Abstract: This paper investigates how human rights and democracy affect public support for war. Our experiments, embedded in public opinion surveys, support several major findings. First, respect for human rights has an enormous effect on mass public support for war. Other factors equal, citizens are much less likely to strike a country that respects human rights than a country that violates them, even when the military dispute is not about human rights violations. Second, our experiments shed light on causal mechanisms. We demonstrate that human rights practices affect attitudes toward war primarily by changing perceptions about threat and morality. Our findings provide microfoundations for a “human rights” peace that is distinct from—and potentially more powerful than—the democratic peace.
1. Introduction

Despite significant progress over the last century, many governments around the world violate the human rights of their citizens. In 2010, 85 percent of countries carried out at least one documented instance of torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, or disappearance, and nearly 60 percent of countries committed frequent violations on at least one of these dimensions (CIRI 2011).

Scholars have recently begun to investigate the relationship between human rights and interstate conflict. They find that, other factors equal, domestic respect for human rights has been associated with peaceful foreign relations (Caprioli and Trumbore 2006, Sobek, Abouharb, and Ingram 2006, Peterson and Graham 2011). The historical correlation persists regardless whether countries are democratic or autocratic, suggesting that human rights could be a distinct source of peace, independent of formal political institutions.

Although these studies break new ground, we still have much to learn about the apparent relationship between rights and peace. First, can we be confident that observed correlation is causal? As is often the case with historical research, problems of multicollinearity, omitted variables, and endogeneity make it difficult to know whether human rights actually contribute to peace, or whether other factors could be responsible.

Second, what mechanisms could be driving the rights-peace relationship? One plausible mechanism involves threat perception: when a country violates human rights, other states might infer that the country would use violence internationally, as well. Another possibility involves morality: human rights violations could affect perceptions about the ethics of military intervention. Respect for human rights could affect other considerations, as well, including the costs of fighting and the likelihood of success. To date, no studies have directly adjudicated among these competing mechanisms.

Finally, can we put recent work on firmer microfoundations? The existing literature focuses on the behavior of states, without also examining the preferences and perceptions of citizens who shape leaders’ decisions, particularly in democratic countries. A number of studies have highlighted public opinion as a potential source of peace, and recent work has shown that citizens in democracies are substantially less likely to attack fellow democracies (Johns and Davies 2012, Lacina and Lee 2013, Tomz and Weeks 2013). To date, though, researchers have not assessed whether human rights practices affect public support for war.

In this paper we use survey-based experiments to address all three questions. Our experiments, administered to representative samples in the United States and the United Kingdom, describe a country that is developing nuclear weapons. We randomly and independently varied information about the country’s human rights record and political regime, while holding other factors (including its alliance status, economic ties, and military power) constant. After describing the situation, we asked individuals whether they would support or oppose a preventive military strike against the country’s nuclear facilities.

We find that both American and British citizens are more willing to use military force against a country that violates human rights, than against an otherwise equivalent country that respects the rights of its own citizens. The effect of human rights is at least as large as the effect of democracy, and arises even when the interstate dispute concerns a pure
security issue (nuclear proliferation) that has nothing to do with the treatment of individuals. Because the treatments in our experiment were randomized, we can be confident that the effects were causal, rather than spurious.

Our experiments also reveal why this relationship exists. We find that human rights practices affect preferences about war primarily by changing perceptions of threat and morality. In our studies, respondents were more likely to view human rights violators as threatening, and they felt a stronger moral obligation to intervene. Our findings thus provide microfoundations for a “human rights” peace that is distinct from—and potentially more powerful than—the democratic peace.

2. Human Rights and Public Support for War

It is now widely accepted that public opinion affects leaders’ decisions to use military force. While early research claimed that public opinion did not play an important role in foreign policy decisions (Almond 1960 and Wildavsky 1966), numerous recent studies have shown that mass opinion matters, particularly in democracies. Leaders know that citizens care about foreign policy, that foreign policy plays a role in electoral campaigns, and that foreign policy mistakes can have consequences at the ballot box (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989, Gronke, Koch, and Wilson 2003, Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007).

Public opinion also affects whether the leader is able to overcome institutional hurdles to war (Morgan and Campbell 1991, Lindsay 1994, Hildebrandt et al. 2013) and raise revenues for military operations (Hartley and Russett 1992, Narizny 2003, Flores-Macias and Kreps 2013). Furthermore, popular leaders are more likely to achieve both domestic and international policy goals than unpopular leaders.1 Consistent with these arguments, countless studies have concluded that, in decisions about using force, democratic leaders pay close attention to public opinion (Rosenau 1961, Mueller 1973, Russett 1990, Foyle 1999, Sobel 2001, Reiter and Stam 2002, Baum 2004, Holsti 2004, Canes-Wrone 2006, Baum and Potter 2008, Berinsky 2009, Chapman 2011).

But how do voters decide when military force is warranted? Previous work has emphasized four categories of perceptions that affect public support for war. When deciding whether to support a military engagement, citizens consider the level of external threat, the morality of using force, the material costs of using force, and the predicted likelihood of success.

We hypothesize that the human rights practices of countries could affect all four considerations. Our hypotheses are informed by the enormous literature about the democratic peace, which explains how political institutions provide clues about threat, color perceptions of morality, and influence the costs of war and the likelihood of success. We summarize the existing claims about democracy, and adapt them to the topic of human rights.

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Threat Perception

The first input into the decision for war is perception of threat, or whether another state intends hostile action. According to some theories of the democratic peace, citizens in democracies believe it is right to solve domestic disagreements peacefully, and they transfer those nonviolent norms to their relations with fellow democracies. Democracies trust that, when dealing with other democracies, they will resolve disputes peacefully rather than with military force (Doyle 1986, Maoz and Russett 1993, Russett 1993, Dixon 1994, Owen 1994, Risse-Kappen 1995). In contrast, nondemocratic governments frequently use violence against their own citizens. Recognizing this fact, citizens and leaders in democracies assume that autocracies will apply violent norms to their international behavior, as well. A related argument suggests that democracy reduces perceptions of threat by signaling shared interests, rather than shared norms. In this view, democracies perceive each other as unthreatening because they assume that democracies have similar foreign policy interests (Oneal and Russett 1999).

Although these arguments were developed to explain the democratic peace, similar predictions could be made about human rights. First, human rights practices provide strong clues about domestic and international norms of conflict resolution. Bonta (1996) has argued that countries with peaceful norms for resolving internal disputes are also significantly less likely to engage in violence against outsiders. Caprioli and Trumbore (2003, 2006) echo this view, and find that countries that violate human rights by engaging in torture, imprisonment, disappearance, or government killings engage in foreign military conflicts more frequently than countries that respect their citizens.² Sobek, Abouharb, and Ingram (2006) and Peterson and Graham (2011) argue that countries expect normative transfer to occur, and show that joint respect for human rights reduces the likelihood of conflict between two countries. Second, as with democracies, human rights practices could affect beliefs about shared interests, further reducing perceptions of threat.

While these studies have made important strides by discovering historical correlations between respect for human rights and international conflict, they do not test whether individuals view human rights-abusing countries as more threatening, how the effects of human rights compare to those of democracy, and how those beliefs shape support for war. Our experiments complement the previous work by measuring individual perceptions of threat perceptions, and by tracing the link between human rights, threat perception, and support for war.

Morality

A growing body of scholarship has argued that moral values affect how the public thinks about foreign policy.³ Moral beliefs shape preferences about military force

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² Similarly, Mitchell and Trumbore (2014) find that human rights violators are more likely to press territorial claims.
(Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, Liberman 2006, Stein 2012), and individuals often cite morality when explaining their views on military intervention (Hermann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; see also Reifler et al. 2014). Moral concerns also affect how countries fight wars, including decisions about using biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons (Price 1995, Price and Tannenwald 1996, Tannenwald 1999) or engaging in torture (Nincic and Ramos 2011).

Elsewhere, we have argued that morality contributes to the democratic peace (Tomz and Weeks 2013). Many citizens in democracies have moral qualms about striking fellow democracies. Some deem it illegitimate to use force to overturn the policies of another democracy, because this would constitute an attack on individual freedom and self-determination. Using force to overturn the policies of a dictator whose actions do not necessarily reflect the will of his own citizens, in contrast, would not present the same moral problem.5

Following a similar logic, a poor human rights record could invite war by reducing moral qualms about a military intervention. Liberman (2006) argues that people have moral beliefs about retribution and humanitarianism, and that “the prospect of war against evil regimes arouses [these] moral feelings” (688). For this reason, “public awareness of foreign evildoing and suffering should result in predictable collective responses” (689), such as higher support for using military force against perceived evildoers. When citizens learn that a foreign government is abusing its own citizens, this could heighten perceptions that the regime is evil and deserves censure (Stein 2014). For this reason, citizens might have fewer moral reservations about attacking governments that harm their own citizens. Moreover, citizens might feel a duty—a positive moral obligation—to intervene against countries that violate human rights, perhaps because this could help the country transition to a government that treats its citizens more fairly. These morally-driven retributive and humanitarian motives could powerfully affect mass support for using military force.

If morality is an independent cause of peace between countries that respect human rights, we would expect to find a moral aversion to using force against other countries that uphold human rights, separate from perceptions of threat or other factors. Using survey experiments, we can isolate the effect of human rights on mass beliefs about the morality of striking.

**The Costs of Fighting and the Likelihood of Success**

When thinking about war, citizens also weigh the costs of fighting (Geys 2010; Flores-Macias and Kreps 2015) and the likelihood of success (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006). Scholars have argued that democracy could affect both of these factors. For instance, Lake (1992), Reiter and Stam (2002), and Bueno de Mesquita et al. (1999) argue that wars against democracies are particularly costly because leaders of democracies can mobilize greater resources and have powerful incentives to win the wars

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4 See also Dolan 2013 on conflicting norms and Press, Sagan, and Valentino (2013) for skepticism about the moral foundations of the nuclear taboo.

they start. Following this logic, citizens might be deterred from attacking democracies because they believe such conflicts would be expensive and doomed to failure.

How might perceptions of human rights affect calculations of cost and success? We anticipate two countervailing effects. On the one hand, observers might expect that countries that respect human rights, therefore signaling their pacific norms, would be a reluctant and restrained adversary. This could lower the anticipated costs of fighting and raise expectations of success. But respect for human rights could also trigger the opposite perception. For instance, a government that respects human rights may enjoy widespread support from its own citizens, allowing it to fight more effectively. Moreover, attacking a country that respects human rights could hurt relations with other countries and cause allies to flee. Our experiments will measure the net effect of these countervailing possibilities.

3. Research Design

To study whether and why human rights practices affect public opinion about war, we administered a survey experiment to a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults. The experiment was administered by YouGov, an internet-based polling firm, to 1,430 respondents in October 2012.

We began by telling participants: “We are going to describe a situation the United States could face in the future. For scientific validity the situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. Please read the details very carefully.”

Respondents then received a vignette about a country that was developing nuclear weapons. We chose the topic of nuclear proliferation not only for comparability with previous research about the effect of democracy on preferences about war (Tomz and Weeks 2013), but also to see how human rights practices affect perceptions in a policy domain that is not directly related to the treatment of citizens.

The vignette said: “A country is developing nuclear weapons and will have its first nuclear bomb within six months. The country could then use its missiles to launch nuclear attacks against any country in the world.” Participants were told that the country did not have high levels of trade with the U.S, that the country had not signed a military alliance with the U.S., and that the country’s conventional military strength was half the U.S. level. We mentioned these factors to prevent assumptions about alliances, trade, and power from confounding the effects of our randomized treatments.

We then randomly assigned information about the human rights practices and the regime type of the potential adversary, resulting in a 2x2 experimental design. To manipulate perceptions of human rights, we told some respondents that “The country

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6 See for example Reiter and Stam 2002.
does not violate human rights; it does not imprison or torture its citizens because of their beliefs,” while telling others that “The country violates human rights; it imprisons or tortures some of its citizens because of their beliefs.” Likewise, some respondents learned that “The country is a democracy. The president, the legislature, and local councils are elected by the people,” while others read that “The country is not a democracy. The people do not have the power to choose the leader.”

The scenario concluded with several additional points that were identical for everyone. Respondents were told that “the country’s motives remain unclear, but if it builds nuclear weapons, it will have the power to blackmail or destroy other countries.” Additionally, they learned that the country had “refused all requests to stop its nuclear weapons program.” Finally, the scenario explained that “by attacking the country’s nuclear development sites now,” the U.S. could “prevent the country from making any nuclear weapons.”

After presenting this information, we asked whether respondents would favor or oppose using the U.S. armed forces to attack the nuclear development sites. We also included a series of questions to measure perceptions of threat, morality, cost, and success, with the goal of shedding light on causal mechanisms. The full text of the experiment is provided in the appendix [to be written].

4. Findings

The Effects of Human Rights and Democracy on Support for Military Strikes

The two randomized treatments, human rights and democracy, profoundly affected support for a U.S. military strike. As Figure 1 shows, 63 percent of Americans wanted to attack when the country not only violated human rights but also had nondemocratic institutions.8 Attitudes toward mixed regimes were more evenly split: roughly half of Americans supported strikes against democracies that violated human rights, or against autocracies that respected human rights. Finally, public enthusiasm for military action was weakest (only 32 percent) when the potential adversary not only respected human rights but also had democratic institutions.

8 To construct Figure 1, we created a dependent variable that was coded 100 if the respondent supported a military strike, and 0 otherwise. We regressed the dependent variable on indicators for each treatment condition, while controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables that by chance could have been correlated with the treatment conditions. Our controls were hawkishness, internationalism, conservative political views, ethnocentrism, religiosity, gender, race, age, and level of education. We used the model to estimate what public support under each experimental condition. Had we computed means without controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables, the results would have been nearly identical: 64%, 50%, 47%, and 33%. Details of the analysis and additional tables are included in the appendix.
Figure 1: Support for a U.S. military strike, by experimental condition

Note: The dots show the average support for a military strike; the horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Using the values in Figure 1, we computed conditional and unconditional effects for each randomized treatment. The top portion of Figure 2 summarizes the impact of human rights. On average, respondents were 17 percentage points less willing to strike countries that respected human rights, than otherwise equivalent countries that violated human rights. Moreover, human rights proved consequential not only when the target was a democracy (19.1 points), but also when it was an autocracy (14.5 points). The difference between these two values was substantively small and statistically insignificant.

The bottom portion of Figure 2 confirms that democracy exerted an independent effect on preferences for war; it reduced the willingness to strike by more than 14 percentage points. The effect was substantial not only when the country respected human rights (16.6 points) but also when it violated them (11.9 points).
Figure 2: Effects of human rights and democracy on support for a U.S. military strike

Note: The dots show the unconditional and conditional effects of each randomized treatment; the horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

In summary, our study provides the first experimental evidence about the effects of human rights on public attitudes toward war. Our data show that human rights contribute to peace, regardless of the regime type of the target. Moreover, the effect of human rights is at least as large as the effect of democracy. Later, we explore whether these effects hold when we modify our experimental design in various ways, such as naming a specific country or geographic region.

The Effects of Human Rights and Democracy on the Mediators

Why do human rights and democracy affect support for war? We tested four mediators: perceptions of threat, morality, success, and cost. Figure 3 displays the average effect of human rights (black circles) and democracy (gray squares) on each mediator. The focus on average effects is not only concise but also empirically justified. A supplementary appendix [to be written] confirms that human rights exerted a consistent effect on the mediators, regardless of whether the target was a democracy or an autocracy. Likewise, the appendix shows that the impact of democracy on the mediators was approximately the same whether the target respected or violated human rights.
To measure perceptions of threat, we asked respondents to rate the likelihood that each of the following events would occur if the U.S. did not attack: the country would threaten to use nuclear weapons against another country; threaten to use them against the U.S. or a U.S. ally; launch a nuclear attack against another country; and launch a nuclear attack against the U.S. or a U.S. ally.\textsuperscript{9} We scaled each response from 0 (almost no chance) to 100 (nearly certain) and computed the mean of all four. On average, countries that respected human rights were seen as substantially less threatening than countries that violated human rights. Countries with democratic institutions also scored much lower on the threat perception scale.

The randomized treatments also affected beliefs about of morality. After presenting the vignette, we asked respondents whether the U.S. had a strong a moral obligation, a weak moral obligation, or no moral obligation to attack the country’s nuclear development sites. We also inquired whether it would be morally wrong for the U.S. military to attack the country’s nuclear development sites. We combined both items into a morality index, which ranged from 0 (immoral to strike) to 100 (moral to strike). As Figure 3 shows, the perceived morality of military action was much lower when the country had democratic institutions, and lower still when the country respected human rights or had democratic institutions.

\textsuperscript{9} Respondents chose from five response options: almost no chance, 25\% chance, 50-50 chance, 75\% chance, or nearly 100\% certain.
Finally, we studied how the treatments affected perceptions of success and cost. We elicited beliefs about success by asking: if the U.S. does attack, what are the chances that it will prevent the country from making nuclear weapons in the near future, and also in the long run. Our success index is the mean of these two items, each running from 0 (almost no chance) to 100 (nearly certain). In a similar fashion, we measured cost on a scale from 0 to 100 by averaging expectations that a U.S. attack would prompt each of the following outcomes: the country would respond by attacking the U.S. or U.S. ally; the U.S. military would suffer many casualties; the U.S. economy would suffer; and U.S. relations with other countries would suffer.

Our treatments had only minor effects on perceptions of success and cost. Respondents were slightly less optimistic about the probability of success when the target respected human rights or had democratic institutions. Respondents also anticipated that striking democratic or rights-abiding countries would entail higher costs, on average. The effects were substantively small, though, and in 3 of 4 cases they were statistically indistinguishable from zero.

In summary, our treatments affected some but not all of the hypothesized mediators. Respect for human rights substantially reduced perceptions of threat and morality, while having relatively little impact on the expected cost of fighting or the likelihood of winning. Democracy generated similar patterns: allaying fears and shaping morality, but barely moving beliefs about costs and success.

**Effects of the Mediators on Support for Military Strikes**

After estimating how the treatments affected the mediators, we investigated how the mediators affected support for strikes. Recall that our survey asked about the mediators instead of randomizing them. As a consequence, we needed to control for variables that could confound the relationship between the mediators and the outcome. Hence, we regressed support for a military strike on all four mediators, while controlling for the randomized treatments and myriad attributes of the respondent: hawkishness, internationalism, conservative political views, ethnocentrism, religiosity, gender, race, age, and level of education. The appendix describes how these variables were constructed and presents the estimates from the regression model.¹⁰

All four mediators proved potent. To quantify the absolute and relative importance of each mediator, we calculated how support for war would change if we increased each mediator from its minimum value of 0 to its maximum value of 100, while holding all other variables constant. The estimated effects for threat, morality, success, and cost were 47 percent, 52 percent, 15 percent, and -19 percent, respectively. All these estimates are not only sizable but also statistically significant.

¹⁰We used linear regression not only to simplify the exposition, but also to ensure that estimates from the mediation analysis were consistent with the values in Figures 1 and 2. When, as a robustness check, we estimated a probit model, the average treatment effect (found by regressing the outcome on the treatments) differed slightly from the sum of causal mechanisms (found by estimating a mediation models and summing the direct and indirect pathways). Fortunately, our substantive conclusions remained the same. For details see the appendix.
**Estimated Causal Pathways**

We have now estimated the effects of human rights and democracy on each mediator, and the effect of each mediator on support for military strikes. By joining these parts of the causal chain, we can see how perceptions of threat, morality, cost, and success mediate the relationships between our two experimental treatments—human rights and democracy—and public preferences regarding the use of force. The appendix describes our algorithm for calculating the proportion of the treatment effect that was transmitted through each mediator.

Using this algorithm, we estimated to what extent the effects of our randomized treatments (Figure 2) were transmitted via each of the four mediators. Recall that respect for human rights reduced support for a military strike by 17 percentage points, on average. Table 1 shows that about 26 percent of that effect arose because human rights changed perceptions of threat, and an additional 41 percent arose because human rights altered perceptions of morality. The mediatory roles of cost and success were much weaker; each accounted for less than 2 percent of the total. Together, threat and morality mediated more than two-thirds of the total effect, whereas perceptions of cost and success played no significant role in the causal chain.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Human Rights</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Threat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
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<td>34.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>1.6 %</td>
<td>3.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>1.7 %</td>
<td>2.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>29.7 %</td>
<td>34.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>100.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a similar way we decomposed the effects of democracy. As noted earlier, support for military strikes was approximately 14 percentage points lower when the target was a democracy than when it was an autocracy. Table 1 attributes about 25% of that effect to the threat mechanism, and an additional 34% to concerns about morality. Once again, cost and success played insubstantial roles.

To summarize, human rights and democracy promoted peace mainly by influencing beliefs about threat and morality, rather than changing perceptions about cost and success. One should not conclude, however, that citizens are insensitive to the costs of fighting and the probability of success. On the contrary, the participants in our study were significantly less enthusiastic about military action when they believed that strikes would be costly or unsuccessful. The reason that cost and success did not mediate the effects of human rights and democracy, is because those political conditions had only a negligible effect on perceptions of costs and success (Figure 3).
5. Discussion and extensions

We found that Americans were less willing to attack countries that respect human rights, even when the military dispute was not about human rights violations. Moreover, in our study, the effect of human rights was at least as large as the effect of democracy. Thus, our data suggest the existence of a human rights peace that is distinct from, and as powerful as, the democratic peace. We now consider several questions about our findings.

Political Consequences

One set of questions involves the political significance of the effects we found. Were the effects we observed large enough to be politically consequential? We believe so. In our experiments, human rights reduced overall willingness to strike by about 17 percentage points, while democracy had an effect of about 14 points. Shifts of that magnitude could change the nature of political debate.

The combined effects of human rights and regime type were even larger: only 32 of citizens favored strikes against democracies that respected human rights, whereas 63 wanted to attack non-democracies that violated human rights. Thus, our treatments doubled public support for war, transforming the proponents of war from a small minority into a large majority. Such shifts in opinion are important because leaders of democracies rarely go to war without public support (Reiter and Stam 2002).

The swings in opinion were even larger among the most politically engaged segments of the population. We examined the opinions of politically attentive citizens, who follow government and public affairs most of the time (57% of the sample). Within this politically attentive group, human rights reduced enthusiasm for war by 19 percentage points, versus 14 points among citizens who were less politically aware. Democracy had an 18-point effect among the politically interested, compared with an 11-point effect among those who do not follow politics closely. Thus, our treatments mattered for the people who were most likely to follow politics.

Human rights and democracy also mattered for politically active citizens who engage in concrete political acts such as attending meetings, putting up political signs, donating money, working for campaigns, or running for office. Among this group (45% of the sample), the effect of human rights was 19 points, and the effect of democracy was 21 points. Finally, our treatments mattered to voters. The pacifying effects of human rights and democracy were 17 points and 16 points, respectively, among respondents who said they voted in the 2008 election (81% of the sample).

Real and Hypothetical Scenarios

Another set of questions concerns the hypothetical nature of our scenario. We explained, “We are going to describe a situation the United States could face in the future. For scientific validity the situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today.” We purposefully avoided naming countries because we wanted to learn about the general effects of human rights and democracy, rather than impressions of particular countries or leaders. Had we asked respondents to compare real countries, we
might have lost experimental control, since countries differ on many dimensions other than human rights and democracy.

Although we had scientific reasons for keeping the scenario hypothetical, some readers might wonder whether respond differently to hypothetical situations than to real ones. Other readers might worry that our treatments prompted respondents to think about real-world countries. For example, when we described the country as a human rights violator and/or a non-democracy, participants might have assumed that we were asking about Iran or North Korea.

Previous research has gone a long way toward allaying these concerns. Scholars have found little difference in public reactions to hypothetical versus real scenarios, and to generic versus actual countries (Hermann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Berinsky 2009, 124; Horowitz and Levendusky 2011, 531-32).

Nevertheless, we assessed the robustness of our conclusions by fielding two additional studies that made our vignettes more concrete. In the first, we replicated our main experiment but made clear that the country pursuing nuclear weapons was in Africa, rather than omitting information about its geographic location. By placing the country in Africa, we signaled that we were not asking about North Korea, Iran, or other nuclear aspirants that have been in the news recently. We administered the Africa experiment in October 2012 to a diverse sample of 748 U.S. adults, whom we recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk.

Figure 4 shows that, when the target was in Africa, human rights and democracy strongly affected public support for war. The average effects of those treatments were 24 points and 9 points, respectively. As in our main study, the impact of human rights did not depend on democracy, and the impact of democracy did not vary with human rights. Finally, in the Africa study, human rights proved much more consequential than democracy, lending further credence to the idea of a human rights peace that rivals the democratic peace.
A second study focused explicitly on Iran. In May 2014 we recruited 1,472 American respondents via Amazon Mechanical Turk and presented the following scenario: “Many experts think that Iran is developing nuclear weapons and could have its first nuclear bomb within six months.” We varied information about human rights in Iran by telling some respondents that “Iran generally respects human rights; it rarely punishes its citizens because of their beliefs,” while telling others that “Iran often violates human rights; it imprisons or tortures many of its citizens because of their beliefs.” To vary our portrayal of Iranian institutions, we either said that “Iran is a democracy; the president, the legislature, and local councils are elected by the people,” or said that “Iran is not a democracy; the people do not have the power to choose their leader.” As in our other experiments, we held information about alliances, trade, and military power constant. The experiment concluded by asking whether the U.S. military should attack Iran’s nuclear development sites.

This experimental design represented a hard test for our hypotheses. If respondents entered our study with strong prior beliefs about political conditions in Iran, our vignette might not have affected their impressions. Moreover, respondents may have entered with strong opinions about the wisdom of striking Iran’s nuclear facilities, making it less likely that our treatments would sway their preferences.

Despite being a hard test, the Iran experiment confirmed the potency of human rights. Support for striking Iran fell by 17 percentage points when we characterized the country as having a good human rights record. The effect of democracy was smaller, but still noteworthy: about 5 percentage points, on average. Respondents may have assumed that real political power rests with religious leaders, including the famous Ayatollah, rather than elected politicians. In any case, Figure 5 reinforces our main findings about the effect of human rights on public support for war.
Figure 5: Effects of human rights and democracy when the target was Iran

Note: The dots show the unconditional and conditional effects of each randomized treatment; the horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Effects in Other Countries

Finally, readers might wonder whether our findings would hold if we ran similar experiments in other countries. As a step toward answering this question, we replicated our original experiment in the United Kingdom (with minor wording changes to adapt to the British context). The UK experiment was fielded in March 2014 to 1,450 adults, who were recruited by Survey Sampling International.

The UK experiment corroborated our earlier studies in the United States. When our vignette involved a country that violated human rights and was not democratic, 49 percent of UK respondents favored using the British Armed Forces to attack the country’s nuclear development sites. Support was considerably lower when the country violated human rights but had democratic institutions (40 percent) or respected human rights but lacked democratic institutions (38 percent). Finally, when the vignette involved a democratic country that respected human rights, the preference for military strikes was only 26 percent. Thus, even though the British were less militaristic than their American counterparts, the overall pattern of responses was similar in both countries.

Figure 7 summarizes the main effects of human rights and democracy on public opinion in the UK. The human rights treatment reduced British support for war by 12 percentage points, an effect that remained relatively stable, regardless of whether the target was democratic or autocratic. In a similar way, democracy sapped British enthusiasm for war by 10 percentage points, an effect that did not depend critically on whether the country respected or violated human rights. Thus, in Britain as in the United States, we found strong micro-level evidence for a human rights peace that is distinct from, and at least as strong as, the democratic peace.
Figure 7: Effects of human rights and democracy on British support for a military strike

Note: The dots show the unconditional and conditional effects of each randomized treatment; the horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

By what mechanisms did these effects arise? Using the same measures and procedures that we employed for the United States, we decomposed the effects of human rights and democracy into four mechanisms: threat, morality, success, and cost. As Table 2 shows, human rights exerted around 25% of its effect on British opinion by changing perceptions of threat, and an additional 43% by altering perceptions of morality. Beliefs about success and cost played comparatively minor roles, each accounting for only 3-5 percent of the total. Democracy activated the same mediators, and to similar degrees. These patterns closely resemble what we uncovered in the United States.

Table 2: Causal mechanisms in the UK, as a percentage of total effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Human Rights</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
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<td>Morality</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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6. Conclusion

Countries with formal democratic institutions rarely fight each other. In recent years, scholars have presented evidence that a similar relationship exists among countries that respect human rights, regardless of institutional regime type. Using historical data, several studies have uncovered a correlation between respect for human rights and peace (Caprioli and Trumbore 2006, Sobek, Abouharb, and Ingram 2006, Peterson and Graham 2011), which persists whether or not the country is democratic. But why is respecting human rights associated with peace? Is the relationship causal, what mechanisms drive it, and to what extent does human rights affect public support for war?

We used survey-based experiments to answer these fundamental questions. Our experiments revealed that citizens in the United States and the United Kingdom were significantly more willing to use military force against countries that violate human rights than otherwise identical countries that respect their citizens. Moreover, the effect of human rights was at least as large as that of democracy. By randomly and independently manipulating the human rights practices and regime type of the adversary, we were able to infer the causal effect of each.

Moreover, our experiments helped reveal why this relationship exists. We found that threat perception and concerns about morality mediate approximately two-thirds the of the relationship between the target’s human rights record and respondents’ willingness to strike. Individuals viewed the nuclear programs of human rights violators as much more threatening than those of otherwise identical countries that respected human rights. They also had fewer moral objections to attacking countries that abuse human rights, and were more likely to articulate a moral obligation to intervene. Those perceptions, in turn, motivated the desire to strike. Thus, our experiments help distinguish between possible theories, while also highlighting the often-overlooked role of morality in international affairs.

For decades, U.S. and foreign leaders have cited democracy as a way to reduce the threat of international war. Our findings suggest that respect for human rights could be an equally powerful, and independent, source of international peace, with important implications for policymakers. For example, leaders would be wise to recognize that when they violate human rights—for example through torture or political imprisonment—this engenders significant fear and distrust abroad. Committing such abuses also invites attack by making war seem morally legitimate. On the flip side, our findings suggest that respecting human rights has security benefits. Countries that respect human rights are met with trust and restraint, even when they take actions that could otherwise set off alarm bells. Thus, respecting the rights of citizens confers significant benefits abroad.
Works Cited


