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Changing standards or political whim? Evaluating changes in the content of US State Department Human Rights Reports following presidential transitions

Rebecca Cordell^a, K. Chad Clay^b, Christopher J. Fariss^c, Reed M. Wood^d, and Thorin M. Wright^d

^aUniversity of Texas at Dallas; ^bUniversity of Georgia; ^cUniversity of Michigan; ^dArizona State University

ABSTRACT

The annual US State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* represents one of the principal data sources used to generate multiple commonly used human rights measures. Despite the frequency with which these indicators are used in quantitative studies of human rights, scholars have rarely considered how the qualitative information in the source has varied over time. We contribute to this area of research by investigating the general changes in the amount of information included in the reports as well as the administration-specific changes in this information. Using automated text analysis techniques, we find that the amount of information in the reports generally increases over time. However, our analysis also reveals that the rate (and direction) of change varies across different human rights topics and across presidential administrations. Consequently, we find evidence to support a changing standard of accountability as well as evidence that political considerations shape human rights reporting.

Since the mid-1970s, US law has required that the State Department submit annually to Congress a summary of human rights practices for all states receiving financial assistance from the United States.¹ The State Department delivered the first set of these reports to Congress in 1977, and the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* were made publicly available the following year. These reports have historically served as an important source of information for evaluating the diplomacy and aid decisions the United States makes with regard to other states. The importance of these documents is hard to overstate. Policymakers and activists frequently use the information in the reports as part of their efforts to “name and shame” governments that engage in abuses. The reports also represent one of the principal data sources from which multiple, widely used categorical human rights indices derive their scores. These include the Political Terror Scale (PTS; Wood and Gibney 2010), the CIRI Human Rights Data Project (Cingranelli and Richards 1999; Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay 2014), and Hathaway’s (2002) torture dataset, which represent the primary quantitative measures scholars have used to empirically investigate patterns of human rights practices across the globe.

Despite the frequency with which these indicators have been used, scholars have only recently begun to consider how the qualitative information included in the documentary source material

CONTACT Rebecca Cordell  rebecca.cordell@utdallas.edu  School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, University of Texas at Dallas, 800 West Campbell Road, Richardson, TX 75080

Reed M. Wood is now affiliated with University of Essex

Data used in this study can be obtained for purposes of replication at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jhr>

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varies over time. Recent studies have demonstrated that the information contained in these reports has changed over time, with a general trend toward longer, more detailed coverage of an increasing number of human rights issue areas (Bagozzi and Berliner 2018). For example, the reports published in the 1970s were only a few pages in length, even for the most severely abusive countries (e.g., El Salvador), and only contained information on state abuses of physical integrity rights (e.g., killing, torture, and disappearance) and some types of civil and political rights (e.g., rights to assemble, speech, and voting). In recent decades, coverage has expanded to include other rights, including those specifically related to women, the LGBTI+ community, indigenous populations, refugees and displaced persons, and others.² Prior research has also examined potential political bias in the State Department reports compared to reports produced by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations (Poe, Carey, and Vasquez 2001; Nieman and Ring 2015). Related studies have also suggested that human rights reporting and information gathering—including in the State Department report—has improved over time, potentially introducing bias into the indicators that use these reports for their source (Fariss 2014). As such, explicitly examining to what extent and how the information contained in these reports has changed over the four decades they have been published is important for scholars who seek to use the information they provide for systematic analyses of human rights practices. Additionally, investigations might provide new insights into the ways different US leaders think about and prioritize human rights issues.

In this study, we build on existing attempts to investigate changes in the information contained in these reports. Specifically, we examine both the longer-term trends in reports and the ways in which the information included in the reports varies across presidential administrations. Furthermore, we attempt to explore the nature of the texts themselves by explicitly considering which sections and topics of the reports generate greater coverage over time and between administrations. Ultimately, we are interested in understanding the role the political preferences of specific administrations have on how the reports are written and presented. Alongside longer-term influences like alliance and aid ties to reported countries and the budget and size of the State Department, we believe that shifts in administration preferences will also have an impact on the specific topics and content of the reports. We explore this by examining the trends in the text, particularly focusing on which sections and topics receive more or less attention at points of transition for the reports by comparing the first year of new administrations to the last year of prior administrations.

Our study relies on automated text analysis techniques to compare the overall length of reports and content of each titled section (e.g., physical integrity rights, civil liberties) of the reports across each presidential transition between 1981 and 2017. Our results indicate that although the attention given to physical integrity rights and civil liberties varies little across administrations, attention to other human rights issues—particularly discrimination and societal abuse—varies substantially in response to changes in administration. We also find that the transition from Barack Obama to Donald Trump corresponded to a significant and substantively large decline in information related to multiple human rights issues. This result is of particular normative concern because, prior to this most recent transition, these rights had emerged as salient new topics of concern for human rights defenders.

A brief history of the US State Department Human Rights Reports

Although the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* are now considered a standard part of the State Department's workload, their origin was controversial, even within the department itself. The reports first emerged out of congressional action demanding that the United States incorporate human rights as a part of its decisions for allocating foreign aid and military assistance. Frustrated by continued US support for repressive authoritarian regimes in Chile, South Korea,

and other states, members of Congress demanded that human rights practices in other countries play an explicit part in US foreign policy decisions. Keys (2010) and Snyder (2013, 2018) described this oversight, and what would eventually become the standardized reports we read today, as emerging from interbranch competition between the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements, led by member of Congress Donald Fraser, and the State Department during the Nixon and Ford administrations, led by Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. The result of this struggle between Congress and the State Department resulted in Section 502b of the 1974 Foreign Assistance Act, which required the United States to limit, reduce, or stop military assistance to “gross violators” of human rights—specifically, the rights of physical integrity, focusing on violations to the body: imprisonment, torture, and killings. Keys (2010: 836) noted that Fraser made this widely recognized set of rights the focus so as to avoid being accused of “US imperialism” by dictating that certain human rights were important despite not being widely recognized outside of the US-aligned countries. As we demonstrate, the focus on physical integrity rights has remained a central part of human rights reporting by the State Department and has also remained one of the most consistent across all presidential administrations.

The first country reports were not publicly released; nor were individual country reports given to members of Congress, who instead were given a general summary report (Keys 2010: 846–847; Snyder 2018: 164). Furthermore, the initial staff dedicated to human rights within the State Department was limited to just three people. Rather than using a well-staffed, centralized bureaucracy to synthesize information, these early reports relied heavily on regional bureaus that would have the ability to revise the reports in light of diplomatic concerns. Because these initial reports were often heavily revised by the regional bureaus and then only summarized for members of Congress, many representatives were initially skeptical and highly critical of the reporting (Keys 2010; Snyder 2018). For instance, Senator Hubert Humphrey reportedly characterized the reporting language as “bland ... as swallowing a bucket of sawdust” (as quoted in Keys 2010: 848; and in Snyder 2018: 164).

Soon after, however, Congress passed more stringent requirements for reporting, including a requirement that the reports be public. This was Section 301 of the 1976 *International Security Assistance and Arms Export Act*, which strengthened the prior 502b requirements (Snyder 2018: 164) and obliged the State Department to conduct separate reports on each country that received aid from the United States. However, the reports made in compliance with the 1976 act were not fully reported until 1978 during the Carter administration (Keys 2010: 848). During that administration, the reports—as well as the bureau within the department dedicated to composing them—became more institutionalized and standardized. In this period, the reporting expanded to countries beyond just those receiving foreign aid from the United States, and by 1980 (the first year of our data sample) covered 154 countries. Although this institutionalization period was not smooth, the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (now the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor) became an integral part of the State Department’s operation going into the Reagan administration (Drezner 2000; Schmidli 2011).

Drezner (2000: 745) noted that the reporting quality steadily improved over the course of the Reagan administration. However, there is also significant evidence that these reports, although becoming more detailed, were also biased in favor of US allies during this period (Poe et al. 2001). Although certain aspects of the Carter administration’s human rights emphasis were simply not reflected during the Reagan administration (including a shift back to national security interests being dominant), the continued reporting on countries was one aspect of the human rights and humanitarian affairs bureau that did become fully institutionalized. For example, in our sample the number of reports from the first year of the Reagan administration to the last year of Reagan’s term expanded from 157 country reports to 170 country reports. However, the removal of economic rights from the State Department’s characterization of human rights during

the Reagan administration (but the prolonged focus on physical integrity rights and civil and political rights) suggests that there may be certain aspects of human rights reporting that are fully institutionalized, whereas others may shift according to the political preferences of administrations (Drezner 2000: 745).

Since the Carter and Reagan administrations, the reports have become a more regularized part of the State Department, and we expect the institutionalization of the reports to have continued under subsequent administrations. For example, Poe and colleagues (2001) noted that after the end of the Cold War, the distance in human rights scores given to countries based on the State Department reports and those based on Amnesty International's reports decreased. This could be indicative of shifting priorities of American foreign policy after the Reagan era, but also increased autonomy for the Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs, which writes the reports.

Reporting over time and the effect of presidential transitions

In general, we expect that the length, detail, and coverage of reporting on human rights by the State Department will increase over time. We believe they will expand over time primarily because of three factors: (1) bureaucratic inertia, (2) increased information availability, and (3) a changing standard of accountability. We see these factors working in conjunction to increase the amount of information regarding human rights practices contained in the reports. Specifically, we observe that over time the reports become longer, more detailed, and provide coverage of a wider range of human rights. However, we also have reason to believe that the pace of this expansion varies across different administrations, largely as a result of the political preferences and foreign policy prerogatives of the specific administrations. It is also plausible that we might observe periods of slight reduction in human rights information included in the reports, particularly when a new administration seeks to roll back the policy agenda of a predecessor.

We expect a continued expansion of the information contained in the reports due to bureaucratic inertia because of the increased institutionalization and independence of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (formerly, the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs) over time. Indeed, Drezner (2000: 738–739) argued that if *embedded* agencies like this are able to survive their initial foundation period, they are likely to become part of the bureaucratic culture and even thrive. Although the initial expansion of this bureau under the Carter administration was somewhat rocky, the bureau adapted to the larger foreign policy goals of the Reagan administration and survived. Not only did the bureau thrive after the Reagan administration, previous studies have suggested that the agency's reporting became more independent of the foreign policy priorities of particular presidents over time (Poe et al. 2001). Absent concerted efforts by an administration to directly impose its specific ideology or policy preferences over the agency, the combination of bureaucratic inertia and entrenched standard operating procedures (e.g., Allison 1971) has likely contributed to an increase in the level of information contained in the reports over time.³

In addition to agency-level bureaucratic inertia, we also expect that broad changes in national and international attitudes toward human rights have also influenced the content of the reports. Several scholars have observed a changing standard of international accountability, in which states and international organizations have become both more attentive to human rights issues and more likely to criticize states for violating international human rights standards over time (e.g., Keck and Sikkink 1998; Clark 2001). In addition, such changes have likely produced bias in many commonly used quantitative human measures (Clark and Sikkink 2013; Fariss 2014). This bias occurs because positive changes in the standard of accountability have led to greater amounts of information about human rights practices over time.

First, since the 1980s the number of domestic and international NGOs gathering and distributing information on state respect for human rights has dramatically increased, thus increasing the

overall level of information available to the State Department officials who produce the reports. Second, it is likely that standards of human rights behavior have become stricter over time. For example, certain forms of ill-treatment or torture that are included in the reports today would not have been included twenty years ago, as the State Department may have had to focus on a far larger number of more extreme cases of this type of abuse. There has also been an increase in recognition of discriminated groups by states and societies. For example, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) rights movement and feminist movements have become more global and expanded over time. This indicates that we are potentially applying higher standards of behavior, as well as expanded recognition of who should be protected under these rights. Together, this suggests the potential for longer and more detailed reports over time.

Taken as a whole, the discussion above generates two important expectations related to the evolution of the information contained in the State Department's human rights reports. First, arguments regarding bureaucratic inertia and the changing standard of accountability suggest that reporting on human rights is likely to increase, as is the density of the information contained in the reports. As discussed, the State Department's ability to gather and aggregate information has increased over time, as have the information gathering and information transmission capabilities of domestic and international human rights NGOs and domestic agencies that monitor human rights. Together, these factors mean that over time, the agency that produces the State Department's annual human rights reports should have both more information to sift through and a greater capacity to parse and process it. These factors alone create conditions that allow the State Department to produce more detailed reports. Consequently, over time the length of the reports and the information contained within them should increase.

Importantly, the trend toward expansion of the reports should apply not only to conventional and uncontroversial areas of human rights (physical integrity rights, civil liberties, etc.) but also to more politically contentious areas, such as women's rights and LGBTI+ rights. As societal attention to and advocacy for these rights increases, international NGOs are likely to devote additional coverage to them and to more intensely scrutinize state abuses of marginalized or minority communities that would have received limited attention in previous eras. For its part, over time the State Department is likely to increasingly incorporate coverage of these issue areas into its reports. Thus, for the same reasons highlighted above, the attention provided to these classes of rights in the official reports is likely to increase over time.

However, although the depth and scope human rights coverage is likely grow over time, we expect the rate of this increase to vary across time due to the prevailing political environment. Although the bureaucratic apparatus of the State Department should be nominally insulated from political winds, the State Department is a part of the Executive Branch, and the President appoints its leadership (including the Secretary of State) with an eye toward achieving his or her political and strategic objectives. Therefore, the political views and strategic interests of a given presidential administration are likely to exert at least a marginal influence on the behaviors and outputs of individual departmental agencies within the Executive Branch. This may lead to variations in the reporting trends across different types of human rights.

Moreover, major foreign policy priorities of administrations may influence the reporting. For example, Drezner (2000) noted that Cold War considerations may have influenced the Reagan era reports, and shifting foreign policy goals toward democracy expansion after the Cold War may have broadened human rights concerns in the reporting (Forsythe and Rieffer 2002). The way in which concern for human rights may affect the content of reports could also be a function of the political preferences of particular administrations. For example, although both Republican and Democratic presidents may hold similar views on the importance of protecting civil liberties and condemning physical integrity violations, they are likely to differ substantially in terms of the strength of their commitments to advancing reproductive rights or protecting LGBTI+ rights. Accordingly, we expect administrations to prioritize certain types of rights and deprioritize

(although not wholly neglect) others. This should result in observable variations in the increase in reporting across different types of rights from one administration to the next, particularly when the change in administration also reflects a transition from one party to another.

We also expect a larger shift in the 2017 reporting from the Trump administration in particular. The Trump administration's rhetoric on the impact of human rights on foreign policy is reminiscent of the pre-Report era by the Nixon administration (Snyder 2017). Remarks by the administration's first Secretary of State indicated that human rights represent American values, but not American *policy* (Baker and Shear 2017; Tillerson 2017). Others have argued that LGBTI + rights and sexual and reproductive rights in particular have been negatively impacted by the early years of the Trump administration (Girard 2017; Shear and Savage 2017; Lopez 2018), and we expect this impact to be present in the human rights reporting by the State Department as well (Berry and Hendrix 2018; Toosi 2018). These political factors, together with a reduction in the number of staff working in the State Department early on in the Trump administration, may lead to a reduction in length and detail of the reports (Harris 2017).

Data and methods

For this study, we analyze 2,194 US State Department annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, representing every presidential administration transition from 1980 to 2017. We include reports produced during the final year of each outgoing president and the first year of each incoming president in our sample. The dates of the reports often create some confusion. Reports detailing human rights practices observed in a given year are typically released in the following year. Thus, the report released in early 2019 (the 2018 report) covers events occurring in 2018. As a result, during presidential transitions, the last report constructed by the staff of the previous administration is actually approved and released by the Secretary of State of the new administration during the first few months of his or her tenure. We therefore consider the 2017 report as the final report produced by the Obama administration, even though it was released under the Trump administration.⁴ In order to evaluate trends in reporting over time and the effect of US presidential transitions, we focus on changes in report length, section length, and frequency of terms associated with women's rights and LGBTI + rights.

Each report in our digital collection is organized by country and year in a text file format.⁵ We created a corpus of text files for each year included in our sample. We began by preprocessing the documents by developing regular expression algorithms to correct all strings concatenated or separated in error and removing unnecessary white space, punctuation, encoded text, and non-ASCII characters. Second, we converted the text to lower case, removed all numbers and stop words (e.g. "are," "at," "by," "from," "that," "the"), and stemmed the text using the Porter (1980) stemming algorithm to reduce all words to their base root form (e.g. "killed," "kill," and "killing" would all be condensed to "kill"). We used this set of corpuses for calculating the frequency of words included in our dictionary. This helps to streamline the analysis by removing aspects of the text that are most irrelevant to our dictionary and avoids overcounting the same terms and concepts (e.g., words in their capitalized, small letter, and stringed variations). We did not perform this second step on the set of corpuses that we used to calculate the report and section word counts, as these features of the text still make up the total number of words contained in each document (e.g., numbers and stop words describing country human rights practices).

In order to measure the change in report length during US presidential administration transitions, we created a document term matrix (DTM) for each year included in our sample. Each DTM describes the frequency of terms that occur in reports produced during the same year, with the columns corresponding to the unique words and the rows corresponding to the country reports. First, we calculated the total word count per report and then computed the total word count of reports produced during the same year. Next, we calculated the average word count for

Table 1. Sections of US State Department Annual Country Reports on Human Rights

Section	Year
Physical Integrity Rights	1980–2017
Civil Liberties	1980–2017
Political Rights	1980–2017
Corruption and Transparency	2009–2017
Domestic and International Human Rights Groups	1980–2017
Discrimination and Societal Abuses	1988–2017
Worker Rights	1988–2017

reports produced during the same year by computing the mean. We then calculated the change in average report length for each of the six US presidential administration transitions by subtracting the average report length of the first year of the incoming president from the average report length of the final year of the outgoing president. In order to test whether the change in report length is statistically significant, we created a vector for each year, with the row corresponding to each country report and the column corresponding to the total word count, and performed a Welch two sample *t*-test on each pair of US presidential administration transitions in our sample, as recommended by Paquot and Bestgen (2009). We then took the *p*-value as an indication of whether the difference in means between the two corpuses is statistically significant.

In order to measure the change in section length during US presidential administration transitions, we used a regular expression algorithm to segment every country-year report into sections. Table 1 displays the list of sections included in State Department annual country reports on human rights practices during presidential administration transitions. We then created a corpus of text files and DTMs for each section describing the frequency of terms that occur in each section produced during the same year. Using the DTMs, we calculated the average word count of each section produced during the same year. We then computed the change in average section length for each of the six US presidential administration transitions by subtracting the average section length of the first year of the incoming president from the average section length of the final year of the outgoing president. Again, we tested whether the change in section length is statistically significant by performing a Welch two sample *t*-test on each pair of US presidential administration transitions.

In order to further evaluate the effect of US presidential administration transitions on reporting over time, we built a dictionary of terms associated with women's rights and LGBTI+ rights. We choose to analyze this group of rights as we found that they are the most susceptible to change during US presidential administration shifts. By focusing on the number of times women's rights and LGBTI+ rights are discussed in a report (including references outside of the subsection that focuses on those rights areas), we were able further examine whether an increase in rights coverage over time is conditional on the political nature of those rights. This is important because, although the discussion of women's rights and LGBTI+ rights is located in the section on discrimination and societal abuses, there are likely to be many other references to women and the LGBTI+ community throughout the report in which a country's human rights practices are described as affecting female/LGTBI+ members of the population.

Table 2 displays the list of terms contained in our dictionary, organized by concepts. To account for changes in language and topical coverage over time, we selected terms for our dictionary using the State Department's annual human rights report's appendix, *Notes on Preparation of the Country Reports and Explanatory Material*, which describes the topics discussed in each section. We then added to the dictionary by searching for associated terms in the corpus for all years included in the sample, in order to avoid biasing our results and capturing as much variation in language over time as possible. We divided terms associated with women's rights into four subcategories given their scale and scope: family, gender, sexual and reproductive health, and violence against women. We measured the change in word frequencies associated with our

Table 2 Stemmed terms included in the *Women's Rights and LGBTI + Rights Dictionary*

Women	
Family	adulteri, divorc, dowri, famili, marri, marriag
Gender	femal, gender, girl, woman, women
Sexual and Reproductive Health	abort, birthcontrol, birthplan, breastfeed, condom, contracept, familyplan, femininhygien, fgm, matern, menstruat, reproduct, steril
Violence against Women	batteri, domestabus, domesticviol, honorkill, rape, sexualabus, sexualassault, sexualdiscrimin, sexualharass, sexuallytransmit, sexualviolenc
LGBTI+	
biphobia, bisexu, gay, genderident, genderreassign, homophob, homosexu, intersex, lesbian, lgbti, maletofemal, queer, samesex, sexualorient, sodomi, thirdgend, transgend, transphob, transsexu, transvestit, transwomen	

Note: Only the most prominent terms appearing in the corpus are included in our dictionary.

dictionary during US presidential administration transitions by creating a DTM for each year included in our sample that counts the number of times a word appears anywhere in a report. Using the DTMs, we calculated the average word frequencies for terms included in our dictionary across all reports produced during the same year. We then computed the average change in these word frequencies for each of the six US presidential administration transitions by subtracting the dictionary's average word frequencies of the first year of the incoming president from the dictionary's average word frequencies of the final year of the outgoing president. Again, we tested whether the change in frequency of terms included in our dictionary was statistically significant by performing a Welch two sample *t*-test on each pair of US presidential administration transitions.

Results

Report length

In order to analyze the change in human rights reporting during presidential transitions, we first looked at the change in report length over time. [Figure 1](#) presents the change in average word count of US State Department annual country reports on human rights practices produced during the final year of each outgoing president and the first year of each incoming president in our sample. As expected, all reports increased in length over time with one exception: the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. These findings are in line with the general trend observed by human rights scholars toward longer, more detailed coverage of an increasing number of human rights issue areas (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Clark 2001; Clark and Sikkink 2013; Fariss 2014). Although the depth and scope human rights coverage is likely grow over time, we expect the rate of this increase to vary across time due to the prevailing political environment. For example, during the transition from the George H. W. Bush administration to the Clinton administration, the reports increased significantly in length by 17 percent. However, the reports decreased significantly in length by 14 percent during the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, in line with a negative shift in human rights preferences (Girard 2017; Shear and Savage 2017; Lopez 2018).

The top ten countries that experienced the greatest increase in total word count from the last year of the George H. W. Bush administration to the first year of the Clinton administration were Turkey, Croatia, Israel, Poland, Greece, Samoa, the United Kingdom (UK), Indonesia, Germany, and Guatemala. The top ten countries that experienced the greatest decrease in total word count from the last year of the Obama administration to the first year of the Trump administration were Israel, Hungary, China, Russia, Sudan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Iraq. In order to identify which aspects of the reports were driving these changes, we examined the change in section length over time.

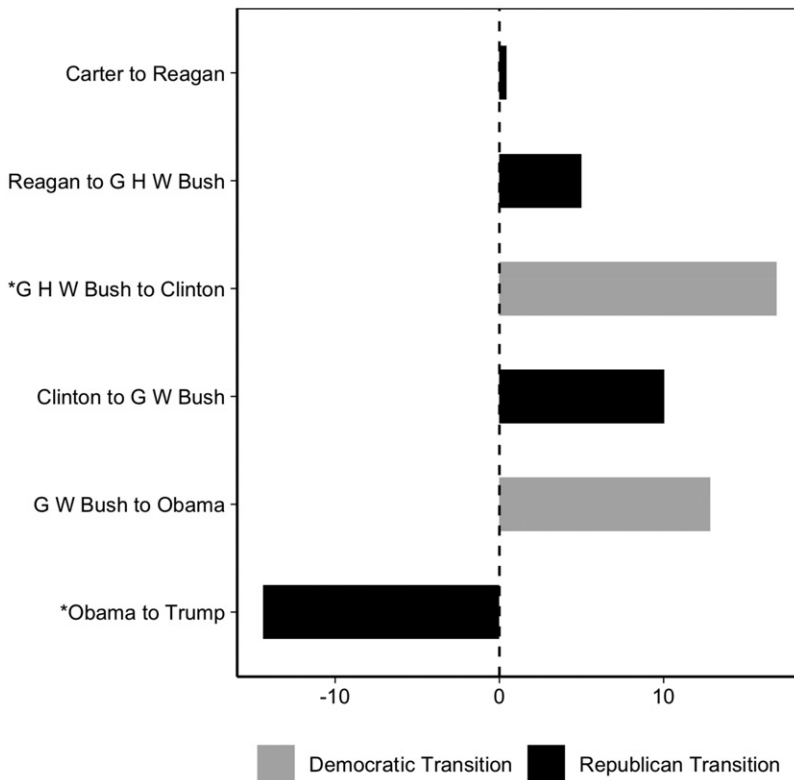


Figure 1. Percentage change in average word count of State Department human rights reports, during presidential administration transitions. * = average word count significantly different at the 95 percent confidence level based on Welch two sample *t*-test.

Section length

Figure 2 displays the percentage change in average word count of sections included in the State Department's annual country reports on human rights practices produced during the final year of each outgoing president and the first year of each incoming president in our sample. Again, our results show that the majority of sections increased over time. Similar to the findings of Richards (2016), the section on physical integrity rights (which includes subsections on extrajudicial killings; disappearances; torture; arbitrary arrest or detention; denial of public fair trial; interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence; and abuses in international conflicts) had a constant average section length over time, with no statistically significant changes taking place during the presidential administration transitions in our sample (see Figure 2). This is likely due to continued global support for this widely recognized set of rights and the prolonged focus of the United States on enshrining physical integrity rights in international law.

Along with the changing standard of accountability of human rights, this would lead to a steady increase over time in the different types of treatment that fall into this, with more events being included in reports over time (Clark 2001; Clark and Sikkink 2013). For example, only in recent years has solitary confinement become considered as tantamount to torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; it is thus less likely to appear in reports produced during the early years in our sample. Moreover, given an increase in the amount of information available on human rights practices, the number of allegations of the same type that appear in reports is also likely to increase (Fariss 2014). These results also hold for the sections on civil liberties and domestic and international human rights groups.

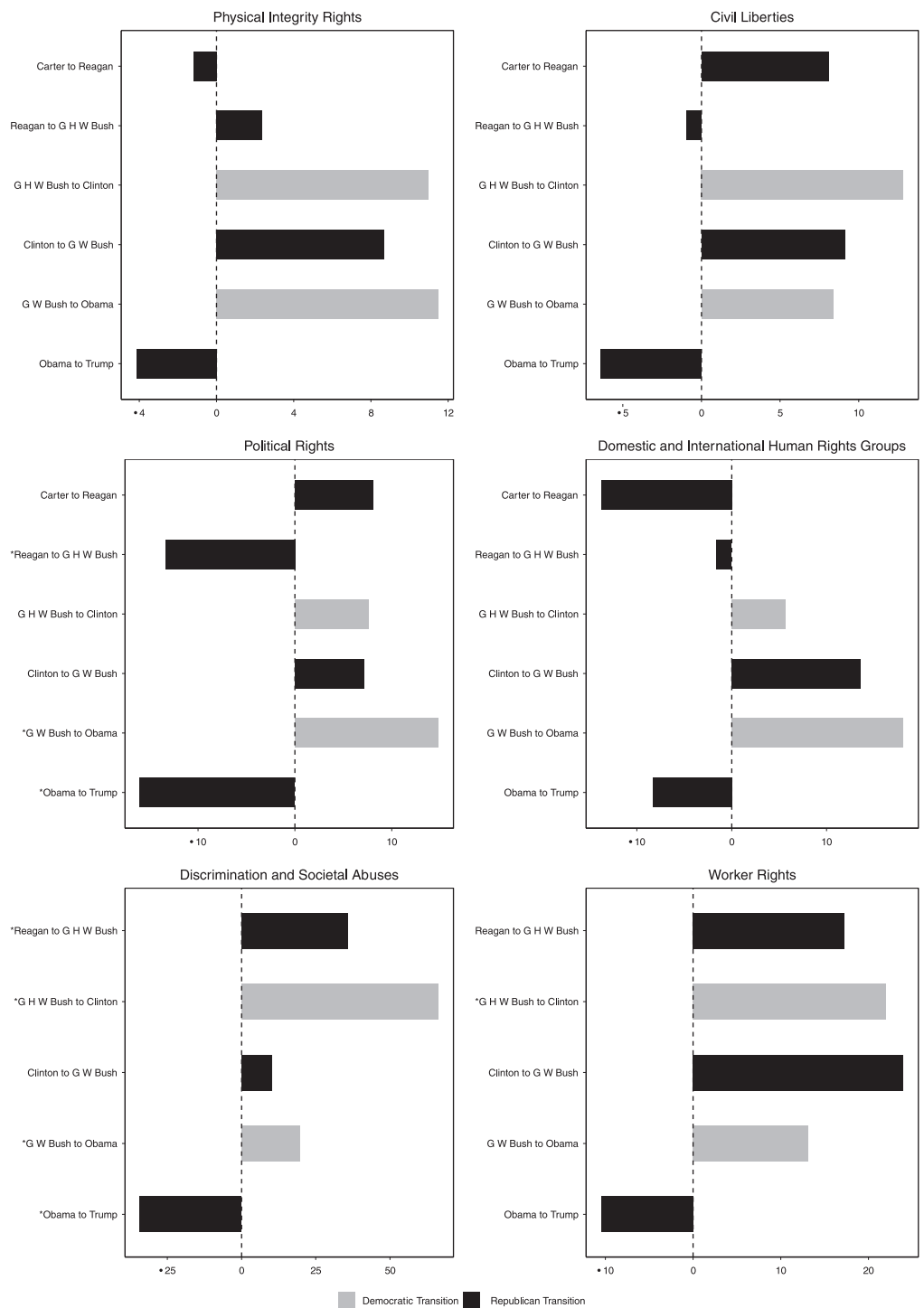


Figure 2. Percentage change in section average word count of State Department human rights reports, during presidential administration transitions. * = average word count significantly different at the 95 percent confidence level based on Welch two sample *t*-test.

The section on discrimination and societal abuses experienced the greatest substantive and significant changes during the presidential administration transitions in our sample.⁶ This section includes subsections on women, children, anti-Semitism, human trafficking, persons with disabilities, national/racial/ethnic minorities, indigenous people, LGBTI+ rights, and HIV/AIDS. This section increased in length for the majority of reports produced during the presidential administration transitions included in our sample with one exception: the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. These findings are again in line with the changing standards of accountability argument: As the rights of more groups in society are recognized over time, greater information on human rights abuses becomes available, and stricter standards for human rights behavior are imposed (Clark 2001; Clark and Sikkink 2013; Fariss 2014). For example, the discussion of LGBTI+ rights in the reports does not feature prominently in the reports until the later years in our sample, when NGOs fixated heavily on these rights that states in turn adopt as norms over time. The substantive and significant increase in average word count from the George H. W. Bush administration to the Clinton administration (at 66 percent) is striking and indicates that the increase in overall length of reports produced during the first year of the Clinton administration is in large part due to the expansion of this section.

On the other hand, although the 34 percent decrease in average word count for this section for reports produced during the Obama administration to the Trump administration deviates from the norm, the results are in line with public rhetoric on policies related to sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTI+ rights (Girard 2017; Shear and Savage 2017; Lopez 2018). These results also hold for the sections on political rights. We note that the substantial decline in attention to societal discrimination in the Trump administration's first set of reports is not merely a "regression to the mean" or a return to prior reporting patterns of the prior Republican administration. We also compared the first year of the Trump administration's report and section lengths to the final year of the George W. Bush administration. We found that Trump's reports are shorter in both overall length and section length, with the exception of two sections: physical integrity and worker rights. The decrease by the Trump administration in the sections for civil liberties and societal discrimination are statistically significant.⁷

Frequency of terms associated with women's and LGBTI+ rights

Figure 3 displays the percentage of change in average word count of terms associated with the concepts included in our women's and LGBTI+ rights dictionary in the State Department's annual country reports on human rights practices produced during the final year of each outgoing president and the first year of each incoming president in our sample (throughout the entire report and not just within their relevant subsection; i.e., discrimination and societal abuses). As expected, our results show that the majority of terms increased in frequency over time. As the rights of more women and LGBTI+ rights become recognized, as more information about human rights practices became available, and a stricter standard of human rights behavior developed, more cases of women's and LGBTI+ rights allegations were mentioned in reports and in greater detail.

The concepts that remained the most constant over time were associated with terms relating to the family. This is likely due to the less politically controversial nature of this set of women's rights, which includes terms related to adultery, divorce, dowry, the family, and marriage. However, the change in average word count of terms associated with this topic still decreased significantly by 24 percent during the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. The concepts that experienced the greatest amount of change over time were terms relating to gender and sexual and reproductive rights, experiencing a substantive and significant increase during all US presidential administration transitions with two exceptions: during the Carter to Reagan transition (at a decrease of 6 to 7 percent) and the Obama to Trump

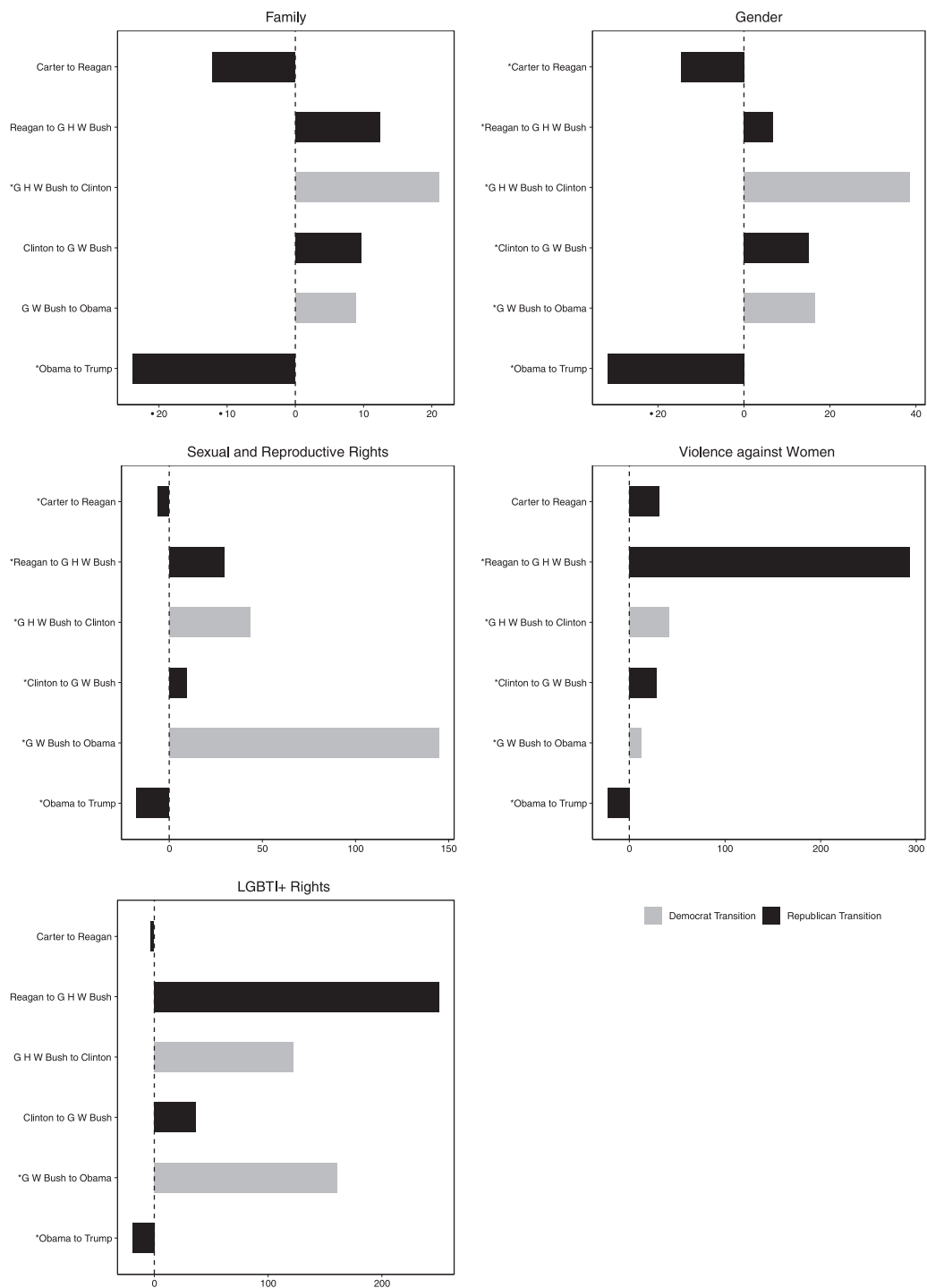


Figure 3. Percentage change in average word count of terms associated with women's rights and LGBTI + rights. * = average word count significantly different at the 95 percent confidence level based on Welch two sample *t*-test.

transition (at a decrease of 18 to 37 percent). The findings in relation to terms that reference gender (female, gender, girl, woman, women) indicate that the attention paid to women's rights in general is susceptible to change within the report during US presidential administration transitions, beyond any specific topic. As the number of human rights events reported in the sources used by the State Department increases over time, so do the details pertaining to each allegation, such as the identity of victims, including their gender.

However, it appears that this positive trend is conditional on the preferences of different presidential administrations on women's rights. Moreover, the increase or decrease of terms relating to women in general may be inflated by the preferences of presidential administrations on more politically contentious women's rights, in which terms relating to the gender of a woman accompany her description, such as sexual and reproductive rights. For example, the reports produced during the first year of the Trump administration deleted the section on "reproductive rights" under the women's rights subsection. This change omitted information from the reports on access to contraception, abortion, and maternal mortality rates, and replaced this section with a statement relating to whether there were reports of "coerced abortion, involuntary sterilization, or other coercive population control methods." We also found that terms relating to violence against women increased substantively and significantly in the majority of US presidential transitions, except for the Obama to Trump transition.

In relation to LGBTI+ rights, an increase in average word count of terms relating to bisexual, gay, intersex, lesbian, and transgender people remains constant over time during the majority of US presidential administration transitions. As the rights of more LGBTI+ people are recognized around the world (as well as the rise in information on human rights allegations in general that cite the identity of victims including their gender and sexual orientation), the number of mentions in reports increases. However, we see a large and statistically significant increase in the average word count of terms relating to bisexual, gay, intersex, lesbian, and trans people during the first year of the Obama administration (160 percent) but a significant decrease in average word count during the first year of the Trump administration (18 percent).⁸ This indicates further that the effect of preferences of US presidential administrations on the content of US State Department human rights reports are more likely to be targeted at more politically controversial rights they want to prioritize or deprioritize.

Conclusion

In sum, our results largely conform to our expectations. Generally, we observed a steady increase in report length that is also reflected in specific section length. We also observed a somewhat static trend with the original "core" of the reports going back to the early congressional hearings on the topic (Keys 2010): sections on physical integrity rights and civil liberties. Although most of the transitions led to increases in these sections, none were statistically significant, indicating that these sections are the most institutionalized and insulated aspects of the reports. The consistency of these sections over time suggests that bureaucratic insulation and inertia seems to play some role in the way the reports are put together, even when presidential transitions occur.

We also saw an increase over time in the frequency of key words focusing on groups that have historically faced discrimination: women and the LGBTI+ community. This general trend is reflective of both more information available on human rights abuses around the world and the changing standard of accountability (Fariss 2014), in which more groups are recognized and higher standards are applied to behavior, leading to more information about abuses being reported. Although this positive, general trend in greater coverage occurs throughout most of the reports' lifespan, regardless of the party of the President, we observed a stark reversal with the transition to the Trump administration. The first year of this administration's reports saw

decreases across the reports as a whole as well as in every section, with statistically significant decreases in the sections focusing on societal discrimination and political rights.

The Trump administration—and President Trump, in particular—has often embraced dehumanizing rhetoric as well as made policy statements that diminish the level of priority given to human rights in making foreign policy. Given the public statements and posturing of the administration, it perhaps comes as no surprise that these attitudes would be reflected in the human rights reports. Although our results across prior transitions suggest that the State Department might be somewhat isolated from presidential preferences, it seems that the more extreme preferences of the Trump administration have affected how the reports are written. One potential reason beyond their public stances for this could be that the Trump administration sought to cut the size of the State Department itself (Harris 2017). However, we did not observe significant decreases across all sections of the report. Although the core sections of physical integrity and civil liberties did decrease in 2017, they did not represent a statistically significant shift from the last year of the Obama administration. Ideology seems to play a role here instead, as we observed a sharp decrease in the length of the section that focuses on societal discrimination and the abuse of historically marginalized groups.

Our findings raise several policy-related concerns. In some ways, these reports may offer human rights activists a window into not just whether the Trump administration prioritizes human rights but *which* aspects of human rights will be prioritized or deprioritized. Our results suggest that historically marginalized groups, such as the LGBTI+ community and women, are a lower foreign policy priority for this administration than for prior administrations. Our results offer guidance on where other human rights groups—such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and International Lawyers for Human Rights—should consider investing in additional monitoring and reporting to make up for and directly critique these changes.

Notes

1. Specifically, see the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and the Trade Act of 1974.
2. For consistency, we use the same acronym used by the US Department of State to represent the LGBTI+ community.
3. This is according to Allison's (1971) organizational processes model, in which standard operating procedures and past practice dominate bureaucratic organizations' output.
4. This is noted in media coverage of the report releases, as well. See, for example, articles by Torbati (2017) and Finnegan (2018).
5. For information on these files and their availability, see Fariss, Linder, Jones, Crabtree, Biek, Ross, Kaur, and Tsai (2015).
6. Unlike the other reports in our sample, those produced during the last year of the Carter administration and the first year of the Regan administration do not include a separate section on discrimination and societal abuses.
7. We do not display tables of these results because of space constraints, but we include them in our online appendix.
8. A similar study commissioned by Oxfam but using a smaller catalogue of terms and issue areas reached similar conclusions about the change in the attention given to women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights during the Trump administration (see Berry and Hendrix, 2018).

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Notes on contributors

Rebecca Cordell is an Assistant Professor in the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences at the University of Texas at Dallas. She received her PhD in 2017 from the University of Essex. Her research interests include state repression, political violence, human rights, international security cooperation and measurement.

K. Chad Clay is the Director of the Center for the Study of Global Issues (GLOBIS) and an Associate Professor of International Affairs at the University of Georgia. He received his PhD in 2012 from Binghamton University. His research focuses on the measurement, causes, and consequences of human rights practices and conditions.

Christopher J. Fariss is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and a Faculty Associate in Center for Political Studies, both at the University of Michigan, (2016–). He received his PhD in 2013 from the University of California San Diego. His research interests include human rights, repression, political violence, foreign policy, measurement, and research design.

Reed M. Wood is Reader of political science at the University of Essex. He received his PhD in 2010 from the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. His research interests include human rights, civil conflict, terrorism, and gender and conflict. He is also co-manager of the Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset (WARD) and the Political Terror Scale (PTS).

Thorin M. Wright is an Associate Professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University. He received his PhD in 2012 from the University of Illinois—Urbana Champaign. His research interests include human rights and repression, refugees, international conflict, and peacekeeping.

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