International Complaints Mechanism and State Respect for Human Rights

Hannah M. Smidt
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Department of Political Science
University of St. Gallen
Email: hannah.smidt[at]unisg.ch

Christoph V. Steinert
Post-doctoral researcher
Department of Political Science
University of Zurich
Email: christoph.steinert[at]ipz.uzh.ch

Abstract: How do international human rights complaints mechanisms influence state respect of human rights? Complaints mechanisms allow individual citizens to make human rights violations known to international organizations. In response, international organizations send public letters, known as communications, explaining how the alleged violation breaches international law. Researchers find that if states allow their citizens to use an international complaints mechanisms, violation decisions in response to complaints tend to improve state respect of human rights. However, what remains understudied are the human rights consequences of complaints mechanisms that are open to citizens of *any* state regardless of the state's approval. We argue that such universally open complaints mechanisms pressure state governments to enact broader human rights reforms by shifting "shaming power" to marginalized people in ways that governments find difficult to preempt through repression. Moreover, complaints-based communications are sent by independent experts in international organizations and identify individual victims, enabling credible and personalized shaming campaigns. The human rights benefits of complaints-based communications are likely stronger for state governments that (i) face more constraints on their power and (ii) derive power from programmatic appeals to all members of society (rather than clientelistic appeals to a selected set of societal groups)—conditions that should amplify pressures for compliance with universal human rights standards. We test our theory across a global sample of countries using multiple identification strategies, including instrumental variables. Our cross-country evidence suggests that individual complaints-based communications positively correlate with respect for physical integrity rights, especially if state governments derive power from political programs promising public goods to society as a whole (rather than clientelistic appeals promising "club" goods to selected set of societal groups). Contrary to conventional wisdom, constraints on the power of the state government do not condition the effectiveness of complaints-based shaming. Our findings highlight that while personalized attention to victims of human rights abuses is not without risks, it may contribute to improving human rights respect under certain conditions.

Introduction

Thousands of individuals have used complaints mechanisms of international organizations (IOs) to accuse states of human rights violations. In turn, IOs have publicly responded to these complaints by contextualizing alleged violations in international law and requesting accused states to undertake measures to address the alleged abuse.[1] By providing victims with *direct* access to international organizations, complaints mechanisms empower citizens vis-à-vis states. In this way, complaints mechanism avoid political biases that beset the state-based human rights system (e.g., Hug and Lukács, 2014; Lebovic and Voeten, 2006; Terman and Byun, 2022; Terman and Voeten, 2018). Moreover, complaints mechanisms may also complement activities carried out by non-state organizations, such as Amnesty International, which likely are—due to resource and information constraints—selective in their advocacy on behalf of citizens in repressive states (Hendrix and Wong, 2014; Meernik et al., 2012). Yet, do international organizations' responses to complaints by individual victims actually improve state respect of human rights?

A rich literature investigates IOs' efforts to publicize and condemn country-level patterns of human rights abuses, finding conditional positive effects on human rights progress for some types of abuses (DeMeritt and Conrad, 2019; Hafner-Burton, 2008; Terman and Voeten, 2018). However, only few studies investigate the human rights consequences of the public responses by international human rights organizations to individual complaints (e.g., Schoner, 2024; Shikhelman, 2019; Ullmann and Von Staden, 2024). Their findings remain inconsistent: One of the most comprehensive study testifies to conditional improvements of physical integrity rights respects at the state level (Schoner, 2024). Yet, another study demonstrate that improvements in the human rights situation of individual complainants are rare (Ullmann and Von Staden, 2024) and that governments often use retaliatory repression against the civil society organizations that support complainants (Steinert and Smidt, 2025). Moreover, the state-level positive effects of the international

[1] See https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/

responses to individual complaints have only been found in selected states that voluntarily agreed to human rights treaties featuring a complaints mechanism (Schoner, 2024). What remains unknown is whether these effects extend to a global sample and to a complaints mechanism that is universally open to citizens of *any* state.

We argue that governments, which are accused in publicized individual complaints of violating human rights, fear reputation costs. Individual complaints are assessed by independent experts in IOs. Their responses to complaints do not only lend credibility to the alleged wrongdoings, but also request remedies and reforms. Publicized complaints are then spread to a broader audience by, among others, news media, the UN Human Rights Council, and international NGOs. While fearing reputation costs, governments likely find it difficult to deter complaints through selective repression, especially when the complain mechanism is universally open, so that everyone could be a potential complainant, even without collective organizing and even anonymously. Taken together, IOs' responses to individual complaints plausibly pressures governments to enact broader human rights reforms. We further claim that specific conditions within the targeted state likely make IOs' responses to individual complaints more effective for inducing state-level human rights progress. First, liberal-democratic constraints on state power, such as independent civil society organizations and courts, request governments to "protect individuals' autonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source—state, church, or society" (Zakaria, 1997: p. 26), thereby amplifying pressures to act upon publicized complaints by any individual, independent of whether she belongs to a majority or a minority group. Second, human rights respect in response to publicized complaints may depend on the relationship between society and the state. If political actors win state power through programmatic appeals to all citizens in society, they are politically rewarded for respect of universal human rights. Conversely, if political actors appeal to selected "client"-groups in society, whom they provide with goods and services (Corstange, 2018; Kitschelt and Kselman, 2013), they may feel threatened by universal human rights progress because it counteracts their hold onto power.

We test our argument across countries using data from the individual complaints mechanism of the UN Special Procedures (UNSP) of the Organisation of the High Commissioner of Human rights (OHCHR) in the 2011-2022 period. Unlike complaints mechanisms of human rights treaty bodies of the UN Human Rights Council, the UNSP complaints mechanism is open to individuals in *any* state regardless whether its government supports the mechanism. Human rights experts, who work for UNSP complaints mechanism without pay, review individuals' complaints about human rights abuses. In response to the complaints, these experts can send public response letters, so-called "communications", to governments (OHCHR, 2026). The UNSP communications name the alleged violation, contextualize it in international law, and request a government reply with further information, including on measures taken to prevent the type of alleged violation. Communications can thus be seen as a form of shaming by explaining how abuses that are allegedly committed by state governments diverge from international norms. Communications often include the names of the individuals whose rights have allegedly been violated, but may also protect the identity of victims. They are publicly available and presented in each session of the UN Human Rights Council.

We regress government respect of physical integrity rights on the number of UNSP communications received by the government in the previous year. We account for time-invariant differences between countries with fiexed effects. We also consider potential reverse causation—i.e., the possibility that complaint-based international shaming increases with physical integrity rights violations—using instrumental variables model relying on exogenous variation in staff rotation and language skills of UNSP mandate-holders. To probe the conditional effects, we interact the number of UNSP communications with measures of constraints on government power (i.e., the degree of horizontal constraints on governments like courts and the degree of diagonal accountability like free civil society or media) and a measure of sources of government power, capturing whether governments rely on programmatic or clientelistic ties society in a given country and year.

The results suggest that UNSP communications in response to individual complaints

in a given a country are, on average, positively associated with physical integrity rights protection in that country. The effect is moderated by the sources of government power: Protection tends to improve in response to UNSP communications when political actors in a country become more reliant on programmatic than clientelistic ties to society. Our analysis further shows that constraints on government power do not moderate the influence of UNSP communications on government respect for human rights.[2] Overall, our empirical analysis suggests that it is the sources of government power, rather than constraints on government power, that shape whether states improve their repressive records in response to complaints-based shaming. This evidence highlights the scope condition under which complaints mechanisms can improve the human rights records of states.

Our findings make important contributions to the literatures of international organizations (IOs), naming and shaming, and individual complaints mechanisms. Speaking to research on IOs, we shed light on the consequences of providing individuals with direct access opportunities in IOs. While existing research has analyzed why IOs increasingly allow the direct participation of civil society actors and individuals, for instance, to alleviate democratic deficits (Sommerer and Tallberg, 2019; Steffek, 2013; Tallberg et al., 2013), our study sheds light on the consequences of giving individuals access to IOs—via complaints mechanisms—with a focus on domestic human rights protection.

Contributing to research on "naming and shaming", we present first evidence on how sources of government power affect the human rights consequences of international shaming. Specifically, researchers have long emphasized that international shaming campaigns need domestic support (i.e., "pressure from below") for being effective in changing gov-

[2]We note that institutional constraints on governments are likely endogenous to physical integrity rights respect. Where constraints are many, physical integrity is likely protected. Where constraints are few, physical integrity is likely violated. The endogeneity implies that the reason for why UNSP communications have little physical integrity rights-inducing effects on more constrained governments is not that constraints do not pressure governments to respect physical integrity rights but that there is is just little room for improvement.

ernment behavior (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Risse, 2017). While this literature has already examined the moderating effect of domestic constraints on government power, e.g., through independent civil society (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2007; Murdie and Davis, 2012; Neumayer, 2005), it has so far ignored how the domestic sources of government power may equally moderate the effectiveness of shaming. We start filling this gap by building on a rich literature on clientelism, where political actors exchange material goods for political support (Fox, 1994; Keefer, 2007; Stokes, 2011; Wantchekon, 2003; Weitz-Shapiro, 2012). We show that the degree to which political actors derive power through clientelistic exchanges rather than political programs helps us understand why government may ignore international demands for human rights protection.

Finally, we add to the small but growing body of research on individual complaints mechanisms of international human rights organizations. While several studies analyze violations decisions in response to complaints to UN human rights treaty bodies (Heyns and Viljoen, 2001; Schoner, 2024, 2025; Shikhelman, 2019; Smith-Cannoy, 2012; Ullmann and Von Staden, 2024), our study is the first one on the human rights consequences of UNSP complaints mechanism. This complaint mechanism is special because it is universally open and not restricted to individuals in states that have ratified a treaty-based complaint mechanism. Our study sheds light on the extent to which participation in this universally open mechanism can contribute to the protection of human rights.

Research on the effects of human rights complaints

Recent research identifies growing opportunities for *direct* participation of individuals and civil society organizations in IOs, especially in the area of human rights (Grigorescu, 2015; Scholte, 2011; Sommerer and Tallberg, 2019; Tallberg et al., 2013: 3, 5). These opportunities include, for example, the consultative status of civil society organization at the UN Economic and Social Council (Krommendijk, 2015; Steffek, 2013: 1004), through which societal actors also gain access to the UN Human Rights Council; the

"Arria formula meetings" at the UN Security Council, which Council member states use to consult with civil society (Jarvis, 2025); and private litigant access in international human rights courts (Alter, 2006; Helfer and Slaughter, 1997; Hillebrecht, 2014). Our focus lies on participation in the individual complaints mechanism of the UN Special Procedures (UNSP). This mechanism provides what can be considered the most universal access to the international human rights regime: any individual or civil society organization in any state can file complaints about any type of human rights violation to the UNSP, even without having exhausted domestic remedies.

When it comes to evaluating the consequences of direct access of societal actors to international human rights organizations, existing research mostly focuses on international human rights courts (Alter, 2006; Helfer and Slaughter, 1997; Hillebrecht, 2014). Their rulings lead states to change laws and practices—at least when the executive has the administrative capacity to do so (Anagnostou and Mungiu-Pippidi, 2014). Human rights court rulings can also incentivize governments to enact human rights reforms, at least if domestic legislative and judicial institutions support human rights progress (Hillebrecht, 2012a,b; Voeten, 2014).[3]

Fewer studies investigate the human rights consequences of participating in individual complaints mechanisms (for this assessment, see Shikhelman, 2019: 754). In what is arguably the most comprehensive study of the country-level human rights consequences of individual complaints to date, Schoner (2024) analyses physical integrity rights across 56 states (1969-2016) that ratified the individual complaints mechanism in the First Optional Protocol of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) but engaged in repression at the time of ratification. A greater number of violation decisions by the ICCPR oversight body (i.e., the UN Human Rights Committee) in response to individual

[3]Researchers also show that societal mobilization renders international human rights organizations more effective in achieving state compliance (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Neumayer, 2005; Simmons, 2009). We know for example that civil society mobilization from below makes it more difficult for governments to ignore international "naming and shaming" from above (Brysk, 1993; Murdie and Davis, 2012).

complaints is associated with a short-term increase in physical integrity rights respect, but only when civil society organizations were involved in filing such complaints.[4] Since treaty body decisions on human rights violations are public but non-enforceable, Schoner (2024) attributes human rights improvements to a "naming and shaming" effect, which is magnified by the fact that violations decisions use personalized frames (i.e., refer to abuses against individuals), employ objective treaty-based criteria, and are sanctioned by experts working for the treaty oversight body.

The empirical finding of human rights improvements in response to complaints-based shaming contrasts with results by individual-level studies analyzing state compliance with specific remedies requested by treaty bodies in response to individual complaints. Using comprehensive data on the decisions by the eight UN human rights treaty bodies that feature an individual complaints procedure, Ullmann and Von Staden (2024) show that the compliance rate is only at 35%. Compliance with requested general remedies aimed at preventing the recurrence of a given violation through policy reform is even lower (27.8%).[5] Similarly, analyzing the follow-up reports on decisions issued by the ICCPR treaty body (2014-2016, Sessions 110-118), Shikhelman (2019) finds that compliance with requested individual-level remedies for complainants is more likely than compliance with requested measures of non-repetition and policy change (Shikhelman, 2019: 768). To

[4]Case studies provide anecdotal evidence of positive human rights consequences of complaints-based shaming. Heyns and Viljoen (2001: 516-7) showcase positive institutional changes in response to decisions made by the oversight bodies of the ICCPR, the Convention Against Torture (CAT), and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in 20 countries from different world regions. Smith-Cannoy (2012) shows positive changes in human rights policies and practices as a result of decisions issued by the oversight bodies of the ICCPR, CERD and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in selected post-Communist states in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

[5]Unfortunately, states do not always provide follow-up reports to UN treaty bodies that allow for an assessment of compliance. They only exist in 55% of decisions. When treating decisions without follow-up reports as instances of non-compliance, the rate of compliance drops to 19%.

explain why international responses to individual complaints do not lead to broader human rights reforms, Heyns and Viljoen (2001: 517-8) point out that governments tend to "guard jealously over their sovereignty" and that there is "widespread ignorance of the treaty system", including in government cycles and among journalists (see also Shikhelman, 2019; Von Staden, 2022).[6]

Researchers also started to examining how liberal-democratic constraints on government power, especially independent civil society activity, shape the effects of complaints-based shaming on human rights respect. Schoner (2024) demonstrates that, across countries, complaints-based shaming improves state respect for human rights only when civil society organizations or other third parties support the complainants.[7] However, across individuals, compliance with specific remedies is independent of whether victims received civil society or other third party support (see also Schoner, 2024; Shikhelman, 2019: 771-3) and whether independent civil society organizations on the executive exist (Ullmann and Von Staden, 2024: 19). This null effect of civil society is explained with the idea that civil society organizations may not necessarily be in favor of universal human rights. As Von Staden (2022: 470) writes, "(w)hen pro-violation constituencies exert greater influence over decision-makers than those that are pro-compliance, a strong civil society may thus also contribute to bringing about noncompliant outcomes." In addition, Steinert and Smidt (2025) indicate that backlash repression against civil society organizations involved in individual complaints could neutralize compliance (see also Chaudhry and Heiss, 2022; Smidt et al., 2021).

[6]Conversely, democratic states that do not employ political terror as state policy tend to comply with adverse decisions of the CAT oversight body on the prohibition to deport people to countries where they face human rights violations, i.e., the non-refoulement principle (Von Staden, 2022).

[7]Similarly, Stiansen (2021) shows that a minimum level of institutional accountability of governments is required for suggested remedial actions by European Court of Human Rights judgments to be implemented. Hence, suggested remedies by international organization seem to foster timely state compliance by enabling pro-compliance actors to hold responding authorities accountable.

Taken together, it is still an open question whether and under which conditions individual complaints mechanisms improves state respect for human rights. In particular, we need research on the country-level impact of universally accessible complaints mechanisms in a global set of states (Schoner, 2024: 8, for this assessment). Findings on country-level human rights improvements in response to individual complaints are bound to a select set of states that have formally ratified the complaints mechanism of the treaty (Schoner, 2024). Since ratification is more likely when costs of good human rights performance are lower (Dai and Tokhi, 2023; Schoner, 2025), existing research likely excludes the most difficult cases for finding human rights improvements and therefore is affected by selection effects.[8] Furthermore, existing research suggests that liberal-democratic constraints on government power enhance the human rights impact of IOs' responses to individual complaints (Schoner, 2024; Stiansen, 2021; Von Staden, 2022)—although the findings for independent civil society as constraint on government power are more mixed Von Staden (2022: 19). What has been overlooked is how states' sources of power—i.e., whether they rely on programmatic or clientelistic linkages to citizens—condition the effect of individual complaints-based shaming on state respect of human rights.

[8]Indeed, Schoner (see 2024: 8) points out, voluntary delegation by states might be a scope condition for a positive effect of international human rights organizations' response to individual complaints. Moreover, Schoner (2024) further limits her sample to initially repressive states. Repressive states might qualify as tough cases for observing human rights benefits of shaming because of their insincere commitment to human rights treaties. Yet, existing research suggest that autocracies are more likely than democracies to improve human rights in response to "naming and shaming" (Hendrix and Wong, 2013) and initially repressive regimes transitioning to more open polities seem to benefit most from human rights treaties (Simmons, 2009: 153). Thus, initial repression at the time of ratification of the complaints mechanism might be another important scope condition for a positive effect of complaints-based shaming.

Theory: How individual complaints shape human rights

Why should international organizations' responses to individuals complaints change the broader pattern of human rights respect by states? Complaints are made by individuals or civil society organizations and pertain to violations incurred by individuals. Therefore, states may be able to contain the damage to their reputation by symbolically providing individual remedies without enacting broader and potentially more costly human rights reforms (Ullmann and Von Staden, 2024: 13-14). For example, Stiansen (2019) shows that governments are more likely to significantly delay—although not completely abandon—compliance with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgments when broader legislative changes (rather than merely individual-focused remedies) are required. [9] As a result of this particular nature of shaming, individual complaints mechanisms may not improve the *general* human rights situation.

Yet, there are also reasons to expect that individual complaints–based shaming may generate pressure for broader human rights reforms. First, a summary of the publicized complaints is presented in each session of the UN Human Rights Council. Complaints also enter in civil society's shaming campaigns and in media reports (Steinert and Smidt, 2025). For example, the UNSP Communication issued in November 2021 on behalf of José Abelino Cedillo and other environmental rights activists in Honduras (AL-HND-5/2021) preceded an Amnesty International Urgent Action campaign launched in March 2022 promoting the hashtag `#LibertadParaGuapinol` and calling for the release of individuals detained for activism related to protecting the Guapinol River.[10] Repeated publicized complaints may be read as a pattern of abuse by pro-compliance constituencies. Given

[9]Moreover, sthat either act as complainants themselves or support individual complainants (Steinert and Smidt, 2025).

[10]Similarly, the UNSP Communication issued in March 2022 on behalf of Tunisian citizen Noureddine Bhiri (AL-TUN-3/2022) preceded an Amnesty International Urgent Action campaign concerning the same individual in November 2024.

the challenges that international human rights organizations face in collecting information (Meernik et al., 2012), the publication of repeated complaints by individuals can reveal patterns of abuses that might otherwise remain hidden. Individual remedies are not sufficient if governments want to prevent future accusations, heightening pressures for broader reforms.

Governments should find it difficult to mitigate reputation costs by dismissing complaints-based public letters because the information on human rights abuses revealed through these letters is credible and personalized. International organizations' responses to individual complaints are written by independent human rights experts. In the case of the UNSP individual complaints mechanism, these experts have built an international reputation as independent human rights defenders and are not paid for their work (Carraro, 2019). Such expert-based accounts of how alleged abuses violate international law may have considerable weight among pro-compliance constituencies (for a similar argument, see Schoner, 2024: 12). Moreover, international organizations' responses to complaints provide personalized accounts of suffering. For example, the UNSP Communication on Ms. Arias Torres from Mexico highlighted that she was disappeared during her mother's wedding together with her boyfriend (AL-MEX-3/2026).[11] Such personal, victim-centered accounts are often emotionally powerful, attracting media and public attention and causing severe reputational damage to perpetrator states (for a similar argument, see Schoner, 2024: 10).

Governments may also be limited in using preemptive repression against complaints-based shaming by the UNSP. Individual complaints mechanisms widen access to international audiences beyond organized opposition parties, politicians and civil society groups, enabling ordinary people from marginalized groups to make their grievances about hu-

[11] As another example of personalization, the UNSP Communication concerning Mr. Ihar Losik from Belarus highlighted that he had attempted suicide twice while in prison and that he suffered from "prohibitions on receiving money transfers and lack of funds to purchase basic necessities, such as toilet paper and toothpaste" (AL-BLR-1/2026).

man rights abuses heard. For example, UNSP Communications in response to individual complaints have been filed on behalf of Pakistani refugees in Nepal (AL-NPL-1/2026), Syrian refugees in Laos (UA-LAO-4/2025) or on behalf of a Kurdish family in Turkey (AL-TUR-11/2025).[12] These cases do not represent salient human rights defenders, but rather marginalized minority groups that filed complaints about human rights abuses. Submitting complaints is relatively easy and can be done online. Thus, individual complaints mechanisms shift "shaming power" to a much broader number of people in society. As a result, repressive governments may find it difficult to preempt this form of shaming through repression. Preemptive repression requires targeting the motivated and mobilized challengers. Yet, potential complainants could be anyone that feels discriminated against by the state, which limits the potential of preemptive repression (cf., Aktan, 2025; Beiser-McGrath, 2019; Truex, 2019). Moreover, unlike complaints mechanisms enshrined in human rights treaties, the UNSP complaints mechanism is open to citizens in any state. State government ratification of the mechanism is not required. This universal openness may also make it harder for governments to anticipate shaming or to preempt it through repression. Hence, we derive the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 1: If state governments receive UNSP communications in response to individual complaints, they subsequently improve their respect for human rights.

Constraints on government power

A substantial body of research suggests that human rights pressure is not sufficient in and of itself for human rights improvements (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2007; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Murdie and Davis, 2012; Neumayer, 2005). The influential 'spiral model' of human rights progress emphasizes that improvements "can only be expected once pressure is exerted on norm-violating governments 'from above' and 'from below"' (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999: p. 276; Risse and Sikkink, 1999). In essence, this literature highlights

[12]See https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/

that the effectiveness of international shaming is conditional on domestic constraints on state power. In particular, governments that face strong domestic constraints on their power—such as independent judiciaries, mobilized civil society groups, or free media—are more likely to respond to external pressure, as non-compliance is more costly domestically. In contrast, state governments that face few domestic constraints on their power have little incentives to comply with the demands of international shaming. Hence, constraints on state government power could *moderate* the effect of shaming on state respect for human rights.

Such a conditional effect of shaming could especially apply to UNSP communications. Because complaints-based shaming shifts "shaming power" to a broader number of people in society, the power gap between the sources of shaming and the target state is particularly large compared to other forms of shaming (e.g. NGO statements in the Universal Periodic Review). In such a setting, domestic counterweights to state power that amplify and sustain the demands of individual complaints may be especially important (Murdie and Davis, 2012). Moreover, constraints on state government power may play an important role in enabling broader institutional changes that lead to human rights improvements beyond state compliance in individual cases. For instance, independent domestic courts may incorporate the statements from international human rights experts into their reasoning, not only in cases directly linked to UNSP communications, but also in related or future cases involving similar rights violations. Over time, such processes may contribute to structural improvements in human rights protection that go beyond case-specific responses to shaming. To test how constraints on state government power moderate the effectiveness of complaints-based shaming, we derive the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 2: If state governments face more constraints on their power, UNSP communications in response to individual complaints are more likely improve state respect for human rights.

Sources of government power

The effect of UNSP communications on human rights may also be conditional on the sources of government power. Specifically, we differentiate between states where political actors derive power from making programmatic appeals to society and states where political actors derive power from maintaining clientelistic linkages with specific groups in society. When political actors operate through clientelistic linkages, they gain popular backing from the contingent and iterated exchange of material rewards to selected groups in society for the quid pro quo of political support (Corstange, 2018; Stokes, 2011). Such material rewards could include cash, consumer goods, government licenses, subsidized school and medical fees, or public sector jobs (Blaydes, 2010; Calvo and Murillo, 2004; Magaloni, 2007). In contrast, in states where political actors derive power from programmatic appeals, constituents respond to these political actors' programmatic policy positions and popular backing is a function of citizens' support for these positions. We acknowledge that there is evidence that political actors can combine both clientelistic and programmatic ties (Contreras, 2024). Hence, we conceptualize clientelism as a latent continuum, with states varying in the degree of clientelistic linkages between constituents and political actors.[13]

We expect that clientelistic vs. programmatic sources of government power determine the latter's political will to favorably respond to publicized individual complaints. For programmatically oriented governments, the relevant selectorate is broad. It may encompass the entire population. Therefore, governments derive political rewards from

[13]The related concepts of 'vote-buying' and 'patronage' can be considered as subtypes of clientelism (Stokes, 2011). Vote-buying is a more specific concept because in clientelistic systems, goods are exchanged not only for votes, but also for other types of popular support (see the literature on varieties of clientelism, e.g., Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter, 2014). Patronage focuses specifically on the exchange of public employment by office-holders for electoral support, but clientelistic strategies can also be employed by political actors who do not hold public office and are therefore unable to distribute public employment.

constraining short-term incentives for repression even against marginalized groups or political opponents, because these groups could be part of their power base in the future. Political actors that compete on the basis of political programs are likely to benefit from a long-term strategy focused on the provision of widely popular public goods, such as the protection of physical integrity rights (see Dancy and Fariss, 2024). The implementation of the recommendations of international human rights experts allows governments to publicly signal their credible commitment to this public good.

In contrast, in states where political actors have more clientelistic linkages to society, political actors rely on more narrow and fixed constituencies that they reward with private goods in exchange for political support (Fox, 1994; Wantchekon, 2003). Responding to international human rights complaints could be considered as a self-defeating strategy for clientelistic governments. The logic of clientelist rule is the selective exchange of goods or services in return for political support. If the demands of political out-groups—who are plausibly the subject of human rights complaints—were met, in-groups may call into question politicians' exclusive political responsiveness to their demands. Moreover, the repression of political out-groups itself may be a payoff that in-groups receive in exchange for their support. Previous research highlights that governments may use the selective repression of rivals as a political reward for supporters (Esberg, 2020). If politicians fear that constituents punish them for respecting human rights by withdrawing their support, they lack incentives to improve the human rights situation of out-groups (Hicken and Nathan, 2020: 288).[14] Based on this reasoning, clientelistic governments would antagonize their supporters and thus weaken their power base when accommodating the demands of international human rights experts in response to individual complaints. Hence, we derive the following hypothesis:

[14]Another argument is that clientelistic political actors are more reliant on repression than programmatic political actors because they rely on repression to make voters believe that vote choice can be monitored (Hicken and Nathan, 2020: 286). The perception among voters that their behavior at the ballot box can be observed is what makes clientelist strategies efficient from the perspective of politicians.

Hypothesis 3: If political actors derive state power from making more programmatic (and fewer clientelistic) appeals to society, UNSP communications in response to individual complaints are more likely to improve state respect for human rights.

Research design

We test our hypotheses in a global sample of countries in the 2011-2022 period using regression analysis. Source data on UNSP communications comes from a publicly accessible digital database maintained by the OHCHR.[15] While the UNSP complaints mechanism exists already since 2003, our period of analysis only starts in 2011 for two reasons. First, knowledge of the UNSP complaints mechanism was initially limited to a select group of individuals, which is reflected in a low number of complaints in the 2003-2009 period.[16] In 2010, the UNSP established an online form for complaint submission, which enhanced civil society access to its complaints mechanism. Second, UNSP communications are only publicly available since 2010, likely limiting their shaming effects before that year and, therefore, the applicability of our argument. As we lag the count of communications by one year in the cross-country analyses, the period of analysis starts in 2011.

Dependent variables

We focus on a subset of the human rights that protect bodily autonomy, i.e., physical integrity rights, including include freedom from killing, torture, arbitrary arrests and disappearances. Physical integrity is the most "frequently studied right in empirical research on human rights violations" and, given its position in international human rights treaties, is often thought of as "the most fundamental human right" (Hill, 2016: 822). In addition, the focus on physical integrity potentially cautions against over-estimating an expected positive human rights effect of UNSP communications in response to individual complaints. Research on human rights courts suggests that state are less likely

[15]See: https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/.

[16]According to interviews with UNSP staff members.

to comply with judgments on abuses of physical integrity rights than with judgments on other types of abuses because "such violations almost by definition strike at the heart of executive control over a society, and thereby are likely to elicit executive resistance" (Grewal and Voeten, 2015: 504-5).[17] Finally, although complaints to the UNSP may concern any type of abuse, a focus on physical integrity makes our assessment of the effects of complaints-based shaming comparable. Aggregated human rights measures obscure important differences between respect for, for example, social and economic rights and physical integrity rights.

To operationalize our dependent variable, we rely primarily on Fariss (2014a) human rights scores, which are considered "the present state-of-the-art in cross-national studies of human rights" (Murdie, 2017: 285). Fariss scores adjusts for the fact that standards for "good" human rights performance have become more stringent over time. In more recent years, human rights monitors tend to "look harder for abuse, look in more places for abuse, and classify more acts as abuses" (Fariss, 2014b: 297). Source data for measures of human rights respect, such as Amnesty International reports, reflect this trend. Fariss latent variable model corrects for this trend to yield comparable estimates of physical integrity rights respect over time, which are suitable for our models that focus on within-country variation over time. Figure A.1 in the Appendix shows the distribution of country averages Fariss scores for our analysis period, which ranges from 2011 to 2019.[18]

Explanatory variables

Our key explanatory variable is the number of communications sent by the UNSP to governments in response to complaints about physical integrity rights for each country and year. We only count UNSP communications that follow-up on complaints ('allegation

[17]Yet, Ullmann and Von Staden (2024) show that states are neither more nor less likely to comply with treaty body decisions regarding physical integrity rights abuses compared to treaty body decisions regarding other types of abuses.

[18]Fariss human rights scores are only available until 2019, which limits our analysis to this period.

letters' and 'urgent appeals') and exclude those that raise general concerns about laws ('other letters'). We also exclude communications that are sent by UNSP with country-specific mandates or directed at non-state actors.[19] Finally, to filter communications on physical integrity rights, we focus only on communications that are signed by the "Special Rapporteur on Extra-judicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions" (killings), the "Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances" (disappearances), the "Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment" (torture), and the "Working Group on Arbitrary Detention" (political imprisonment).

Figure 1 shows the country averages of the number of UNSP communications focused on physical integrity rights abuses across countries for our period of analysis.[20] The average number of UNSP Communications concerning physical integrity rights was highest for Iran, followed by the United States, Egypt, and China, suggesting that communications are partly responsive to repression levels but also shaped by other factors such as local 'complaint resources' (see Steinert, 2024). We focus on UNSP communications rather than individual complaints, because the latter are not public. Due to their non-public nature, they should not prompt a government response by exerting external pressure or acting as a commitment device (Schoner, 2024).

[19]About 8.5% of the UNSP communications in our sample are directed at non-state actors such as companies and rebel groups.

[20]Our sample includes 31.8% country-year observations without any UNSP communications. There are six countries (Benin, Bhutan, Iceland, Jamaica, Sao Tome and Principe, and Vanuatu) that have not received any UNSP communication during the entire analysis period.

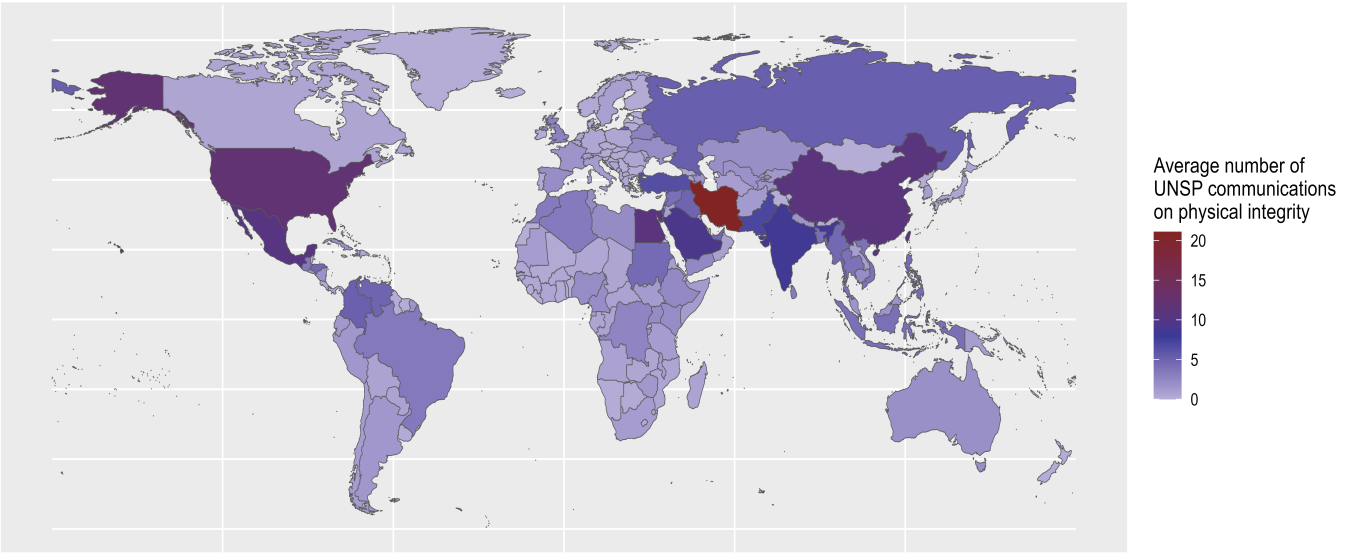


Figure 1: Yearly average of number of UNSP communications focused on physical integrity rights abuses from 2011 to 2022

Our theoretical framework suggests that constraints on state government power moderate the relationship between UNSP communications and human rights compliance. To operationalize this moderator and to differentiate between different types of constraints on governments, we use the measures of *horizontal* accountability constraints and *diagonal* accountability constraints from the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2023). Horizontal accountability refers to the capacity of state institutions to monitor government actions by requesting information, scrutinizing officials, and sanctioning misconduct. It captures institutional checks on executive power through actors such as legislatures, courts, and oversight bodies. In contrast, diagonal accountability refers to the ways citizens, civil society organizations, and independent media hold governments accountable outside formal electoral channels. V-Dem provides us with continuous time-varying measures of these latent dimensions, which we interact with the number of UNSP communications addressed to a given state to examine the hypothesized conditional effect on human rights compliance (Hypothesis 2).

We further expect that the sources of state government power, in particular the degree of clientelistic vs. programmatic appeals to win political support, moderate the relation-

ship between UNSP communications and human rights compliance. We operationalize the degree of clientelistic vs. programmatic sources of power in a given country-year with the 'party linkages' variable from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2023). Expert coders classify countries each year based on the question *"Among the major parties, what is the main or most common form of linkage to their constituents?"* on an ordinal scale ranging from 0 = clientelistic (*"Constituents are rewarded with goods, cash, and/or jobs."*) to 4 = policy/programmatic (*"Constituents respond to a party's positions on national policies, general party programs, and visions for society"*). The responses of different expert coders for each country and year are aggregated into a continuous score using an item response model (Pemstein et al., 2023). Higher scores on the continuous party linkages measure indicate higher degrees of programmatic rule. We interact this measure of party linkages with the number of UNSP communications to examine the hypothesized conditional effect on human rights compliance (Hypothesis 3).

The measure of clientelistic vs. programmatic sources of political support captures important variation that differs from standard measures of liberal democracy and thus horizontal and diagonal accountability constraints. While measures of democracy are correlated with less clientelistic and more programmatic linkages between political parties and voters—the correlation with V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index and Electoral Democracy Index is is 0.64 and 0.57, respectively—these measures are not congruent. For example, Peru is a highly clientelistic state despite relatively high levels of democracy (Muñoz, 2014), while other states with similar scores on the Liberal Democracy Index, such as Latvia or Japan, have much lower levels of clientelism. In Appendix A.3, we visualize the substantial residual variation in the degree of clientelistic vs. programmatic rule that is not explained by standard measures of democracy. This highlights the need to move beyond these commonly used measure of democracy to explain conditional effects of naming and shaming.[21]

[21]Appendix Table A.4 shows that the interaction between the polyarchy measure of democracy and UNSP communications is not statistically significant in explaining physical integrity rights protection.

Methods and identification

A pooled cross-country regression analysis likely under-estimates the human rights progress as a result of UNSP communications due to endogeneity. Specifically, countries with a deteriorating human rights records likely receive a greater number of communications compared to countries on a path to improved human rights respect. One reason is that communications often include "urgent appeals" that request governments to stop impending abuses.

Consider the following stylized comparison to understand why endogeneity may make it harder to find the expected positive effect of UNSP communications for human rights progress. In state A, security forces regularly violate physical integrity rights. There are many victims and some of them file complaints. The UNSP responds and sends several communications to state A. While the government in state A may want to be responsive to the UNSP's criticism, it lacks state capacity (e.g., control over state security forces) and abuses continue. By contrast, in state B, physical integrity rights are generally protected. Yet, due to an exceptional case of disproportionate use of force by police to dissolve a demonstration, a group of victims files one complaint and the UNSP sends one communication to state B. In response, the government of state B increases its control of state security forces. It has high state capacity (e.g., control over state security forces) and effectively prevents future abuses. Thus, if we do not take into account that UNSP communications may be endogenous to state capacity (and related factors such as control over state security forces), then we under-estimate the positive effect of communications on physical integrity rights respect.

In order to identify the causal effect of UNSP communications on physical integrity rights protection, we instrument the number of UNSP communications in country i and year t with the number of newly entering UNSP mandate-holders (also known as Special Rapporteurs and Independent Experts) who are responsible for screening and acting upon complaints in year t, the number of newly entering UNSP mandate-holders in t who are

experts on physical integrity rights and possess language skills for dealing with complaints from country i, and the interaction between these two instruments. We additionally include the total number of UNSP mandate-holders in year t and the total number of UNSP mandate-holders who are experts on physical integrity rights and possess language skills for dealing with complaints from country i in year t.[22] We assess whether a newly entering UNSP mandate-holders possess language skills for dealing with complaints from country i by identifying whether they hold citizenship in a country that shares at least one official language with country i. For instance, Mr. Mohammed Al-Obaidi from Iraq was appointed to the UNSP Working Group on Disappearances in September 2024. Iraq has two official languages: Arabic and Kurdish. Hence, Mr. Al-Obaidi is counted as a newly entering UNSP mandate-holder in 2024 who has expertise on physical integrity rights and possesses language skills for dealing with complaints from the countries with Arabic or Kurdish as official languages (i.e., Algeria, Bahrain, Chad, Comoros, Djobouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.)

[22]Data come from `https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council/current-and-former-mandate-holders-existing-mandates`, accessed 20 May 2026.

Table 1: First stage model

	DV: Communications on Physical Integrity
New mandate-holder with language skills (lag 1yr)	-0.903^{*}
	(0.357)
All new mandate-holder (lag 1yr)	-0.050^{***}
	(0.013)
Interaction: New mandate-holders with language skills*	0.057^{**}
All new mandate-holders (lag 1yr)	(0.022)
Education (lag 1yr)	0.452
	(0.277)
Conflict (lag 1yr)	0.352
	(0.343)
GDP per capita (lag 1yr)	$0.749^{\dagger}$
	(0.432)
Export to democracies (lag 1yr)	$0.322^{\dagger}$
	(0.187)
UNSP country visits	0.006
	(0.065)
Active mandate-holders with language skills (lag 1yr)	0.047
	(0.081)
Active mandate-holders (lag 1yr)	0.034^{***}
	(0.007)
Number of observations	1502
Country fixed effects	Yes
Time-varying controls	Yes
First stage F-statistic	17.454
R^2	0.699
Adjusted R^2	0.659

Notes: The models are estimated with ordinary least squares regression. Cluster-robust. standard errors are in parentheses. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Our instruments are both theoretically and empirically relevant. When UNSP mandate-holders just entered into office, they have to familiarize themselves with their dossier and the working procedures at the UNSP. Since individual complaints need to be distributed among mandate-holders and complaints-based communications are often drafted and signed by multiple mandate-holders, newly appointed mandate-holders also require

time to get to know each other and establish effective coordination processes. Consequently, a higher number of newly entering mandate-holders in year t lead to fewer communications upon complaints on physical integrity abuse in that year t. However, the productivity-depressing effect of new mandate-holders on UNSP communications on physical integrity rights abuses targeting country i in year t is less severe, when new mandate-holders possess expertise on physical integrity rights and language skills appropriate for that country i in year t (see Kahn-Nisser, 2024: for evidence that the nationality of experts in UN treaty bodies affects which states receive communications by these experts). These productivity gains as a result of new mandate-holders with expertise on physical integrity rights and language skills appropriate for country i in year t might be especially high when there are fewer new mandate-holders without this physical integrity rights expertise and with language skills for countries other than i in year t. The reason is that fewer new appointments to the UNSP generally reduce coordination problems for writing communications. Conversely, when a higher number of mandate-holders is newly joining the UNSP in year t, then the new mandate-holders with appropriate expertise and language skills for country i in year t must solve more coordination problems for writing communications. Consequently, there are lower productivity gains for communications regarding physical integrity rights violations in country i in year t.

Table 1 shows the empirical relevance of our instruments in a fixed effects regression with the above specified time-varying controls. The F-statistic is large (17.454), well above the threshold value of 10, indicating that the instruments are valid (Sovey and Green, 2011). As expected, the negative coefficients on *both* the yearly number of new mandate-holders *and* the yearly number of new mandate-holders with expertise on physical integrity rights and language skills appropriate for country i suggest that any turnover in the UNSP depresses yearly communications targeting country i. Yet, the positive interaction effect between these two measures indicates that as long as the number of newly appointed mandate-holders in year t is low or moderate, more new mandate-holders with physical integrity rights expertise and country i-specific language skills in year t still

increase the number of communications on physical integrity rights targezing country i in year t. Figure 2 illustrates this dynamic.

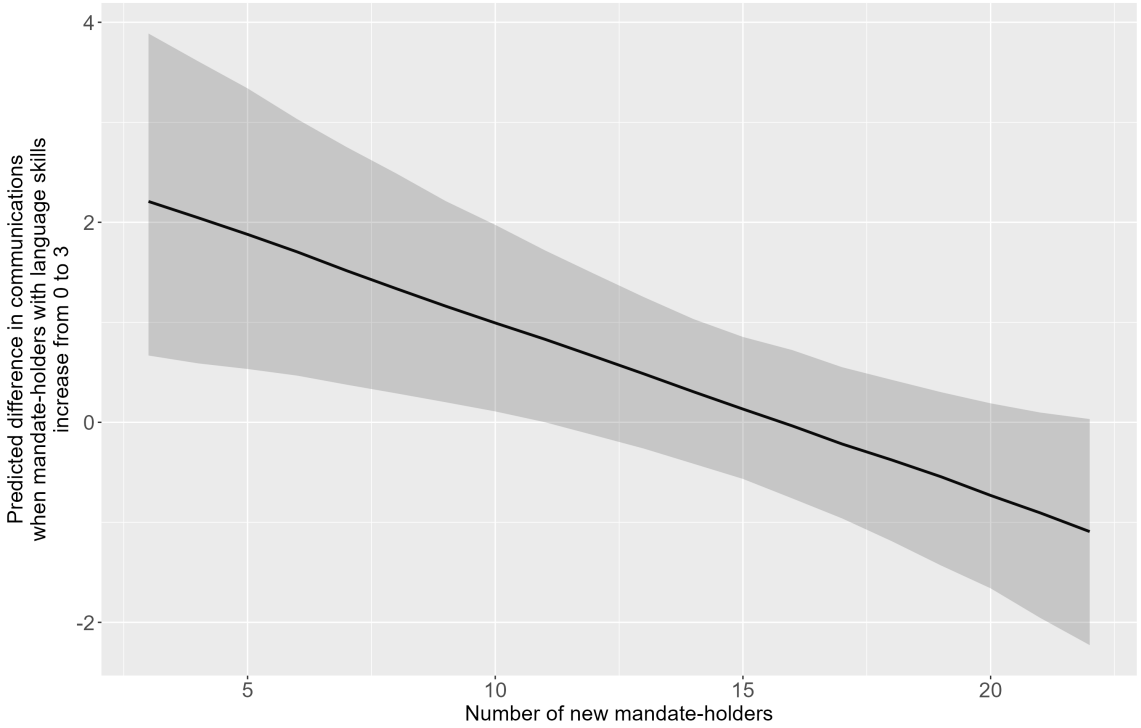


Figure 2: New mandate-holders' effects on UNSP communications (first stage model)

Our instruments plausibly fulfill the independence and excludability assumptions. First, it unlikely that the number of new appointments of mandate-holders in year t directly depend on physical integrity rights abuses in a *particular* country i in year t. Instead, the number of new appointments of mandate-holders in year t depends on the thematic priorities of the UN and the global human rights situation. For example, when women's rights were high on the agenda, the UNSP added mandate-holders with this specific expertise. As mentioned above, mandate-holders are appointed to work on specific thematic mandates with global scope (e.g., women's rights or rights of persons with disabilities) rather than particular countries. Furthermore, the appointment of UNSP mandate-holders is always for six years. This long duration in office limits the possibilities for adapting new appointments to the human rights situations in a particular country.

similarly, it is equally unlikely that the number of new mandate-holders, who possess

expertise on physical integrity rights and speak the official language of country i, depend on physical integrity rights respect in country i in year t. Since there are (informal) regional quotas for the countries of origin of the mandate-holders, it is highly unlikely that these mandate-holders are chosen based on language skills for countries with deteriorating physical integrity rights records.[23] Moreover, we infer language skills from mandate-holders' country of origins. Many countries share an official language (e.g., Arabic or French). Hence, it is unlikely that the appointment of new mandate-holders with specific language skills relate to human rights practices in a particular country.

The only possible violation of the excludability assumption that we can think of are other activities of UNSP mandate-holders that are likewise affected by personnel turnover and new appointments. According to the Manual of Operation of the UNSP, communications and country visits are the two primary activities of UNSP mandate-holders (UNSP, 2008). Thus, we collected data on country visits provided by the OHCHR (2024). We then include country visits by UNSP mandate-holders as control variable in our models.

Rather than using two-stage least squares regression (2SLS) models, we estimate the instrumental variables regression using a control function approach. This approach estimates the first stage model of UNSP communications and then retrieves the residuals for each observation of this model, i.e., the variation in UNSP communications per country and year that cannot be explained by the instrumental variables and the endogenous controls. The second stage model of physical integrity rights respect then controls for these residuals from the first stage model. While the estimated effects of UNSP communications on physical integrity rights respect do not differ between the control function approach and 2SLS, the former is more suitable for our purpose because it allows us to include an interaction term between instrumented UNSP communications and programmatic rule in the second stage model.

[23]The UNSP working groups are regionally balanced, with each of the five staff members representing a different regional group of the UN. While there is no formal rule for regional balance among Special Rapporteurs and Independent Experts, there is an informal norm to strive for regional balance.

While we consider our causal identification strategy to be credible on its own, we further reduce the risk of confounding by controlling for time-varying factors that may affect both the number of UNSP communications and physical integrity rights. We discuss and justify these control variables in detail in Appendix A.5.

Results

In the following sections, we present the results of our empirical analyses. To test hypothesis 1, we first examine the average effect of UNSP communications on the protection of physical integrity rights. Subsequently, we assess whether the effect of UNSP communications on physical integrity rights is conditional on constraints on government power (Hypothesis 2) and sources of government power (Hypothesis 3).

Average Effect of UNSP Communications on Physical Integrity Rights

Table 2 presents the estimated average effect of UNSP communications on the level of state respect for physical integrity rights. The evidence from the OLS regression models suggests that UNSP communications have no statistically significant effect on physical integrity rights as reported in column 1 (without time-varying controls) and column 2 (with time-varying controls). However, once we address potential unobserved endogeneity by instrumenting UNSP communications with the entry of new UNSP mandate-holders and their country-specific language skills, the estimated coefficient becomes positive and statistically significant at the $p < 0.1$ level. Hence, there is some (although weak) evidence in support of hypothesis 1, suggesting that UNSP communications tend to improve state respect for physical integrity rights. However, this average effect of UNSP communications may mask important heterogeneity and potentially countervailing effects across different types of states. We therefore further explore how characteristics of the shamed states condition this effect in the following section.

Table 2: Model of respect of physical integrity rights

	DV: Fariss' human rights scores		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
UNSP communications (lag 1 yr)	−0.006	−0.006	0.076†
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.040)
Education (lag 1 yr)		−0.014	0.010
		(0.082)	(0.083)
Conflict (lag 1 yr)		−0.194*	−0.201*
		(0.083)	(0.082)
GDP per capita (lag 1 yr)		0.087	0.041
		(0.101)	(0.099)
Exports to democracies, log (lag 1 yr)		0.003	0.006
		(0.051)	(0.051)
UNSP country visits			−0.006
			(0.010)
Residuals (control function)			−0.084*
			(0.041)
Number of observations	1546	1502	1502
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time-varying controls	No	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.973	0.973	0.974
Adjusted R^2	0.970	0.970	0.970

Notes: The models in columns 1 and 2 are estimated with ordinary least. squares regression. Cluster-robust standard errors are in parentheses. Model 3 shows the results of the instrumental variable regression estimates with a control function approach. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Conditional Effect of UNSP Communications on Physical Integrity Rights

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the empirical analyses focusing on the interaction between UNSP communications and domestic constraints on state governments. The results show that the interaction effects are not statistically significant for both horizontal constraints (first row of Table 3) and diagonal constraints (first row of Table 4) across model specifications. This suggests that neither institutional nor societal constraints on executive power moderate the effect of UNSP communications on physical integrity rights. In other words, states with higher (or lower) levels of constraints on the state

government are not more (or less) likely to improve physical integrity rights protection in response to UNSP communications. Hence, our empirical evidence does not support hypothesis 2.

Table 3: Model of respect of physical integrity rights conditional on horizontal constraints

	DV: Fariss' human rights scores		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communications*Horizonal constraints	0.004	0.004	0.004
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
UNSP communications (lag 1 yr)	−0.004	−0.004	0.074†
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.041)
Horizontal constraints	0.233*	0.235*	0.233*
	(0.092)	(0.092)	(0.091)
Education (lag 1 yr)		−0.029	−0.006
		(0.075)	(0.076)
Conflict (lag 1 yr)		−0.186*	−0.193*
		(0.082)	(0.082)
GDP per capita (lag 1 yr)		0.093	0.049
		(0.102)	(0.102)
Exports to democracies, log (lag 1 yr)		0.014	0.017
		(0.050)	(0.049)
UNSP country visits			−0.006
			(0.010)
Residuals (control function)			−0.080*
			(0.040)
Number of observations	1546	1502	1502
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time-varying controls	No	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.974	0.974	0.975
Adjusted R^2	0.971	0.971	0.971

Notes: The models in columns 1 and 2 are estimated with ordinary least. squares regression. Cluster-robust standard errors are in parentheses. Model 3 shows the results of the instrumental variable regression estimates with a control function approach. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 4: Model of respect of physical integrity rights conditional on diagonal constraints

	DV: Fariss' human rights scores		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communications*Diagonal constraints	−0.002	−0.002	−0.003
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
UNSP communications (lag 1 yr)	0.0002	0.0003	0.117**
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.039)
Diagonal constraints	0.418***	0.438***	0.468***
	(0.091)	(0.093)	(0.088)
Education (lag 1 yr)		−0.106	−0.079
		(0.070)	(0.070)
Conflict (lag 1 yr)		−0.167*	−0.176*
		(0.077)	(0.077)
GDP per capita (lag 1 yr)		0.111	0.046
		(0.099)	(0.096)
Exports to democracies, log (lag 1 yr)		−0.001	0.004
		(0.049)	(0.048)
UNSP country visits			−0.008
			(0.009)
Residuals (control function)			−0.119**
			(0.039)
Number of observations	1546	1502	1502
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time-varying controls	No	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.975	0.976	0.976
Adjusted R^2	0.972	0.972	0.973

Notes: The models in columns 1 and 2 are estimated with ordinary least. squares regression. Cluster-robust standard errors are in parentheses. Model 3 shows the results of the instrumental variable regression estimates with a control function approach. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Finally, we turn to Hypothesis 3 and investigate whether programmatic (vs. clientelistic) appeals moderate the effect of UNSP communications on physical integrity rights protection. The evidence presented in Table 5 lends support to this hypothesis. The key interaction effect is statistically significant across model specifications, including the OLS regression models (columns 1–2) and the instrumental variable model that accounts for

unobserved endogeneity (column 3). In line with our expectations, the negative coefficient on UNSP communications and the positive coefficient on programmatic rule together suggest that a higher number of UNSP communications decreases physical integrity rights respect in clientelistic regimes but increases physical integrity rights respect in programmatic regimes. Thus, the sources of government power, and in particular whether they rely on programmatic or clientelistic appeals, play an important role in shaping whether governments are responsive to individual complaints-based shaming.

Taken together, we consistently find that UNSP communications on physical integrity violations tend to improve physical integrity rights protection in countries under programmatic rule, while this does not apply to countries under clientelistic rule. We do not find that the effect of UNSP communications is conditional on constraints on government power. Hence, our empirical analysis suggests that it is the sources of government power, rather than constraints on government power, that shape whether states improve their repressive records in response to complaints-based shaming. This evidence identifies an important scope condition of the effectiveness of the universally accessible complaint mechanism operated by the UNSP.

Table 5: Model of respect of physical integrity rights conditional on clientelism

	DV: Fariss' human rights scores		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communications*Programmatic appeals	0.009**	0.008**	0.008*
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
UNSP communications (lag 1 yr)	−0.010*	−0.010*	−0.002
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.046)
Programmatic appeals	0.097*	0.095*	0.090†
	(0.045)	(0.044)	(0.046)
Education (lag 1 yr)		−0.020	0.014
		(0.080)	(0.085)
Conflict (lag 1 yr)		−0.185*	−0.198*
		(0.082)	(0.082)
GDP per capita (lag 1 yr)		0.086	0.032
		(0.099)	(0.102)
Exports to democracies, log (lag 1 yr)		0.011	0.015
		(0.050)	(0.052)
UNSP country visits			−0.005
			(0.010)
Residuals (control function)			−0.011
			(0.046)
Number of observations	1546	1502	1502
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time-varying controls	No	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.973	0.974	0.974
Adjusted R^2	0.970	0.970	0.971

Notes: The models in columns 1 and 2 are estimated with ordinary least. squares regression. Cluster-robust standard errors are in parentheses. Model 3 shows the results of the instrumental variable regression estimates with a control function approach. †p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Conclusion

To be determined.

Thank you for reading our manuscript. All your comments and questions are very welcome.

References

Aktan, Dogus (2025). "How Does Violence Deter? Functional and Informational Effects of Preemptive Repression". *Journal of Peace Research* 62 (6), pp. 1923–1937.

Alter, Karen (2006). "Private litigants and the New International Courts". *Comparative Political Studies* 39 (1), pp. 22–49.

Anagnostou, Dia and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2014). "Domestic Implementation of Human Rights Judgments in Europe: Legal Infrastructure and Government Effectiveness Matter". *The European Journal of International Law* 25 (1), pp. 205–227.

Beiser-McGrath, Janina (2019). "Targeting the Motivated? Ethnicity and the Pre-emptive Use of Government Repression". *Swiss Political Science Review* 25 (3), pp. 203–225.

Blaydes, Lisa (2010). *Elections and distributive politics in Mubarak's Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brysk, Alison (1993). "From above and below: Social movements, the international system, and human rights in Argentina". *Comparative Political Studies* 26 (3), pp. 259–285.

Calvo, Ernesto and Maria Victoria Murillo (2004). "Who delivers? Partisan clients in the Argentine electoral market". *American Journal of Political Science* 48 (4), pp. 742–757.

Carraro, Valentina (Sept. 2019). "Electing the experts: Expertise and independence in the UN human rights treaty bodies". *European Journal of International Relations* 25 (3), pp. 826–851.

Chaudhry, Suparna and Andrew Heiss (Mar. 15, 2022). "NGO repression as a predictor of worsening human rights abuses". *Journal of Human Rights* 21 (2), pp. 123–140.

Contreras, Gonzalo (2024). "Outsourcing Machines. How Programmatic Parties Include Clientelistic Strategies". *Comparative Political Studies*.

Coppedge, Michael et al. (2023). *V-Dem Dataset v13. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*. URL: `https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds23`.

Corstange, Daniel (2018). "Clientelism in competitive and uncompetitive elections". *Comparative Political Studies* 51 (1), pp. 76–104.

Dai, Xinyuan and Alexandros Tokhi (2023). "New Democracies and Commitment to Human Rights Treaties". *International Studies Quarterly* 67 (4), pp. 87–123.

Dancy, Geoff and Christopher J. Fariss (2024). "The global resonance of human rights: What Google trends can tell us". *American Political Science Review* 118 (1), pp. 252–273.

DeMeritt, Jacqueline H.R. and Courtenay R. Conrad (2019). "Repression Substitution: Shifting Human Rights Violations in Response to UN Naming and Shaming". *Civil Wars* 21 (1), pp. 128–152.

Esberg, Jane (2020). "Censorship as reward: Evidence from pop culture censorship in Chile". *American Political Science Review* 114 (3), pp. 821–836.

Fariss, Christopher J. (2014a). "Respect for human rights has improved over time: Modeling the changing standard of accountability". *American Political Science Review* 108 (2), pp. 297–318.

Fariss, Christopher J (2014b). "Respect for Human Rights Has Improved Over Time: Modeling the Changing Standard of Accountability". *American Political Science Review* 108 (2), pp. 297–318.

Fox, Jonathan (1994). "The difficult transition from clientelism to citizenship: Lessons from Mexico". *World Politics* 46 (2), pp. 151–184.

Gans-Morse, Jordan, Sebastian Mazzuca, and Simeon Nichter (2014). "Varieties of clientelism: Machine politics during elections". *American Journal of Political Science* 58 (2), pp. 415–432.

Grewal, Sharanbir and Erik Voeten (2015). "Are new democracies better human rights compliers?" *International Organization* 69 (2), pp. 497–518.

Grigorescu, Alexandru (2015). *Democratic Intergovernmental Organizations? Normative Pressures and Decision-Making Rules.* Cambridge University Press.

Hafner-Burton, Emilie M. (2008). "Sticks and stones: Naming and shaming the human rights enforcement problem". *International Organization* 62 (4), pp. 689–716.

Hafner-Burton, Emilie M. and Kiyoteru Tsutsui (July 2007). "Justice Lost! The Failure of International Human Rights Law To Matter Where Needed Most". *Journal of Peace Research* 44 (4), pp. 407–425.

Helfer, Samuel and Anne-Marie Slaughter (1997). "Toward a Theory of Effective Supranational Adjudication". *Yale Law Journal* 107 (273), pp. 273–389.

Hendrix, Cullen S. and Wendy H. Wong (2013). "When is the pen truly mighty? Regime type and the efficacy of naming and shaming in curbing human rights abuses". *British Journal of Political Science* 43 (3), pp. 651–672.

– (2014). "Knowing your audience: How the structure of international relations and organizational choices affect amnesty international's advocacy". *The Review of International Organizations* 9, pp. 29–58.

Heyns, C. H. and Frans Viljoen (2001). "The Impact of the United Nations Human Rights Treaties on the Domestic Level". *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (3), pp. 483–535.

Hicken, Allen and Noah L. Nathan (2020). "Clientelism's Red Herrings: Dead Ends and New Directions in the Study of Nonprogrammatic Politics". *Annual Review of Political Science* 23, pp. 277–294.

Hill, Daniel W. Jr. (2016). "Democracy and the Concept of Personal Integrity Rights". *The Journal of Politics* 108 (3), pp. 661–687.

Hillebrecht, Courtney (2012a). "Implementing International Human Rights Law at Home: Domestic Politics and the European Court of Human Rights". *Human Rights Review* 13, pp. 279–301.

– (2012b). "The Domestic Mechanisms of Compliance with International Human Rights Law: Case Studies from the Inter-American Human Rights System". *Human Rights Quarterly* 34 (4), pp. 959–985.

Hillebrecht, Courtney (2014). *Domestic Politics and International Human Rights Tribunals. The Problem of Compliance*. Cambridge University Press: cambridge Studies in Comparative and International Law.

Hug, Simon and Richard Lukács (2014). "Preferences or blocs? Voting in the United Nations Human Rights Council". *International Studies Quarterly* 9 (1), pp. 83–106.

Jarvis, Samuel (2025). "Informal Practices and the Future of Mass AtrocityPrevention: Exploring the Function of Arria Formula Meetings". *International Peacekeeping* 32 (1), pp. 125–152.

Kahn-Nisser, Sara (2024). "Friendly advice: socializing shaming in the committee against torture." *Contemporary Politics* 30 (3), pp. 361–382.

Keck, Margaret E. and Kathryn Sikkink (1998). *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Keefer, Philip (2007). "Clientelism, credibility, and the policy choices of young democracies". *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (4), pp. 804–821.

Kitschelt, Herbert and Daniel M. Kselman (2013). "Economic development, democratic experience, and political parties' linkage strategies". *Comparative Political Studies* 46 (11), pp. 1453–1484.

Krommendijk, Jasper (2015). "The domestic effectiveness of international human rights monitoring in established democracies". *Review of International Studies* 10 (2), pp. 489–512.

Lebovic, James H. and Erik Voeten (2006). "The politics of shame: the condemnation of country human rights practices in the UNCHR". *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (4), pp. 861–888.

Magaloni, Beatriz (2007). *Voting for autocracy: Hegemonic party survival and its demise in Mexico.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Meernik, James, Rosa Aloisi, Marsha Sowell, and Angela Nichols (2012). "The Impact of Human Rights Organizations on Naming and Shaming Campaigns". *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (2), pp. 233–256.

Murdie, Amanda (2017). "R2P, Human Rights, and the Perils of a Bad Human Rights Intervention". *Global Responsibility to Protect* 9 (3), pp. 267–293.

Murdie, Amanda M. and David R. Davis (2012). "Shaming and blaming: Using events data to assess the impact of human rights INGOs". *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (1), pp. 1–16.

Muñoz, Paula (2014). "An informational theory of campaign clientelism: the case of Peru". *Comparative Politics* 1 (47), pp. 79–98.

Neumayer, Eric (2005). "Do international human rights treaties improve respect for human rights?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49 (6), pp. 925–953.

OHCHR (2024). *Country visits of Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council since 1998*. URL: `https://spinternet.ohchr.org/ViewCountryVisits.aspx?visitType=all&lang=en` (visited on 06/21/2024).

– (2026). *What are Communications?* URL: `https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council/what-are-communications`.

Pemstein, Daniel, Marquardt Marquardt, Tzelgov Tzelgov, Juraj Medzihorsky, Joshua Krusell, Farhad Miri, and Johannes von Römer (2023). *The V-Dem Measurement Model: Latent Variable Analysis for Cross-National and Cross-Temporal Expert-Coded Data.*

Risse, Thomas (2017). *Domestic politics and norm diffusion in international relations: Ideas do not float freely*. Taylor & Francis. URL: `https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50470`.

Risse, Thomas, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds. (1999). *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*. Vol. 66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Risse, Thomas and Kathryn Sikkink (1999). "The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices". *Domestic politics and norm diffusion in international relations*, pp. 117–149.

Scholte, Jan Aart (2011). *Building Global Democracy: Civil Society and Accountable Global Governance.* Cambridge University Press.

Schoner, Rachel J. (2024). "Naming and Shaming in UN Treaty Bodies: Individual Petitions' Effect on Human Rights". *The Review of International Organizations, Online First*, pp. 1–40.

– (2025). "Empowering your victims: Why repressive regimes allow individual petitions in international organizations". *The Review of International Organizations* 20, pp. 87–123.

Shikhelman, Vera (2019). "Implementing Decisions of International Human Rights Institutions – Evidence from the United Nations Human Rights Committee". *The European Journal of International Law* 30 (3), pp. 753–777.

Simmons, Beth (2009). *Mobilizing for Human Rights.* Cambridge University Press.

Smidt, Hannah, Dominic Perera, Neil J. Mitchell, and Kristin M. Bakke (2021). "Silencing their critics: how government restrictions against civil society affect international 'naming and shaming'". *British Journal of Political Science* 51 (3), pp. 1270–1291.

Smith-Cannoy, Heather (2012). *Insincere commitments: Human rights treaties, abusive states, and citizen activism.* Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Sommerer, Thomas and Jonas Tallberg (2019). "Diffusion Across International Organizations: Connectivity and Convergence". *International Organization* 73 (2), 399–433.

Sovey, Allison J. and Donald P. Green (2011). "Instrumental Variables Estimation in Political Science: A Readers' Guide." *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (1), pp. 188–200.

Steffek, Jens (2013). "Explaining cooperation between IGOs and NGOs – push factors, pull factors and the policy cycle". *Review of International Studies* 39 (4), pp. 993–1013.

Steinert, Christoph V. (2024). "Elitist Remedies: Complaint Resources and Representation in International Human Rights Bodies". *International Studies Quarterly* 68 (2), pp. 1–16.

Steinert, Christoph V. and Hannah M. Smidt (2025). "The Backlash Against Civil Society Participation in International Organizations: The Case of Human Rights Complaints Mechanisms". *British Journal of Political Science, Forthcoming*.

Stiansen, Øyvind (2019). "Delayed but not derailed: legislative compliance with European Court of Human Rights judgments". *The International Journal of Human Rights* 23 (8), pp. 1221–1247.

– (2021). "Directing Compliance? Remedial Approach and Compliance with European Court of Human Rights Judgments". *British Journal of Political Science* 51 (2), pp. 899–907.

Stokes, Susan C. (2011). "Political clientelism". *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 604–627.

Tallberg, Jonas, Thomas Sommerer, Theresa Squatrito, and Christer Jönsson (2013). *The opening up of international organizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Terman, Rochelle and Joshua Byun (2022). "Punishment and politicization in the international human rights regime". *American Political Science Review* 116 (2), pp. 385–402.

Terman, Rochelle and Erik Voeten (2018). "The relational politics of shame: Evidence from the universal periodic review". *The Review of International Organizations* 13, pp. 1–23.

Truex, Rory (2019). "Focal Points, Dissident Calendars, and Preemptive Repression". *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63 (4), pp. 1032–1052.

Ullmann, Andreas J. and Andreas Von Staden (2024). "A Room Full of 'Views': Introducing a New Dataset to Explore Compliance with the Decisions of the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies' Individual Complaints Procedures". *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68 (2).

UNSP (2008). *Manual of Operations of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, adopted by the mandate-holders at the 15th Annual Meeting of Special Procedures*. URL: `https://tinyurl.com/4rjaa78j` (visited on 06/21/2024).

Voeten, Eric (2014). "Domestic Implementation of European Court of Human Rights Judgments: Legal Infrastructure and Government Effectiveness Matter: A Reply to Dia Anagnostou and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi". *The European Journal of International Law* 25 (1), pp. 229–238.

Von Staden, Andreas (2022). "The Conditional Effectiveness of Soft Law: Compliance with the Decisions of the Committee against Torture". *Human Rights Review* 23 (4), pp. 451–478.

Wantchekon, Leonard (2003). "Clientelism and voting behavior: Evidence from a field experiment in Benin". *World Politics* 55 (3), pp. 399–422.

Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca (2012). "What wins votes: Why some politicians opt out of clientelism". *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (3), pp. 568–583.

Zakaria, Fareed (1997). "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy". *Foreign Affairs* 76 (7), pp. 22–43.

A Appendix

A.1 Summary Statistics A-2

A.2 Distribution of the Dependent Variable A-3

A.3 Clientelistic Rule and Democracy Measures A-4

A.4 Moderated Effect of UNSP Communications with Polyarchy A-5

A.5 Control Variables A-6

A.1 Summary Statistics

Table A.1: Summary Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Fariss human rights scores	1,502	0.68	1.54	−2.42	5.34
UNSP communications on PhysInt Rights	1,502	1.55	2.93	0	25
Horizontal accountability constraints	1,502	0.46	0.98	−1.93	2.37
Diagonal accountability constraints	1,502	0.69	0.87	−1.81	2.08
Party linkages (programmatic vs. clientistic)	1,502	0.35	1.32	−2.36	3.63
UNSP country visits	1,502	0.73	0.96	0	6
Education	1,502	0.64	1.48	−2.48	3.53
Conflict	1,502	0.18	0.38	0	1
GDP per capita	1,502	8.57	1.46	5.41	11.73
Exports to democracies	1,502	8.72	2.34	1.38	13.92

A.2 Distribution of the Dependent Variable

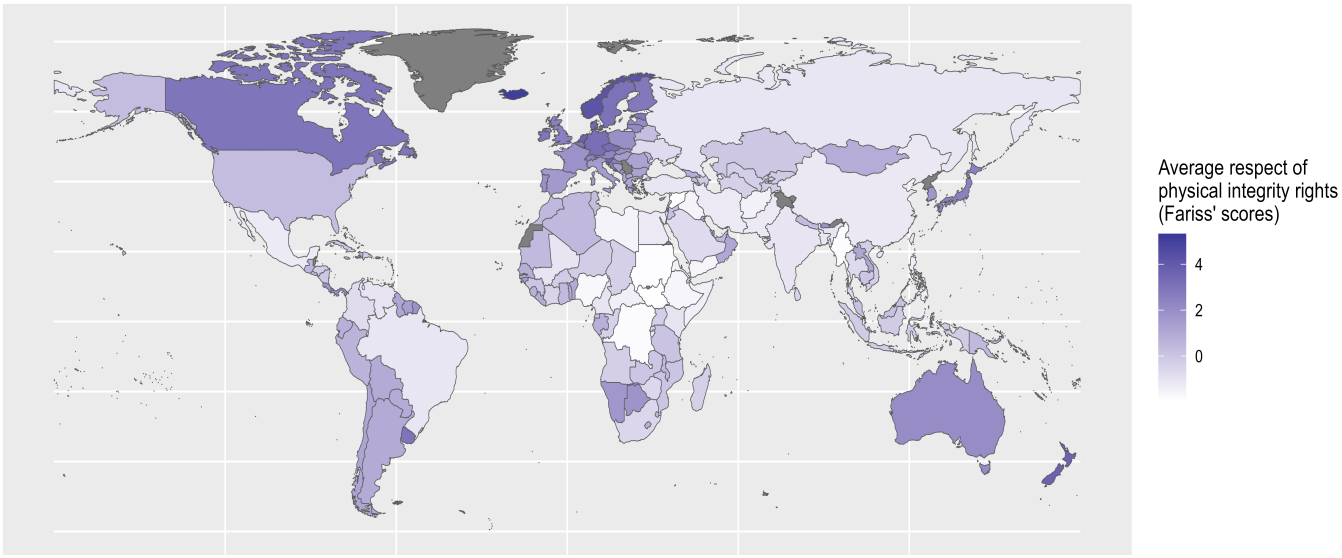


Figure A.1: Country averages of physical integrity rights respect between 2011 and 2019 (based on Fariss human rights scores)

A.3 Clientelistic Rule and Democracy Measures

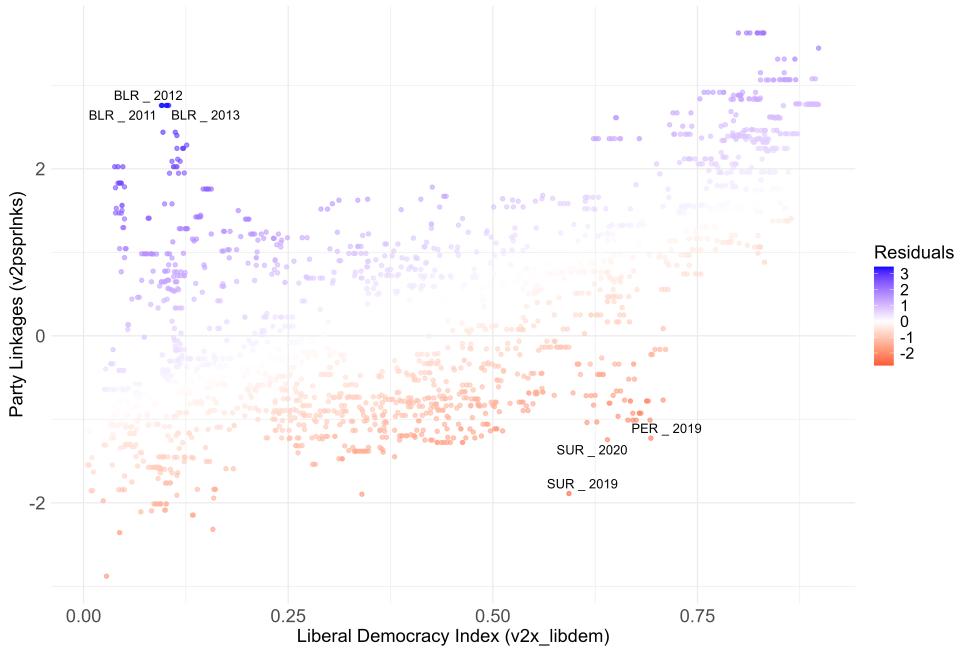


Figure A.2: Residual Variation in Clientelistic Rule Not Explained by Liberal Democracy

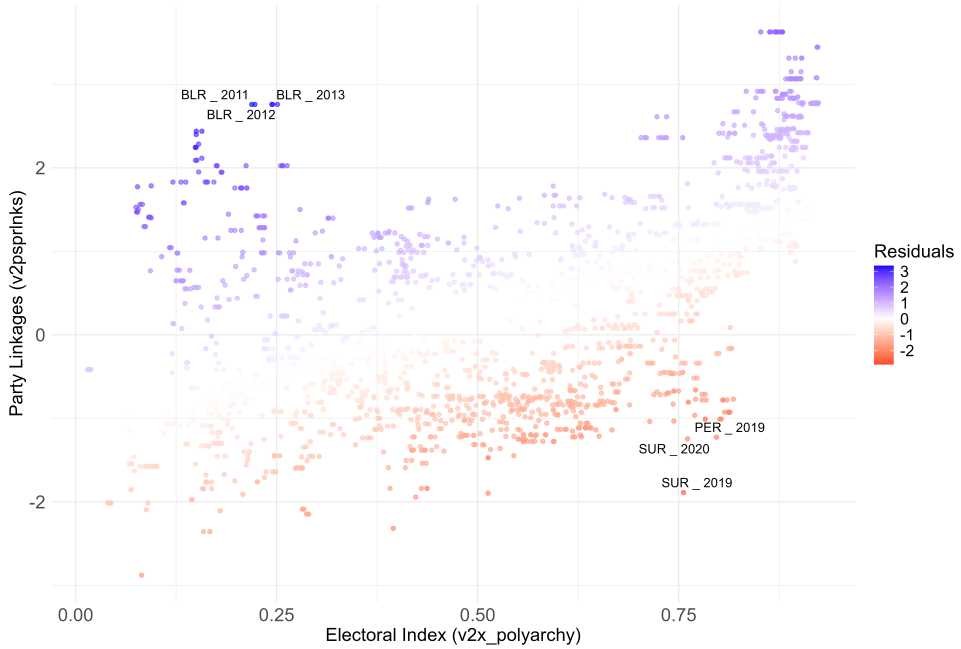


Figure A.3: Residual Variation in Clientelistic Rule Not Explained by Electoral Democracy

A.4 Moderated Effect of UNSP Communications with Polyarchy

Table A.2: Model of respect of physical integrity rights conditional on electoral democracy

	DV: Fariss' human rights scores		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communications*Electoral democracy	0.005	0.006	0.005
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.016)
UNSP communications (lag 1 yr)	−0.004	−0.004	0.027
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.044)
Electoral democracy index	1.550***	1.626***	1.662***
	(0.341)	(0.343)	(0.344)
Education (lag 1 yr)		−0.074	−0.038
		(0.068)	(0.072)
Conflict (lag 1 yr)		−0.189*	−0.202*
		(0.082)	(0.082)
GDP per capita (lag 1 yr)		0.076	0.014
		(0.096)	(0.097)
Exports to democracies, log (lag 1 yr)		−0.011	−0.005
		(0.046)	(0.047)
UNSP country visits			−0.008
			(0.010)
Residuals (control function)			−0.034
			(0.044)
Number of observations	1546	1502	1502
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time-varying controls	No	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.975	0.976	0.976
Adjusted R^2	0.972	0.972	0.973

Notes: The models in columns 1 and 2 are estimated with ordinary least. squares regression. Cluster-robust standard errors are in parentheses. Model 3 shows the results of the instrumental variable regression estimates with a control function approach. $^{\dagger}p<0.1$; $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

A.5 Control Variables

We account for economic development using logged and ppp-adjusted GDP per capita (The World Bank, 2022), as individuals with higher income levels are more likely to participate in human rights complaint mechanisms (Steinert, 2024), while increasing levels of economic development may decrease the likelihood of physical integrity rights violations (Carey, 2010). We further include a measure of educational equality from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2023), given that more educated societies may be more likely to report their grievances to international human rights bodies (Steinert, 2024). At the same time, higher levels of education are associated with stronger capacities for collective protest, which can in turn provoke physical integrity rights abuses (Dahlum and Wig, 2019). Our model also controls for exports to democratic states, using a measure taken from XXXX, to account for temporal variation in economic dependence on states that value physical integrity rights protection, which could influence both the availability of complaint mechanisms and state records of physical integrity rights abuse. Finally, we account for ongoing armed conflicts with data from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, which likely affects both the frequency of human rights complaints and physical integrity rights violations (Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg, 2023; Gleditsch et al., 2002).[1a]

[1a]We tested for multicollinearity. All control variables have a Variance Inflation Factor below the critical threshold value of 5. Summary statistics are shown in Table A.1.

References

Carey, Sabine C. (2010). "The Use of Repression as a Response to Domestic Dissent". *Political Studies* 58 (1), pp. 167–186.

Coppedge, Michael et al. (2023). *V-Dem Dataset v13. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*. URL: https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds23.

Dahlum, Sirianne and Tore Wig (2019). "Educating demonstrators: Education and mass protest in Africa". *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63 (1), pp. 3–30.

Davies, Shawn, Therese Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg (2023). "Organized violence 1989-2022 and the return of conflicts between states?" *Journal of Peace Research* 4 (60), pp. 691–708.

Gleditsch, Nils Petter, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand (2002). "Armed conflict 1946-2001: A new dataset". *Journal of Peace Research* 39 (5), pp. 615–637.

Steinert, Christoph V. (2024). "Elitist Remedies: Complaint Resources and Representation in International Human Rights Bodies". *International Studies Quarterly* 68 (2), pp. 1–16.

The World Bank (2022). *Population, total. United Nations Population Division.* URL: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.