STATES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND VOTING IN THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY: AN ANALYSIS OF COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RESOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT
Although human rights have become one of the most visible issues of international politics today, academic interest in states’ human rights policies remains limited. For example, there are only few works examining UN General Assembly (UNGA) human rights resolutions. Especially how states design their foreign policy on human rights and what factors influence their human rights policies are significantly understudied. In an attempt to help fill this gap, this paper quantitatively analyzes country-specific UNGA resolutions from 2000 to 2010 that target specific countries to condemn their human rights practices. The main question that this paper seeks an answer is to what extent political and economic considerations shape states’ voting behavior on country-specific human rights resolutions. For example, do democracies vote differently than non-democracies? Do states vote against the resolutions that target a country in the same region or a political-military ally? Findings of this research may enhance our understanding of the two most prominent international relations theories: Realism and Liberalism. The paper may also shed some light onto the political and economic factors that influence states’ human rights votes in the UNGA. Preliminary findings suggest that both democratic development and strategic security calculations influence states’ human rights policies.

Keywords: Human rights; Realism; Liberalism; United Nations General Assembly; Democracy; Security calculations

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INTRODUCTION

Human rights issues tend to be highly controversial. It leads to political and even economic tensions between countries. This is largely because western countries, international organizations as well as various interested parties like international non-governmental organizations use human rights issues to condemn and pressure other countries for their violations of human rights. However, despite its growing prominence in international politics, human rights politics has been largely neglected by the academic community. This should largely be because of the difficulty to analytically analyze states’ foreign policy regarding human rights. However, this paper argues that it may be possible to examine what kinds of factors might influence states’ foreign policy preferences with regards to human rights issues by focusing on their voting attitudes on human rights in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). This paper aims to present the design and preliminary findings of an ongoing research project to enhance its scope and intellectual and academic depth. In light of this brief introduction, the rest of the paper may be outlined as follows. First, it will be argued that UNGA votes may be utilized in academic works to assess states’ foreign policy attitudes. Second, research questions and theoretical framework will be presented. Next, the data and methodology will be discussed. Finally, preliminary findings will be presented. By sharing a general framework of the planned project and providing some details into its theoretical and empirical modeling and preliminary findings, the presentation aims to gain insight to develop the paper further into a full length article.

THEORY, RESEARCH QUESTIONS and PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

This paper relies on the argument that states’ voting patterns in the United Nations General Assembly may be used to assess their foreign policy attitudes. States have to cast their votes and therefore publicly declare their policy preferences in General Assembly resolutions every year. These resolutions concern various issues such as security, economics and human rights. States may display their preferences on these votes in one of four ways as “yes,” “no,” “abstain,” and “non-participation.” An extensive literature exists analyzing how states vote on these resolutions with an aim to understand their foreign policy attitudes and political alliances (for examples see: Rai 1972; Chai 1979; Graham 2011; Yuvaci and Kaplan 2013a; Yuvaci and Kaplan 2013b). Thus, analyzing how states vote on human rights resolutions, it
may be possible to understand the factors that influence states’ foreign policy pertaining to human rights.

However, it should also be noted that there are different kinds of human rights resolutions. One group of human rights resolutions is nothing but general statements, rules and norms that deal with general human rights matters such as gender, child and minority rights. However, a more controversial set of human rights resolutions target particular countries by explicitly mentioning their names and condemning their violations of human rights. For example, it is frequent to see human rights resolutions that condemn countries such as Iran, North Korea or Myanmar for their human rights practices. These resolutions are controversial as they are perceived to be as interference in their domestic affairs by the targeted countries. It is another important assumption of this project that these resolutions may be analyzed how states position themselves on human rights issues.

Two different and competing theoretical approaches may provide a framework to define the project and its variables. The first of these approaches is “Realism,” according to which states are guided by their strategic calculations to maximize their interests. Therefore, according to the Realist understanding of International Relations, UN states will never support resolutions that target their allies or neighboring countries not to endanger their security over an ‘unimportant’ issue like human rights.

A second theoretical position that may provide a framework for analysis in this paper is Liberalism. According to Liberalism, democracies should behave differently in its foreign affairs. In fact, it has even been claimed that democracies are more peaceful against other democracies (Doyle 1983). Thus, according to Liberalism, it may be expected that democracies should be more likely than non-democracies to support resolutions that target particular countries for their human rights practices that are against international norms.

To test these claims, this paper proposes to study UN human rights resolutions that target specific countries. When states’ votes on all targeted resolutions from 2000 to 2010 are viewed to gain some preliminary findings, it has been observed that states tend to avoid voting against political-military allies as well as against neighbors. In addition, it has also been observed that democracies are more likely than nondemocracies to vote for targeted resolutions. Thus, both theoretical approaches appear to be informative in light of these preliminary observations.

The research may be advanced by adding new variables such as trade relationship between UN member states and targeted countries and by formulating new questions such as whether the North-South division has any impact (regional voting, e.g.) on shaping their
voting attitudes in the UNGA. Developing this project into a full-length article may enhance our understanding of the factors that influence states’ human rights policy-making as well as the major theoretical foundations of the discipline of International Relations.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aims to share the main ideas, conceptualization, modeling and preliminary findings of an ongoing research project in an attempt to gain constructive feedback to develop the mentioned project into a meaningful article. The main question that this project seeks to answer is what factors shape states’ foreign policy attitudes in human rights issues. In this context, it has been argued that United Nations General Assembly resolutions that target specific countries for their human rights violations as states’ votes in the UNGA should reflect their policy choices. When whether democracies are more likely than non-democracies to vote in favor of targeted resolutions and whether states are more hesitant to support such resolutions when they target neighboring countries or military allies, it has been observed that both hypotheses have merits. In other words, preliminary findings of the ongoing project suggest that both democratic development and strategic security calculations influence states’ human rights policies. The inclusion of new variables and refining the research questions of the project may not only enhance our understanding of states’ human rights policy-making but also shed some light onto international relations theories like Realism and Liberalism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


