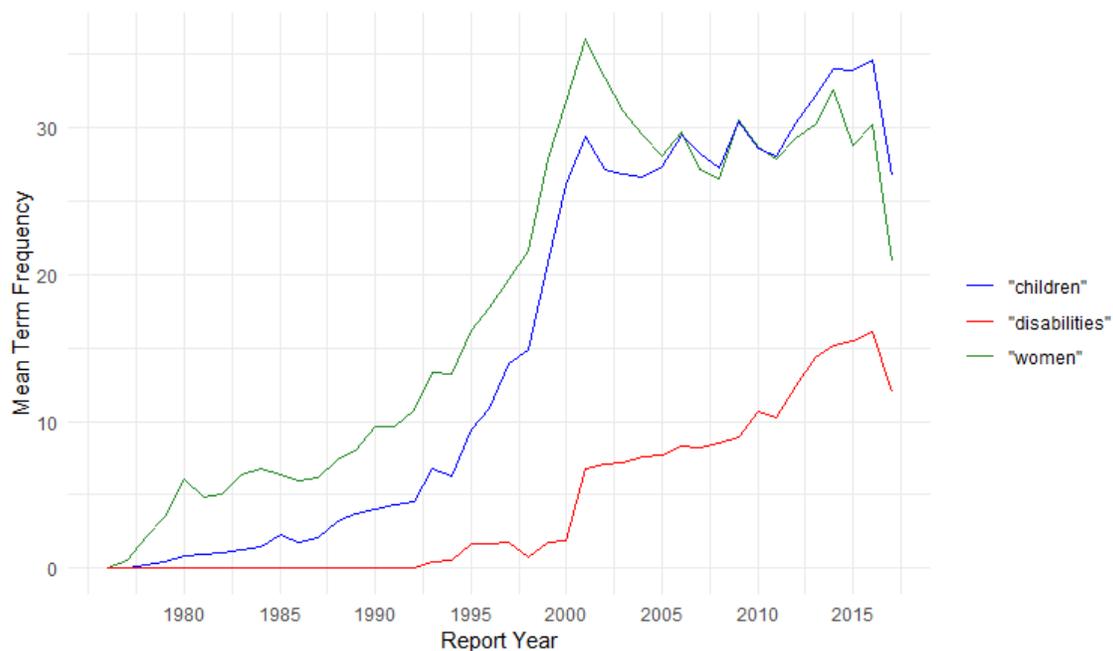


Figure 2: Mean Frequency of Terms for Each Report Year

Figure 2: This figure shows the mean frequency of the terms “women”, “children”, and “disabilities” for each report year from 1976 through 2017

5.3. Presidential Administration and Political Party

Although the reports are produced by every presidential administration, administrations may differ in how they treat the reports. Policy goals of the president would be passed down to the State Department, and thus could lead to changes in the reports over the years. An administration that is more favorable to human rights reporting and includes human rights more heavily in its foreign policy decisions may take the production of the reports more seriously or expand the scope of the reports by adding in coverage on new topics or sections. The same could also work in reverse, where an administration less favorable to human rights and with a smaller emphasis on human rights in foreign policy decisions may not expand the reports at all, or even take steps to scale back the reports, either in level of detail or scope.

In order to measure possible differing foreign policy goals between administrations, I will be using the indicator variables of presidential administration responsible for producing the reports for that year and political party of this administration. While this will not account for any particular goals that these presidents and their administrations may

have, it would be able to indicate whether there are any significant changes between administrations, or likewise whether Democrat or Republican administrations have consistent effects on the reports.

5.4. Support for Human Rights Conventions

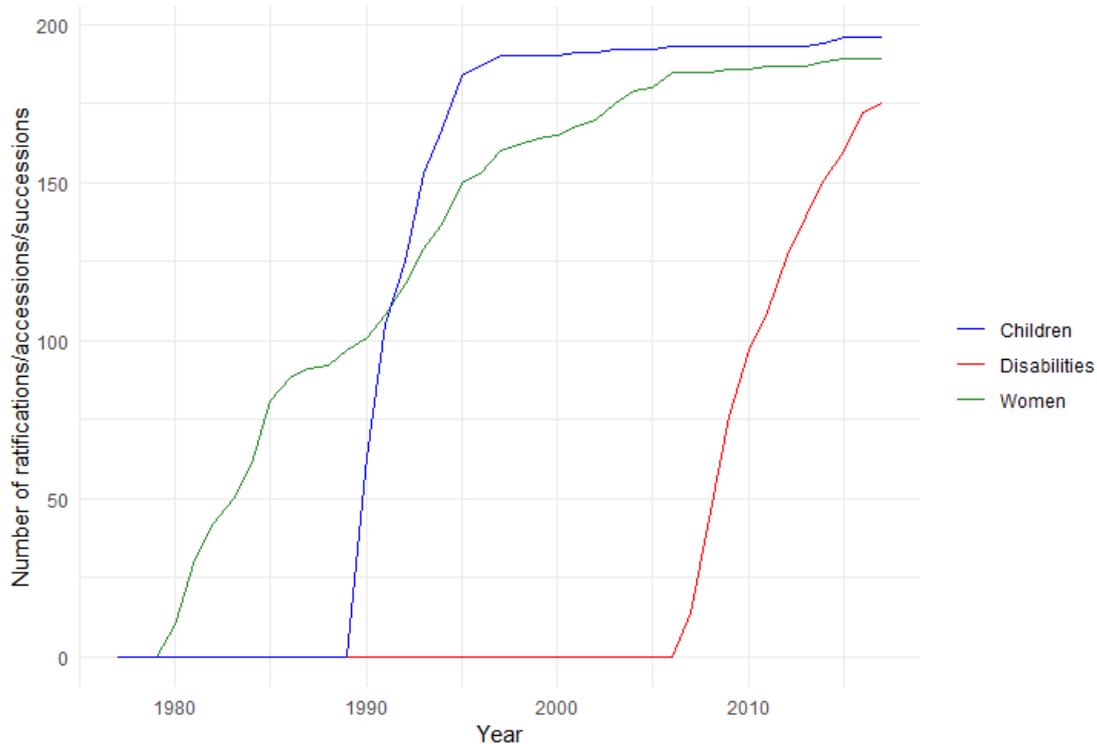


Figure 3: Number of Ratifications/Accessions/Successions to Treaties

Figure 3: This figure shows the cumulative number of ratifications, accessions, and successions to the three international human rights treaties that I am considering. Children is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Disabilities is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Women is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

If a new form of abuse is becoming more recognized as a human rights abuse within the international community, then the State Department may be pushed to include such abuses in the reports if they were not present previously. As such, I am considering changing international human rights norms to be not only the introduction of some new idea about human rights into the discourse but also the level of support this new idea has gathered. A measure of changing international norms regarding particular groups could be international human rights treaties, and specifically the level of international support that these treaties have as measured by the cumulative number ratifications, accessions, and successions to the treaties each year. A number of the prominent sections that have been added over the years have pertained to specific subsections of society that are uniquely targeted. These groups include women, children, and persons with disabilities. Of the core international human rights instruments, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Convention on the Rights of Child, and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities all were established after the creation of the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. The number of countries that have ratified these documents may, in fact, be correlated to the references to these populations from year to year or have prompted the introduction of such information in the first place. The growth in these numbers from 1977 to 2017 are shown in Figure 3.

5.5. Budget of the State Department

While producing the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices is only one of many tasks of the State Department, the overall resources available to the State Department would indicate how well the department is functioning overall and any sort of effect this could have on the reports. If the department is struggling overall in any given year, it is unlikely that a significant amount of attention will be able to be given to the reports, so we would be unlikely to see any major changes or additions during that year. Instead, the reports would likely stay within the guidelines that have already been established or even be rolled back to provide even less information.

The reports are dependent on the manpower and resources necessary to gather all of the extensive data needed to put together comprehensive reports. The fiscal year budget of the State Department would provide some indication of how well the department is able to function in any given year. A decrease in funding from one year to the next may be reflected in the attention and detail that is able to be afforded to the reports, while an increase in funding may allow for more staffers to work on the reports, and increase the quality of the reports or an expansion of the topics included. The percentage of discretionary budget authority for each fiscal year by department is available publicly online, beginning in 1976.ⁱⁱ This percentage for the State Department for the year that each report was produced will serve as an indication of how well funded the State Department was for that year compared to other government agencies.

5.6. Control Variable

Due to the nature of the reports, the length of the reports will vary greatly depending on whether there are major conflicts occurring a country. A country in civil conflict, for example, will likely have a significantly longer report overall than a country with no major conflicts. As a result, I will be using the Political Terror Scale scores as a control for the severity of state-sponsored violence in the reports influencing the length beyond simply what information is being counted.²⁴ The Political Terror Scale uses the State Department human rights reports to code countries on a 5-point scale where 1 is the best score and 5 is the worst.

6. Analysis

In order to analyze each of my hypotheses, I ran linear regressions for each combination of variables and report lengths. In the first, I looked at the effects of political parties and specific presidential administrations on the length of the reports, as well as the ratio of societal section length to the overall report length for each administration. Then I looked at the support for different international human rights treaties and the frequency of terms related to each treaty within the reports. Lastly, I look at the effect of the discretionary budget authority of the State Department in a given year with regards to the length of the reports.

6.1. Differing Foreign Policy Goals

In looking at differing foreign policy goals and the effects these may have on overall report lengths and the length of the societal section, I ran a linear regression for these lengths against political party and presidential administration, controlling for PTS scores in both.

Table 3: Regression Results of Political Party on Overall and Societal Section Lengths

	Overall Length	Societal Section Length
Republican	-1,312.5*** (104.2)	-550.3*** (33.7)
PTS	1,986.6*** (45.3)	254.0*** (14.6)
Constant	2,526.4*** (130.0)	1,233.7*** (42.0)
Observations	6,675	6,531
R ²	0.235	0.079
Adjusted R ²	0.235	0.078

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. Reported are the linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. This summary shows the linear regression between political administrations tasked with producing the reports and the resulting overall report length and societal section length. The constant in this model is Democratic administrations.

Table 3 shows the regression results of linear regression for administration political party and overall report length, and party and societal section length. The estimates shown in Table 3 show that Republican administrations reduce the overall length of the report by 1,313 words, and the length of the societal section by 550 words. Given the mean and median lengths of the societal section as seen in Table 2 and the constant coefficient of 2,526 words for the Democrat effect, a negative effect of 550 fewer words is quite a significant impact on the societal sections.

Table 4: Regression of Political Administrations on Overall and Societal Section Length

	Overall Length	Societal Section Length
Bill Clinton	-3.837.4*** (123.2)	-1,718.6*** (36.2)
Donald Trump	-920.0*** (247.4)	-927.6*** (71.8)
George H.W. Bush	-6,058.6*** (156.6)	-2,473.6*** (45.5)
George W. Bush	-1,024.1*** (122.5)	-703.4*** (35.8)
Jimmy Carter	-7,665.2*** (170.0)	-2,890.0*** (49.3)
Ronald Reagan	-6,825.7*** (126.3)	-2,467.5*** (37.0)
PTS	1,780.6*** (34.8)	183.0*** (10.2)
Constant	5,720.9*** (119.8)	2,522.6*** (34.9)
Observations	6,675	6,531
R ²	0.554	0.557
Adjusted R ²	0.554	0.557

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. Reported are the linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. These regression results show the effect of different presidential administrations on the overall and societal section lengths of the reports. The constant is representative of the Obama administration.

Table 4 then shows the regression results of the effect of individual presidential administrations on the lengths. The coefficients for each president indicate an increasing length of reports over the years, but with varying paces of increase between them. The only administration to stray from this pattern is the Trump administration. Instead of keeping in line with the sequential effects of administrations as seen in Table 4, the Trump administration instead has a negative effect on the reports compared to both Obama and Bush administrations before. This could potentially be a result of the single year of reports able to be considered so far for the Trump administration, while the Obama and Bush administration each have 8 years worth of reports to draw data from, however the effect as it stands is still interesting to consider. This result would be consistent with the idea that Trump's foreign policy goals include making human rights a lower priority.²⁵

More generally, the effects show that although the reports appear to increase in length over the years, there is a difference from administration to administration on how drastic the changes are, and where those changes are present. Looking at the differences in overall length and societal section length, some administrations have much stronger effects on the societal section than others. As the societal section is counted as a component of the overall length, differences in the societal section are contributing to the differences in overall length too. For example, the Bush administration has a coefficient of -1,024 words on the overall length as compared to the Obama coefficient, and an additionally strong effect of -703 on the societal section. Similarly, the Trump administration depressed the length of the full report by an average of 1,100 words, and by an average of 984 words in the societal section. Overall, it seems that the changes from administration to administration are represented in both the overall report length and the societal section length, with some presidents having more of an effect on the societal section than others. In order to further look at the impact of the administrations on the societal section in particular, I then took the ratio of the societal section length to the full report length. This ratio represents the emphasis on the societal section within the full report. If the societal section is consistently a relatively significant proportion of the report overall, it can be inferred that more emphasis was put on this section than other areas of the report.

Table 5: Regression of Presidential Administrations and Ratio of Length of Societal Section to Overall Report Length

	Ratio
Bill Clinton	-0.098*** (0.003)
Donald Trump	-0.070*** (0.007)
George H.W. Bush	-0.175*** (0.004)
George W. Bush	-0.046*** (0.003)
Jimmy Carter	-0.312*** (0.004)
Ronald Reagan	-0.132*** (0.003)
Constant	0.312*** (0.002)
Observations	7,261
R ²	0.461
Adjusted R ²	0.460

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. Reported are the linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. These regression results show the relationship between presidential administrations and the ratio of the societal section length and the full report length. The constant in this model is the Obama administration.

The results, as shown in Table 5, are also quite similar, except the ratio of the societal section relative to the overall report also dropped lower during George H. W. Bush's administration than it has been during the Reagan administration before. The Trump administration also has a shorter societal section relative to the overall report than either the Obama administration or the Bush administration, as was previously seen.

These results are consistent with my theory that different parties and administrations will have differing foreign policy goals that then color how their years of reports are produced. Not only do different administrations and parties in power result in varying degrees of change to the overall length of the reports, these also result in variations to the length of sections relating to societal groups and the proportion of the length of these sections relative to the overall report.

6.2. Changing International Human Rights Norms

In order to evaluate the hypothesis that increasing support for international human rights treaties has a positive effect on the reports, I ran three linear models based on the cumulative number of ratifications, accessions, and successions each year and the frequency of a term most closely related to the content of those treaties. For example, for women, I used the number of ratifications, accessions, and successions, and the number of times that the term “women” appears in any given report.

Table 6: Regression of Number of Ratifications of International Human Rights Treaties on the Frequency of Related Terms in Reports

	“women”	“children”	“disabilities”
Women convention	0.167*** (0.003)		
Children convention		0.128*** (0.002)	
Disabilities convention			0.078*** (0.001)
Constant	-3.176*** (0.385)	0.026 (0.310)	2.331*** (0.064)
Observations	7,466	7,466	7,466
R ²	0.357	0.356	0.482
Adjusted R ²	0.357	0.356	0.482

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. Reported are the linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. This regression summary shows the correlation between the number of ratifications, accessions, and successions to a particular human rights treaty and the frequency of a term directly related to the subject of the treaty.

Table 7: Aggregate Summary Statistics for Term Frequencies

	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Std.Dev.
“women”	0	159	19.6	16	16.3
“children”	0	148	16.8	11	18.1
“disabilities”	0	56	5.0	2	6.7

From the results in Table 6, all three treaties have a positive effect on the frequencies with which words appear in the reports. Disabilities has the smallest effect, with 0.08 increase in mentions of the term “disabilities” per each additional ratification, accession, or succession to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The frequency of “children” increases by 0.128 mentions and “women” by 0.167 mentions for each additional ratifications, accessions, and successions to the respective treaty.

Also of interest are the intercepts for these three models. The intercept for Women is -3.176, showing the early and steady increase of support following the convention's entry into force, as well as that the term was likely not present at all in the reports prior to the convention. Children and Disabilities then have the opposite effect, where the intercepts are slightly positive, suggesting that either the terms began appearing in the reports slightly before the treaties, or increased in frequency right along with the increase in support. This positive increase in term frequency with the increase of support for a treaty is consistent with my hypothesis. Under this model, an increase of 6 ratifications, accessions, and successions to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women would result in one additional mention of the term in individual reports-year observations. Given that currently 189 countries are party to the convention, this is a relatively significant impact. The same also goes for the coefficients for children and disabilities, where there is a smaller but still positive effect. Table 7 shows the summary statistics for the term frequencies in the report. Given that the mean and median frequencies for all three terms are quite low, especially so for “disabilities”, even these small increases per country are significant.

6.3. Resources Available to Produce the Reports

Table 8: Regression of Budget and Overall and Societal Section Lengths

	Overall Length	Societal Section Length
Budget	12,677.5*** (239.4)	4,850.0*** (70.3)
PTS	1,870.8*** (38.5)	208.1*** (11.4)
Constant	-4,543.8*** (158.5)	-1,499.8*** (46.7)
Observations	6,675	6,531
R ²	0.449	0.446
Adjusted R ²	0.449	0.445

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. Reported are the linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. This regression summary shows the relationship between discretionary budget authority percentage and the overall and societal section lengths. The constant here represents a budget authority of 0%, and then increases by 1%.

The results of the regression of budget and the overall report length show a positive effect of discretionary budget authority of the State Department on the length of the reports. Table 8 shows that when controlling for human rights conditions using PTS scores, a 1% increase in discretionary budget authority results in a 12,641 word increase in overall report length. In this dataset, this discretionary budget authority ranges from 0.3% to 0.9%, and the marginal effect of a 0.1% increase would then be approximately 1,200 words. The same also goes for the societal section length, with the marginal effect of a 0.1% increase resulting in a nearly 500 word increase in the length of this section. Given the general length of the reports, this is quite a significant increase. This is the result that I would have expected from my hypothesis, as in this model a higher discretionary budget authority results in longer reports both overall and within the societal section. With a greater percentage of the discretionary budget allotted for the State Department, more resources and manpower are available for the department, including for the production of the human rights reports.

7. Conclusion

The results shown indicate that the variables considered have impacted the length of both the overall reports over the years, as well as the length of societal sections and frequency of terms relating to specific societal groups.

For my first hypothesis, I argued there would be variation in changes to the report from administration to administration. This was based on the theory that different political parties and presidential administrations in charge of producing the reports would have differing foreign policy goals that would dictate what information they found important to be included in the reports. While the sections on state actors have been present since the initial reports, the sections pertaining to societal actors and groups are much more recent additions. My regression results show that while there is a significant difference in societal section length from administration to administration, there is also a significant difference with the overall length of the reports, suggesting that there are changes occurring elsewhere in the reports from administration to administration that are changing the overall length as well. The same conclusion can be drawn from the regression results of the overall and societal section lengths and political party, where a Republican administration has a negative effect on the length of both the overall report as well as the societal section.

The results I found with regards to both the changes in budget and changing international norms were consistent with my hypotheses. For budget, I hypothesized that an increase in discretionary budget authority to the State Department would have a positive effect on the length of the overall report and societal section. I found that for every 1% increase in discretionary budget authority, there is a 12,641 word increase in the length of the overall reports, and a 4,850 word increase in the societal section length. Increasing support through ratifications, accessions, and successions to three international human rights treaties pertaining to women, children, and persons with disabilities as a measure of changing international human rights norms was also shown to correlate positively to the frequency of related terms in the reports.

Given the reversal of the pattern of increasing length from administration to administration with the Trump administration, I think it is important that further studies be done on changes to the reports produced by the Trump administration and what these changes then mean for use of the reports for measurement projects. The results suggest that the changes made by the Trump administration paring back information previously included in the reports is inconsistent with the pattern set by previous administrations. The changes from administration to administration prior to the Trump administration sequentially had a positive effect on the reports in terms of overall and societal section length, while the Trump administration's effect was negative. I think that this necessitates further study, not only through the 2017 reports to determine the full extent of these initial changes made by the administration but also for the next three years of reports set to be produced by the administration.

8. Notes

1. The unit of analysis is report-year rather than country-year due to the inclusion of reports for disputed territories not independently recognized as countries. These include reports for the Western Sahara, Crimea, or the West Bank and Gaza in recent years.

2. This data can be accessed here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/historical-tables/>

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