

# Research Statement

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My research activity covers two primary themes: human rights and the methods of measurement. The kinds of questions that have animated my research agenda have arisen from my contribution to conceptual and empirical debates about which of the existing indicators of political repression are valid, and how the patterns conveyed by these different measures are interpreted. In short, several existing indicators of repression imply that human rights practices have been stagnant over the last 40 years, despite the spread of human rights norms, better monitoring by private and public agencies, and the increasing prevalence of electoral democracy. My research contributed on one front by leading academic coders to question the validity of existing categorical indicators based on new insights from latent variable models. On the second front, my research led to a reevaluation of negative assessments regarding the international human rights project, by showing how conclusions based on existing categorical indicators are biased. Addressing the broader human rights debate, and resolving the measurement issues that are critical to this conceptual discussion, are essential academic tasks that I continue to devote effort to addressing both empirically and conceptually. More recently, I have focused on a set of research projects based on a new large scale data collection project funded by the National Science Foundation, new conceptual work on the micro foundations of human rights legal compliance, and new human rights field research in Haiti and Sweden. These new projects provide insights into how institutional and social processes change human rights practices for good or for ill.

The first human rights debate my work addresses relates to the documentation of human rights abuses and the academic coding process that follows. 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 an article 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).

My research was the first to systematically incorporate the concept of the standard of accountability into a measurement model of repression, which yields both estimates of how standards for different forms of repression have changed over time and new corrected estimates of human rights. 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 remains contested. In a recently published letter in *American Political Science Review*, Cingranelli and Filippov (2018) 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.

In a new manuscript, published at the *American Political Science Review*, I respond to the Cingranelli and Filippov (2018) critique (Fariss, 2019). In this new article, I address the conceptual issues directly and show how the simulation based evidence and alternative latent variable model proposed by Cingranelli and Filippov (2018) 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. This 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 itself important, but it also has wide-ranging implications for both theory and practice. For example, past work grappled with a puzzle about the finding that the UN Convention Against Torture has been ratified by states that are more likely to abuse human rights. In an article 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 the UN Convention Against Torture and several other treaty variables is positive, which contradicts findings from existing research (Fariss, 2018). The results suggest that countries that respect human rights are more likely to ratify the human rights treaties in the first place, that the treaties may have a causal effect on human rights protection once ratified, or possibly even both.

Overall, the new human rights estimates developed in Fariss (2014) and extended in Fariss (2019), support the conclusion that human rights practices are improving over time. Until the publication of the theory of the changing standard of accountability and the new latent variable estimates by Fariss (2014), the academic discourse around human rights progress was becoming increasingly pessimistic (Hopgood, 2013; Moyn, 2010; Posner, 2014). 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 address this continuing debate about mechanisms with three groups of ongoing projects.

First, 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. This work is part of a collaborative National Science Foundation grant titled *The Sub-National Analysis of Repression Project* (Clay et al., 2017-2019). In this data collection and measurement project, Rebecca Cordell (University of Texas at Dallas), Chad Clay (University of Georgia), Reed Wood and Thorin Wright (Arizona State University) and I first identify each individual allegation of human rights abuse contained within a set of human rights documents. For each allegation, of which there are hundreds

of thousands, we use human and automated coding tools to categorize information about the perpetrator of the 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; Reuning, Kenwick and Fariss, 2019; Schnakenberg and Fariss, 2014). This collaborative research project has generated one published article (Cordell et al., 2019) and several new working papers, currently under review.

Second, in a series of articles published in *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, and *Law & Contemporary Problems*, Geoff Dancy (University of Tulane) and I have begun developing what we have termed a neo-constitutive approach to understanding the relationship between human rights, law, and measurement (Dancy and Fariss, 2017, 2018; Fariss and Dancy, 2017). This approach takes as given, the interrelationship between law and politics, and focuses on the interactions that occur between individuals and the state. A focus on the micro-level interactions of individuals and the assumption of the endogenous relationship between the use of law and the exercise of political authority represents a departure from most of the top-down critiques that are leveled at the efficacy of the international human rights regime (Hopgood, 2013; Moyn, 2010; Posner, 2014). What the neo-constitutive approach focuses on, is the micro-level interactions of individuals embedded in the social and political systems in which both legal institutions and political authority relationships must be navigated simultaneously. This approach also represents a counterpoint to other pessimistic accounts of measurement leveled by critical constructivists. The neo-constitutive approach accepts the critical idea that measurement itself can be politicized and used to create or reinforce authority relationships. However, it departs from the critical constructivists because it allows for systematic empirical analyses of state sanctioned measurement projects and can identify the potential biases that political interactions might bring to the measurement process. Once these potential politically motivated biases are identified, just like the changing standard of accountability, they too can be addressed in future applications of the latent variable models discussed above.

Third, 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 recently 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). The level of transparency for this deviant case is not typical for most other cases, even other contemporary European states. 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.

In another related project with Tara Slough (Columbia University), 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, 2018). 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 (USAID), to detainees using a novel large- $n$  randomized rollout experiment. The experimental results demonstrate that legal assistance accelerates case advancement and liberation.

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, 2018). 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 *The Sub-National Analysis of Repression Project* is now addressing.

More broadly, I consider the question of how easy is it for an individual to gain access to basic bureaucratic services in a state. Are these everyday forms of repression intentionally designed to restrict access to certain groups of individuals, such as those who are known not to be supportive members of the regime, or are they a function of capacity issues as the case of Haiti seems to exemplify? This is another important research question for human rights scholars, which my project with Tara Slough is only beginning to address. The innovative experimental design we developed is also a contribution to the field of measurement and political methodology. This is because many large scale policy interventions cannot be implemented simultaneously, which requires carefully measuring the differential levels of the intervention as a function of time.

As the contributions from my research on human rights 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.

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. For example. in a series of papers with Jonathan Markowitz (University of Southern California), we have worked at measuring key features of the structure of the international system (Markowitz and Fariss, 2013, 2018; Markowitz, McMahon and Fariss, 2019). In an article published in the *Journal of Peace Research*, we introduce a measurement approach, specifically designed to measure the level of geopolitical competition between states (Markowitz and Fariss, 2018). In a manuscript with

Therese Anders (University of Southern California) currently under review, 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, 2018). 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.

In a manuscript published in the journal *Political Analysis*, Kevin Reuning (Miami University of Ohio), Michael Kenwick (Rutgers University) and I investigate several new approaches for modeling dynamic political processes using latent variable models (Reuning, Kenwick and Fariss, 2019). We demonstrate that the properties of both static and dynamic latent variable models for cross-sectional time-series data are not well suited for modeling periods of volatility. We propose and evaluate two new latent variable models, which are much more flexible. These new models are capable of capturing volatile periods in the time-series cross-sectional data. Evidence from simulations and replications of the ideology of Supreme Court justices and a regime type demonstrates that the new robust dynamic model produces more valid estimates of time-series cross-sectional data that experience sudden changes. Building on this article, we are now developing a robust dynamic latent variable model to accommodate censored count data from multiple sources. In this paper, we explore several specifications that account for over dispersion and zero-inflation. This new model is important because counting repressive events is difficult because state leaders face different incentives to conceal or reveal the actions of their subordinates or sometimes even destroy evidence of abuse.

This second paper was submitted as part of a special issue to the *Journal of Peace Research*, which I am currently guest editing with James Lo (University of Southern California). 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 13 projects included in the submission make use of some form of latent variable model or related measurement model. Each of the projects is explicitly focused on both a theoretical concept of interest to the international relations community and a measurement model innovation that can help evaluate the way scholars understand that concept. Though these projects share a common methodological theme, they represent the diversity of substantive interests that span the study of peace and conflict. As part of this issue, I am co-writing an introductory article, best practices document, and several shorter pieces designed to create new connections with the political methodology community.

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 and construct validity. I look forward to continuing to work in these important areas of research. I also look forward to continue helping other scholars and students learn about these areas of research and to apply the measurement and computational tools that have aided me in generating and validating evidence for important new concepts and academic debates.

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