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## ***Upholding Fairness, Dignity and Opportunity:***

Public Opinion Research on Human Rights in the U.S.

August 2007

### **Overview**

This research project examined the opinion of three key audiences on human rights in the U.S. as applied to social justice issues: the American public, social justice advocates not currently using the human rights approach, and journalists who regularly cover social issues. The research components are described below.

- Six **focus groups** in Atlanta, Chicago and Minneapolis with members of the “**persuadable**” **public**. The goal of the focus groups was to understand how Americans think and talk about human rights principles and their application to domestic social justice issues. These groups informed the development of the subsequent **nationwide telephone poll** of 1,500 respondents from the **general public**.
- Six **moderated discussion groups** in Atlanta, Chicago, and Minneapolis with local **social justice advocates**. The purpose of these groups was to understand how to communicate more effectively with this audience about the human rights framework, and the adoption of that approach in their work. The insights from these groups informed an **online survey** of over 600 social justice advocates.
- A **focus group of journalists** in Chicago held to determine barriers and opportunities facing reporters interested in human rights when covering issues through that lens.

### **Findings**

Generally, each of these research pieces found promising trends amongst the target audiences. Most people are open to a human rights framing of domestic issues, particularly around issues related to equality, discrimination, fair and humane treatment in the criminal justice system, and education. There was also some agreement that health care, a clean environment and fair pay were human rights. With certain qualifications, the public accepts the idea of economic and social human rights as well as civil and political rights. While unsure of the government’s ability or responsibility to *provide* such rights, the public does feel that government has a role in *protecting* them.

Social justice advocates and the journalists interviewed were also receptive to the notion of human rights, though skeptical of its power with public audiences and policymakers. Advocates personally embraced the concept of human rights and some even described their work in human rights terms, but they were not wholly convinced that it was the most effective frame for their issues. Similarly, the journalists with whom we spoke were open to the concept, but could not see many opportunities to infuse human rights concepts into their stories outside of those about specific violations. The reports on this research provide several recommendations for addressing these barriers. The full reports are available at [www.opportunityagenda.org](http://www.opportunityagenda.org).

## Survey Results

The national survey on human rights finds the American public accepts a human rights framework for social justice issues in the U.S. and the survey provides guidance on the communications and education that will make the most difference as advocates engage the public. The analysis suggests several values-based messages, based on four main conclusions, listed below. The analysis also divided the populace into five clusters, based on their receptivity to human rights messaging. The cluster analysis appears at the end of this document.

### 1. Belief in the concept of human rights

Americans agree that “every person has basic rights regardless of whether their government recognizes those rights or not” (80% agree; 62% strongly).

- Only 18% believe that rights are given to an individual by the government.
- Americans agree “we should strive to uphold human rights in the U.S. because there are people being denied their human rights in our country” (81%).
- A minority say the U.S. should move “slowly” or allow solutions to human rights problems to “evolve naturally” (23%).
- BUT of the three-quarters who want to move forward with a human rights agenda, few (27%) believe the country should be moving “aggressively”(27%) in this direction and half the nation (50%) believes we should move “cautiously” trying to make regular progress on human rights problems.

### 2. Social justice issues in the human rights framework

More than eight in ten Americans “strongly agree” that the following are human rights:

- Equal opportunities regardless of gender (86% “strongly”);
- Equal opportunities regardless of race (85%);
- Being treated fairly in the criminal justice system (83%);
- Freedom from discrimination (83%);
- Freedom from torture or abuse by law enforcement (83%); and
- Equal access to quality public education (82%).

Majorities also “strongly” believe meeting people’s basic needs are human rights, including:

- Access to health care (72% “strongly”);
- Living in a clean environment (68%);
- Fair pay for workers to meet the basic needs for food and housing (68%); and
- Keeping personal behavior and choices private (60%).

To a slightly lesser degree, Americans “strongly” believe the following should be considered human rights:

- Equal opportunities regardless of whether you are gay or lesbian (57% “strongly”);
- Freedom from extreme poverty (52%);
- Adequate housing (51%);
- Ensuring economic opportunity (47%); and
- Abortion (40%).

Americans agree that the following are human rights violations:

- Racial profiling (84% “agree”; 70% “strongly”);
- Lack of quality education for children in poor communities is a violation of human rights (81%; 62% “strongly”);
- Torture of terrorist suspects (67% agree; 43% “strongly”); and
- Treatment of residents of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (60% “agree”; 41% “strongly”).
- BUT only half the public (49%) agrees that “the human rights of illegal immigrants in the U.S. are violated when they are denied access to medical care.”

### **3. Government as a protector and provider of human rights and ideas of personal responsibility**

- Most Americans agree that the role of government in human rights should be as the “protector” and “provider” (77% “strongly” and 69% “strongly” respectively).
- Two-thirds (67%) agree that upholding human rights may mean expanding government assistance programs.
- BUT Americans are evenly split between the belief that people are poor because of a lack of effort on their part (47%) and the belief that circumstances beyond their control cause poverty (48%).
- AND, Americans’ attitudes toward the role of government in upholding human rights are complicated by a strong belief in personal responsibility and concerns that some individuals take advantage of government programs.

### **4. Challenges in communicating about human rights**

Americans raise few objections to applying a human rights framework to social justice issues in the U.S. Assertions of American exceptionalism are soundly rejected.

- Eight in ten Americans (81%) disagree that “because the U.S. has the Constitution and Bill of Rights we do not need to strive to uphold human rights here in America.” Six in ten (61%) “strongly disagree.”
- BUT, the American public holds more mixed views regarding the feasibility and mechanisms of enforcing human rights around the world: 46% believe that the U.S. should not sign and follow international human rights treaties because “it would violate our sovereignty and our government’s right to protect our interests.”
- AND, Americans hold generally unfavorable views of the United Nations. Four in ten Americans (42%) express “not very much” or “no confidence” in the U.N; two-thirds agree (67%) that the U.N. “is not an effective enforcer of human rights around the world.”

### **Values-Based Messages**

Based on the results of the poll and focus groups, a number of values were identified that connect the public with a human rights agenda in the U.S. The frames that resonate most strongly across the public include:

- “Because it is important to treat people fairly and with dignity” (69% “extremely important”);
- “Because it is better for everyone to live in a society that pays attention to human rights, rather than one that ignores human rights” (58%); and
- “Because America was founded on Thomas Jefferson’s belief that we all have rights that no government should take away” (58%).

The message that is most closely associated with the belief that the U.S. should move aggressively on a human rights agenda is the statement that references society:

- “Because it is better for everyone to live in a society that pays attention to human rights, rather than one that ignores human rights.”

## Identifying Target Audiences

The survey analysis segments the American public into groups of people with similar views on human rights, the application of human rights in the U.S., and attitudes toward the United Nations. Researchers used a technique called cluster analysis to identify groups based on their attitudes to these main themes. This analysis identified five segments of the population in the United States, listed in the table below.

### The 2007 Human Rights Segmentation - Analysis at a Glance

	<b>Human Rights Champions (29%)</b>	<b>Young Cautious HR Supporters (19%)</b>	<b>U.S. Human Rights Supporters (21%)</b>	<b>Anti-U.N. ites (17%)</b>	<b>Anti-Gov't Bedrock Conservatives (14%)</b>
<b>Description</b>	More women Younger High income Highest ed High prof Most liberal Most Dem More city	More women Youngest Most single Low inc Most moderate High Dem	More women Younger Most parents Highest Hisp and African Amer Lowest ed and inc High cons High Dem More city More south	More men Oldest High married Most retired High cons High Rep Most rural More South	More men Older Most married Highest inc High educ High prof Most cons Most Rep Most suburb High Midwest
<b>Engagement</b>	Among most likely national newspapers readers, blogs, NPR  Donate and vol for charitable orgs	High NPR listeners  Volunteers  Least likely attend rel. services	High relig attendees  High news consumers  Least likely voters	Highest relig attendees  Most political  Most talk radio	High voters and most pol and charitable donors  High newspaper readers
<b>Applications of Human Rights and Role of Gov't</b>	Among most likely to agree w/applications of HR.  100% agree HR of illegal imm violated when denied med care  86% agree to expand gov't programs to uphold HR	Agree with HR but not all the applications.  100% <b>disagree</b> HR of illegal imm violated when denied med care  100% agree expand gov't programs to uphold HR	Agree w/HR; highest on econ-related rights  95% agree HR of illegal imm violated when denied med care  84% agree to expand gov't programs to uphold HR	Narrow view of HR.  96% <b>disagree</b> HR of illegal imm violated when denied med care  59% <b>disagree</b> expand gov't programs to uphold HR	Narrow view of HR.  90% <b>disagree</b> HR of illegal imm violated when denied med care  100% <b>disagree</b> expand gov't programs to uphold HR
<b>Potential Challenges</b>	95% disagree that the U.S. should NOT sign international treaties.	67% disagree that the U.S. should NOT sign international treaties.  But: 57% agree b/c of diff cultures and values it is imp to have rights that apply to everyone in the world.	97% <b>agree</b> that the U.S. should NOT sign international treaties.  Most to say b/c of diff cultures and values it is impossible to have rights that apply to everyone in the world. (64%)	100% <b>agree</b> that the U.S. should NOT sign international treaties.  Most negative opinions on U.N.	63% disagree that the U.S. should NOT sign international treaties.
<b>Urgency</b>	92% agree should strive to uphold HR in U.S.  36% "aggressively"	86% agree should strive to uphold HR in U.S.  28% "aggressively"; 57% "cautiously"	89% agree should strive to uphold HR in U.S.  34% "aggressively"	70% agree should strive to uphold HR in U.S.  41% "slowly" or "evolve"	60% agree should strive to uphold HR in U.S.  36% "slowly" or "evolve"
<b>Overall Framework</b>	Imp to treat people fairly and w/dignity  Better for everyone to live in a society that pays attention to HR, rather than one that ignores HR	Imp to treat people fairly and w/dignity	Imp to treat people fairly and w/dignity  Amer founded on Jefferson's belief that we all have rights that no gov't should take away  Respecting HR follows the will of God	Amer founded on Jefferson's belief that we all have rights that no gov't should take away  Imp to treat people fairly and w/dignity	Imp to treat people fairly and w/dignity

## Recommendations

The following communications recommendations provide guidance on how to build upon current public attitudes and values to help advocates move forward.

- 1. Adopt a human rights framework when talking about social justice issues.** The good news from the research is that advocates need not hesitate to adopt human rights language as they talk about social justice issues.
- 2. Increase enthusiasm among target audiences.** To increase the level of urgency and enthusiasm for a human rights agenda, advocates should start a steady stream of communications to those who are already receptive to the concept of human rights and acknowledge their application in the U.S (the top three tiers of the cluster analysis, above).
- 3. Start with engaging the public on topics of agreement to connect to more difficult applications.** Outreach efforts should first focus on human rights that deal with issues of equality, fairness, and freedom from mistreatment, such as equal opportunities, freedom from discrimination, fair treatment in the criminal justice system, and equal access to education.
- 4. Focus on the goal – upholding human rights – rather than the process.** Effective communications will keep the goal of ensuring human rights front and center. The role of government, the need for international treaties, and support for the United Nations are about *how* advocates are working to achieve human rights, and should take a backseat to the central goal.
- 5. Describe the goal using values.** The most motivating rationale for promoting human rights is “because it is important to treat people fairly and with dignity.” Communications should also call upon the belief that it is “better for everyone to live in a society that pays attention to human rights, rather than one that ignores human rights.”
- 6. Do not get discouraged because of Americans’ hesitations about the U.N. and international treaties.** For most Americans, the concept of human rights is not about treaties or international declarations. They think of human rights as inherent rights that are shared by all and that transcend governments and treaties. The public needs to hear a drumbeat of how human rights as a concept is connected to the social justice issues Americans care about. This must be a prelude to an education on treaties. Where appropriate, education can show the public how international treaties can be applied and help forward the goal of upholding human rights in the U.S., but the focus needs to be kept on the goal, not the process.

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