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ARTICLE

Call Me By Your Name: The Impacts of American Human Rights Violations in Authoritarian States

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Abstract

When the world's leading human rights advocates violate international norms, how does this affect support for those norms around the world? Rather than diffusing norm breaking across borders, I argue that authoritarian states' propaganda about liberal states' violations may increase the salience of human rights norms in places where those norms are normally censored. Focusing on American racial discrimination, I find that the Chinese Communist Party publicizes American human rights violations on to its citizens for strategic political reasons. Through two survey experiments I show that while exposure to news about American discrimination does provide substantial propaganda benefits to the regime, it also makes Chinese respondents more supportive of minority rights and more critical of their own country's respect for those rights. The study shows how prominent violations of international norms may be an underappreciated means of strengthening global public support for those norms.

Keywords: human rights; international norms; racism; authoritarian politics; China

The police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, became headlines around the world in June 2020 (Haynes 2020). It even became front-page news in countries that would normally clamp down on public discussions of anything to do with race or human rights (Tharoor 2020). In China, state media was unsparing in its coverage (Bandurski 2020; Hernandez 2020), with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian stating that 'racism against ethnic minorities in the U.S. is a chronic disease of American society' (CGTN 2020). For a time, Black Lives Matter protests and American racial discrimination became the most-discussed topics on Chinese social media (Daxue 2020). The tone of the articles was reminiscent of Soviet 1960s propaganda and its lavish coverage of racial tensions in the USA (Ioffe 2017; Dudziak 2011).

Many commentators have assumed that racist incidents like this in the USA would do untold damage to liberal norms around the world (Adkins and Devermont 2020; Dudziak 2020; Joshi 2020; Hernandez 2020). Yet the events of June 2020 also inspired local calls for better protection of minority rights, from policing in Europe (Nwabuzo and Sanaullah 2021) to the treatment of natives in Indonesia (Maulia 2020) – just as the American civil rights fight of the 1960s was taken on as inspiration by anti-colonial movements around the world (Vardaman 2015).

What are the global impacts of these kinds of prominent violations of human rights? When nations like the USA, which vehemently advocate for human rights protections abroad, tolerate the abuse of those rights at home, do these actions weaken human rights norms, making it more acceptable for others to violate them, or do they increase public commitment to their protection?

This is not just a question limited to racial discrimination. The USA has been accused of violating norms against torture (McKeown 2009), norms on the treatment of prisoners (Vasiliades 2005), and norms of democratic governance (McGee 2020). And while there is substantial literature on deliberate challenges to international norms (Wolff and Zimmermann 2016; Deitelhoff and Zimmerman 2019; Heller et al. 2012; McKeown 2009; Hurd 2013; Birdsall 2016), we know little about the consequences when states or their actors simply fail to respect those norms.

In this article, I examine the impacts of liberal states' human rights violations within authoritarian countries. I focus on authoritarian countries not only as leading violators of human rights themselves (Mitchell and McCormick 1988) but because a central feature of authoritarian regimes is their control of information, such that any information about human rights norms or violations that reaches the population is heavily dependent on the authorities. I argue that liberal states' violations of international human rights norms are an underappreciated way by which those norms are stimulated in authoritarian environments. Autocrats have incentives to strategically play up liberal rivals' violations of human rights to gain geopolitical propaganda advantages and to defend against attacks on their own behaviour. But by doing so, they increase the salience of those human rights norms amongst their citizens, norms that those citizens would otherwise have limited exposure to.

I examine this argument in China, using the case of racial discrimination in the USA. While this article began with the fallout from George Floyd's murder in 2020, it is about more than just that exceptional time. Through analysis of the *People's Daily* after 1979, I find that Chinese state media regularly covers racial issues in the USA, but is significantly more likely to do so after American criticism of human rights in China. In two survey experiments in China, both carried out in the years before George Floyd's murder, I demonstrate that, while exposure to information about discrimination in the USA does make Chinese respondents more negative about the USA and more positive about their own country, it also makes them significantly more supportive of policies that protect minority rights and significantly more likely to say that minorities are discriminated against at home. There is evidence that the authorities may recognize this trade-off, as Chinese state media discussions of minority rights in China also increased notably in the aftermath of reports about racism in the USA.

These findings have implications for our understanding of the spread of human rights norms. They demonstrate that for people living in America's authoritarian rivals where there is minimal opportunity to discuss sensitive issues around human rights, regime propaganda about American human rights violations may inadvertently open space for people to consider those norms and their (lack of) respect at home. While more research is needed on whether these findings extend to democracies or to geopolitical allies of the USA, the results show that prominent incidents of racial discrimination do not necessarily stall the progress of minority rights around the world. High-profile violations of international norms around racial equality and minority rights may be one way by which those norms attract attention and gain support, not least in authoritarian states.

Contestations and violations

Given that international norms are quite regularly – and publicly – broken, it is perhaps surprising that there has been little analysis of what these violations mean for those norms. Scholars have started to examine the other side of the longstanding International Relations literature on the emergence and spread of norms (for example Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Kelley 2008) and explored how norms regress (Clark et al. 2018) or die (Panke and Petersohn 2012). A concept particularly relevant to this literature is norm contestation: the idea that norms are things that can be challenged, bolstered, and reinterpreted (Deitelhoff and Zimmerman 2019). Some studies of contestation have examined its challenges to the liberal world order (Wolff and Zimmermann 2016; Bettiza and Lewis 2020; Acharya 2011), while others have examined its local normative

implications (Bloomfield and Scott 2016; Bob 2012). Many have focussed on American challenges to international norms, most notably how the US government sought to contest and reinterpret the norm against torture after 2001 (Heller et al. 2012; McKeown 2009; Hurd 2013; Birdsall 2016).

According to Wiener (2014, 1), norm contestation is when an actor 'discursively' expresses their disapproval or opposition to a norm. But this only covers some occasions when norms are violated. In the War on Terror, for instance, US leaders, lawyers, and officials sought to redefine and legally justify torture (McKeown 2009), and to sell that justification to the American people and the world. But torture has also been carried out – at Abu Ghraib, for example, or in Chicago's prisons – by soldiers and police who were not seeking to deliberately contest that norm (Taylor 2016).

To date, there has been no work on how these kinds of violations of international norms – violations that are not explicit contestations – affect those norms. Violations are not just discursive, and they are not always expressive. When actors violate international norms – from engaging in torture to widespread racial discrimination – they are not necessarily doing so as part of an explicit attempt to express disapproval of that norm. They are not always what McKeown (2009, 11) calls 'norm revisionists': those who 'actively seek to reshape understandings of their country's relationship to the norm', or what Bloomfield and Scott (2016, 1) call 'norm antipreneurs', those who 'resist, as opposed to promote, normative change in world politics'. They may seek to hide or deny that violation, downplay or dismiss it, or seek an exemption or excuse to the norm – all while still upholding their commitment (Shannon 2000). Moreover, actors may contest or express disapproval of an international norm without violating that norm – they might question whether states should have a no-first-use nuclear posture without actually launching a nuclear strike, for example. As such, not all violations are contestations, nor are all contestations violations.

Moreover, the focus on norm revisionists and antipreneurs has meant that most work has examined only how those norms are publicly discussed or implemented by states or international organisations (see Deitelhoff and Zimmerman 2019).[1] There has been almost no examination of what these challenges and violations mean for public support for the norms.[2] And public opinion is not just a crucial barometer of the health of international norms, but a major factor in determining whether or not governments or organisations choose to implement or protect them. Even in China, public opinion has sparked changes in policies on issues as sensitive as women's rights (Rauhala 2015) and the death penalty (Kinzelbach 2014).

As Simmons and Jo (2019, 23) point out: '*to ignore public opinion when thinking through norm robustness is to ignore the very agents on whose behalf these norms are supposed to operate*. When publics support international . . . norms, it helps to make them more robust' (original emphasis). To understand how violations affect the spread and regression of norms, we need to pay attention to how members of the public react to those violations.

The Impacts of International Norm Violations

The evidence from the sociology, economics, and psychology literature is that norm violations are contagious.[3] Observing others break norms makes people realize that norms could be violated without punishment (Becker 1968) and re-evaluate whether the norms are even appropriate (Cialdini et al. 1990). In this case, people (partly) base their views about a norm on the behaviour of others, and whether others – particularly high-status others – respect that norm is a cue for whether it is worth respecting (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Diekmann et al. 2015).

[1]The articles in this special issue are the only in-depth analysis of the impacts of norm contestation.

[2]The one exception is Simmons and Jo (2019) on public support for international criminal law.

[3]See, for example, Wilson and Kelling (1982); Cialdini et al. (1990); Glaeser et al. (1996); Keizer et al. (2008); Hill et al. (2012); Diekman et al. (2015); Georg et al. (2024).

And on the individual level at least, we know that when people hear about others' discriminatory beliefs or see them discriminating against ethnic minorities, they become more likely to do the same themselves (Blanchard et al. 1994; Stangor et al. 2001; Spörlein and Schlueter 2020; Álvarez-Benjumea 2023).

This feeds into an assumption of the contestation literature, which is that when actors see an international norm being violated by other states, they will perceive it to be less legitimate – and so become less likely to respect it (Panke and Petersohn 2012; McKeown 2009; Hurd 2007; Chow and Levin 2024; Carnegie and Carson 2018). Indeed, for some scholars, the only way that norms erode is if they are not respected (Onuf 1994; Panke and Petersohn 2012; McKeown 2009; Hurd 2007). Onuf (1994, 18) argues that 'every time agents choose not to follow a rule, they change the rule by weakening it and in so doing they may well contribute to the constitution of some new rule'.

If this argument is correct, then information about high-profile violations of international norms should reduce support and respect for those norms. And if minority rights norms are broken by the USA, a high-status leader of the liberal international order and proponent of minority rights after the First World War (Fink 2000), then the effect on the legitimacy of those norms should be even stronger. McKeown argues that American contestations of the norm against torture brought about a 'crisis of legitimacy in the international norm' (McKeown 2009, 5), and other governments used American abuses to justify their own use of torture (Johnson et al. 2016; Schmidt and Sikkink 2019). Chow and Levin find that referencing US human rights violations significantly diminishes American citizens' criticism of other states' behaviour, arguing that their actions 'reshape Americans' views on whether other countries' actions were norm violating' (2024, 109).

Some scholars have argued, however, that states' contestations may end up strengthening international norms. When a state expresses a public challenge to a norm, the subsequent reaction from civil society and the international community helps others reach a shared understanding of that norm (Wiener 2014; Badescu and Wiess 2010; Deitelhoff and Zimmerman 2019). So, while America's use of torture did worsen human rights amongst those countries who had joined in US-led counterterrorism programmes (Schmidt and Sikkink 2019), it also made other countries come out and publicly reiterate their commitment to the norm against torture, clarifying where it did and did not apply (Keating 2014), arguably increasing the norm's robustness in the long term.

This suggests that there may be a difference between the immediate license that norm violations give to some people or states to go on and break the norms themselves and the longer-term impacts those violations have on wider public internalisation of that norm.

Norm salience

Rosert (2019) argues that the salience of a norm is a critical factor behind its success. People's preferences about policy issues are inconsistent and often determined by whatever is at the front of their minds at a given time (Zaller 1992) – something that the news cycle has a crucial role in. Research on agenda setting has shown that the level of media coverage can significantly affect how concerned people are about a particular issue (Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs and Reynolds 2009), from crime (Romer et al. 2003) to the European Union (Peter 2003) and, importantly for this study, racism (Wang 2000). People are much more likely to care about issues that are salient to them, and therefore more likely to become norm entrepreneurs – and mobilize behind norm entrepreneurs – on salient issues (Rosert 2019). The more information that is publicly available about a norm at any given time, then the more likely that people will develop common knowledge around what their peers think about the norm (Chwe 2001; Morris and Shin 2002), making it easier for them to coordinate and mobilize around it (McAdams 2000).

As we have seen, prominent violations of international norms – like the George Floyd killing or the CIA torture revelations – often receive worldwide coverage, pushing issues like racial

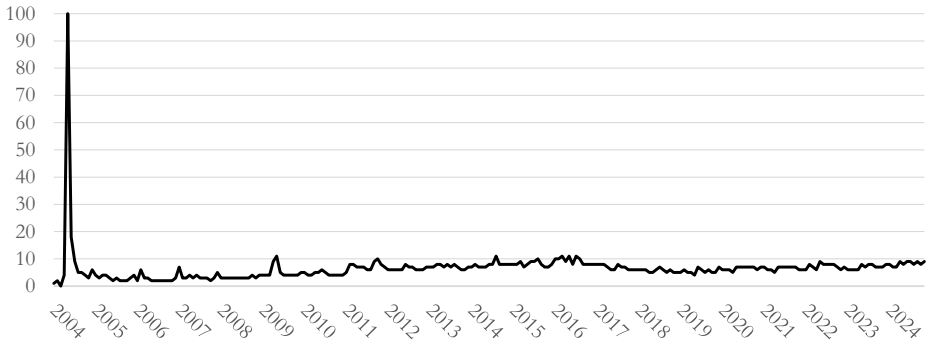

Figure 1. Weekly Google search trends for تعذيب (Arabic for 'torture') around the world, from 2004-2024. The scale is a relative measure of search volume over time from 0–100, whereby a volume of 10 is a tenth of the volume of 100. The 'peak' date encompasses the full five weeks from 25 April – 30 May 2004. The Abu Ghraib abuses hit the news on 28 April.

discrimination or torture to the front pages of newspapers around the world for weeks, in a way they rarely are in the normal news cycle. Unlike when individuals observe their peers cheating (Hill et al. 2012) or see hate speech online (Álvarez-Benjumea 2023), what makes prominent international violations distinctive is that they are often accompanied by a news cycle filled with mass domestic and international criticism, debates, protests, and deep examination of the norm and its consequences. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, for example, Google searches and tweets about racism (Thelwall and Thelwall 2021) rose to unprecedented levels,[4] criticism poured in from international leaders and organisations (Hernandez and Mueller 2020), and debates surged around the world over norms towards racial equality, minority rights, and police brutality (Hassan and Noack 2021). Even following US attempts to contest norms around torture (McKeown 2009), as Figure 1 shows, over the month following the Abu Ghraib revelations in 2004, Arab attention to the issue reached extraordinarily high levels. It was the high-profile violation of these norms of torture and racial equality that made them more salient than at any other point before or afterwards.

This all suggests that when norms like these are made so salient, then instead of a contagion of violations, we may see a rise in awareness and support among observers around the world (Opp 2012; Mäs and Opp 2016). Rosert (2019) shows that the reason the norm against the use of napalm became so strong was because its devastating use in the Korean War made the norm so salient that it was taken on by anti-war campaigners and stayed on their agenda even after the war ended. One feature of the global George Floyd protests was how they took on not just police brutality in Minneapolis, but respect for norms around racial and ethnic equality in their own locality. Amidst the dramatic global rise in tweets about racism in early June 2020, only 12 per cent of tweets referenced George Floyd or Black Lives Matter, with most talking more generally about systemic racism and discrimination (Thelwall and Thelwall 2021). In the aftermath, people in Houston, Texas – the other side of the country – became 12 percentage points less likely to say that race relations in their own town were 'excellent' or 'good' (Olin 2021). Protestors in Australia called on local leaders to defend the rights of Indigenous communities; protestors in France sought to highlight the death in police custody of one of their own, Adama Traoré; and Belgian demonstrators called on the country to face up to its colonial legacy. According to the ACLED database of protests, in May/June 2020 there were at least 800 global protests related to George Floyd. At least 85 per cent of these involved some kind of protest at racial injustice in their own country. Local activist groups around the world sought to co-opt their own public's heightened attention towards what was going on in the USA to launch protests about issues of racial justice and police brutality at home (Mohdin et al. 2020).

[4]See Supplementary Materials Figure 2 for global search trends around the George Floyd killing.

The George Floyd case does highlight an important scope condition: the presence of a negative global or local response to the norm violation – and highlights the difference between violations and contestation. The norm of racial equality is a strong one (Búzás 2018) that has not been explicitly contested by the USA, and the global reaction to prominent instances of American racism has – in general – been highly critical (Dudziak 2011). As such, global coverage of these violations has not just increased the salience of the norms of racial equality to people, but also the salience of the globally critical response.

But prominent norm violations may not always meet such a widespread negative reaction, and some countries will be far less critical of those violations than others. Strong allies of the violator may try to defend or justify its behaviour, for example, or the norm itself may be locally contested, with some local actors openly welcoming the violator's challenges to the norm. Carnegie and Carson (2018) argue that norms may be weakened when actors see that violators have not been punished sufficiently by the international community, while Adler-Nissen (2014) posits the same when states shamed for their norm violations choose to actively contest that stigmatisation. Implicit in both arguments is the idea that violations may be more likely to weaken norms when there are actors who openly accept or justify those violations.

For watching foreign publics, this kind of acceptance or justification is normally less prevalent, however. If human rights violations are prominent in international news, it is invariably because they are being widely criticised by foreign leaders, journalists, or civil society. Rarely are a country's violations of human rights celebrated around the world, especially violations of strong norms like the ones around racial equality discussed in this study. Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that the argument may not necessarily hold in countries where the local media narrative is more accepting of the norm violations.

Authoritarian states

In authoritarian states, especially those that are geopolitical rivals of the US, I argue that the media narrative is not only likely to be highly critical, but that the impacts of American human rights violations may be especially strong.

Regimes like the Chinese Communist Party rarely allow news of any human rights violations at home, and heavily censor discussions of ethnicity, religion, and minority rights, particularly over issues like Xinjiang and Tibet (Brady 2012; Tai 2014). Repnikova (2017, 81) cites one Chinese journalist's account that there are 'some clearly outlawed topics, such as . . . the issues concerning contentious minorities'. There is a stark difference here with the attention that Chinese media has given to racial and ethnic issues in the USA. Through the summer of 2020, for example, Chinese newspapers featured hundreds of news stories and editorials about George Floyd's killing and the subsequent protests (Bandurski 2020), making highly salient the normally taboo topics of racial equality, respect for ethnic minorities, and police brutality. And like the rest of the world, in China, there was an outpouring of sympathy and outrage for George Floyd on social media (Daxue 2020), with extraordinary levels of internet searches for 'racism' and 'ethnic minorities'.[5]

And in China, state media articles about US human rights violations are indeed invariably critical. In contrast to the way that human rights in China is talked about,[6] Chinese state media reports about the USA have highlighted the individual and social suffering caused and played up the need to respect international norms and values of racial equality and justice. After George Floyd, for example, state media protested 'the painful struggle of American minorities under the weight of racial discrimination' (Beijing Youth Daily 2020), how 'in America, racial discrimination has the most unbearably dark history and scars' (Xinhua 2020a), discrimination that violated 'the general consensus of the international community' (Xinhua 2020b). Even two years later, state

[5]See 种族偏见https://trends.so.com/result?query＝种族偏见; and 少数民族https://trends.so.com/result?query＝少数民族.

[6]For a deeper discussion of how human rights issues are framed by Chinese state media, see Chen and Hsu (2018).

media was continuing its criticism, with an article under the leadership's official pen name 'Zhong Sheng' (钟声) entitled: 'Minorities 'Can't Breathe': Racism Runs Through the US Political System' (People's Daily 2022).

As such, in authoritarian states like China, mass reporting of prominent American human rights violations significantly increases the salience of human rights norms and brings rare cues from the state that those norms should be respected. This may not just increase public support for those norms, but even open up space for discussion of domestic issues that would have otherwise seemed impossible. Mokhtari (2009) gives a superb example of these dynamics in the Middle East after revelations of US troops' torture of Iraqis in Abu Ghraib in 2004. She notes how the revelations provoked an impassioned outcry from autocrats across the region – autocrats who had been using very similar techniques against their own citizens (and suppressing any criticism of their actions). But in this case, the widespread state-sanctioned media and public outrage at American violations opened up space for citizens in Jordan, Yemen, and beyond to discuss and criticize those same violations at home. Local activists across the region took advantage of the increased public attention to human rights and the space to discuss the issues more freely to put pressure on their own governments, calling for the abolition of torture as well as other rights abuses. Mokhtari quotes one news commentator (2009, 157) saying:

> Since the Abu Ghraib prison crime was exposed, the biggest discussion group in the Arab world has been human rights, and this is a fine thing. The subject of human rights, freedom, and the state of the prison has taken over every conversation (in the Arab world), after many years when the Arabs talked little about the value of the individual and the severity of the torture and killing.

Why then, given these dangers and given their control over information, would authoritarian regimes allow their citizens to hear about these violations? It may be that the violations are just too high-profile to be censored – given the scale of international coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests, it would be hard to hide the protests from the population. But as we have discussed, Abu Ghraib, George Floyd, and indeed many other far less publicised human rights issues in the USA have been front-page news in authoritarian states across the Middle East, Russia, and China, often for weeks, and often accompanied by extensive criticism from government officials. There appears to be a strategy behind the coverage of these abuses.

Geopolitics

One explanation is geopolitical – for states like Russia and China at least, the USA is a geopolitical rival, and an accusation of human rights abuse is a useful tool to denigrate and delegitimize that rival both on the international stage and at home.[7] Friendly countries, on the other hand, may be more likely to play down or justify their ally's actions, especially if that ally itself fights back against the criticism (Adler-Nissen 2014). Certainly, the most extensive coverage (in authoritarian states at least) of American human rights violations has come amongst its geopolitical rivals (Dugyala 2020). That is not to say that America's authoritarian allies have not covered or even criticised its violations, especially in the case of Abu Ghraib[8] – but this coverage has often been less enthusiastically negative than that of its adversaries.[9]

[7]See, for example, Bachman and Brito Ruiz (2024) for a discussion of how geopolitical relationships influence coverage of human rights abuses.

[8]Mokhtari (2009).

[9]In the Middle East, for example, coverage of George Floyd was far more critical in Iran than in Egypt (although US-ally Jordan was a dissenting exception, Abdelaziz and Katz 2020).

For these adversaries, highlighting American human rights violations may help to entrench their citizens' negative opinions of the USA and its behaviour, bolster their views about the comparative superiority of their own country,[10] and make them more likely to consider how well – in comparison - their own leaders respect those same rights.[11]

Whataboutism

Authoritarian states are also particularly likely to be shamed and sanctioned by the international community for their own human rights violations (Lebovic and Voeten 2006). In the first place, as mentioned above, highlighting American abuses may show that these kinds of violations are not that unusual or counter-normative. Moreover, given that the USA is often at the forefront of any human rights shaming, highlighting American leaders' own inability to live up to their words helps to frame those criticisms as hypocritical and illegitimate (Chow and Levin 2024).

And just as a common response in the Soviet Union to American critiques of their political system was 'and you lynch negros',[12] Chinese propagandists have regularly accused the USA of hypocrisy when it pressures Beijing over human rights (Gruffydd-Jones 2022). This also works the other way: Egyptian state media's comparatively restrained response to George Floyd was plausibly linked to the Trump administration's recent refusal to condemn Cairo's own crackdowns (Abdelaziz and Katz 2020).

This implies that America's geopolitical rivals, as well as those countries subjected to its human rights criticism, have incentives to play up American violations. In practice, there will be substantial overlaps between the two. States are far more likely to put pressure on their geopolitical opponents over human rights (Terman 2023), while human rights pressure can critically damage bilateral relations – China in particular has increasingly conditioned its diplomatic relationships on silence over human rights. How under-pressure US allies might deal with American violations is a question for another study – but the above argument does imply that authoritarian rivals of the USA subject to regular American pressure over their human rights will see strategic advantages from reporting highly critical accounts of America's own violations on to their people.

But while these propaganda tactics may well lend those states a temporary ideological victory, as Mokhtari (2009, 163) says: 'governments can be trapped by their own appropriations'. Autocratic rivals' efforts to gain a strategic advantage from naming and shaming liberal states' human rights violations leave them vulnerable to giving oxygen to those same norms at home. While authoritarian state media coverage of the norms may not necessarily tell people what their peers at home think, it does give space for those peers to consider and talk about those norms in a way they may not have done otherwise. Geopolitical rivalry may even strengthen these dynamics. We would expect that publics who are already highly anti-American will be especially critical of the USA when it breaks an international norm. In order to be consistent with this criticism, they may persuade themselves that the norm is highly important to them (Acharya et al. 2018), and, as a result, pay more attention to how well their own country protects that norm.

In China, the CCP's attempts to rally its populace against a hypocritical USA has, on occasion, led to unintended consequences, spreading awareness of human rights at home (Gruffydd-Jones 2022). In April 2022, for example, at the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns in Shanghai, the CCP sought to battle back against a U.S. Congressional report on human rights in China by issuing its own heated denunciation of the conditions in America, under the hashtag 'America is the country with the world's biggest human rights deficit.'[13] In one night, the hashtag received over 580 million

[10]See Kayser and Peress (2012); Aytaç (2020) for the role of international comparisons in public approval.

[11]See Terman (2023) and Gruffydd-Jones (2022) for the importance of geopolitical rivalry in shaping public responses to international shaming.

[12]Ioffe (2017).

[13]美国就是全球最大的人权赤字国https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=percent23美国就是全球最大的人权赤字国percent23.

views on Weibo – but not in the way intended. Instead, accompanied by the phrase 'Call me by your name', the hashtag became the focal point for an extraordinary burst of criticism towards COVID-19 restrictions, human rights, and authoritarianism in China (Ma 2022).[14]

To summarize, prominent violations of international human rights norms by liberal powers may be a way by which those norms develop and spread in information-poor authoritarian environments. Regimes seeking to gain (geo)political advantages against their liberal rivals have incentives to publicize and condemn their rivals' failures to respect human rights norms. However, the subsequent unusual salience afforded to these norms and to the criticisms of their violation may increase support for the norms themselves and make citizens more critical of the (lack of) respect for those norms at home. This gives us four hypotheses:

H1a: Authoritarian regimes will be more likely to publicize information about liberal states' violations of human rights norms to their citizens when geopolitical rivalry with those states is greater.

H1b: Authoritarian regimes will be more likely to publicize information about liberal states' violations of human rights norms to their citizens when facing human rights pressure from those states.

H2a: Information about liberal states' violations of human rights norms will reduce support for the liberal state and increase support for the home state amongst citizens of authoritarian states.

H2b: Information about liberal states' violations of human rights norms will increase support for the norm and decrease the belief that it is respected at home amongst citizens of authoritarian states.

Chinese media coverage of race in America

In this paper, I focus on how American discrimination against ethnic, racial, and religious minorities affects the attitudes of citizens in China. The relevant norms here are the norm of racial equality, a strong international norm (Klothz 1995; Búzás 2018) containing as its core elements the norm of equality of treatment, equality of opportunity, and equality of outcomes,[15] as well as the range of global and regional norms and laws aimed at the protection of ethnic minorities (Kymlicka 2017).

The USA signed the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1966, although the country's subsequent compliance has been accused of being 'grossly inadequate' in many areas (Human Rights Watch 2022). The People's Republic of China has also been an advocate for international norms around racial equality and minority rights (Sautman 1999) and signed the ICERD in 1981. Despite criticism from the United Nations and others that it has also widely violated these norms and laws (OHCHR 2022), the CCP has publicly proclaimed itself a defender of minority rights and racial equality and has implemented hundreds of national and local laws and regulations aimed at protecting the rights of its 125 million ethnic minority citizens (Leibold 2016). Despite this, as discussed above, the treatment of minorities is a highly censored topic in China.

Firstly, I examine how violations of minority rights in the USA are reported in China's state media, in order to understand what the CCP wishes its public to be exposed to. To do this, I use

[14]This is a good case of how incessant state media coverage of American problems may backfire in other ways, as 'netizens' expressed their irritation towards the government's repeated efforts to appeal to anti-Americanism, despite troubles at home (Koetse 2022).

[15]See Búzás (2018), pp. 364–5 for more details.

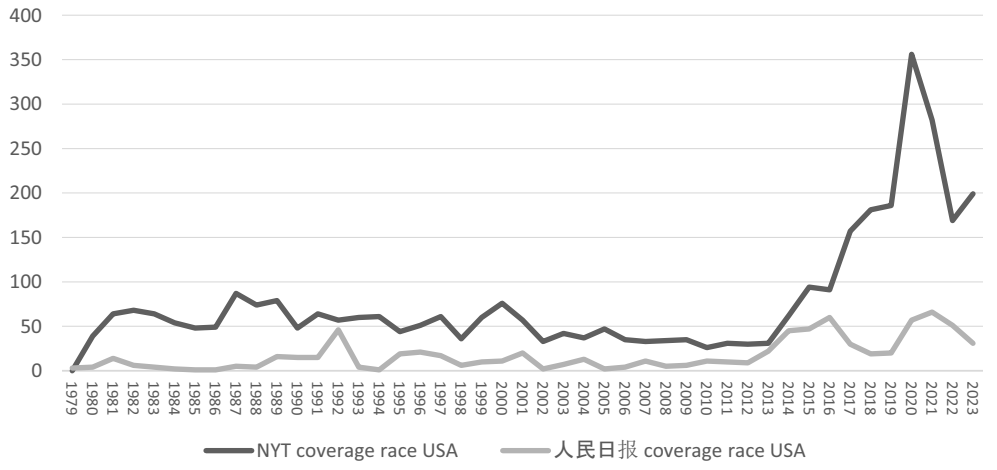

Figure 2. Number of articles mentioning 'racism' or 'racial discrimination' and 'United States' in the *People's Daily* and *New York Times* by year from 1979-2023.

the *People's Daily* (人民日报), the most authoritative and tightly controlled source of CCP propaganda (Stockmann 2013). As Figure 2 demonstrates, the paper's coverage of racial issues in the USA does not appear to neatly follow domestic coverage in the US. So, what does explain this coverage?

If H1a is correct, Chinese state media coverage of American racial issues should be more likely at times of particularly intense geopolitical tension between China and the USA. If H1b is correct, then coverage should be more likely at times of American criticism of human rights in China. To test this, I conducted time-series regressions of *People's Daily* mentions of racial discrimination in the USA[16] between 1979 and 2023, examining the change in the twenty-eight days after a major international incident between China and the USA[17] and the twenty-eight days after any American criticism of human rights in China.[18] Further details of the time series model are in Supplementary Materials 1A, including a discussion of covariates.[19]

As we might expect, American media coverage of racial issues in the USA does predict coverage in Chinese state media. But the *People's Daily* is also significantly more likely to write about this discrimination in the period after American pressure on human rights in China. In the twenty-eight days after (any) American pressure, on average the newspaper includes almost twice as many stories about racial issues in the USA than at other times.[20] It is over twice as likely to write about these issues in the aftermath of geopolitical incidents with the USA, although this is only weakly statistically significant.[21]

Much of the coverage was a direct response to American criticism of human rights in China. Some *People's Daily* stories that reported on recent American criticism of China also sought to play up the hypocrisy of those comments by highlighting racism in the USA,[22] while *People's Daily*

[16]Coding details in Supplementary Materials 1A.

[17]Between 1979 and 2023 (see Supplementary Materials 1A for details). For robustness, I also examine a monthly aggregate of US-China tensions between 1993 and 2023, taken from Rogers et al. (2024).

[18]Extending Gruffydd-Jones's (2022) dataset on American pressure on human rights in China (1979-2023). See Supplementary Materials 1A for full details.

[19]These include a control for NYT coverage of racial discrimination in the USA. The model is robust to the inclusion of various covariates (Supplementary Materials Table 1).

[20]An increase from 0.033 to 0.06 stories a month ($p<0.001$).

[21]$p = 0.067$. We also see no relationship to Rogers et al.'s (2024) US-China tension index, suggesting the results are not highly robust. See the Supplementary Materials for full regression tables.

[22]For example, People's Daily (2011).

stories about Congressional reports on human rights in China were often featured right next to China's own reports on the USA.[23] Indeed, issues of the *People's Daily* that mention American human rights pressure are almost three times as likely to also contain references to American racial discrimination (whether in the same article or not, see Supplementary Materials Table 3). The timing and content of these articles suggest that the goal is to delegitimize the USA as a global leader and arbiter of human rights, rather than to rile the public up against a rival. Issues of the *People's Daily* that discuss American racial discrimination are significantly more likely to describe the USA as a 'hegemon', for example, but are no more likely to refer to it as an 'enemy'.[24]

The coverage is overwhelmingly critical. In none of the articles is there an attempt to justify or contest the norms around racial discrimination or minority rights. Sometimes the coverage itself takes a highly critical tone,[25] at other times it highlights other states' criticisms,[26] and at others it explicitly emphasizes the fact that international norms and laws have been violated.[27] Indeed, the *People's Daily* mentions the ICERD significantly more often in the aftermath of stories about the USA's racial problems than at any other time,[28] showing how in Chinese state media, international laws are most likely to be talked about when the USA breaks them.

Experiments on the impacts of American racial discrimination in China

The above analysis shows that Chinese citizens are regularly exposed to information about discrimination in the USA, and not necessarily at the times when the discrimination occurs. Next, I examine how American violations of international norms affect attitudes and preferences at an individual level, using online survey experiments with Chinese citizens.

Study 1

The first goal was to test **H2b**: how exposure to American discrimination against minorities influences Chinese attitudes towards minority rights at home. The experimental design was a simple one. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Those in the control group were given a paragraph containing generic information about minority groups around the world (see Supplementary Materials for full texts).[29] Those in the main treatment group were given a paragraph about systemic discrimination against minority groups in the USA that was designed to closely reflect storie, 2022). This text contained generic information rather than news about a specific incident to ensure that respondents' views were not influenced by potential biases around the incident itself.[30] While the text highlighted the human and social costs of discrimination, the language used was designed to be as neutral as possible:[31]

[23]For example, People's Daily (2015).
[24]See Supplementary Materials Table 4.
[25]For example, People's Daily (2024a).
[26]For example, People's Daily (2020).
[27]For example, People's Daily (2024b).
[28]See Supplementary Materials Table 5.
[29]The text was designed to ensure that control group respondents also read about minority rights, such that we can be sure that the treatment effect was not merely due to treatment groups being primed to think about minorities. It was designed to do so as neutrally as possible without mentioning the treatment of those rights (positive or negative) and was designed to be roughly the same length as the treatment. See the Supplementary Materials for more details on the neutrality of the control.
[30]The randomisation procedures were successful (see Supplementary Materials Tables 8 and 13). There are no statistically significant differences in demographic variables.
[31]The treatment includes information on how the USA has violated each aspect of the norm of racial equality (equality of treatment, equality of opportunity, and equality of outcomes: see Búzás 2018).

Treatment (translated from Chinese)

> Ethnic minorities in the United States face varying degrees of discrimination. There is a deep-rooted prejudice in the field of law enforcement in the United States and the basic human rights of ethnic minorities are often arbitrarily trampled. According to United Nations statistics, ethnic minorities like African-Americans and Muslims are often targets of arbitrary arrest for peaceful activities and are disproportionately more likely to be arrested and sentenced by police than the majority whites. In the economic field, ethnic minorities are in an all-round disadvantage in terms of employment, career development, wage income, and economic status. In addition, the US government has also heavily monitored its Muslim community, and the Muslim community is experiencing increasingly serious discrimination. Ethnic and racial discrimination in the United States runs through its history.

After questions on their understanding of the text, respondents were given two main items.[32] The first tests the belief that norms against discrimination are respected at home, and asks (on a 1–100 scale, from 'none at all' to 'very serious'): 'Does discrimination exist in China against any minority religious or ethnic groups?' To test support for norms around minority rights, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with three questions, which were aggregated to form one 'norms' measure:[33]

- Religious or ethnic discrimination should be illegal in China.
- Minority religious and ethnic groups in China should be given preferential access to education to ensure equal representation.
- Workplaces should provide discrimination training to ensure good ethnic and religious relations.

The first pilot study was carried out online in summer 2018, with a sample of 409 respondents recruited through a Chinese crowdsourcing company. The surveys were drawn from all walks of life, but the sample more closely resembles the social media population – more urban, rich, and well-educated – than the overall population, and those who participated are likely to be those citizens who are more interested in social issues (they chose to take a survey on 'social attitudes'). However, the social media population, in 2019 almost 60 per cent in China,[34] are arguably those most likely to find out about news of racial discrimination in the USA, as well as being especially likely to participate in public political and social discussions (Yang 2009). Studies of Chinese online samples (Li et al. 2018) have found that they are largely consistent with population-based surveys.

Results

Study 1 provides initial support for **H2b.** As Figure 3 shows, information about discrimination in the USA increased Chinese citizens' willingness to support policies that protect minority rights by 0.14 on a 1–4 scale ($p = 0.015$) and increased their perception that minorities were discriminated against in China by 5 percentage points ($p = 0.06$).

[32]These questions were created to allow respondents to give their opinions on general questions of minority rights and discrimination without asking sensitive questions about specific issues or ethnic/ religious groups.

[33]Please see Supplementary Materials Table 9 for a discussion of these three measures. There was a reasonable degree of consistency in these measures in both surveys, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.65. Results were similar for the measures individually as for the aggregation.

[34]Cheung (2019).

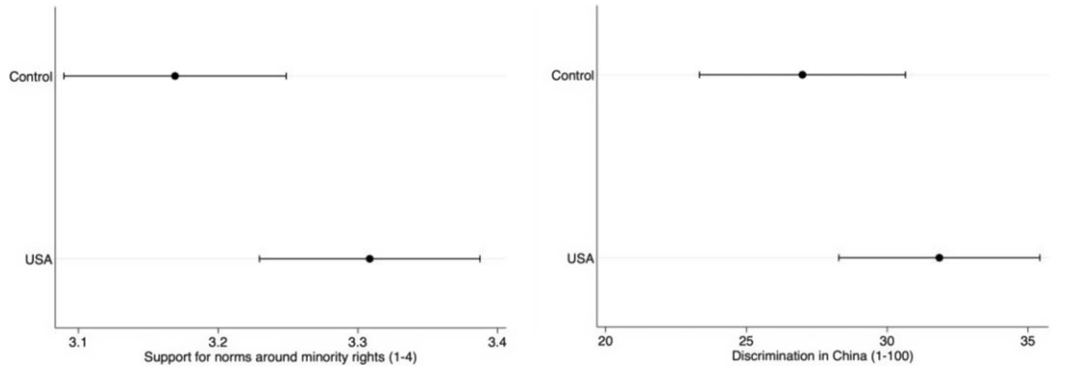

Figure 3. Study 1's Average Treatment Effects of US discrimination on beliefs about the seriousness of discrimination in China and support for minority rights (combined three measures), 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Study 2

Given the small sample size, the first study has only moderate power.[35] To replicate and extend our findings, I carried out a second study in 2019, this time with an online sample of 974 respondents from across China. This experiment provided the same prompts in the control and US treatment group and measured the same two main dependent variables. It also extended the study in two ways.

The first goal was to test **H2a**: that exposure to information about American human rights violations would provide propaganda benefits to the Chinese Communist Party. The survey included two post-treatment questions asking respondents to state their opinions towards the US government; and their level of patriotic sentiment (both on a 1–4 scale). In this survey, questions directly asking about support for the CCP were removed for political sensitivity reasons, but the CCP has promoted patriotism for political purposes (Zhao 1998), and patriotism is a strong predictor in surveys of support for the Party (Dickson et al. 2017). Nonetheless, even by itself, an increase in patriotic sentiment would demonstrate clear propaganda benefits of this strategy.

The second goal was to understand whether the effects in Study 1 were driven by the fact that violations occurred in the USA. On one hand, we might expect that any information about human rights violations would increase the salience of those norms, regardless of their location. On the other hand, the USA is a liberal democracy, a global hegemon and leader of the human rights movement over the last three decades, and a geopolitical rival to China. As such, violations in the USA should be more noteworthy than violations in allied or other authoritarian states. To test this, in Study 2, respondents in a second treatment group were given a similar paragraph to Treatment 1 about discrimination against minority groups in Iran (see Supplementary Materials).

Results

Exposure to information about discrimination in the USA increased the proportion of respondents who saw the USA in a negative light from 59 per cent to 69 per cent and increased those who reported the highest level of patriotism from 66 per cent to 75 per cent.[36] As with Study 1, however, this information also significantly increased Chinese citizens' belief that minorities were discriminated against in their own country, and increased their willingness to support policies that protect minority rights (Figure 4). In the control group, Chinese people were highly supportive of policies that protected minority rights, but relatively sceptical of the existence

[35]69 per cent power.

[36]Both are statistically significant at $p<0.05$. Both split into binary scales for ease of interpretation, but are also significant on the ordinal scale, see Supplementary Materials Figure 1.

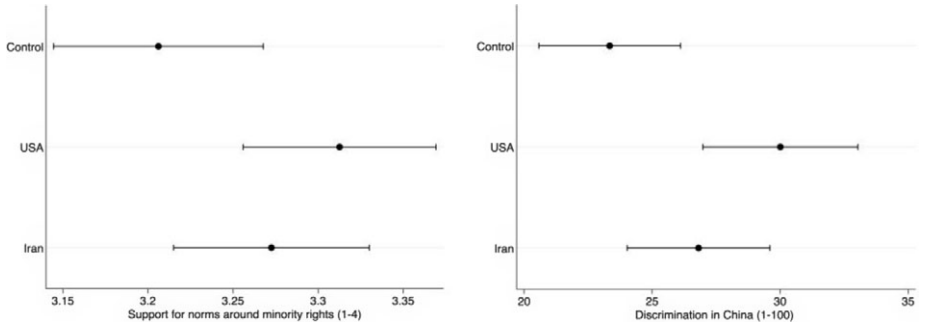

Figure 4. Study 2's average treatment effects of US and Iranian discrimination on beliefs about the seriousness of discrimination in China and support for minority rights (combined three measures), 95 per cent confidence intervals.

of discrimination at home. US discrimination increased their already-high support for minority rights by around 0.1 on a 1–4 scale (difference significant at $p = 0.013$), and their perceptions of discrimination at home by almost 7 percentage points ($p = 0.0015$).

For the Iran treatment, while the direction of the effects was the same as for the USA, the strength of those effects was weaker. Given that respondents were equally critical in the survey about US and Iranian violations,[37] this suggests that there may be something about the fact that violations occurred in the USA that made these norms particularly salient.[38]

These results are robust to the inclusion of covariates and the disaggregation of the norms measures (see Supplementary Materials Tables 14 and 15). Despite the low starting point for perceptions of discrimination in the control group, the results do not appear to be due to floor effects. After splitting the variable into two blocks ('high' (over 50) and 'low' (below 50), the treatment makes significantly more Chinese citizens (from 16 per cent to 24 per cent) believe that discrimination is 'high' in their country.[39]

Limitations

The online samples are more well-educated and urban than the Chinese population, and more reflective of social media users.[40] The impact of violations on support for norms was higher for university-educated than non-university-educated respondents (although the non-university sample size was low and there was no difference in perceptions of discrimination: Supplementary Materials Table 17), suggesting that the effects may not extend to more rural and less highly-educated citizens. We should note also that since there are very few minority respondents in this survey (although the proportion of the majority Han ethnic group in the survey is similar to the population), the study can tell us little about non-majority groups.

We also cannot rule out the role of social desirability biases, whereby exposure to a passage that is critical of discrimination in the USA makes respondents more aware of the social costs of expressing support for discrimination rather than actually changing their views. Other responses are consistent with this: in Study 2, for example, exposure to American discrimination also made respondents more likely to say they would accept a family member marrying a black person (with

[37]On average, respondents in the US treatment condition said that the seriousness of discrimination in the USA was 79 on a 1–100 scale, whereas, in the Iran treatment condition, respondents scored Iran as 78.5.

[38]The difference between the Iran and US treatments for both norms and discrimination was not significant, however, which limits too much interpretation of this finding. The Iran treatment had no impact on views towards China or the USA, or indeed towards Iran.

[39]We see similar effects for norms (Supplementary Materials Table 18). The results are also all robust to attentiveness measures: see Supplementary Materials Table 15 for details.

[40]Full breakdown of characteristics in Supplementary Materials Table 7.

no impacts on Muslims or white people, Supplementary Materials Table 21).[41] However, social desirability does not explain the difference in responses between the US and Iran treatments, of which respondents were otherwise equally critical. There were also low levels of non-response for the questions on norms and discrimination, suggesting that these questions were not highly socially sensitive.[42] Perhaps more importantly, even if respondents are displaying social desirability biases, the findings are still relevant for our understanding of the impacts of overseas violations. Even if exposure to overseas violations does not actually lead to genuine changes in attitudes, the studies show at the minimum that exposure makes Chinese citizens – and especially the kinds of citizens who tend to use social media – more likely to openly express their support for human rights norms rather than embolden them to express support for the violation of these norms.

Semi-structured interviews with Chinese citizens suggest that these responses are not merely superficial reactions to surveys. In spring 2016, our team randomly approached seventy citizens in public places across a city in eastern China.[43] As part of the interviews, we provided them with information about gender discrimination in the USA,[44] and asked them for their thoughts, without any further prompts. Most respondents offered their views on women's rights in the USA, both positive and negative, and some (fifteen interviewees) mentioned that they thought the information made the USA look hypocritical in its approach to human rights in China and beyond. Only five respondents dismissed women's rights as irrelevant or unconcerning to them. Importantly, for this study, however, over a third of the interviewees then proactively brought up women's rights in China,[45] and went on to discuss their own concerns about the conditions for women at home. While many of these comments were nuanced in comparing the US and Chinese approaches to gender equality, it is clear that for these interviewees, information about discrimination in the USA opened up space for a conversation about those issues in China.

While none of the interviewees explicitly highlighted China's geopolitical rivalry with the USA, it is plausible that the survey respondents' desire to condemn the behaviour of a rival may have led them to overemphasize their own concern about the violated norms. Certainly, as Figure 2 shows, similar violations in a non-rival (Iran) did have a weaker impact. However, as noted, respondents were equally critical towards discrimination in the USA and Iran, suggesting that a) geopolitical rivalry was not driving their criticism, and b) their desire to condemn those countries' abuses was not driving their views towards discrimination at home. There is little evidence that respondents were merely seeking consistency in their views about discrimination across countries: indeed, the respondents who were the most critical of American discrimination against minorities were not only no more likely to support minority rights norms but were also the least critical of discrimination in China.[46]

Moreover, if geopolitics were indeed the driving factor, we would expect that the US treatment would have its biggest impact on anti-American respondents. But in Study 1, respondents'

[41]Although the US treatment did also make respondents significantly more likely to say they would accept their family member marrying a Buddhist, suggesting that they are not just superficially expressing answers on the subject matter of the vignette but are thinking about minority groups and discrimination more deeply.

[42]Nederhof (1985). See Supplementary Materials Tables 19 and 20.

[43]For a discussion of the sampling method please see Supplementary Materials, Section 4. While we approached people from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible, this sample is not representative of the Chinese population. It was based in an affluent city and overestimated people who would spend time in public places. Nonetheless, the interviews do help illustrate how ordinary Chinese people react to American discrimination in their own words.

[44]This was done as part of a wider project on women's rights (see Gruffydd-Jones 2022). At this time, women's rights and gender equality were relatively openly discussed in China. We judged that it would have been too sensitive to encourage interviewees to speak even in the abstract about minority rights, as unstructured conversations may have risked discussions of politically sensitive topics.

[45]Twenty-six interviewees, of whom twenty were women.

[46]See Supplementary Materials Table 22.

attitudes towards the USA had no impact on their response to the treatment,[47] and in Study 2, although I only asked about these attitudes post-treatment, it was just more educated respondents (who were more pro-American in the control group) who became more supportive of minority rights norms.[48] While this suggests that the results do not appear to be driven by people's dislike of the USA, further studies should address this question in an authoritarian American ally, where geopolitical considerations are less relevant.

Discussion

This study examines how prominent American violations of international human rights norms affect the strength of those norms for citizens of authoritarian rivals. It shows that, in China, the ruling party chooses to proactively pass on news of racial discrimination in the USA to its public when it is facing human rights pressure, and (less robustly) at times of higher bilateral tensions. Passing on this news does have propaganda benefits – it bolsters patriotic and anti-American sentiment – but it also makes Chinese citizens significantly more supportive of minority rights norms and more likely to believe that discrimination is a problem in China.

The findings imply that high-profile transgressions of international norms may not always weaken those norms. On the contrary, human rights violations – especially when they come from a self-professed 'world leader' of human rights like the USA[49] – may end up strengthening those norms in authoritarian states where their public discussion is normally censored. This suggests that prominent American human rights violations may be an underappreciated way by which norms around human rights gain attention and support in authoritarian environments.

This marks a notable contrast to the naming and shaming literature, which has found that being *targeted* for international criticism – especially by rivals – may sometimes increase people's support for their government's human rights violations (Terman 2023; Gruffydd-Jones 2022; Abramson et al. 2025; Bassan-Nygate 2024). As such, this gives us the counterintuitive finding that, while being stigmatised by rivals over human rights violations may make a country's public *less* concerned about respect for those norms at home, stigmatising rivals for their violations may make the home public *more* concerned about the norms. This opens up the question of whether the act of being a 'human rights shamer' might itself help to promote support for human rights at home.

The study also highlights some potential negative externalities of state propaganda (Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024), not least how pandering to geopolitical incentives may pose domestic social challenges for authoritarian leaders. This may explain why the Chinese government has sometimes found itself torn between highlighting American human rights violations and censoring them, even in the aftermath of George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter protests (Bandurski 2020).

Looking at Chinese state media, there is evidence that the CCP is indeed aware of the ramifications of this kind of propaganda push. In the twenty-eight days after any *People's Daily* mentions of racial discrimination in the United States, the paper is 50 per cent more likely to write about minority rights in China than at any other time of the year.[50] Given the overwhelmingly positive tone of these articles, a plausible interpretation is that propaganda chiefs use this coverage to compensate for their citizens' heightened awareness of ethnic and religious minority rights by providing positive coverage of those issues at home. While authoritarian reporting of American abuses is unlikely to lead to the kinds of Black Lives Matter protests that arose in Europe in 2020,

[47]See Supplementary Materials Table 10.

[48]See Supplementary Materials Table 17.

[49]At least according to the State Department https://www.state.gov/policy-issues/human-rights-and-democracy/.

[50]An increase from 0.106 to 0.140 stories a month, significant at $p<0.001$, using a similar time series model, controlling for foreign human rights criticism and other covariates. See Supplementary Materials, Section 2.

we saw in the Middle East, after Abu Ghraib, how autocratic political opportunism may nonetheless open up some space for liberal change (Mokhtari 2009). Certainly, Arab leaders appeared to have learned their lessons from Abu Ghraib and were far less willing to publicize the 2014 reports of American torture in the region than they had been ten years before (Leber 2014).

Future research should examine the external validity of these findings. Most immediately, it should extend the survey samples to citizens who are older, rural, less likely to be university-educated, and more likely to receive their news through state media. Secondly, while the study is the first to explore the impacts of overseas violations on public support for international norms, the findings strictly only tell us about authoritarian rivals' response to American violations of strong existing norms. It will be useful to examine not only how these findings extend to America's authoritarian allies, but how they affect more democratic places where the norms are already highly salient and openly discussed or places where the norms themselves are weaker and more locally contested. Future work should also consider how these findings apply to norm revisionists or antipreneurs – where states do not just violate norms but actively contest the norm or even fight back against the stigma imposed on them (Adler-Nissen 2014).

Nonetheless, this study demonstrates that norms are not just strengthened when they are respected. When states protect norms, they may well provide a positive example to other states and their citizens, who may seek to emulate that behaviour. But respect for norms is rarely featured in global media (Cole 2010). International norms normally only receive mass coverage, opinion pieces, and debates when they are contested or violated. The heightened salience of norms that comes when they are violated may be an important means by which support for those norms is spread across borders.

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Data availability statement. Replication data for this paper can be found at the BJPS Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HYSZT2.

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