

Human Rights and Public Opinion: From Attitudes to Action

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Contrary to the notion that civil and political rights trump economic rights in American popular consciousness, this article demonstrates that Americans widely view the right to a minimum standard of living as a human right—and say they are willing to pay more for ethically produced goods in order to promote such rights. For the first time, there are data to demonstrate the connection between what Americans think about human rights, and how they are willing to behave. The national public opinion poll conducted by the authors and discussed in this article is the first in a series aimed at exploring such connections.

Nearly two decades ago, scholar Kathleen Pritchard noted that: “There is very little research on the role played by mass public opinion, and perhaps even less, on factors that shape and influence that opinion in the field of human rights.”¹ Her appraisal remains accurate almost 20 years later. Our

¹ Kathleen Pritchard, “Human Rights: A Decent Respect for Public Opinion?” *Human Rights Quarterly* 13 (May 1991): 123–142.

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research seeks to fill this gap. We do so in a new context—one in which the Cold War has ended, global trade barriers have dropped, and economic competitiveness has increased. Interestingly, even in a situation in which their own economic futures are often less secure, we find that Americans are willing to spend more to consume ethically.

Our review of all available American national public opinion surveys² conducted since 1990 revealed that such polls have typically included either questions on human rights attitudes³ or questions on various forms of ethical consumption,⁴ but not both. Additionally, no national surveys have simultaneously asked about three core rights protected in international treaties: the right not to be tortured, the right to freedom of thought and expression, and the right to a minimum guaranteed standard of living (itself a component of basic economic rights).⁵ Our survey does both.⁶

Finally, surveys have not explicitly linked human rights attitudes to ethical consumption. We do so by asking respondents to indicate their “willingness to

² Polling data was accessed through the iPOLL databank and other resources provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, on 19 June and 27 June 2007. A full listing of all polls reviewed is available at <http://sp.uconn.edu/~scruggs/nsflinks.htm>.

³ Sam McFarland and Melissa Mathews, “Who Cares About Human Rights?” *Political Psychology* 26 (June 2005): 365–385; Sam McFarland and Melissa Mathews, “Do Americans Care About Human Rights?” *Journal of Human Rights* 4 (September 2005): 305–319; Jeannette Diaz-Veizades, Keith F. Widaman, Todd D. Little, and Katherine W. Gibbs, “The Measurement of Human Rights Attitudes,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 135 (June 1995): 313–328.

⁴ Marymount University, *The Consumer and Sweatshops* (Arlington, VA: Marymount University Center for Ethical Concerns, 1999), accessed at www.marymount.edu/news/garmentstudy/overview.html, 15 July 2008; Marymount University, *Garment Workers Study*, report available from Marymount University Center for Ethical Concerns (Arlington, VA: Marymount, 1996); Marymount University, *Garment Workers Study*, report available from Marymount University Center for Ethical Concerns (Arlington, VA: Marymount, 1995); University of Maryland Program on International Policy Attitudes, *Americans on Globalization: A Study of Public Attitudes* (College Park, MD: PIPA, 2000), accessed at http://www.pipa.org/archives/us_opinion.php, 15 July 2008; Kimberly Ann Elliott and Richard B. Freeman, “White Hats or Don Quixotes? Human Rights Vigilantes in the Global Economy,” working paper 8102, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2001; Marsha A. Dickson and Mary A. Littrell, “Consumers of Clothing from Alternative Trading Organizations: Societal Attitudes and Purchase Evaluative Criteria,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 15 (1997): 20–33; Marsha A. Dickson and Mary A. Littrell, “Socially Responsible Behaviour: Values and Attitudes of the Alternative Trading Organisation Consumer,” *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* (October 1996): 50–69; Maria L. Loureiro and Justus Lotade, “Do Fair Trade and Eco-Labels in Coffee Wake Up the Consumer Conscience?” *Ecological Economics* 53 (April 2005): 129–138.

⁵ See the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (CAT); the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR); and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). The United States has signed and ratified both the CAT and the ICCPR; however, it has signed but not ratified the ICESCR.

⁶ See Appendix A for question wordings.

pay more” for two ethically produced goods: “sweatshop-free” clothing⁷ and “fair-trade” coffee.⁸ Willingness-to-pay questions are a widely used contingent valuation tool in economics research on consumer preferences in incomplete and imperfect markets—both characteristics of the market for ethical consumption.⁹ One criticism that is commonly raised about such questions is that the answers are simply “cheap talk.” After all, people buy many goods that are not ethically produced. This is a valid criticism—but only up to a point. Certified “ethically produced” goods generally do have less than 1 percent market share in many sectors, and most such goods are not widely available.¹⁰ However, the problem with using market size as the gauge of preferences is that the absence of a market for something does not imply that people do not value it. (For instance, the tiny market for carbon offsets does not imply that public concern about global warming is just cheap talk.) There is simply a limited market for ethically produced goods in most localities, and a very incomplete one. But overall sales of fair-trade commodities in North America and the Pacific Rim rose by close to 40 percent in 2003,¹¹ totaling \$291.75 million—with coffee representing 32 percent of those sales¹²—so there is evidence of an emerging potential market.

Central to the quality of democracy is knowing what citizens think rights are, and ensuring that what citizens think about rights informs public policy formulation and outcomes.¹³ Understanding what the public does—and does

⁷ The term “sweatshop” has traditionally been associated with the poor workplace conditions and low pay offered by individual firms. See Robert J.S. Ross, *Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Robert J. Liubicic, “Corporate Codes of Conduct and Product Labeling Schemes: The Limits and Possibilities of Promoting International Labor Rights Through Private Initiatives,” *Law and International Business* 30 (Fall 1998): 112–158; César A. Rodríguez-Garavito, “Global Governance and Labor Rights: Codes of Conduct and Anti-Sweatshop Struggles in Global Apparel Factories in Mexico and Guatemala,” *Politics and Society* 33 (June 2005): 203–233.

⁸ “Fair trade” encompasses a broader set of requirements related to mode of production and market prices, and may include both labor and environmental criteria (such as organic production). See Margaret Levi and April Linton, “Fair Trade: A Cup at a Time,” *Politics and Society* 31 (September 2003): 407–432; Loureiro and Lotade, “Do Fair Trade and Eco-Labels in Coffee”; James A. Roberts, “Profiling Levels of Socially Responsible Consumer Behavior: A Cluster Analytic Approach and Its Implications for Marketing,” *Journal of Marketing* 3 (Fall 1995): 97–117.

⁹ Robert Cameron Mitchell and Richard T. Carson, *Using Surveys to Value Public Goods: The Contingent Valuation Method* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future, 1989); and W. Michael Haneman, “Valuing the Environment Through Contingent Valuation,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 8 (Fall 1994): 19–43.

¹⁰ Patrick De Pelsmacker, Leisbeth Driesen, and Glenn Rayp, “Do Consumers Care about Ethics? Willingness to Pay for Fair-Trade Coffee,” *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 2 (Winter 2005): 363–385.

¹¹ Loureiro and Lotade, “Do Fair Trade and Eco-Labels in Coffee.”

¹² Fair Trade Federation, *2005 Report: Fair Trade Trends in North America and the Pacific Rim* (Washington, DC: Fair Trade Federation, 2005).

¹³ Guillermo O’Donnell, Jorge Vargas Cullell, and Osvaldo M. Iazzetta, eds., *The Quality of Democracy: Theory & Applications* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2004).

not—think about particular human rights can also promote democratic efforts to reconcile citizen attitudes and public policy. Of course, what people think about human rights cannot be fully captured in public opinion surveys alone. Nonetheless, more-comprehensive public opinion data on human rights and on ethical consumption is important. Understanding mass attitudes about human rights is central to facilitating the implementation of existing legal principles. Understanding linkages between human rights, particularly economic rights, and ethical consumption can allow for new and innovative citizen-led, market-led, and government-led strategies for protecting and promoting a fuller scope of rights. This article and the survey it draws upon are an initial contribution to what we hope will become a dynamic new research area in both human rights and public opinion scholarship and policy analysis.

Our results contain at least three significant findings. First, there is a much higher acceptance of a minimum standard of living as an inviolable right among Americans than is commonly assumed. There is also a high willingness to pay for ethically produced goods. This implies that the relative neglect of economic rights in American public policy discourse is out of step with what the average American citizen believes about such rights. Second, privileged groups are more likely to support some sorts of rights over others. White males, for example, are much more likely to support a human right to freedom of thought and expression than to support freedom from torture and a right to a minimum guaranteed standard of living. These findings contradict the notion that more-privileged groups tend to be less enthusiastic about human rights overall.¹⁴ Third, we find that there is a weak connection between support for economic rights and willingness to pay more for ethically produced goods.

CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

There is a vast scholarly literature on human rights, spanning multiple disciplines.¹⁵ However, little work in the human rights field engages the question

¹⁴ McFarland and Mathews, “Who Cares”; McFarland and Mathews, “Do Americans Care”; Jost Stellmacher, Gert Sommer, and Elmar Brähler, “The Cognitive Representation of Human Rights: Knowledge, Importance, and Commitment,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 11 (2005): 267–292.

¹⁵ Louis Henkin, Gerald L. Neuman, Diane F. Orentlicher, and David W. Leebron, *Human Rights* (New York: Foundation Press, 1999); Henry J. Steiner and Philip Alston, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals*. 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Richard P. Claude, *Comparative Human Rights* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Jack Donnelly, *International Human Rights*. 3d ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007); David Forsythe, *Human Rights in International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Todd Landman, *Protecting Human Rights: A Comparative Study* (Washington, DC:

of public opinion. There have been a handful of scholarly articles on the subject produced over the past two decades—divided among scholars who focus principally on human rights attitudes in the United States¹⁶ and those who focus on public opinion internationally.¹⁷ Our work here focuses on American public opinion.

The existing public opinion literature on human rights has focused disproportionately on civil and political rights. Even when polls have taken up topics in the realm of economic rights, such as occupational standards in “sweatshops” or child labor, they have tended to be limited to the instrumental nature of such issues in American foreign policy rather than inquiring about respondents’ basic orientations about rights. Previous national polls have also failed to link attitudes about human rights to concrete expression in personal action—such as willingness to purchase ethically produced goods. This is true even in previous surveys on child labor, anti-sweatshop purchasing, and fair trade. Our understanding of public opinion about human rights and related expressions of consumer behavior has also been hampered by a range of methodological weaknesses. Small or unrepresentative samples are the norm, and are often based on surveys of college students and/or faculty.¹⁸ None of the prior polling data we reviewed addressed the complexity of the multiple human rights relevant in everyday life and codified in international law. Our survey was designed to address these shortcomings.

METHODS AND DATA

We integrated questions on human rights attitudes and ethical consumption within a larger nationally representative telephone survey conducted from

Georgetown University Press, 2005); Zehra Arat, *Democracy and Human Rights in Developing Countries* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001); David L. Cingranelli and David L. Richards, “Measuring the Level, Pattern and Sequence of Government Respect for Physical Integrity Rights,” *International Studies Quarterly* 43 (June 1999): 407–417.

¹⁶ Anne E. Geyer and Robert Y. Shapiro, “A Report: Human Rights,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 52 (Fall 1988): 386–398; Pritchard, “Human Rights: A Decent Respect.”

¹⁷ Christopher Anderson, Patrick M. Regan, and Robert L. Ostergard, “Political Repression and Public Perceptions of Human Rights,” *Political Research Quarterly* 55 (June 2002): 439–456; Christopher Anderson, Aid Paskeviciute, Maria Sandovici, and Yuliya Tverdova, “In the Eye of the Beholder? The Foundations of Subjective Human Rights Conditions in East-Central Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 38 (September 2005): 771–798; Matthew Carlson and Ola Listhaug, “Citizens’ Perceptions of Human Rights Practices: An Analysis of 55 Countries,” *Journal of Peace Research* 44 (July 2007): 465–483; Christopher J. Cohrs, Jürgen Maes, Barbara Moschner, and Sven Kielmann, “Determinants of Human Rights Attitudes and Behavior: A Comparison and Integration of Psychological Perspectives,” *Political Psychology* 28 (August 2007): 441–470.

¹⁸ Dennis Chong, “How People Think, Reason, and Feel about Rights and Liberties,” *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (August 1993): 867–899; Cohrs, Maes, Moschner, and Kielmann, “Determinants of Human Rights”; McFarland and Mathews, “Who Cares”; McFarland and Mathews, “Do Americans Care”; Diaz-Veizades, Widaman, Little, and Gibbs, “The Measurement.”

15 November to 27 November 2006. The number of respondents was 508. Responses were weighted based on standard demographics from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey to be representative of the national adult population. The overall margin of error for the survey (n=508) is approximately $\pm 4.5\%$. However, the margin of error for subgroups within the sample (e.g., non-whites) is larger. Our questions about three types of human rights (i.e., protection from torture, freedom of thought and conscience, and the right to a minimum guaranteed standard of living) all contained the following standard introduction (full question wording is available in Appendix A):

Now I'm going to read you some possible human rights. For each one please tell me whether YOU think it is a right that should be guaranteed to every human being and never violated, a right that may be desirable but that can be violated under certain circumstances, or not really a right at all.

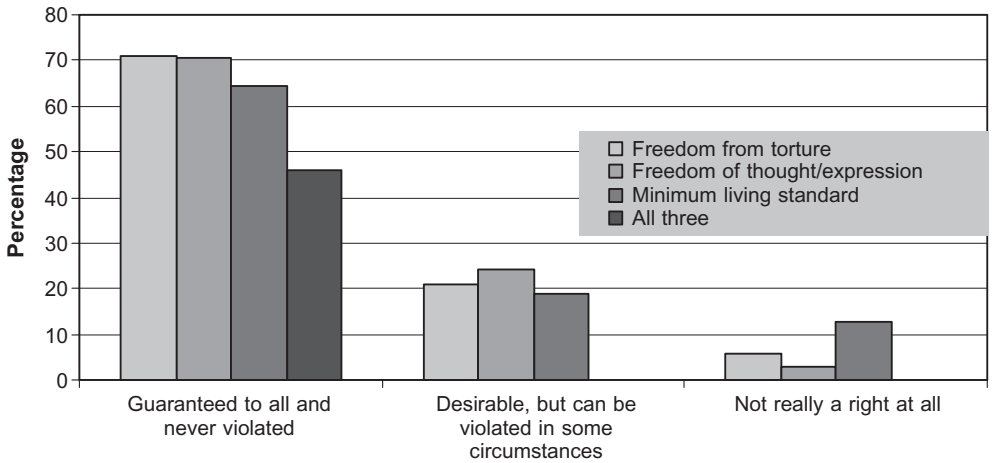
One charge that might be leveled against these general questions is that they lead to over-reporting of support for human rights. They require little commitment by respondents beyond expressing support for different types of rights. This is a major reason that we utilized a subset of questions to probe in much greater depth whether those who express support for values are willing to trade something for such values. It is also important to note that the wording of the questions was not phrased to inflate support. The questions state that support implies that the right be unconditional, and allows respondents to choose an “in-between” category that permits conditional violations of the prospective right.

We asked respondents how much *extra* they would be willing to pay for two common items, sweaters and coffee, if those products were produced under conditions that better provided for a minimum standard of living. The items were chosen to represent an import competing sector (textiles), and an item that is not domestically produced (coffee), in part to test whether respondents' beliefs about the right to human rights protection may be linked to economic nationalism. (Though we do not discuss the results in this paper, we also included survey questions that asked more directly about economic nationalism.) We also designed the survey to avoid prompting respondents to refer back to their previous statements about human rights when giving their willingness-to-pay answers.

FINDINGS ON HUMAN RIGHTS ATTITUDES

Figure 1 displays the aggregate responses to each of the questions we asked about the three different types of rights. Support for the set of civil and political rights that have defined political liberalism for centuries is higher in the American population than is support for economic rights. Nevertheless, a substantial majority of Americans do believe in basic economic rights. Over 70 percent of Americans say freedom from torture and freedom of expression

FIGURE 1
Beliefs about Human Rights



Source: Shareen Hertel, Lyle Scruggs, and C. Patrick Heidkamp, *Ethical Consumption Survey*, 2006.

are guaranteed rights to all people, and 64.5 percent of respondents consider a guaranteed minimum standard of living to be an inviolable human right. About 80 percent of those who support guaranteed civil and political rights also support a guaranteed minimum standard of living. This basic support for economic human rights is, in fact, consistent with other U.S. public opinion data. For example, the General Social Survey consistently finds that 65–70 percent of Americans support spending more on assistance to the poor.¹⁹

Interesting differences among social groups emerge in respondents' level of support for the more traditional civil and political rights (that is, freedom of speech and freedom from torture). More people say that protection from torture is “not really a right at all” than is the case with regard to freedom of expression. Since almost identical numbers report that both rights should be inviolable, it is tempting to argue that the differences are due to the fact that torture became much more legitimized in the context of the George W. Bush administration's U.S. “war on terrorism.”

Indeed, we have identified at least 29 public opinion polls that address the issue of torture, conducted nationally in the United States since 1990. Most of these have occurred since the beginning of the current Iraq war in 2002, with the bulk conducted after the revelation that the U.S. government has engaged in actions that are widely interpreted as torture. Public knowledge of torture in

¹⁹ Tom W. Smith, “Trends in National Spending Priorities, 1973-2006,” *General Social Survey*, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 10 January 2007.

the context of current American antiterrorism efforts may have altered public opinion on torture itself as a human rights issue. David Richards and Mary Anderson's survey of American college students offers some insight into the demographic variation in tolerance of torture.²⁰ However, the lack of detailed comparative survey data prevents us from answering this question more definitively.

Correlates of Support for Human Rights

Our survey included basic demographic and political identification information on respondents (along with the consumer behavior questions mentioned above). This survey design enabled us to analyze differences in support for human rights among several key demographic groups, such as race, gender, income, marital status, age, and political ideology. The independent variables are the groups defined as follows: the category "non-white" includes all those not self-identifying as white. "Female" is self-explanatory. "Income less than \$50 K" refers to those in households reporting annual income less than \$50,000. "Single" refers to respondents in a single-person household. Age groups "over 60" and "under 30" are self-explanatory. Finally, "liberal" refers to those who self-identify as being either "somewhat liberal" or "very liberal" in their political ideology.

Table 1 displays an estimate of the proportion of the population in each demographic group claiming that the human right "should be guaranteed to every human being and never violated." For each group on which the table reports, the first number is the percentage *in* the group agreeing; the second number is the percentage *not* in the group agreeing. For example, if all non-whites and all whites thought "freedom from torture" was an inviolable right, the percentages in the upper left of the table would be 100 and 100. Asterisks indicate when estimated *differences* between the groups (i.e., whites versus non-whites) fall outside of the sampling margin of error.

Table 2 provides odds-ratio estimates from a multivariate logistic regression (logit) model of support for each type of the three human rights included in the survey. For each column, each number reported in the table represents the likelihood that someone in the demographic category on the far left (non-white, female, etc.) considers the right to be inviolable, *divided by* the likelihood that someone not in the category considers the right inviolable, holding all of the other variables constant. So, for example, the first number in Table 2 indicates that non-whites are 2.28 times *more likely* than whites to say that torture is an inviolable human right, holding all of the other variables in the table constant. All numbers greater than 1.00 mean that those in the corresponding demographic group are *more likely* than those not in the group

²⁰ David L. Richards and Mary Anderson, "What Do US Citizens Think About Torture, and Why?" paper presented at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, September 2007.

TABLE 1

Support for the Inviolability of Selected Human Rights by Demographic Group

	<i>Freedom from Torture</i>		<i>Minimum Standard of Living</i>		<i>Freedom of Thought and Expression</i>		<i>Combined</i>	
	<i>In Group</i>	<i>In Rest of Population</i>	<i>In Group</i>	<i>In Rest of Population</i>	<i>In Group</i>	<i>In Rest of Population</i>	<i>In Group</i>	<i>In Rest of Population</i>
Non-white (n = 105)	80	67**	70	62	64	74	44	47
Female (n = 276)	78	63**	65	64	65	77**	51	40*
Income less than 50 K (n = 172)	70	71	68	63	69	74	45	48
High school education or less (n = 132)	68	74	71	59**	69	71	46	45
Single (n = 122)	79	70*	61	66	72	71	50	45
Over 60 (n = 141)	67	72	62	66	73	71	50	45
Under 30 (n = 48)	73	71	73	64	72	71	43	47
Liberal (n = 120)	82	68**	77	61**	82	67**	66	40**

Source: Shareen Hertel, Lyle Scruggs, and C. Patrick Heidkamp, *Ethical Consumption Survey*, 2006.

Note: The “in group” column is the percentage in the group responding that the right is inviolable; “in rest of population” is the percentage *not in the group* responding that the right is inviolable. The n is the number of survey respondents for the “in group”. The “out group” is 508-n.

*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed.

to say the right is inviolable. Conversely, a number lower than 1.00 means that those in the named group are less likely to say the right is inviolable than those not in the named group.

Consistent with other research, political ideology exerts a considerable effect on support for all three types of human rights. More-liberal respondents are much more likely to say that they support human rights. Our results corroborate other scholars’ findings.²¹

One interesting pattern we identify is that politically more-marginal demographic groups (women and non-whites) are more likely to support a human right to protection against torture and to a guaranteed minimum standard of living than are males and whites. In striking contrast, dominant social groups (e.g., white and males) are substantially more supportive of the absolute right to freedom of thought and expression: 80 percent of non-whites support an inviolable human right to protection from torture versus only 67 percent of whites. The respective proportions supporting a right to minimum income are 70 percent and 62 percent. Meanwhile, only 64 percent of non-whites support

²¹ Michael H. Crowson, “Human Rights Attitudes: Dimensionality and Psychological Correlates,” *Ethics and Behavior* 14 (July 2004): 235–253; Fathali M. Moghaddam and Vuk Vuksanovic, “Attitudes and Behavior Toward Human Rights Across Different Contexts: The Role of Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Political Ideology, and Religiosity,” *International Journal of Psychology* 25 (August 1990): 455–474; McFarland and Mathews, “Who Cares”; McFarland and Mathews. “Do Americans Care.”

TABLE 2

Odds-Ratio Based on Logit Estimates of Support for Inviolable Human Rights

	<i>Freedom from Torture</i>	<i>Minimum Standard of Living</i>	<i>Freedom of Thought and Expression</i>	<i>Combined</i>
Non-white	2.28**	1.96**	0.71	1.25
Female	2.28**	1.28	0.49**	1.66*
Income less than 50 K	0.79	0.98	0.84	0.99
High school education or less	0.96	2.38**	1.08	1.27
Single	1.79	1	1.29	1.14
Over 60	0.81	0.83	1.39	1.05
Under 30	0.95	1.33	1.28	0.83
Liberal	1.71	2.36**	2.1*	2.96**
n	459	459	459	459
Pseudo R ²	0.06	0.06	0.04	0.05

Source: Shareen Hertel, Lyle Scruggs, and C. Patrick Heidkamp, Ethical Consumption Survey, 2006.

Note: Coefficients are odds ratios from logit estimates.

*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed.

an absolute right to freedom of thought and expression versus 74 percent of whites. As the first row in Table 2 suggests, we see similar results after controlling for potentially confounding demographic factors. Non-white respondents are about twice as likely as whites to say that freedom from torture and a right to a guaranteed minimum standard of living are unconditional rights, but they are only half as likely to support an unconditional right to freedom of thought and expression.

Gender is also an important factor differentiating support for particular human rights. While 78 percent of women, as opposed to 63 percent of men, support an absolute right to freedom from torture, men are substantially more likely to embrace an absolute right to freedom of thought and expression, by 77 percent to 65 percent. These differences are statistically significant, that is, larger than the survey margin of error. (Income differences, by contrast, play no role in differentiating support for freedom from torture as a human right.) All three of these findings are corroborated in our logistic regression results presented in Table 2. Controlling for other factors, women are more than twice as likely to support a fundamental right to protection from torture and less than half as likely to support freedom of thought and expression.

If we examine the interaction effects between race and gender, about 83 percent of non-white females support freedom from torture as an unconditional right, while only 56 percent of white males support this as an unconditional right. The corresponding percentages for freedom of thought and expression are a mirror image: 57 percent of non-white females support an unconditional right to freedom of thought and expression versus 80 percent of white males.

These findings on attitudes regarding torture are in keeping with contemporary claims about the particular vulnerability of women to varied forms of violence. As Charlotte Bunch has argued: “The most pervasive violation of

females is violence against women in all its manifestations.... These abuses occur in every country.... They cross class, race, age, and national lines.”²² Our findings are also in line with theories about institutional racism, which are invoked to explain the unique vulnerability of certain minority groups in America (particularly African Americans) to violence by agents of the state.²³

The only other major difference that we find in the level of support for human rights is the correlation between lower levels of education and greater support for economic rights. Though not a complete explanation, simple self-interest may play a role here. Those with low education face a considerable and growing wage gap in the United States, so one might imagine that this group currently experiences, and can increasingly expect to face, poor economic prospects.²⁴

One might argue that the absence of a strong relationship between income and support for economic rights in our sample undermines this argument. Two additional factors support our argument. First, those with lower incomes are somewhat more likely to support a guaranteed standard of living. Second, the measure of income that we have used is current household income—so it ignores future income prospects, differences in the size of households, and number of income earners. A family with one earner reporting an income of \$40,000 could be expected to have quite different economic prospects than one composed of two earners making \$20,000 each.

To our knowledge, differences in the public’s support for particular kinds of human rights have not been reported in the social science literature, even in psychology. Yet these findings are consistent with some psychological theories. Many explanations of human rights attitudes focus on the fact that human rights claims tend to demand greater egalitarianism, and represent “threats” to dominant social groups. This leads many psychologists to predict that socially powerful groups would oppose human rights more or less across the board.²⁵

Our findings are more nuanced. White males have historical social and economic dominance, which may explain their strong level of support in our sample for freedom of thought and expression.²⁶ Such findings are in line with

²² Charlotte Bunch, “Women’s Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 12 (November 1990): 486–498.

²³ Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America’s Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001); William T. Armaline, “(Re)Conceptualizing Adolescent Homelessness: Misdirection of the State and Child Welfare” in Barbara Arrighi and David Maume, eds. *Children and the State*, Vol. 4 of the *Child Poverty in America Today* series (Westport, CT: Praeger Press/Greenwood, 2006).

²⁴ David H. Autor, Lawrence F. Katz, and Melissa S. Kearny, “Trends in US Wage Inequality: Re-assessing the Revisionists,” working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2005.

²⁵ Cohrs, Maes, Moschner, and Kielmann, “Determinants of Human Rights.”

²⁶ Joe Feagin, and Eileen O’Brien, *White Men on Race: Power, Privilege, and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003).

feminist standpoint theory, which argues that hierarchical relationships between subordinated groups and dominant ones endorse the communication practices of the dominant group,²⁷ including, in this case, the power to define the realm of free speech.

When analyzing public opinion about the international human rights regime in America, we might want to look beyond support for the individual human rights mentioned in our survey, and focus on support for *all three*. All three are codified in international human rights law, which the United States has signed.

Even on a generous counting, less than a majority of Americans (46 percent) answer that all three rights are inviolable. (This count includes those respondents who replied that the right is unconditional to two of the three items, and replied “don’t know” to the third.) An optimistic assessment of these numbers would point to widespread normative support for human rights. Two-thirds of Americans believe that two of these rights are guaranteed and that the third is at least conditionally guaranteed. Only a minority (18 percent) of respondents maintain that one or more of the three is not really a right at all. Almost 75 percent of the public believes that at least one of the three is an inalienable human right.

The final columns in Tables 1 and 2 show the level of individual support for *all three* human rights as inviolable. (Recall that based on our estimates, less than half of the American public as a whole considers all three rights inviolable.) We find large differences in support for only two groups of Americans: women versus men, and liberals versus non-liberals. Women are significantly more likely than men to support all three rights (51 percent versus 40 percent), though in the logistic regression results, estimates for gender differences are within the margin of the sampling error (that is, the p value is greater than .05), so the difference we found is not highly reliable. Liberals are much more likely to consider all three rights inviolable (66 percent versus 40 percent). Controlling for demographic variation, we find that liberals are about three times more likely than are non-liberals to support all three.

FINDINGS ON ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

Our questions about consumer willingness to pay for ethically produced goods focus on two classes of products: textiles produced under sweatshop-free con-

²⁷ Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1987); Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Working Women’s Studies* (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Women, 1988); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Margaret Gray and Shareen Hertel, “Immigrant Farmworker Advocacy: The Dynamics of Organizing” paper prepared for a panel on “Labor and Economic Rights Advocacy in the Americas: Mechanisms Central to Coalition-building, Protest and Political Mobilization” at the 2007 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, September 2007.

ditions and coffee produced under the fair-trade label. The textile question asked respondents how much more they would be willing to pay for a sweater that was guaranteed not to have been produced under sweatshop conditions. The fair-trade coffee question asked respondents who regularly purchased coffee how much more they would be willing to pay for coffee with a fair-trade label, a label which guarantees that producers receive a minimum price for their coffee. The exact question wording is provided in Appendix A.

A popular conception of ethical consumption is that it has a limited potential market, with demand limited to those with liberal political leanings or high disposable income. Our results, however, indicate that a large majority of Americans say they are willing to pay more for ethically produced goods. Based on our survey, about 68 percent of the population would pay significantly more for a twenty-dollar sweater made under good working conditions. Such a high rate of support for ethical consumption goals is, in fact, similar to findings of previous polls. A sizeable majority (62 percent) report that they are willing to pay at least five dollars more, and more than one-third of Americans report that they would be willing to spend 10 dollars more. With respect to willingness to pay for fair-trade coffee, our results suggest that more than 75 percent of coffee buyers would be willing to pay at least 50 cents more per pound for fair-trade, while more than half would pay a premium of one dollar or more. To put this amount in perspective, between 2001 and 2005, the average retail price of coffee in the United States was about three dollars per pound. This result is broadly consistent with previous surveys.²⁸

Correlates of Support for Ethical Consumption

Table 3 provides the proportion of people in key social groups who say they are willing to pay at least a five-dollar premium for a sweatshop-free sweater, and those willing to pay at least one dollar more per pound for coffee with a fair-trade label.²⁹ The first eight groups are the same ones we used previously in analyzing support for various human rights. We include one additional group: respondents who identified economic rights as an inviolable human right. Table 4 provides results from a multivariate logistic regression analysis. (These results do not differ substantially from what is illustrated in Table 3; therefore, we do not discuss them in depth here).

Consistent with our findings on the general level of support for economic rights, respondents with limited education (high school diploma or less) were more willing to pay more for sweatshop-free goods. Those with less education

²⁸ Comparable results are found in the Marymount polls (1995, 1996, 1999); Elliott and Freeman, "White Hats or Don Quixotes"; Marsha A. Dickson, "Utility of No Sweat Labels for Apparel Consumers: Profiling Label Users and Predicting Their Purchases," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 35 (Summer 2001): 96–119; and Loureiro and Lotade, "Do Fair Trade and Eco-Labels in Coffee."

²⁹ International Coffee Organization, historical statistics, accessed at www.ico.org, 15 July 2008.

TABLE 3
Willingness to Pay for Ethically Produced Goods

	<i>Willingness to Pay at Least \$5 More for Sweatshop-free Sweater</i>		<i>Willingness to Pay at Least \$1 More for Fair-trade Coffee</i>	
	<i>In Group</i>	<i>In Rest of Population</i>	<i>In Group</i>	<i>In Rest of Population</i>
Non-white (n = 107)	53	65** (n = 53) ^a	47	58
Female (n = 284)	63	58 (n = 165)	53	56
Income less than 50 K (n = 177)	58	67 (n = 93)	53	57
High school education or less (n = 136)	68	56** (n = 80)	55	54
Single (n = 126)	54	63 (n = 59)	43	56
Over 60 (n = 147)	48	66** (n = 94)	39	60**
Under 30 (n = 48)	63	62 (n = 17)	67	53
Liberal (n = 94)	64	60 (n = 68)	55	54
Human right to minimum standard of living (n = 307)	65	54* (n = 187)	59	44*

Source: Shareen Hertel, Lyle Scruggs, and C. Patrick Heidkamp, Ethical Consumption Survey, 2006.

Note: The "in group" column is the percentage in the group responding that the right is inviolable; "in rest of population" is the percentage *not in the group* responding that the right is inviolable. The n is the number of survey respondents for the "in group" for willingness to pay for a) the sweater and b) coffee.

^aThe n for willingness to pay for coffee is lower, because the question was only asked of coffee buyers.

*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed.

were, on average, also more likely to say they would pay more for fair-trade coffee, but the difference is small, and less than the standard margin of sampling error. The largest difference in willingness to pay occurs between those over and under 60 years old. Older Americans are substantially *less* likely to say they are willing to pay more for ethically produced goods. While support for human rights is positively associated with willingness to pay for sweatshop-free clothing and fair-trade coffee, the estimated effect is within the survey margin of error.

It is notable that inter-group differences in willingness to pay are sometimes different from expressed support for a human right to a minimum living standard. First of all, non-whites are *less* likely than are whites to express a willingness to pay more for sweatshop-free clothing or for fair-trade coffee. Second, gender differences in willingness to pay for sweatshop-free goods are small and within the margin of sampling error. Third, those with higher incomes generally are willing to pay more for ethically produced goods, though the difference is outside of the margin of error for sweatshop-free clothing, not for fair-trade coffee.

The fact that consumers with higher incomes are more willing to pay for ethically produced goods is not terribly surprising. Insofar as individuals attach *some* positive value to ethically produced goods, we would expect higher incomes to increase their expressed willingness to pay. A more counter-intuitive finding is that non-whites are less willing than whites to pay more for ethically produced goods, even though we saw earlier that they were more likely to

TABLE 4

Odds-Ratio Based on Logit Estimates for Determinants of Willingness to Pay for Ethical Consumption

	<i>Willingness to Pay at Least \$5 More for Sweatshop-free Sweater</i>		<i>Willingness to Pay at Least \$1 More for Fair-trade Coffee</i>	
Non-white	0.55**	0.51**	0.49	0.44*
Female	1.57	1.54	0.76	0.78
Income less than 50 K	0.54**	0.54**	0.93	0.95
High school education or less	2.44**	2.27**	1.16	1.05
Single	1.01	1.02	0.82	0.78
Over 60	0.49**	0.5**	0.37**	0.39**
Under 30	0.88	0.85	1.44	1.43
Liberal	1.03	0.94	0.89	0.82
Human right to standard of living	–	1.58*	–	1.83
n	459	459	258	258
Pseudo R^2	0.06	0.07	0.05	0.06

Source: Shareen Hertel, Lyle Scruggs, and C. Patrick Heidkamp, Ethical Consumption Survey, 2006.

Note: Coefficients are odds ratios from logit estimates. The n in last two columns is lower because the question was only asked to coffee buyers.

*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed.

say that a minimum standard of living was an inviolable right. Since we controlled for things like income and education in the logit analysis, it is not likely that this group's lower *willingness* to pay is simply due to a lower *ability* to pay.

Significantly, willingness to pay more for one of the two ethically produced goods was highly correlated with willingness to pay more for the other: 85 percent of those who said they would pay at least one dollar more for a pound of fair-trade coffee also reported a willingness to pay at least five dollars more for a sweatshop-free sweater. In other statistical analyses (available from the authors), willingness to pay for one item was associated with about a 10-fold increase in willingness to pay for the other.

THEORETICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the context of increasing global economic integration, some Americans have invoked protectionist rhetoric to justify creating trade barriers, while others have pointed to the challenge of global competition as a justification for reluctance to markedly raise wages or improve working conditions. Our survey suggests that American consumers are more likely to “put their money where their values are” in progressive defense of economic rights than has heretofore been suggested. In order to accurately represent the public interest, policymakers need a fuller sense of their constituents' opinions about human rights. In order to risk innovation in developing ethically produced goods, entrepreneurs need evidence of market demand for this type of product. Research like the kind we have presented here yields both kinds of data. Equally

important is experimental research involving field-level observation of actual consumer purchasing behavior; such work was beyond the scope of our study but would be a useful complement to it.³⁰

Our work also reveals a number of findings worthy of future study, particularly in terms of attitudes regarding “classic” liberal rights (such as protection from torture and freedom of thought and expression). For example, we find that more Americans believe protection from torture is “not really a right at all” than do so with regard to freedom of expression. Yet being in a politically more-marginal group does indeed increase support for a human right to protection against torture. By contrast, traditionally more-powerful social groups voice stronger support for freedom of thought and expression as an inviolable right. Another finding to explore is the greater willingness of non-whites to support a right to a guaranteed living standard but their lower willingness to pay for products that would seem to support that human rights goal—even after the lower average ability to pay is taken into account.

One of the main contributions of our study was to link willingness-to-pay data with respondents’ attitudes about rights. The demographic anomalies uncovered in our research merit exploration through additional survey work. Beyond their scholarly value, such data could have public policy significance if they lead to broader social mobilization or government responsiveness to human rights—in particular, economic rights. Notably, the United States is alone among industrialized nations in not having ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and is the only nation other than Somalia not to have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty with strong provisions on children’s economic rights. Might the reluctance of members of Congress to champion ratification change if these treaties were linked to a groundswell of popular support for such rights? Might organizations involved in promoting ethical consumption enlarge their market base if they had access to better data on why certain groups are (or are not) willing to pay more for sweatshop-free or fair-trade products? Without public opinion data, we cannot know. This research is but a first step in forging deeper analytical and practical links between public opinion on human rights and popular action.*

³⁰ Michael J. Hiscox and Nicholas F.B. Smyth, “Is There Consumer Demand for Improved Labor Standards? Evidence from Field Experiments in Social Product Labeling,” unpublished working paper, Harvard University; Howard Kimeldorf, Rachel Meyer, Monical Prasad, and Ian Robinson, “Consumers With a Conscience: Will They Pay More?” *Contexts* 5 (Winter 2006): 24–29. Monica Prasad, Howard Kimeldorf, Rachel Meyer, and Ian Robinson, “Consumers of the World Unite: A Market-based Response to Sweatshops,” *Labor Studies Journal* 29 (Fall 2004): 57–80.

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APPENDIX A

Question Wording about the Inviolability of Specific Human Rights.

“Now I’m going to read you some possible human rights. For each one please tell me whether YOU think it is a right that should be guaranteed to every human being and never violated, a right that may be desirable but that can be violated under certain circumstances, or not really a right at all.”

- Freedom from physical and mental torture
- A guaranteed minimum standard of living
- Freedom of thought and expression

Willingness to Pay for Sweatshop-free Goods. Wording regarding sweatshop-free goods consisted of two questions:

“Some clothing producers in foreign countries make their employees work in unsafe conditions, often called sweatshops, to keep costs and prices low. Would you be willing to pay more for clothing that you knew was made under SAFE working conditions?”

Only those responding “Yes” were asked the following follow-up question:

“If you were considering buying a sweater priced around twenty dollars, how many MORE dollars would you be willing to pay for the sweater to get a guarantee that it was made under safe working conditions?” (ENTER 2-DIGIT DOLLAR AMOUNT 0-96) (IF MORE THAN \$20 PROBE: Is that how much you would pay total or how much MORE you would pay?)

Responses were top coded at \$97, and “don’t know” or refusals were coded 0.

Willingness to Pay for Fair Trade Coffee. Questions about willingness to pay for fair-trade coffee involved several that were only asked to those who regularly purchase coffee. The following two questions were initially asked of all respondents:

“Some products from developing countries carry a label saying ‘Fair Trade,’ meaning that the product was produced under fair and safe working conditions, and that the workers who produced it received a living wage. Have you ever seen this type of label?” and

“How often do you purchase coffee or coffee beans from a grocery store or supermarket? Regularly, sometimes, rarely, or never?”

Only those who claim to regularly purchase coffee were asked the following about what they would pay for ‘Fair-Trade’:

Given what you currently pay for coffee, how much more per pound, if anything, would you be willing to pay for coffee that carries the ‘Fair-Trade’ label? Fifty cents, one dollar, two dollars, more than two dollars, or nothing at all?”