

Research Statement

Christopher J. Fariss

October 6, 2022

[click here for the most up to date version of this document](#)

My research activity covers three primary themes (1) human rights and the politics of violence, (2) the resources, structure, and power of the international system, and (3) the methods of measurement and research design. The types of questions that have animated my research agenda over the past decade have arisen from my contributions to each of these three conceptual areas.

My most important and influential contributions focus on the conceptual and empirical debates about whether pre-existing indicators of human rights and other international relations concepts are valid, and how the patterns conveyed by these different measures are used to support important inferential claims. Prior to the publication of several of my articles, human rights scholars debated why existing indicators of human rights show that human rights practices have been stagnant over the last 40 years. These patterns stood in stark contrast to the contemporaneous spread of human rights norms, better monitoring by private and public agencies, and the increasing prevalence of electoral democracy. My research resolved this debate and thus spurred on the creation of several new areas of scholarship that focus on human rights processes, human rights measurement, and measurement more broadly. To date, thousands of new studies build on the insights from my research on measuring human rights.

Addressing the broader human rights debates and resolving measurement issues that are critical to these conceptual discussions, are essential research tasks that I continue to devote effort to addressing. Building on my earlier research, I am now focused on a new set of human rights research topics that are based on a new large-scale data collection project funded by the National Science Foundation, and new conceptual work on the micro foundations of human rights legal compliance, human rights reporting, and human rights engagement using new large-scale datasets, field research in Haiti, Sweden, and several cities in the United States, and several novel experimental designs. These new projects provide insights into how institutional and social processes change human rights practices for individuals as they make human rights claims, seek out information, or interact with state agents. All of these projects contribute to answering the broader question of why are human rights patterns using new data improving? I have also helped develop new conceptually grounded measurement models to estimate constructs related to the resources, structure, and power of the international system. The resources, structure, and power of the international system each represent fundamental concepts for scholars of international relations, but, as with human rights, the variables designed to measure them are often biased, prone to measurement error, or not fully conceptualized. More broadly, several additional projects have made important contributions to measurement validity and research design to other areas of political science research. Next, I review my research agenda in more detail and describe future trajectories for each of the three research streams briefly outlined above.

Human Rights and the Politics of Violence: The first debate my research resolves is about how the process of documenting human rights abuses relates to the process by which scholars code this information into categorical indicators of human rights abuse. To systematically document human rights abuses, human rights monitoring organizations like the US Department of State, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other groups, establish a standard of accountability, or a baseline set of expectations that states ought to meet in order to be considered respectful of human rights. The standard of accountability changes over time because of the tactics used by reporting agencies to gather accurate information, the broader coverage of information-gathering campaigns in conjunction with other international and domestic NGOs, and the continuous pressure on governments to make additional improvements, even after real reforms have been implemented to reduce the occurrence of more egregious rights violations. In two articles published in the *American Political Science Review*, I demonstrate that, if the standard of accountability has meaningfully changed over time, then the categorized variables from human rights documents will mask real improvements in human rights and instead show a stagnant pattern over time (Fariss, 2014, 2019).

My research was the first to introduce and systematically incorporate the concept of the standard of accountability into a measurement model of human rights protections. This model yields both estimates of how standards for different forms of repression have changed over time and new corrected empirical estimates of human rights, which I continue to update and refine each year. Taken together, this evidence shows that respect for human rights has improved and our standards for assessing human rights have been steadily increasing. However, the measurement debate had, up until recently, remained contested. In a published letter in the *American Political Science Review*, critics question whether the standard of accountability is changing and if data on mass-killings are part of the same underlying conceptual process of repression as other human rights abuses. These claims are used to justify alternative models, which show no improvement in human rights. However, by focusing on the coding process, these authors misunderstand that the standard of accountability is

about how monitoring organizations produce documents in the first place and not how political scientists use published documents to create data. My response to this letter definitively rebuts this critique (Fariss, 2019). In this article, I address the conceptual issues directly and show how simulation based evidence and alternative latent variable model proposed by critics do not account for time in a substantively meaningful way (Fariss, 2019). Beyond responding to the critique, I also present evidence from several new and alternative models, which validate the conclusion that human rights practices are improving over time. The new evidence that I present suggests that the Amnesty International reports are more consistently produced from year to year than the State Department reports and that, within the State Department reports themselves, allegations of torture and ill treatment is the topic most sensitive to the effects of the changing standard of accountability. These results suggest that it may be more difficult for human rights monitoring organizations to detect torture and ill treatment in comparison to the other forms of physical integrity rights abuse as the scale of other abuses increases and easier as the scale decreases.

Resolving the human rights measurement debate is important but it also has wide-ranging implications for both theory and practice. For example, past research grappled with a puzzle about the finding that the UN human rights treaties have been ratified by states that are more likely to violate human rights. In two articles published in the *British Journal of Political Science*, I use the latent variable estimates of repression to demonstrate that the relationship between human rights respect and ratification of human rights treaties are positive, which contradicts findings from existing research (Fariss, 2018*a,b*). Overall, the human rights estimates developed in Fariss (2014) and extended in Fariss (2019) and now Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning (2020), support the conclusion that human rights practices are improving over time and have become a standard tool for analyzing patterns of human rights across countries and over time. Until I published the theory of the changing standard of accountability, the academic discourse around human rights progress was becoming increasingly pessimistic. This is because debate persists about the exact mechanisms the lead to these improvements over time and whether or not the new improvements are substantively meaningful. I engage with this continuing debate about mechanisms with three groups of published and ongoing research projects.

For the first area of research that engages with human rights mechanisms, I am in the process of collecting more detailed information about human rights allegations over time and across political contexts at the state and sub-state level. Levels of state repression and the frequency, severity, and targets of human rights abuses vary spatially within states. However, most previous studies on these topics have only considered repression typically aggregated into data at the country-year level. This is problematic because the high degree of spatial and temporal aggregation misses important subnational variation of violations, and implicitly assumes that states employ similar levels of abuse throughout their territory. Yet, even a cursory examination of the patterns of repressive events and behaviors suggests that repression is employed unevenly within the state. In order to capture subnational variation in repression — and to ultimately aid in explaining this variation — several coauthors and I have constructed a new dataset that provides new latent variable estimates of repression at the level of the sub-national unit for a global sample of states. In short, scholars of human rights and repression have much to learn by systematically disaggregating and studying human rights content.

This research project is part of a collaborative National Science Foundation grant titled *The Sub-National Analysis of Repression Project* (Clay et al., 2017-2022) or *SNARP* for short. The *SNARP* project is a theoretically motivated data collection, categorization, and measurement project, that represents an ongoing collaboration with Rebecca Cordell (University of Texas at Dallas), Chad Clay (University of Georgia), Reed Wood (University of Essex), and Thorin Wright (Arizona State University). In the project, we first identified each individual allegation of human rights abuse contained within a set of human rights documents (allegations are identified at the sentence level). For each allegation, of which there are hundreds of thousands, the project team used hand coding, dictionary-based approaches, and supervised machine learning methods to categorize information about the perpetrator of the human rights abuse, the victim of the abuse, and information about the spatial and temporal context of the abuse. In some cases, these allegations are quite specific. In other cases, these allegations are rather general. To combine this information into comparable subnational and country-year estimates, we extend the measurement model for repression that I have developed in other published research (Fariss, 2014, 2019; Fariss and Schnakenberg, 2014; Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning, 2020; Schnakenberg and Fariss, 2014). To date, the *SNARP* collaborative research project has generated two published articles in *Journal of Human Rights* and *International Studies Quarterly* (Cordell et al., 2020, 2022) and several new working papers, and large-scale, publicly available dataset including 163,512 unique human rights abuse allegations in 196 countries between 1999 and 2016 (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/SNARP>).

Overall, the *SNARP* project sets a new standard for transparency and accessibility of human rights reporting content. It also can serve as the foundation for any new human rights coding projects that use the country year human rights reports as part of the document corpus because it is now the most easily accessible and searchable database for content from three sets of annual human reports. The *SNARP* project continues in several directions (1) new dictionary development, (2) new

sets of report sentences and allegations (pre-1998 and 2017-2020), (3) new machine learning classification modeling and validation of all categorized allegation features (e.g., scope, intensity, actor, location), (4) validation of subnational coding (capital city, region, geo-coding, location dictionaries), (5) validation of actor coding (UCDP, GED actor dictionaries), (6) *SNARP* web app and near-real time human coding, (7) allegation and sentence forecasting from new online information sources (e.g. social media data). All of this material is being added to the publicly available dataverse repository for the benefit of the human rights research community

In the second area of research that engages with human rights mechanisms, I argue that in order to move beyond the ongoing epistemological and conceptual debates and to augment macro-level measurement projects, comparative studies are necessary to understand the interrelationship between the processes of human rights, law, and measurement itself. For example, in an article published in *Human Rights Quarterly*, Kristine Eck (Uppsala University) and I present new case study evidence on human rights reporting from Sweden suggests that the level of institutional transparency is an important but neglected concept that helps or hinders human rights monitoring across different countries (Eck and Fariss, 2018). This project is important because it reveals how a highly transparent government reveals fine grain details about the types of human rights abuses that still occur even in a country like Sweden. The results from this case study suggest that institutional variation is systematically related to the ability of human rights monitoring organizations to observe state human rights behaviors in different institutional contexts. An important measurement implication from this research is that it may be more difficult for human rights monitoring organizations to detect torture and ill treatment in comparison to the other forms of physical integrity rights abuse as the scale of other abuses increases and easier as the scale decreases

In another related project with Tara Slough (New York University), published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, we examine how certain classes of human rights abuses may arise absent the purposeful intent to repress because of the misaligned incentives of state agents (Slough and Fariss, 2021).¹ We specifically examine prolonged pretrial detention, the largest form of illegal imprisonment globally, which we argue is a form of human rights abuse which is consistent with this logic of misgovernance instead of purposeful, state sanctioned intent. We evaluate the effort of state agents working within the Haitian criminal justice system by providing free legal assistance (funded by the US Agency for International Development) to detainees using a novel large- n randomized rollout experiment. The experimental results demonstrate that legal assistance accelerates case advancement and liberation. Conceptually, these results suggest that this form of human rights abuse, and possibly others, result from misgovernance and not purposeful intent. Practically, these results supported the development of legislation that created Haiti's first Legal Aid service in September 2018 (Projustice, 2017, pg. 25). Prolonged pretrial detention is an understudied form of physical integrity right abuse, yet it affects a staggeringly large number of individuals globally, which we estimate to be approximately 1 million individuals across 186 countries (Slough and Fariss, 2021). Moreover, the individuals illegally and indefinitely detained in prison are not the politically active opposition members or repressed members of a political elite who typically garner international attention or letter writing campaigns. Thus, this group of individuals is understudied in the broader human rights literature and is a form of abuse not currently included in the cross-country measurement projects, which the *SNARP* project is now addressing.

But who demands human rights? Who is even interested in them? The third area of research that engages with human rights mechanisms builds on a series of cumulative articles published in *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, *Law & Contemporary Problems*, and a conditionally accepted manuscript at *American Political Science Review* (Dancy and Fariss, 2017, 2018, 2022; Fariss and Dancy, 2017). Most international relations and human rights scholarship focuses on states, non-governmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations. Typically, the role of the individual rights holder is a center piece for human rights arguments, but only by assumption. For example, an influential group of critics calls into question the relevance of the international human rights project on the day-to-day experience of the individual. For these scholars, individual rights holders neither know nor care about the international human rights project. But these scholars have never empirically evaluated this claim. In our continued critique of these elite-based arguments, Geoff Dancy and I call this argument into question by bringing empirical evidence to bear. Cross-national survey research provides some answers to this question, but it can only provide us with snapshots that are difficult to compare and generalize from. In a new paper and book project, we compare worldwide interest in human rights using aggregated data from Google search trends (Dancy and Fariss, 2022). At its core, our project tests two divergent accounts of human rights interest: an imposition model which holds that human rights comes from the outside-in, and an emergence model that treats human rights interest as a bottom-up, organic development within different societies. We find not only that aggregate global interest in human rights remains steady, but also that demand for human rights is driven primarily by searchers who reside in states that need human rights the most. We believe that these findings show the human rights are in demand and are working now on designing surveys to validate these new results and generate new questions about the role the individual plays within the international human rights regime.

¹Winner of the *American Journal of Political Science* Best Article Award, Midwestern Political Science Association (2022).

Measuring the Resources, Structure, and Power of the International System: As with the human rights measurement research discussed above, the construct validity of the measures used in my other projects is an essential focus of my research agenda. In a series of collaborative articles with Jonathan Markowitz (University of Southern California), Miriam Barnum (Purdue University), and several others, we have worked at conceptualizing and measuring key features of the structure of the international system (Anders, Fariss and Markowitz, 2020; Fariss et al., 2022; Markowitz and Fariss, 2013, 2018; Markowitz, McMahon and Fariss, 2019; Markowitz et al., 2020). In one of these articles published in the *Journal of Peace Research*, we introduce a measurement approach that is specifically designed to measure the level of geopolitical competition between states (Markowitz and Fariss, 2018), which we then expand upon and further validate in a new paper published in *International Studies Quarterly* (Anders, Fariss and Markowitz, 2020) and a new working paper (Markowitz, Barnum and Fariss, 2022).

In developing this measurement approach we continued to grapple with the fact that many of the key concepts of interest to scholars of international relations lacked construct validity because they were often incompletely translated from concept to operational procedure to actual data. We therefore built on this early work in order to expand on our early measurement contributions. First, in an article with Therese Anders (University of Southern California) published in the *International Studies Quarterly*, we refine this measure and augment it with more appropriately measured information about the potential economic capacity that a state may bring to bear when investing in arming or power projection capabilities (Anders, Fariss and Markowitz, 2020). Specifically, we argue and demonstrate that previous research has mismeasured power and military burdens by using GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as a proxy for the resources states have to arm. The core problem is that GDP confounds two conceptually distinct forms of economic resources into one aggregate indicator. Subsistence resources are the economic output necessary for the basic caloric needs that ensure the population's survival. Surplus resources are the remaining economic output that could be invested in guns or butter. Subsistence income represents resources needed to provide the "bread" necessary to cover the basic subsistence needs of the population. Surplus income represents the remaining resources that could be allocated to "guns" or "butter." Our new measure of SDP (Surplus Domestic Product) corrects for this measurement error by decomposing subsistence income and surplus income from total GDP. With this new operational procedure we are able to re-evaluate the empirical relationship between measure of power resources and specific foreign policy actions. Conceptually, we expect the decision to arm is influenced by the distribution of power; however, empirical models using GDP find mixed support for this expectation but with our new measure we show the expected relationship. To estimate GDP, we need valid and historic measures. Coverage for these variables was not uniform, especially prior to 1950, so we built a new measurement model for these important concepts that span over 500 years and incorporate multiple datasets together (Fariss et al., 2022). The new economic and population estimates from these project have facilitated two new contributions, one measuring land-rent dependence with Benjamin Graham and Suzie Mulesky (both at University of Southern California) (Markowitz et al., 2020) and the other measuring military expenditures using a latent variable model (Barnum et al., 2022).

Methods of Measurement and Research Design: As the contributions from my research on human rights, political violence, and international relations suggests, measurement is essential because, without a clearly articulated link between the empirical content of a study and the theoretical structure that gives rise to that content, it is not possible to make claims about the relationship between data and the world. Yet, despite the necessity for valid measurement, research in the social sciences tends to ignore the construct validity of most measures and usually takes existing data, especially experimental data, for granted or at least as good enough. Thus, one of the critical steps in evaluating theoretical concepts is the development, formalization, and validation of measurement models. This is because there is no model-free way to measure unobservable or difficult to observe concepts like the level of repression, the number of individuals killed during a civil war, or the perception of members of an out group. The concepts of interest to the community of scholars interested in human rights and international relations are often by definition difficult to observe. Measurement models offer systematic tools for evaluating such concepts and I am working on developing and disseminating these tools to many areas of international relations research. For example, in an article published in *Political Analysis*, Kevin Reuning (Miami University of Ohio), Michael Kenwick (Rutgers University) and I investigate several new approaches for modeling dynamic and even volatile political processes using latent variable models (Reuning, Kenwick and Fariss, 2019). Building on this article, we have developed a robust dynamic latent variable model to accommodate censored count data from multiple sources (Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning, 2020). This second paper (Fariss, Kenwick and Reuning, 2020) is published in a special issue at the *Journal of Peace Research* that I co-edited with James Lo (University of Southern California) (Fariss and Lo, 2020). The proposal brings together scholars of peace and conflict, broadly conceived, in order to solidify the connection between new and emerging research on the use of measurement models to measure difficult or impossible to directly observe peace and conflict processes. Each of the articles in this special issue use some form of latent variable model or related measurement model, which is designed to bring together observable pieces of information and estimate a set of values for the underlying concept of interest. Though these projects share a common methodological theme, they represent the diversity of substantive interests that span the study of peace and conflict, broadly conceived.

Conclusion: Overall, the main themes of my research agenda offer a substantively diverse set of papers that are held together by a shared focus on measurement validity. I look forward to continuing to work in these important areas research on (1) human rights and the politics of violence, (2) the resources, structure, and power of the international system, and (3) the methods of measurement and research design.

References

- Anders, Therese, Christopher J. Fariss and Jonathan N. Markowitz. 2020. "Bread before guns or butter: Introducing Surplus Domestic Product (SDP)." *International Studies Quarterly* 64(2):392–405.
- Barnum, Miriam, Christopher J. Fariss, Jonathan N. Markowitz and Gaea Patrice Morales. 2022. "Measuring Arms: Introducing the Global Military Spending Dataset." *working paper* .
- Clay, K. Chad, Christopher J. Fariss, Reed M. Wood and Thorin M. Wright. 2017-2022. "Sub-National Analysis of Repression Project." *National Science Association Award* 1626775.
- Cordell, Rebecca, K. Chad Clay, Christopher J. Fariss, Reed M. Wood and Thorin Wright. 2020. "Changing standards or political whim? Evaluating changes in the content of the US state department human rights reports." *Journal of Human Rights* 19(1):3–18.
- Cordell, Rebecca, K. Chad Clay, Christopher J. Fariss, Reed M. Wood and Thorin Wright. 2022. "Disaggregating Repression: Identifying Physical Integrity Rights Allegations in Human Rights Reports." *International Studies Quarterly* 66(2):sqac016.
- Dancy, Geoff and Christopher J. Fariss. 2017. "Rescuing Human Rights Law from International Legalism and its Critics." *Human Rights Quarterly* 39(1):1–36.
- Dancy, Geoff and Christopher J. Fariss. 2018. "The Heavens are Always Fallen: A Neo-Constitutive Approach to Human Rights in Global Society." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 81:73–100.
- Dancy, Geoff and Christopher J. Fariss. 2022. "The Search for Human Rights: A Global Analysis Using Google Data." *American Political Science Review* Conditionally Accepted.
- Eck, Kristine and Christopher J. Fariss. 2018. "Ill Treatment and Torture in Sweden: A Critique of Cross-Case Comparisons." *Human Rights Quarterly* 40(3):591–604.
- Fariss, Christopher J. 2014. "Respect for Human Rights has Improved Over Time: Modeling the Changing Standard of Accountability in Human Rights Documents." *American Political Science Review* 108(2):297–318.
- Fariss, Christopher J. 2018a. "Are Things Really Getting Better?: How To Validate Latent Variable Models of Human Rights." *British Journal of Political Science* 48(1):275–282.
- Fariss, Christopher J. 2018b. "Human Rights Treaty Compliance and the Changing Standard of Accountability." *British Journal of Political Science* 48(1):239–272.
- Fariss, Christopher J. 2019. "Yes, Human Rights Practices Are Improving Over Time." *American Political Science Review* 113(3):868–881.
- Fariss, Christopher J. and Geoff Dancy. 2017. "Measuring the Impact of Human Rights: Conceptual and Methodological Debates." *Annual of Law and Social Science* 13:273–294.
- Fariss, Christopher J. and James Lo. 2020. "Innovations in Concepts and Measurement for the Study of Peace and Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research* 57(6):669–678.
- Fariss, Christopher J. and Keith Schnakenberg. 2014. "Measuring Mutual Dependence Between State Repressive Actions." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58(6):1003–1032.
- Fariss, Christopher J., Michael R. Kenwick and Keving Reuning. 2020. "Estimating one-sided-killings from a Robust Measurement Model of Human Rights." *Journal of Peace Research* 57(6):801–814.
- Fariss, Christopher J., Therese Anders, Jonathan Markowitz and Miriam Barnum. 2022. "New Estimates of Over 500 Years of Historic GDP and Population Data." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66(3):553–591.
- Markowitz, Jonathan N. and Christopher J. Fariss. 2013. "Going the Distance: The Price of Projecting Power." *International Interactions* 39(2):119–143.
- Markowitz, Jonathan N. and Christopher J. Fariss. 2018. "Power, proximity, and democracy: Geopolitical competition in the international system." *Journal of Peace Research* 55(1):78–93.
- Markowitz, Jonathan N., Miriam Barnum and Christopher J. Fariss. 2022. "Measuring Geopolitical Competition." *working paper* .
- Markowitz, Jonathan N., R. Blake McMahon and Christopher J. Fariss. 2019. "Producing Goods and Projecting Power: How What States Make Influences What They Take." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(6):1368–1402.
- Markowitz, Jonathan N., Suzie Mulesky, Benjamin A.T. Graham and Christopher J. Fariss. 2020. "Productive Pacifists: The Rise of Production-Oriented States and Decline of Territorial Conquest." *International Studies Quarterly* 64(3):558–572.
- Projustice. 2017. "Improving Justice Service Delivery and Sector Reform in Haiti (Projustice) Final Report." *USAID Projustice Project Final Report July 2009 - July 2016* Contract No. 521-C-00-09-00018-00.
URL: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M876.pdf
- Reuning, Kevin, Michael R. Kenwick and Christopher J. Fariss. 2019. "Exploring the Dynamics of Latent Variable Models." *Political Analysis* 27(4):503–517.
- Schnakenberg, Keith E. and Christopher J. Fariss. 2014. "Dynamic Patterns of Human Rights Practices." *Political Science Research and Methods* 2(1):1–31.
- Slough, Tara and Christopher J. Fariss. 2021. "Misgovernance and Human Rights: Experimental Evidence of Illegal Detention without Intent." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(1):148–165.