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Exploring Public Opinion on the Role of Human Rights in Foreign Policy (abstract)

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

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Research Panel: Advocacy – Global and Local

Presenter: Michelle Allendoerfer, George Washington University

Title: Exploring Public Opinion on the Role of Human Rights in Foreign Policy

Abstract: Much of the literature on human rights foreign policy assumes - sometimes explicitly but usually implicitly - that constituents want foreign policy conditioned on human rights or that human rights policy is a political “good” for policymakers to pursue. Yet, little scholarly work has been done to support this assumption, either in terms of providing theoretical foundations for this assumption or assessing the empirical support for it. And this assumption matters not just for the academic literature but also for the practice of human rights advocacy. One tool to promote human rights norms globally and to improve conditions is through advocating for human rights-oriented foreign policy. The conditions under which we would expect to observe this type of human rights policy rests on two mechanisms: political elite preferences and constituent preferences about human rights foreign policy. In this paper, I explore the latter, investigating the conditions under which constituents want foreign policy to account for human rights.

Using an experimental survey design on a national sample, I will analyze public opinion about human rights foreign policy. In particular, I will assess three primary hypotheses about public opinion of human rights foreign policy. First, I hypothesize that respondents will be more likely to favor a human rights-oriented foreign policy against smaller, less strategically or economically important states. I further hypothesize that NGO framing of abuses can activate public opinion about human rights foreign policy. Lastly, I hypothesize that certain demographic characteristics of respondents will matter, namely that women, liberal, and more educated respondents will be more likely to favor conditioning foreign policy on human rights.

Keywords: human rights, foreign policy, public opinion

Biography: Michelle Allendoerfer is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at George Washington University with a primary appointment in the Women’s Leadership Program. She has a PhD from University of Michigan and her research focuses on human rights foreign policy.