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Contesting Human Rights Defenders at the UN Human Rights Council

M. Joel Voss

University of Toledo, mjoelvoss@gmail.com

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Going Against the Grain

University of Dayton Human Rights Center
Social Practice of Human Rights Conference, Oct. 1-4, 2019

Contesting Human Rights Defenders at the UN Human Rights Council

Presented by:

M. Joel Voss, *University of Toledo*

Session: Defending Human Rights

Abstract:

Human rights defenders are being increasingly targeted across the globe. The rise of nationalist, populist regimes is of great concern to both human rights defenders and those that advocate for the rights of defenders. The problem is not only of domestic concern. The UN Human Rights Council, the UN's preeminent human rights institution, is also seeing an increasing number of attacks on defenders, both in formal settings like discussions on resolutions and the Universal Periodic Review process and informally, through threats to participants at the Council.

This paper attempts to better understand and predict which states will both try to weaken the agency of human rights defenders in Geneva but also better understand which states will come to the aid of defenders. The paper uses a mixed-methods approach including elite-level interviews from both Human Rights Council Member States, NGOs, and members of the UN Secretariat as well as quantitative methods including logistic regressions that use state-level characteristics as the independent variables and repression of defenders as the dependent variable.

The paper's preliminary findings suggest that weaker military states with higher rights abuse are more likely to repress than other states. The preliminary evidence on support for human rights defenders is mixed and will undergo further testing. This paper's findings help contribute to the literature on human rights, including human rights defenders, the UN Human Rights Council, and norm contestation.

Presenter information:

M. Joel Voss is an Assistant Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Toledo. Dr. Voss's research focuses on norm development and contestation in international institutions, particularly the UN Human Rights Council. Dr. Voss has published and forthcoming works on norm contestation and sexual orientation and gender identity, the global south as a norm advocate, and sexual orientation and gender identity in international organizations and another piece on LGBT rights within Europe's supranational courts.