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# Do Americans Care About Human Rights?

SAM MCFARLAND AND MELISSA MATHEWS

**Abstract.** National polls indicate strong American support for international human rights. However, that support consistently ranks below national self-interests, appears to be strongly influenced by current events, and wanes as the cost of supporting human rights increases. Although most Americans express agreement with the ideals of human rights, a willingness to commit American resources to promote and defend human rights is much weaker. Americans who are committed to human rights are likely to be “globalists” whose other concerns are international rather than nationalistic, high in principled moral reasoning, empathetic, and optimistic about creating a better world. They are low in ethnocentrism and its root dispositions of social dominance and authoritarianism. Greater education strengthens endorsement of human rights principles but does not appear to increase a willingness to commit US resources and troops to promote and defend human rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Although great advances have been made in human rights since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, the gaps between the Declaration’s ideals and world realities remain massive. The advance of human rights is thwarted in many places by ancient enmities, religious orthodoxies, cultural traditions, and nondemocratic governments. Democratic governments usually express allegiance to human rights but often find that protecting them abroad conflicts with their economic self-interests. In situations of grave human rights abuses, democracies are usually reluctant to risk the lives of their own citizen soldiers to protect others.

For political democracies, public support is essential if a government is to invest resources and take risks on behalf of international human rights. With that in mind, this article reviews the American public’s support for human rights, discusses weaknesses in measures of that support, and reviews studies that distinguish between Americans who are and are not committed to universal human rights.

With some exception during the Carter presidency, American foreign policy during the cold war was little influenced by human rights concerns (Forsythe 1988; Hartman 2001). The cold war ended more than a decade ago, but a coherent post-cold war policy concerning America’s role in promoting human rights has not emerged. American armed forces have been used to protect human rights in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, but American support for the merits of such missions is far from settled. The 2002 attack on the Afghan Taliban regime and the 2003 war with Iraq were presented to the American people as wars to end terrorism, not as wars

to promote democracy and rights. Some Administration proponents of the Iraq war apparently always viewed it as a first step in establishing democracy in Middle Eastern Islamic countries (Lemann 2003), but the Administration's case for war was based almost entirely on a presumed Iraqi threat to America. The goals of promoting democracy and human rights came to the foreground in the Bush Administration's rationale only with the failures to find weapons of mass destruction or to establish Iraqi links to the Al Qaeda terrorist network.

### **AMERICANS' SUPPORT FOR DOMESTIC RIGHTS**

Preliminarily, we note that national polls show that American support for the rights of its own minorities, women, and homosexual persons grew steadily during the last half of the 20th century. As examples, between 1944 and 1972, the percentage of white Americans who agreed that blacks should have "as good a chance as White people to get any kind of job" rose from 44% to 97% (Schuman *et al.* 1997). In 1958, just 38% of white Americans were willing to vote for a black for president; by 1999, 95% said they would do so (Newport 1999a). In 1963, 62% of Americans believed that law should prohibit marriage between blacks and whites, but that percentage dropped to 13% by 1996 (Schuman *et al.* 1997). On women's rights, the percentage of Americans who approve of women working outside the home even if financially not necessary rose steadily from just 12% in 1936 to 79% in 1996 (Myers 1999). Willingness to vote for a woman for president rose from 33% in 1937 to 92% in 1999 (Newport 1999a). Support for the rights of homosexual persons has emerged more recently. In 1977, 56% of Americans supported equal job opportunities for homosexual persons; by 2003, almost 90% did so. By 2003, 60% of Americans agreed that homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal, up from 43% in 1977 (Newport 2004). The percentage of Americans who believe that marriages between homosexuals should be legal grew from 27% in March 1996 to 42% in May 2004. Although the majority still opposes gay marriage, in May 2004 for the first time more Americans supported (49%) than opposed (48%) civil unions for gays, "giving them some of the legal rights of married couples" (Moore and Carroll 2004).

### **DO AMERICANS SUPPORT UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS?**

National polls do not show a similar increase in support for human rights abroad. Before the 1970s, very few polls asked Americans about their support for international human rights. Beginning in 1978, the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) through The Gallup Organization has asked Americans every 4 years to rate the importance of various American foreign policy goals, including that of "promoting and defending human rights in other countries." Samples of both the general public and opinion leaders (including members of the US House of Representatives and Senate, senior administrative staff, leaders of business, labor, and education) have been drawn. Also at 4-year intervals, beginning in 1976, the Foreign Policy

Leadership Project asked the same goals of foreign policy leaders. Off-year polls have also occasionally included ratings of these goals.

At first glance, American support for human rights appears to be strong. In the June–July 2002 poll, 47% of Americans rated the human rights goal as “very important” and an additional 43% rated it as “somewhat important” (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations 2002). Averaging across all these polls since 1978, 42% of Americans have rated this goal as very important, with an additional 22% choosing somewhat important (McFarland and Mathews, 2005).

But four considerations suggest this apparent support for human rights is misleading. First, Americans’ rating of this goal is unstable, fluctuating greatly with major events. The highpoint of support came in 1990 with the euphoria of the fall of the Berlin wall and the ending of communist regimes in eastern Europe, when 58% rated this goal as very important. But 3 years later, when American troops were deployed on an unpopular mission in Somalia, just 28% rated this goal as very important (Holsti 2000). There has been no trend toward greater support from the 1970s through 2002; rather, this support waxes and wanes with the events of the times.

Second, the human rights goal consistently ranks below goals that serve national self-interests. In 2002, supporting human rights ranked just 15th of 20 goals listed, far behind all goals reflecting national self-interests such as “protecting the jobs of American workers” (85% very important), “stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the United States” (81%), “controlling and reducing illegal immigration” (70%), and “maintaining superior military power worldwide” (68%) (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations 2002). At the time of this writing, the human rights goal was asked most recently on February 3–6, 2003. At that time, 50% responded that the goal was very important and 36% said somewhat important. Although most questions regarding national self-interests were not asked in that survey, the goal of “securing adequate supplies of energy” was rated as very important by 68%, following only “preventing future acts of international terrorism” at 87% (Saad 2003). This high importance but low ranking of human rights has been consistent across the surveys. Even at the 1990 highpoint, the human rights goal ranked just sixth of 17 goals, behind all the national self-interests noted here (Holsti 2000).

Third, American support for human rights abroad appears to depend strongly upon the costs of providing it. In June 1999, against the backdrop of American and NATO intervention to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, The Gallup Organization asked the following:

Now we’d like you to think about the use of the United States military in the past few years to stop human rights atrocities such as mass killings or ethnic cleansing. Do you think the United States should use the U.S. military more often than it has been, about the same, or less often to stop these kinds of atrocities?

American ambiguity about such interventions was clear, with 24% selecting more often, 43% about the same, and 29% less often (Saad 1999). On the other hand,

Americans appear more willing to use economic measures to advance human rights. In 1999 and again in 2000, The Gallup Organization asked whether the United States should “increase trade with China NOW, because doing so will promote more economic, political and religious freedoms in that country, or the US should NOT increase trade with China until the Chinese government gives more economic, political and religious freedom to its citizens?” On both occasions, better than 60% favored the latter option (Newport 1999b, 2000). During the war in Kosovo, Gallup asked, “Do you favor or oppose the presence of U.S. ground troops, along with troops from other countries, *in an international peacekeeping force* in Kosovo?” In June 1999, fully 66% of the American public favored this role. However, when asked, “Do you favor or oppose sending U.S. ground troops along with troops from other NATO countries *to serve in a combat situation* in the region?” just 40% favored and 55% opposed doing so (Moore 1999).

Finally, human rights as a foreign policy concern has low salience for many Americans; many consider human rights in weighing policy options only when reminded of its relevance. As noted above, more than 60% opposed increasing trade with China until its human rights record improves. But for parallel samples not reminded of China’s human rights record, 54% favored increased trade with China in 1999 (Newport 1999b) and 56% did so in 2000 (Newport 2000).

College students similarly assign substantial importance but low priority to human rights. The only nationwide representative survey of college students on this issue, the “1980 Global Understanding Student Survey” (Barrows 1981), found that 68% of more than 3,000 students (half freshmen, half seniors) rated the “denial of basic human rights” as a “very important” problem, but that percentage was lower than for national self-interest issues such as “inflation” (80%) or “unemployment” (73%). Attitudes toward human rights were also assessed by four statements embedded in a long questionnaire. One item said, “Political freedom is a basic human right, and no government should be permitted to abridge it.” One negatively worded statement read, “It is none of our business if governments restrict the personal freedom of their citizens.” On the surface, these American students were very supportive of human rights, as between 80% and 95% agreed with the positive statements and fewer than 20% agreed with the above negatively worded statement. However, responses to other statements suggest that these attitudes are superficial. For example, 45% of college seniors agreed that “we should have a world government with the power to make laws that would be binding on all its member nations,” but in a related question, which noted the loss of sovereignty a world government would create, fewer than 15% believed that “the United States ought to be willing to give up its independence and submit to the authority of a United States of the World.”

In summary, although the majority of Americans agree that human rights are important and should be a component of American foreign policy, concern for human rights is substantially influenced by current events, ranks consistently below issues of national self-interest, wanes as the cost of supporting human rights increases, and is not spontaneously considered by many Americans as a factor on specific foreign policy issues.

### IS EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS GENUINE?

Because many rights (freedom of speech, religion, etc.) are a part of the American creed, respondents may endorse human rights in a superficial manner rather than with a true commitment. This distinction is illustrated by one study in which 60% of a youth sample agreed with the statement, "I believe in free speech for all no matter what their views might be," but just 21% were willing to allow a communist to speak in their city (Zellman and Sears 1971). The gap between expressed agreement with any ideal and commitment to its realization may be substantial. Measures that ask respondents to rate their agreement with human rights statements are the most used to study human rights attitudes, and thus responses may reflect little more than facile endorsement of a conventional cultural value. On such measures, respondents typically rate their agreement with each statement from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The Human Rights Questionnaire, for example, assesses self-rated agreement with the contents of the Universal Declaration (Diaz-Veizades *et al.* 1995). "Everyone should have the right to leave any country, even his or her own," was written to reflect Article 13. 2., "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." Most Americans likely agree with such statements, but doing so does not necessarily indicate they regard emigration rights as a significant issue of foreign or international policy.

Similarly, the Attitudes Toward Human Rights Index (ATHRI) is a collection of 40 statements designed to assess attitudes toward an array of human rights, including rights of life and well-being, freedom of speech and press, religious freedom, right of dissent, equal opportunity, privacy rights, and rights of political participation (Getz 1985). Irene Getz, its author, was aware that mere agreement with human rights principles may not indicate a genuine commitment to them and tried to address this issue by matching each of 10 "apple pie" (or "platitudinous") statements, with which most Americans might agree, with 3 "controversial" ones on the same issues. For example, the platitudinous statement, "Freedom of speech should be a basic human right," was matched with "Books should be banned if they are written by people who have been involved in un-American activities." The implication of this matching is that agreement with the both statements would reflect a discrepancy between endorsing the American ideal of freedom of speech and a willingness to grant that freedom to those judged guilty of un-American deeds. But the ATHRI is usually scored by summing across all items, making total scores susceptible to facile responding (e.g., Narvaez *et al.* 1999).

In an effort to distinguish facile endorsement from genuine support for human rights, McFarland and Mathews (2005) developed several measures of human rights support that assess a willingness to commit American resources, including troops, to the defense of human rights. One measure presented a series of important historical events with policy choices. A sample item read as follows:

In the central African country of Rwanda, rival tribal groups, Hutu and Tutsi, had a growing hatred. In 1994, the Hutu extremists began killing all Tutsi, including women, children and

babies. It quickly became evident that a deliberate genocide was beginning. United Nations personnel in the country urged the UN to send troops to stop the genocide and said that such a mission could succeed. However, the mission would be dangerous and costly. Do you think the President of the United States should have

- A. sent American troops as part of the UN mission to stop the genocide?
- B. offered supplies and transportation to troops from other nations, but not sent American troops?
- C. not become involved if no vital American interest was at stake?

Other items focused on issues such as whether the United States should have risked trying to arrest accused Serbian war criminal Ratko Mladic, ratified the International Criminal Court, cut off military aid to the anticommunist government of El Salvador in the 1980s for its human rights abuses, and the like. Each item pitted defending human rights at a cost to American self-interests against acting only on narrow American interests. The Gallup Organization item cited above that asked whether the US military should be used to stop mass killings and ethnic cleansing “much more often” to “much less often” was included. These measures were regarded as assessing “human rights commitment,” in contrast with measures that assess “human rights endorsement” by asking only about agreement with human rights principles.

The contrast between responses to the endorsement and commitment measures is substantial. More than 75% of the sample either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the items from the Human Rights Questionnaire. On the policy choices, however, just 26% thought American troops should have been used as a part of a UN mission to prevent the Rwandan genocide, whereas 41% chose the “not become involved” option. Just 15% wanted to use the American military “more often” or “much more often” to stop mass killings or ethnic cleansing, whereas 38% wanted to do so “less often” or “much less often.”

This distinction between merely endorsing principles of human rights and wanting to commit resources to their defense is important for several reasons. Recognizing this distinction leads to a more realistic interpretation of poll results that indicate strong American support for human rights. Although most Americans applaud human rights principles, the American public *en masse* does not appear to care enough about human rights to invest significant American resources and troops to defending them, even in grave situations of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Should another Rwandan genocide occur, both the national polls and smaller studies suggest that the majority of Americans would prefer for the United States to not try to stop it, either unilaterally or in conjunction with others. Also, as shown below, factors that affect endorsement of human rights often differ from those that enhance commitment to them.

### **WHO SUPPORTS HUMAN RIGHTS?**

Support for human rights is not an isolated feature of an individual; rather, this support or lack of support is integrally related to one’s values and personality. Both

the national polls and other studies using smaller samples have explored individual differences in support for human rights. These studies reveal a number of differences between those Americans who support human rights and those who do not. These differences, summarized below, are often substantial.

### **Globalism (Liberalism) Versus Political Realism**

Holsti (2000) suggested that American ambiguity toward human rights derives from the competing ideologies of political realism and liberalism. To political realists, foreign policy should focus on national self-interests, respect for state sovereignty, and noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries. Realists are typically skeptical that an international consensus concerning human rights can be obtained, and they argue that a nation's self-interests make it impossible to pursue human rights goals with consistency. As a consequence, making human rights a concern of foreign policy inevitably results in hypocrisy. Liberals respond that considerable international consistency concerning human rights has emerged since World War II, coupled with an evolution of human rights law, that there is a clear international trend toward greater concern for human rights, and that supporting human rights abroad is in the best long-term interest of the United States.

In keeping with Holsti's analysis, support for international human rights is strongly associated with a general "globalism"—a more descriptive term than "liberalism"—an ideological orientation that embraces many humanitarian and ecological values. On the national surveys, ratings of the importance of promoting human rights consistently correlate positively and strongly with ratings of "supporting democracy abroad," "combating world hunger," "improving standards of living (of other nations)," and "protecting the global environment." Opinion leaders' support for human rights cohere strongly with support for each of these other policies. This coherence is weaker for the general public, whose attitudes do not as consistently follow a philosophy of either globalism or political realism.<sup>1</sup> Barrows (1981) found a similar globalism versus realism distinction among college students. Ratings of the seriousness of denial of human rights was related to the seriousness attributed to other humanitarian and environmental issues, including "malnutrition and inadequate health care" and "depletion of natural resources."<sup>2</sup> Clearly, there is a globalist (or liberal) orientation as well as one of political realism, and support for international human rights is a part of the former.

### **Political Party and Self-Rated Liberalism**

Poll results also show that human rights support consistently relates to self-identified liberalism and Democratic party membership. Self-identified liberals in the general public have averaged about 10% more likely than conservatives to rate the CCFR human rights goal as "very important," a difference that swells to 33% among opinion leaders. Democrats in the general public have been approximately 10% more likely than Republicans to agree that promoting and defending human rights is a "very important" foreign policy goal. Among opinion leaders, the gap has averaged a whopping 26%. Independents, both among the public and opinion



leaders, generally fall between the two parties (Holsti 2000). These differences are generally replicated when polls ask about immediate issues. On the questions concerning American involvement in Kosovo cited above, Democrats were always 8 to 10% more willing than Republicans to support American actions to end ethnic cleansing there (The Gallup Organization 1999).

### **Global Knowledge**

Endorsing human rights is related to greater global knowledge. In perhaps the first study of human rights attitudes, conducted less than a year after the Universal Declaration was adopted, Grace and Van Velzer (1951) asked college students to rate their agreement with the articles in the Declaration presented in “close to verbatim form” (p. 552). The students were also asked about their knowledge of 10 nations (including Liberia, USSR, Egypt, and others). Students who reported greater knowledge about these nations were more likely to endorse the articles in the Declaration. Those with less knowledge of these countries were more likely to disagree with many of the rights in the Declaration.

Barrows (1981) measured American students’ knowledge on 13 important global issues by means of a 113-item multiple-choice questionnaire. Knowledge of human rights, 1 of the 13, was assessed by seven items. This knowledge was not substantial. Although 80% knew that the term genocide described the extermination of Jews in World War II, just 21% of the freshmen and 33% of the seniors knew that the United Nations was the source of the Universal Declaration or that the Helsinki Accords, a recent agreement at the time of the study, injected human rights into the East–West debate. Knowledge about human rights correlated positively with knowledge on all other issues, yielding a single “global knowledge” score, of which human rights was just one part. Knowledge about global affairs was related to caring about human rights (on the items cited earlier) and other global issues.<sup>3</sup> However, McFarland and Mathews (2005) found that global knowledge related to endorsing human rights as abstract principles but was not related to human rights commitment, to wanting to invest American resources to promote and defend human rights.

### **Education**

Several studies have shown that expressed concern for human rights increases with education. On Barrows’ national student survey, seniors expressed greater concern for human rights (and other global issues) than did freshmen. Scores on the ATHRI have been shown in several studies to correlate with level of formal education.<sup>4</sup> However, education appears to strengthen only the endorsement of human rights values, not a commitment to their global implementation. Greater education in America does not appear, *per se*, to increase a willingness to use American resources to defend human rights.<sup>5</sup>

## Religious Faith

Two studies found that Christian believers, particularly conservative ones, are less likely than others to support human rights, but the validity of these results is questionable. Individuals with conservative or fundamentalist religious beliefs have consistently correlated negatively with scores on the ATHRI.<sup>6</sup> However, the ATHRI includes 11 (of 40) items on issues that express concern for personal autonomy and nondiscrimination but are not human rights as defined by the Universal Declaration or international law (e.g., legalizing homosexual rights, abortion, and euthanasia). Their inclusion makes the ATHRI a measure of libertarianism rather than one of support for recognized human rights. Because conservative Christians generally oppose these libertarian positions, these items in the ATHRI almost certainly inflated the negative relation between conservative religious faith and scores on the ATHRI.

Canadian students' self-ratings of "how active you are in religious practice" negatively predicted endorsing of human rights on a measure that included issues such as free speech, emigration, freedom of religion, health care, and welfare subsistence, although these relations were weaker than those between fundamentalism and the ATHRI. Individuals who were actively religious expressed less concern for human rights in Canada and in the Third World. However, religious and nonreligious respondents were equally concerned about human rights in Russia, where the suppression of religion apparently intensified religious respondents' concern for Russians' human rights (Moghaddam and Vuksanovic 1990).<sup>7</sup> However, in the one empirical test to date, neither religious faith nor conservative religious beliefs were related to human rights commitment that involve economic costs to Americans or risks of American lives.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, the research reported to date indicates that religiousness and the conservativeness of one's religion have, at most, small negative impacts on human rights support. Clearly, its greater negative impact is on support for libertarian beliefs and practices that are not codified as international human rights.

## Ethnocentrism and Its Roots: Authoritarianism and Social Dominance

In his classic work, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport wrote, "One of the facts of which we are most certain is that people who reject one out-group will tend to reject other out-groups. If a person is anti-Jewish, he is likely to be anti-Catholic, anti-Negro, anti any out-group" (Allport 1954: 66). This tendency to reject all outgroups is most commonly labeled ethnocentrism (Adorno *et al.* 1950), although Allport referred to it as "generalized prejudice" (p. 66) because it includes religious and other prejudices that are not ethnic in nature. Such a tendency seems fundamentally at odds with support for human rights. In the only empirical test of this relationship, ethnocentrism, measured as negative attitudes toward an array of ethnic groups (Russians, American Indians, Arabs, Asians, etc.) was strongly negatively related to human rights commitment but interestingly did not correlate at all with the endorsement of human rights principles.<sup>9</sup> Ethnocentric

and nonethnocentric people equally endorse human rights as abstract ideals, but only the latter appear committed to their universal application.

Beginning during World War II, psychologists began a search for the psychological roots of individuals' ethnocentrism. It is now widely agreed that two quasi-independent qualities, the authoritarian personality and the social dominance orientation, are its most important roots (Altemeyer 1998). These two characteristics have been labeled the "lethal union" (p. 88) because of their combined effects on an array of ethnocentric attitudes. But they are quite different. The authoritarian personality consists of a psychological syndrome of interrelated qualities that includes rigid conventionalism; a very strong sense that the world is threatening; an intense self-righteousness, moral indignation, and aggressive punitiveness toward those who hold unconventional values or violate conventional moral norms; a desire for a Nazi-like strong leader whom one follows unquestioningly; and emphasis on power and toughness as the means to solve problems (Adorno 1950). It originates, at least in part, in punitive and threatening child rearing (Duckitt 2001). Using Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale, today's state-of-the-art measure, authoritarianism strongly predicted lower support among Canadians for human rights both in Canada and around the world.<sup>10</sup> However, authoritarianism, like ethnocentrism, is not related to endorsing human rights as abstract principles but correlates negatively with a willingness to commit American resources and troops to support and defend human rights abroad.<sup>11</sup>

The social dominance orientation refers to "the extent that one desires that one's in-group dominate and be superior to out-groups" (Pratto *et al.* 1994: 742). This orientation arises, at least in part, from an absence of childhood affection, which creates a lack of empathy, cold-heartedness, and a strong striving for superiority. The authoritarian sense of threat, moral self-righteousness, and punitiveness are missing from the social dominance orientation. But so is empathy for others' concerns and sympathy for their suffering. Individuals high in this orientation often express strong patriotism and concern for national dominance, but this concern is not couched in expressions of moral superiority. Social dominance strengthens support for wars that promote national dominance but weakens support for wars fought for humanitarian goals such as protecting human rights.<sup>12</sup> Individuals high in social dominance are somewhat lower than others in endorsing abstract human rights principles but they are particularly less willing to commit American resources and troops to promote and defend human rights around the world.<sup>13</sup>

### **Belief in a Malleable World Versus Fatalism**

A willingness to promote and defend human rights requires a belief that it is possible to improve our world. An attitude of fatalism toward the world inhibits that willingness. Individuals who agree with statements such as "Our world has its basic and ingrained dispositions, and you really can't do much to change it," seeing the world as fixed and unchangeable, tend to hold a "duty-based morality"; they are prone to view morality primarily as loyalty to one's social duties. Those who disagree with such statements, seeing the world as malleable and open to improvement

through human effort, are more likely to judge moral actions according to the moral principles of justice and rights. Those with a fixed view are prone to see violations of social norms as worse than violations of individual rights; those with a malleable world view see the latter violations as worse (Chiu *et al.* 1997). Holding a fixed versus a malleable view of the world does not influence endorsement of human rights principles, but holding a malleable view increases a willingness to commit troops and resources to defend human rights.<sup>14</sup>

### Postconventional Moral Reasoning

In his influential theory of moral development, Lawrence Kohlberg described a progression of moral reasoning across three levels as one passes from childhood to maturity. At the earliest or “preconventional” level, the child—or morally retarded adult—is able to consider only punishment and gain in making moral judgments; acts that are punished are wrong, those that are rewarded are right. At the second or “conventional” level, reached by most during adolescence, the morality of one’s central cultural group is adopted uncritically. The majority of adults have attained but remain at the conventional level. At the highest or “postconventional” level, attained by a minority of adults, individuals recognize the limitations of their own culture’s morality, understand cultural relativity, and move toward an ethical reasoning that is abstract and appeals to universal principles such as justice (Kohlberg 1969). Rest *et al.*’s (1974) Defining Issues Test (DIT), recently revised (Rest *et al.* 1999), is used in many studies to assess an individual’s use of postconventional moral reasoning.

As one would expect, postconventional moral reasoning leads to greater human rights commitment (Rest *et al.* 1999).<sup>15</sup> But because many human rights principles are conventional norms in American society, individuals without postconventional moral reasoning appear equally likely to endorse human rights principles (McFarland and Mathews, 2005). Importantly, those high in postconventional moral reasoning are more likely to apply human rights principles consistently, even when their application is controversial. In one study using the ATHRI, only 12% of those with high postconventional moral reasoning were inconsistent in their responses to the noncontroversial and controversial items, whereas 64% of those with low postconventional moral reasoning were inconsistent, generally agreeing with the noncontroversial human rights items but disavowing their controversial applications (Getz 1985). Postconventional moral reasoning also predicts teenagers’ political tolerance, defined as a “willingness to extend basic human rights to one’s least-liked socio-political group” (Avery 1988: 183). Avery asked teenagers to identify the group they like least (e.g., Ku Klux Klan, atheists, communists, etc.) and then asked whether members of this group should have 12 rights drawn from the Universal Declaration (e.g., “A *member of this group* should not be allowed to vote”). Those with postconventional moral reasoning were more willing to extend human rights even to the group they most disliked.

## **Dispositional Empathy**

Dispositional empathy refers to one's tendency to view another's situation with compassion and understanding. It is most commonly measured by a scale developed by Mark Davis (1983) that assesses emotional empathy for those in distress, along with the degree to which one tries to view others' situations and concerns from the others' points of view. These facets of empathy, which are highly related to each other, express an inherent concern for others that seems to imply support for human rights. In the one empirical test, dispositional empathy predicted both endorsement of human rights principles and a willingness to commit American resources to their defense (McFarland and Mathews, 2005).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As this review makes clear, support for human rights is not rooted in a single personality disposition, value, or outlook. Rather, a number of factors reinforce it while others weaken it. However, these factors are themselves interrelated. In general terms, ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, fatalism, and social dominance are all related to one another, and globalism is negatively related to these four. Education and global knowledge are similarly related but only weakly related to the previous group of five. Principled moral reasoning is only slightly related to any of these other factors (McFarland and Mathews, 2005). Research has not yet established which of these characteristics constitute primary causes and which are secondary correlates. Doing so will be a complex task.

Why do some individuals develop a commitment to human rights whereas most do not? This important question has been studied rarely. Jennings (1996) asked young American human rights activists to describe how they became activists. From their own retrospection, their activism arose from a growing criticism of American society's parochialism, isolationism, and exclusionary tendencies, coupled with an emerging view of oneself as connected with all human beings, including victims of oppression. These led, in turn, to a self-identity as one who cares about human rights and to a sense of moral obligation to champion human rights. In a very different and non-American context, Thalhammer (2001) found that Argentines' human rights activism against the military dictatorship of the 1980s was associated with having friends in different social classes and religions, with being politically active before the military coup, and with having had frightening experiences before the military dictatorship, experiences that appeared to prepare activists to defy the dictatorship.

Education for human rights is a vital task, and a number of laudable innovative curricula for teaching human rights have been developed (e.g., Ely-Yamin 1993; Tolley 1998; Krain and Nurse 2004). Nevertheless, the current review points toward the importance of early child rearing in preparing a seed bed for later human rights support. To the degree that, as Duckitt has shown, punitiveness and a lack of affection in childhood induce authoritarianism and social dominance, these early experiences prepare one to be ethnocentric and concerned for superiority and power rather than to adopt global concerns such as human rights. A child who receives substantial affection and little punitiveness may never become a champion

of human rights, but that child has better emotional preparation for later embracing human rights and other global concerns. Concerning moral reasoning, Hart (1988) in a longitudinal study found that moral reasoning development was predicted by paternal involvement in child rearing and by parents' ratings of an adolescent's "conscious strength" (e.g., "To what extent is your child guided and controlled by his conscience?"). Focusing mainly on adolescence, Rest (1988) summarized results of studies using the Defining Issues Test as follows:

The people who develop moral judgment are those who love to learn, who seek new challenges, who enjoy intellectually stimulating environments, who are reflective, who make plans and set goals, who take risks, who see themselves in the larger social contexts of history and institutions and broad cultural trends, who take responsibility for themselves and their environs (p. 117).

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, the struggle to advance human rights has slowly become a vital feature of global politics. This struggle is not just against tyrants and fanatics. It is also for the commitment of those who live in democratic nations, for without their insistence, democratically elected leaders will rarely give priority to protecting human rights around the world.

Those engaged in the struggle might well wish for greater optimism than the research cited here inspires. Powerful dispositions and modes of moral reasoning are molded during childhood and adolescence, and these shape substantially one's later concern or lack of concern for human rights. As long as authoritarianism, social dominance, and less than principled moral reasoning remain the norm, Americans' commitment to human rights seems likely to remain a secondary concern for the majority of Americans and a genuine commitment of only a minority.

However, the situation is not hopeless. The majority of Americans *do* weigh human rights concerns when reminded of their relevance. Although the majority appear unwilling to risk American troops to defend others' human rights, they are willing to take less costly actions such as withholding trade. Newport (2000), commenting on the discrepant support for increased trade with China when participants were or were not reminded of China's human rights record, wrote "These findings suggest that the public's view on the human rights issue are not firmly established, and that the way in which the issue is framed can have a major impact on these attitudes. This suggests that the human rights argument is one that could potentially hold sway with the public if correctly articulated." The moral for those who champion human rights is that they must constantly remind the public of the effects that American policies have on others' human rights.

## NOTES

1. For readers unfamiliar with this statistical measure, the only one used in this article, a positive correlation is a number ranging from .00 to 1.0 that represents the strength of a relationship between two measures. The closer to 1.0, the stronger the relationship. For the opinion leaders, ratings of the human rights goal correlated on average above .60 with the other global goals, indicating a relatively strong relationship. For the general public, the average correlation between ranking of the human rights goal and the other global goals averaged just below .35, indicating some ideological coherence but weaker than among the opinion leaders.

2. Unfortunately, the method of Barrows' reporting makes it impossible to know the exact magnitude of these seriousness ratings.
3. The correlation between global knowledge and caring about human rights was .32 for seniors, .24 for freshmen.
4. Getz reported a correlation of .34 between the ATHRI and level of formal education.
5. McFarland and Mathews (2005) found that level of formal education correlated .21 with endorsing human rights principles but was not related to human rights commitment.
6. A negative correlation, which can range from .00 to  $-1.0$ , indicates that as one measure increases, the other decreases. Negative and positive correlations of the same magnitude (e.g., .60 and  $-.60$ ) are equal in strength but opposite in the direction of the relationship. Narvaez *et al.* (1999) found that Christian fundamentalism correlated  $-.63$  with the ATHRI, indicating that fundamentalists were *less* supportive of human rights on Getz's measure.
7. Moghaddam and Vuksanovic found correlations of Canadians' religiousness with support for human rights in Canada and the "third world" of  $-.30$  and  $-.36$ , respectively. Correlation between Canadians' religiousness and their support for human rights in the Soviet Union was effectively zero.
8. McFarland and Mathews found that neither self-rated religiousness nor religious conservatism was related to human rights commitment.
9. McFarland and Mathews (2005) found that ethnocentrism correlated  $-.57$  with human rights commitment but was not related to endorsing human rights principles.
10. Moghaddam and Vuksanovic found correlations across two studies ranging from  $-.42$  to  $-.66$ .
11. McFarland and Mathews (2005) found that authoritarianism correlated  $-.33$  with human rights commitment but was not at all related to the endorsement of human rights principles.
12. Pratto *et al.* (1994) found that social dominance correlated  $+.31$  with support for wars of national dominance but  $-.41$  for support for wars fought for humanitarian ends.
13. McFarland and Mathews obtained correlations of  $-.25$  and  $-.52$  between social dominance with human rights endorsement and commitment, respectively.
14. McFarland and Mathews found that viewing the world as malleable correlated .30 with human rights commitment but not at all with endorsing human rights as principles.
15. Across a number of studies, the Defining Issues Test correlated between .52 and .65 with ATHRI scores on various samples. McFarland and Mathews obtained a correlation of .29 between the DIT and commitment to human rights.

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