

**Public Opinion Research on Human Rights in the U.S.
Belden Russonello & Stewart
August 2007**

Human Rights in the U.S.

Opinion Research with Advocates, Journalists, and the General public

Executive Summary

Overview

The American public embraces the concept of human rights for all people and believes that our government has some work to do to ensure human rights for everyone in the United states. Americans value human rights because of an appreciation for treating individuals with dignity and fairness and a belief that respecting human rights contributes to a better Society for all. Americans also embrace the recognition of human rights as a sign that the United states has not forgotten its founding principles.

The 2007 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 culminates in values-based messages and communications recommendations, based on four main conclusions:

1. Human rights as a concept is clear and positive for Americans
2. The public places many social justice issues in a human rights framework
3. Perceptions of the role of government complicate human rights communications
4. Communicating about international treaties is a long-term challenge

Advocates are on steady ground engaging the American public in a general conversation about human rights and how it applies to social justice issues in the U.S. While there will be some objections to certain applications of human rights, the biggest hurdle for advocates in the long-term will be increasing public understanding of the need and uses of international treaties. The following summary provides an analysis of where the public stands on these issues and how receptive they will be to human rights advocates in the U.S.

1. Belief in the concept of human rights

Americans strongly believe in the concept of human rights and agree that “every person has basic rights regardless of whether their government recognizes those rights or not” (80% agree; 62% strongly). Only two in ten believe that rights are given to an individual by the government. The public, as we learned in the focus groups, is also very comfortable with the term human rights.

When we turn specifically to human rights in the U.S., eight in ten (81%) 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.” And, three-quarters of the public (77%) want the U.S. to work on making regular progress on human rights. Only two in ten (23%) Americans say the U.S. should move “slowly” or allow solutions to human rights problems to “evolve naturally.”

However, of the three-quarters who want to move forward with a human rights agenda, only one in four (27%) believes the country should be moving “aggressively” in this direction and half the nation (50%) believes we should move “cautiously” trying to make regular progress on human rights problems. Therefore, while large segments of the public agree with a human right framework, only a minority enthusiastically embraces an aggressive approach.

Moving forward we can conclude that the general public will be receptive to a conversation about human rights in the U.S. and one of the tasks ahead for advocates will be to increase the urgency of this issue for a broader segment of the public.

2. Social justice issues in the human rights framework

Americans are open to discussing social justice issues in the context of human rights, and they define a wide array of freedoms and rights as human rights. When asked to evaluate fifteen different items and determine whether they should be considered a human right, large majorities “strongly” acknowledge human rights that have to do with equality, fairness, and freedom from mistreatment. More than eight in ten

Americans “strongly agree” that the following are human rights that should be upheld:

- Equal opportunities regardless of whether you are male or female (86% “strongly should be considered a human right”);
- Equal opportunities regardless of race (85%);
- Being treated fairly in the criminal justice system if accused of a crime (83%);
- Freedom from discrimination (83%);
- Freedom from torture or abuse by law enforcement (83%); and
- Equal access to quality public education (82%).

Majorities of the public also “strongly” believe meeting people’s basic needs of food, housing, and healthcare should be considered human rights:

- Access to healthcare (72% “strongly should be considered a human right”);
- 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 economic-related rights, as well as reproductive rights and equal rights for gays and lesbians should be considered human rights. Even though majorities of Americans consider each of these to be human rights, segments of about two in ten to over a third reject these as rights:

- Equal opportunities regardless of whether you are gay or lesbian (57% “strongly should be considered a human right,” 19% “should not be considered a human right”);
- Freedom from extreme poverty (52%; 20%);
- Adequate housing (51%; 22%);
- Ensuring economic opportunity (47%; 22%); and
- Abortion (40%; 35%).

The Survey also examined the public’s recognition of human rights violations and specific applications of human rights in everyday life. Large majorities of Americans recognize and acknowledge human rights violations in their own backyard. Similar to the way Americans identify what are individual human rights, the clearest examples of human rights violations deal with issues of discrimination based on race and economic conditions. For example:

- Overwhelmingly, Americans agree that racial profiling (84% “agree”; 70% “strongly”) and lack of quality education for children in poor communities is a violation of human rights (81%; 62% “strongly”).
- Americans also acknowledge that torture of terrorist suspects (67% agree; 43% “strongly”) and the treatment of residents of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina are human rights violations (60% “agree”; 41% “strongly”).

A tougher example for the public, however, is considering the rights of immigrants in the U.S. 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,” and 48% reject this assertion. Those who strongly disagree outnumber those who strongly agree 32% to 24%.

Therefore, we find that Americans are generally receptive to a discussion of human rights violations in the U.S. but are divided on some specific applications. The segmentation analysis takes a closer look at the segments of the public who are the most likely to agree with all the applications and those who are less likely to agree.

3. Americans see government as a protector and provider of human rights but also believe in personal responsibility.

Most Americans agree that the role of government in human rights should be as the “protector” and “provider” (77% “strongly” and 69% respectively), and two-thirds (67%) agree that upholding human rights may mean expanding government assistance programs for things such as housing, food, health care, and jobs, while only a third (32%) rejects this idea.

Americans’ attitudes toward the role of government in upholding human rights, however, are complicated by a strong belief in personal responsibility and concerns that some individuals take advantage of government programs. They believe that some rights require personal responsibility and personal action, and Americans want individuals to take some responsibility for fully obtaining their human rights. Americans want to ensure that affirming the rights to food, shelter or education does not mean people can sit back and expect these things to be provided for them.

These attitudes manifest themselves when the public considers poverty in the U.S. 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%). Also, seven in ten Americans (71%) express concerns that poor people in the U.S. have become too dependent on government assistance programs.

Because of the public’s general hesitations around government programs and concerns about personal responsibility, communications on human rights will be on firmer ground if the role of government takes a backseat to the overall goal of striving to uphold human rights for everyone. While the role of government in upholding human rights does not present a large roadblock to engaging the public on human rights, communications should stay focused on the goal of upholding human rights, not on the process.

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.”

However, the American public holds more mixed views regarding the feasibility and mechanisms of enforcing human rights around the world. Specifically, Americans are split about the U.S. signing on to international treaties and the effectiveness of the United Nations. As advocates engage a broad segment of the population, it is the public’s apprehension toward the United Nations and international treaties that may prove the greatest long-term challenge:

- Forty-six percent 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 half (49%) rejects this idea.

- 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.; 45% have “some” confidence and only one in ten (12%) has “a great deal” of confidence. Similarly, two-thirds agree (67%) that the U.N. “is not an effective enforcer of human rights around the world.”

Two other views held by majorities of the public may also cause people to pause when it comes to enforcement of human rights. These views are not necessarily barriers for discussing human rights within the U.S. but may be potential roadblocks when advocates link human rights in the U.S. to the rest of the world:

- Two-thirds (64%) agree with the statement that “people in the U.S. should not try to interpret and enforce human rights for people living in other countries.”
- More than half (55%) agree that “because of different cultures and values, it is impossible to have rights that apply to everyone in the world.”

Values-based messages

A number of values were identified in the survey 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%).
- “Because America was founded on Thomas Jefferson’s belief that we all have rights that no government should take away” (58%).

When developing communications themes from polling data, not only is it important to consider the breadth of support for messages, but also to examine the extent to which reactions to individual messages predict support or opposition to an issue after hearing all the arguments. This analysis reveals that 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.”

Recommendations

The American public’s understanding and commitment to human rights in the U.S. is still developing. Large majorities possess a baseline understanding of human rights, but some hesitate at specific applications, and most Americans do

not make the connection between a domestic human rights agenda and human rights around the world or international treaties. 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 problems in the U.S. The good news to come out of the research is that advocates should not hesitate in moving forward in adopting human rights language as they talk about social justice issues to a U.S. audience.
2. Increase enthusiasm for moving forward on a human rights agenda by targeting audiences most likely to embrace a human rights framework. While most Americans ascribe to the concept of human rights broadly, one of the tasks ahead for advocates will be to increase the level of urgency and enthusiasm for a human rights agenda. One way to do this is to 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 segmentation analysis provides a roadmap to identify the core targets for communications and those who can be considered persuadables.
3. Start with engaging the public on topics of broad agreement to help build connections 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. Initiating a human rights framework on the social justice issues most readily identified as human rights will help make connections to other human rights that are not as readily apparent, such as economic rights.
4. Focus on the goal – upholding human rights – rather than the process. Communications with the public will be most effective if they 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 asserting the goal of achieving human rights for everyone.
5. Describe the goal using values. The values framework with the broadest appeal is “because it is important to treat people fairly and with dignity,” and can be used as an overall theme for communications on human rights in the U.S. In conjunction with this framework, 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” because it is this belief that underlies a desire for the U.S. to move aggressively on a human rights agenda.

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. Building support and understanding for international treaties is a longterm effort, and focusing on it too much in the short term before the public is ready may harm efforts to build a constituency for human rights in the U.S. 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.

<http://www.opportunityagenda.org/atf/cf/%7B2ACB2581-1559-47D6-8973-70CD23C286CB%7D/HUMAN%20RIGHTS%20REPORT.PDF>

or

<http://tinyurl.com/5nadu7>