

Public Opinion Research on Human Rights in the United States

Overview of Research Components

From 2007 to 2009 The Opportunity Agenda undertook a three-year public opinion research project comprised of both quantitative and qualitative methods. In it we examined, with our research partners Belden Russonello & Stewart and Loren Siegel, how several key audiences viewed human rights in the United States as applied to social justice issues. Audiences included social justice advocates not currently using the human rights approach, state-level policymakers, persuadable segments of the public, and the general population. Their opinions were examined through a range of research strategies described in the following. Full reports on each phase of research are available at www.opportunityagenda.org or by emailing partners@opportunityagenda.org.

Research Summaries

2007 Focus Group and Survey

This research included 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**. The survey was offered in Spanish and English, and Asian Americans were “over sampled” to ensure their representative participation.

- Americans see a recognition of human rights as a sign that the United States has not forgotten its founding principles. Americans value human rights because they believe in treating individuals with fairness, but they also tell us that respecting human rights contributes to a better society for all—a sentiment that suggests that honoring human rights for others makes life better for oneself.
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- **Americans agree that “every person has basic rights regardless of whether their government recognizes those rights or not” (80% agree; 62% strongly).**
- 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%).
- Perceptions of the role of government complicate views on human rights. Many Americans believe that the government should be a provider of human rights, expanding government programs to ensure these rights. However, a strong belief in personal responsibility leads others to argue that government should only be expected to protect human rights.
 - The public is poorly informed and holds ambivalent views on the relevance of international treaties for U.S. policymaking: 46% believe that the United States should not sign and follow international human rights treaties because “it would violate our sovereignty and our government’s right to protect our interests.”

Americans agree that the following are human rights:

- Equal opportunities regardless of gender (95% “somewhat” or “strongly,” 86% “strongly”)
- Equal opportunities regardless of race (94%, 85%)
- Being treated fairly in the criminal justice system (95%, 83%)
- Freedom from discrimination (94%, 83%)
- Freedom from torture or abuse by law enforcement (91%, 83%)
- Equal access to quality public education (93%, 82%)
- Access to health care (89%, 72%)
- Living in a clean environment (85%, 68%)

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 (79% “somewhat” or “strongly,” 57% “strongly”)
- Freedom from extreme poverty (78%, 52%)
- Adequate housing (77%, 51%)
- Ensuring economic opportunity (77%, 47%)
- Abortion (64%, 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%)
- Torture of terrorist suspects (67%, 43%)
- Treatment of residents of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (60%, 41%)
- BUT only half the public (49%) agree that “the human rights of illegal immigrants in the U.S. are violated when they are denied access to medical care”

Social Justice Advocates

Six moderated discussion groups were held 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 a

later **online survey** of more than 600 social justice advocates.

The social justice advocates interviewed were also receptive to the notion of human rights, although they were 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. The reports on this research provide several recommendations for addressing these barriers.

Policymaker Interviews

These **interviews with 50 state-level policymakers and opinion leaders** in California and Illinois sought to uncover decision makers' views of human rights as applied to domestic issues and to find opportunities for using a human rights framework effectively with them.

- Some social justice issues, including racial equality and due process, are already considered human rights by state-level leaders in California and Illinois.
- BUT areas such as freedom from poverty and access to health care are harder places to find agreement.
- These policy leaders are wary of framing many social justice issues as human rights because of the potentially far-reaching implications of calling something a human right and of their own limitations in fulfilling the promise of that designation. Many believe they *cannot* protect and fulfill all the needs that are suggested by an expansive view of human rights; and some do not *want* to fulfill all of them.

2009 Message Testing Focus Groups

These 16 **focus groups** in Atlanta; Chicago; Columbus, OH; Houston; New York City; South San Francisco; and Santa Monica, CA examined **key public audiences'** attitudes toward five social justice issues—immigration, health care, due process, life without parole for young people, and racial justice—within the context of human rights.

Findings on specific issues are available in the full report at www.opportunityagenda.org.

- Audiences say that human rights are the rights you have by virtue of being born. Participants frequently volunteered a number of examples of human rights: equality; freedom from discrimination; freedom from torture; and life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.
- However, when audiences begin to distinguish between rights that are *protected*—freedom from torture, freedom of speech, etc.—from rights that are *provided*—health care, education, etc.—there is some hesitation about calling the latter human rights. Participants begin to worry about the appropriateness and feasibility of government providing these rights to everyone in the country.
- There remains concern about the role of personal responsibility. If issues are classified as human rights concerns, participants question whether the right should be upheld for all people, even those who they believe do not contribute to society or who have broken society's rules.