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# On Solid Ground: Evaluating the Effects of Foundational Arguments on Human Rights Attitudes (abstract)

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

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

Oct. 1-3, 2015, Dayton, Ohio

For the archive of the conference, see [http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human\\_rights/2015/](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human_rights/2015/)

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### **Research Panel: Rethinking Rights**

**Presenters:** Stephen Arves, University of Maryland; Joe Braun, University of Maryland

**Title:** On Solid Ground: Evaluating the Effects of Foundational Arguments on Human Rights Attitudes

**Abstract:** What makes some human rights campaigns denouncing prisoner abuse and torture more effective than others? Specifically, what convinces individuals to support, accept, and take action on behalf of calls to stop prisoner abuse and torture? Some normative theoretical literature has argued that justifications for human rights matter, with multiple traditions offering their own versions of rights foundationalism. Other theoretical literature, however, has argued that foundations used to legitimate human rights are unimportant. Despite these theoretical arguments, there is a dearth of empirical investigation into the actual appeal of different foundational arguments. This is surprising, because foundational arguments by their nature assume a universal or broad-based appeal. Although some empirical human rights research has considered individual attitudes, they have not considered the effect or appeal different human rights justifications. We therefore construct an experiment to empirically compare the effects of different justifications used to ground human rights on human rights attitudes and commitments for action. The project explicitly focuses on four prominent human rights justifications: religion, international human rights law, human suffering, and human dignity. Subjects in the experimental conditions are presented with a depiction of prisoner abuse, and are presented with an argument against torture stemming from one of the four justifications. We next measure human rights attitudes towards torture and prisoner abuse and ask subjects to commit to participate in human rights advocacy. Ultimately, we find that the quest for some justification for human rights with universal appeal may be misguided. While each of the arguments, in general, had some positive effect on human rights attitudes and commitments for action, we found that different arguments systematically appealed to different types of people.

**Keywords:** Human Rights, Foundational Justifications, Experiment

**Stephen Arves** is a Government and Politics Ph.D. student at the University of Maryland. He holds a M.A. in Government and Politics from the same university and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of St. Thomas. Stephen's research focuses on nonviolent resistance and human rights. His dissertation considers the conditions under which individuals support and participate in nonviolent resistance.

**Joe Braun** is a Government and Politics Ph.D. student at the University of Maryland. He holds a M.A. in Political Science from University of Nebraska and a B.A. in Political Science and Philosophy from the same university. Joe's research focuses on human rights attitudes, and his dissertation considers factors influencing support for human rights.

Stephen and Joe have collaborated together to conduct human rights research. They have designed and administered survey experiments examining how to motivate individuals to support human rights and actions used to protect them.