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Do Global Publics View Human Rights Organizations as Handmaidens of the United States?

DAVID CROW
JAMES RON

In the spring of 2014, a group of prominent commentators slammed the New York–based organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) for maintaining a “revolving door” with the U.S. government.¹ Exhibit A, the critics said, was Tom Malinowski, a senior staffer who had joined HRW in 2001 after seven years working in the U.S. government, returned to government service from 2013 to 2017, and then was elected as a New Jersey congressman in 2018. This and similar cases, the critics said, made HRW appear overly cozy with U.S. officialdom. Given “the impact of global perceptions on HRW’s ability to carry out its work,” the letter writers opined, even the “appearance of impropriety” undermined the organization’s credibility.

¹“Nobel Peace Laureates to Human Rights Watch: Close Your Revolving Door to U.S. Government,” AlterNet, 12 May 2014, accessed at <http://www.alternet.org/world/nobel-peace-laureates-human-rights-watch-close-your-revolving-door-us-government?paging=off#bookmark>, 4 January 2020.

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To counter these and similar views, HRW has ramped up its criticism of U.S. policies, opened new offices outside North America, and hired more international staff.² Other international human rights organizations (IHROs) have done the same, including Amnesty International, another well-known group whose “moving closer to the ground” strategy has relocated portions of its International Secretariat from London to cities in the Global South.³ Major private funders, including the Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation, have financially supported these globalization efforts.⁴

The foregoing letter criticizing HRW is only one of many such exchanges in a lengthy debate ongoing since the 1970s, when human rights groups first began participating in debates over international politics: whose geopolitical interests do human rights groups *really* serve? When HROs chastise governments, are they geopolitically impartial neutrals advancing universal principles,⁵ furthering U.S. geopolitical interests by delegitimizing rivals and promoting liberal-capitalist ideology,⁶ or engaging in global “soft balancing”?⁷ All actors in this debate must assume that public opinion is generally on their side; to believe otherwise would be to suggest that HROs have systematically deceived publics worldwide.

Until now, however, there has been little systematic investigation of global publics’ *actual* perceptions of HROs’ relations with the United States. To be sure, survey researchers do regularly ask publics worldwide about their views of the United States.⁸ A handful, moreover, have asked the public for their opinions toward human rights principles.⁹ The surveys conducted for the current study, however, are the only ones we

²Iain Levine, “Internationalizing the Human Rights Movement: Creating a North-South Bridge?” openDemocracy, 1 April 2014, accessed at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openglobalrights-openpage/internationalizing-human-rights-movement-creating-northsouth-bridge/>, 4 January 2020.

³Salil Shetty, “Moving Amnesty Closer to the Ground Is Essential, Not Simple,” openDemocracy, 20 January 2015, accessed at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openglobalrights-openpage/moving-amnesty-closer-to-ground-is-necessary-not-simple/>, 4 January 2020.

⁴Ford Foundation, “Ford Grants \$6 Million to Seven Organizations to Reshape the Global Human Rights Movement,” 13 December 2013, accessed at <https://www.fordfoundation.org/the-latest/news/ford-grants-6-million-to-seven-organizations-to-reshape-the-global-human-rights-movement/>, 4 January 2020; and Stephanie Strom, “Soros to Donate \$100 Million to Rights Group,” *New York Times*, 6 September 2010.

⁵Richard Price, “Transnational Civil Society and Advocacy in World Politics,” *World Politics* 55 (July 2003): 579–606.

⁶Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁷Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” *International Security* 30 (January 2005): 7–45. Pape does not explicitly mention HROs.

⁸Giacomo Chiozza, *Anti-Americanism and the American World Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

⁹See, for example, WorldPublicOpinion.org, “Polls Find Strong International Consensus on Human Rights,” 7 December 2011, accessed at <http://worldpublicopinion.net/polls-find-strong-international-consensus-on-human-rights/>, 4 January 2020.

know of to *simultaneously* ask about attitudes toward HROs and the U.S. government. As a result, we know little of the relationship between the two.

To investigate, we administered our Human Rights Perceptions Poll to 9,380 people through face-to-face interviews in six countries in Latin America, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia.¹⁰ In India, Morocco, and Nigeria, we surveyed adults living in and around major financial and political centers (Mumbai, Rabat/Casablanca, and Lagos). In Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico, by contrast, our surveys were nationally representative (see Appendix B). We hypothesize that publics do not regard HROs as allies of U.S. foreign policy; instead, we expect them to view rights organizations either as geopolitical neutrals or as counterhegemony. Statistical analysis of our survey data offers support for this claim; in four of the six locales we investigated and in our pooled, all-country sample, public trust in local HROs (LHROs) is negatively and significantly associated with trust in the U.S. government. The same is true for IHROs in our three Latin American cases and in the pooled sample. As our hypothesis predicted, in none of our cases across world regions is public trust in HROs positively associated with public trust in the U.S. government. These findings cumulatively support our expectation that publics do not view HROs as “handmaidens” of U.S. imperialism.

We begin by demonstrating the statistical association between public *trust* in HROs and *mistrust* in the U.S. government in Latin America. This is a “most likely” case, as HROs working in and on Latin America have historically opposed U.S.-supported state repression by right-wing authoritarians.¹¹ If people *anywhere* are likely to view HROs as neutral or opposed to U.S. primacy, they will do so here. Controlling for other relevant factors, we find exactly that: public mistrust in the U.S. government in Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico is indeed significantly associated with greater *trust* in both LHROs and IHROs. The relationship between trust in HROs and in the U.S. government, in other words, is inverse. Extending our investigation to three other world regions offers a more demanding test, given their broader array of cultural, religious, historical, and geostrategic conditions. Still, even outside Latin America we found no positive associations between trust in the U.S. government and trust in HROs.

¹⁰For these polls in India, Mexico, Morocco, and Nigeria, see James Ron, Shannon Golden, David Crow, and Archana Pandya, *Taking Root* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹¹Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals* (New York: Century Foundation, 2007).

To be sure, HRW's critics may, or may not, be correct in alleging the organization has been closely connected to the U.S. government; our surveys cannot shed light on this question.

As far as public opinion goes in our six cases, however, rights organizations have little cause for concern on this count, as the general public does not perceive them as U.S. government allies. Proponents of U.S. soft power, however, *should* be concerned; if you believe the U.S. government really is a global rights promoter, it should be discomfiting to learn that this view is not widely shared in these six countries.¹²

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND HROs: THREE INTERPRETATIONS
Scholars offer at least three different interpretations of HROs' relations with the U.S. government and its foreign policy. The first interpretation views HROs as "handmaidens" of American empire, collaborating, for better or for worse, with Washington and its allies. The second views HROs as anti-imperial "bulwarks" or "global soft balancers" opposing Washington's geopolitical designs. The third views HROs as principled neutrals scrupulously adhering to universal principles and processes, rather than partisan political positions.

HROs as Handmaidens of Empire

Left-wing critics view HROs' alleged closeness to Washington with distaste, while advocates of projecting U.S. soft power abroad view this closeness with approval. Both sides agree, however, that the United States and HROs enjoy warm strategic and tactical relations. One prominent human rights scholar dates this relationship to the early 1990s, when U.S. policymakers realized "the utility of human rights rhetoric for legitimating foreign policy" and HRO leaders decided "the chance to use a liberal hegemon to enshrine global norms was too good to miss."¹³ Others trace it to the immediate post-Vietnam War period, when Washington policymakers resolved to replace anticommunism with human rights as their justification of choice for global interventions.¹⁴ Another critic, writing from the political left, says the United States began emphasizing human rights in its foreign policy to paper over domestic inequities and

¹²Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); and Emilie Hafner-Burton, *Making Human Rights a Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹³Hopgood, *Endtimes*, 99–102.

¹⁴James Peck, *Ideal Illusions* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011).

debates.¹⁵ Viewed from another angle, some authors point to the United States' principled opposition to Soviet bloc repression.¹⁶

The critical variant of this interpretation believes that HROs violate their own ethical code of neutrality in pursuit of narrow, self-seeking, organizational gain, using their close relationship with the U.S. government to amass policy influence, secure financial donations, and insinuate themselves into the center of global political debates.¹⁷ U.S. foreign policy agencies, in turn, use HROs to rhetorically pummel geopolitical rivals, boost Washington's political image, and make the world safe for U.S. political, cultural, and economic hegemony.

Concerns of this sort are particularly prevalent among world leaders opposed to U.S. primacy. Former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez (in office 1999–2013), for example, complained that liberal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in his country were “financed with millions and millions of dollars from the Yankee empire,” which had tasked them with political destabilization.¹⁸ Ecuador's former president, Rafael Correa (in office 2007–2017), “repeatedly accused domestic NGOs” of “being agents of U.S. influence,” labeling U.S. support for local civil society as “the ‘strategy of empires.’”¹⁹ Russia's current president, Vladimir Putin (in office 2000–2008 and 2012 to the present), has made similar arguments, as have leaders in Egypt, Pakistan, and India.²⁰ Many of these concerns focus on U.S. financial aid to locally operating NGOs, the most politically salient of which are often rights organizations.²¹

As noted earlier, some commentators view this alleged U.S.–HRO collaboration with enthusiasm rather than dismay. Proponents of the U.S. projection of soft power believe that Washington's support for

¹⁵David G. Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

¹⁶Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁷Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Cesar A. Rodriguez-Garavito, *Law and Globalization from Below* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–26.

¹⁸Associated Press, “Venezuelan National Assembly Bars Foreign Funding for NGOs,” *Guardian*, 22 December 2010.

¹⁹Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, *Closing Space* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2014), 11.

²⁰Bahvana V. Aurora, “India to Counter Accusations about Its Human Rights Records,” *Economic Times*, 16 September 2015; David M. Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, “Russia Demands U.S. End Support of Democracy Groups,” *New York Times*, 18 September 2012; Ben Hubbard, “Egypt Convicts Workers at Foreign Non-Profit Groups, Including 16 Americans,” *New York Times*, 4 June 2013; and Irfan Haider, “Imran Accuses HRC of Promoting Foreign Agenda,” *Dawn*, 16 October 2014.

²¹Kendra Dupuy, James Ron, and Aseem Prakash, “Hands Off My Regime! Governments' Restrictions on Foreign Aid to Non-governmental Organizations in Poor and Middle-Income Countries,” *World Development* 84 (August 2016): 299–311.

HROs is good both for the world *and* for the United States.²² The United States has often been a global rights promoter, another prominent scholar argues, by supporting international treaties, free trade, civil society, and democratization.²³ The United States may have intervened militarily worldwide, but in recent decades, it has done so in a manner respectful of international rights norms.²⁴ In fact, scholars say, close U.S.–HRO relations are part of a much broader alliance between Washington and the country’s liberal NGO sector, whose work for global humanitarian assistance, democratization, and civil society has long been a bedrock of its transnationally oriented civil society.²⁵

HROs as Geopolitical Counterhegemons

A second interpretation views HROs as generally arrayed *against* U.S. interests and efforts. While some view this putative tension enthusiastically, others view it with dismay. The notion that HROs are somehow “counterhegemonic” actors on a global scale has a particularly long history in Latin America, where rights groups long battled U.S.-backed authoritarians.²⁶ Critical legal scholars also argue that rights activists often stand alongside social movements resisting the global tide of neoliberalism imposed by Washington and its allies.²⁷ HROs, in this view, struggle *with* popular activists *against* multinational corporations, mining interests, and U.S.-allied states, all of which are backed by the State Department, Pentagon, and U.S.-controlled international agencies such as the International Monetary Fund.

Other scholars agree that HROs are in conflict with the U.S. government, but they view this tension with concern, rather than approval. One, for example, views international NGOs (and, presumably, HROs) as promoters of a “new diplomacy” that seeks to “alter the world’s political power structure... [to] present real threats to American sovereignty and values.”²⁸ Liberal nonstate actors, he argues, tie U.S. power in knots through constraining institutions such as the International Criminal

²²Nye, *Soft Power*.

²³Hafner-Burton, *Making Human Rights*.

²⁴Cohlin H. Kahl, “In the Crossfire or the Crosshairs?,” *International Security* 32 (January 2007): 7–46.

²⁵Sarah S. Stroup, *Borders among Activists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

²⁶Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*.

²⁷Balakrishnan Rajagopal, “Counter-Hegemonic International Law: Rethinking Rights and Development as a Third World Strategy,” *Third World Quarterly* 27 (December 2006): 767–783; and de Sousa Santos and Rodriguez-Garavito, *Law and Globalization*.

²⁸David Davenport, “The New Diplomacy Threatens American Sovereignty and Values,” in Robert H. Bork, ed., *A Country I Do Not Recognize: The Legal Assault on American Values* (Palo Alto, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 2005), 113–134.

Court, while others complain that U.S. geopolitical rivals use international norms, institutions, and law (including human rights, presumably), to thwart U.S. policy. Realists would call this soft balancing, a nonmilitary form of anti-American resistance.

HROs as Geopolitical Neutrals

A third group of commentators identifies HROs as geopolitical neutrals, a view long promoted by many rights advocates and sympathetic scholars. To promote this image, Amnesty International sought to select prisoners of conscience during the Cold War in equal measure from the Soviet, Western, and nonaligned blocs, and it required volunteers to advocate against abuses in countries *other* than their own. Today, Amnesty International continues to proclaim its independence from “any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion,”²⁹ as does its New York–based counterpart, HRW.³⁰ Indeed, some scholars claim that NGOs are globally influential precisely *because* of this neutrality.³¹ Richard Falk, for example, argues that NGOs carry weight in world politics because they hold states responsible to *all* of humanity, freeing themselves “from the interests, biases, and habitual attitudes of any particular place or nation.”³² Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink similarly state that “the power of the human rights idea... was partly the result of [HROs]... principled neutrality,”³³ while Richard Price notes that NGOs often create human rights norms *despite* U.S. government opposition.³⁴ NGOs and HROs differ from transnational diaspora and solidarity groups, in this view, because they are loyal to *universal principles*, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and *universal institutions*, such as the United Nations.

We have thus identified three distinct interpretations of the relationship between HROs and the U.S. government. One views HROs as siding *with* official Washington, for better or for worse; the other views HROs as arrayed *against* the United States and its allies; the third views HROs as geopolitically impartial. To which of these views do global publics subscribe, if any?

²⁹Accessed at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/who-we-are>, 10 March 2019.

³⁰Accessed at <http://www.hrw.org/about>, 10 March 2019.

³¹Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

³²Cited in Paul K. Wapner, *Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996): 144.

³³Keck and Sikkink, *Activists*, 90.

³⁴Price, “Transnational Civil Society.”

CASE SELECTION

To investigate, we collected original public opinion data in six countries and four world regions, using a case selection strategy guided first by the scope conditions necessary to produce significant findings and, second, by a hybrid “most different systems” research design. First, we examine three cases from Latin America, a region most likely to manifest strong associations between public attitudes toward the United States and HROs, given its long history of U.S. military and political engagement. Within that region, we chose three countries with different stances toward the U.S. government—Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico. If we observe a similar relationship between public support for the U.S. government and HROs in countries where public trust in the U.S. government is lower (Ecuador), middling (Mexico), and higher (Colombia), we will have more confidence in this relationship’s generalizability. Next, we combined these within-region cases with cross-regional variation, maximizing differences across four world regions. Again, observing similar relationships between attitudes toward the U.S. government and in HROs in vastly different countries constitutes *prima facie* evidence for generalizability.

Scope Conditions

To conduct meaningful public opinion surveys on HRO–U.S. government relations, we focus on countries with (1) significant human rights problems; (2) relatively open political and media environments; (3) popular knowledge of, and willingness to talk about, human rights problems; and (4) a substantial nongovernmental human rights community. Without sufficient freedom and information to develop informed opinions, surveys on public attitudes toward HROs and the U.S. government might not be meaningful. Moreover, conducting human rights polls in highly repressive environments could put both surveyors and respondents at risk.

All six countries in our study—Colombia, Ecuador, India, Mexico, Morocco, and Nigeria—satisfy these basic scope conditions. On the one hand, human rights conditions in all six were poor. As Table 1 shows, in 2011, all six scored between 0 and 4 on the CIRI (Cingarelli-Richards) project’s Physical Integrity Rights Index, a measure ranging from 0 (“no respect at all”) to 8 (“full respect”) of the right not to be tortured, disappeared, killed, or arbitrarily imprisoned.³⁵

³⁵Accessed at <http://www.humanrightsdata.com/p/data-documentation.html>, 10 March 2019. The last year for which data are available is 2011.

TABLE 1
 Scope Conditions for Case Selection: Sizeable LHRO Populations, Human Rights Problems, Freedom of Expression

Case	Total No. LHROs	Regime (-10 to 10; -10 = least open)	Repression (0 to 8; 0 = most repressive)	Empowerment (0 to 14; 0 = least empowered)	Media Freedom (0 to 100; 100 = least free)
Colombia	—	7	4	10	53
Ecuador	—	5	4	9	58
India	57 total Mumbai (30 interviewed)	9	0	7	37
Morocco	56 total Rabat/Casablanca (30 interviewed)	-4	4	5	68
Mexico	75 total Mexico City/San Cristobal (45 interviewed)	8	3	8	61
Nigeria	64 total Lagos (30 interviewed)	4	2	7	51
Sources	Authors' research in situ	Polity IV	CIRI Physical Integrity Index	CIRI New Empowerment Rights Index	Freedom House

Source: Human Rights Perceptions Poll/The Americas and the World.

Yet all six countries had sufficiently open political systems and freedom of press to permit relatively forthright discussions of human rights abuses. On one widely used measure of “regime openness,” the Polity IV scale (ranging from –10, “least politically open,” to +10, “most politically open”),³⁶ these countries ranged from –4 (Morocco) to 9 (India) in the years when the surveys were taken (see Table 1). Morocco was an outlier because of its monarchy, but the actual state of political discourse in 2012, according to Moroccan HROs, was such that they *could* speak openly about most things, save for the Western Sahara and the king’s political role. These countries’ “media freedom” scores on Freedom House’s scale of 0 (“most free”) to 100 (“least free”) ranged from 68 (Morocco) to 37 (India).³⁷ Similarly, CIRI’s New Empowerment Rights Index, which measures government respect for freedom of speech, assembly, labor rights, and religion (ranging from 0, “no respect,” to 14, “full respect”), rated our countries from 5 (Morocco) to 10 (Colombia).

Given these relatively open political environments, publics in all six countries were able to speak candidly about domestic human rights conditions. When asked “How much respect is there for individual human rights in [your country],” many respondents told us (or the World Values Survey team) that there was either “none at all” or “not much.” More precisely, the percentage of respondents supplying one of those answers ranged from a high of 80 percent in Mumbai and its rural environs to 78 percent in Colombia; 59 percent in Lagos and rural environs; 51 percent in Mexico; 47 percent in Rabat/Casablanca and rural environs; and 38 percent in Ecuador.³⁸

Finally, all six countries were home to substantial nongovernmental rights communities. Research teams identified 50 LHROs in Mexico City, 56 in Rabat/Casablanca, 57 in Mumbai, and 64 in Lagos, as well as significant numbers in Colombia or Ecuador.³⁹ All six cases, in other words, satisfy our scope conditions: they have severe human rights problems, moderately open political and media environments, public awareness of human rights concerns, a willingness and ability to discuss

³⁶ Accessed at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html>, 10 March 2019.

³⁷ Accessed at <https://freedomhouse.org>, 10 March 2019.

³⁸ We asked this question in Mumbai and Rabat/Casablanca in 2012 and in Lagos in 2014. World Values Survey data for Colombia (2012), Ecuador (2013), and Mexico (2012) accessed at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>, 10 March 2019.

³⁹ For the first four countries, see Ron et al., *Taking Root*. For Colombia, see “Derechos Humanos Equipo Nizkor,” accessed at <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/colombia/ong.html>, 10 March 2019; and for Ecuador, see “Mapeo de OSC en Ecuador,” accessed at <http://confederacionecuatorianaosc.org/mapeo-osc-en-ecuador/>, 10 March 2019.

these concerns openly, and substantial nongovernmental HRO communities.

Beyond these similarities, however, we varied our cases across and within regions by government relations with the United States, language, religion, and colonial history. By adopting this aspect of the “least similar” research design, we highlight the importance of similar findings in different contexts. Since our findings are remarkably consistent *in spite* of these differences, we believe that our findings are, likely, generalizable beyond the cases we examine, and perhaps even beyond the countries that meet our scope conditions. And yet, even if our findings apply only to scope condition countries, that is still a lot: by our count, 119 countries are relatively democratic (scoring 0 or higher on the Polity IV scale in 2012), 105 suffer serious rights abuses (5 or lower on the CIRI Physical Integrity Index), and 62 meet both conditions.

Within-Region Variation

We began by sampling three countries in Latin America, a region with long experience of rights-based politics and U.S. intervention. Latin America has also enjoyed unique U.S. government ties because of geographic proximity, trade, and intense U.S. military, political, and economic engagement.⁴⁰ We expect Latin American publics will be especially *disinclined* toward viewing HROs as U.S. government allies. There are differences, however, in the way Latin American governments are situated vis-à-vis the United States. Diplomatic and military relations range from very close (Colombia), to ambivalent (Mexico), to antagonistic (Ecuador). In Colombia, the United States has long been a strong ally, supplying over \$8 billion from 2002 to 2012 to combat drugs.⁴¹ In Ecuador, by contrast, where former president Rafael Correa consistently criticized the United States during his term in office,⁴² the country’s 2012 U.S. aid package was a paltry \$26 million. Mexico is situated between these two extremes, with “an almost reflexive bristle” toward the United States co-existing uneasily with close economic, diplomatic, and security ties.⁴³ In 2012, Mexico received \$209.4 million in U.S. aid, one-third of Colombia’s but much larger than Ecuador’s.

⁴⁰Alan McPherson, *Anti-Americanism in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Berghahn, 2006).

⁴¹U.S. Agency for International Development data accessed at <https://explorer.usaid.gov/data.html>, 10 March 2019.

⁴²Michael Shifter, “U.S. Learning to Live With Strained Ecuador Ties,” *World Politics Review*, January 2014, 14–16.

⁴³Shannon O’Neil, *Two Nations, Indivisible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165.

Public opinion toward the U.S. government also varies. Colombia averages .51 on our 0 (no trust in the U.S. government) to 1 (maximum trust) scale; Mexico, .47; and Ecuador, .44 (see Figure 1). These differences are significant statistically (at 95 percent) and important substantively. Theoretically, public trust in the United States is bounded by 0 and 1, but the effective range in our samples is .24 in Morocco to .59 in Nigeria. The difference between Colombia and Ecuador, .07, is about 20 percent of that effective range.

The differences between the Latin American countries, then, have a Goldilocks quality to them: not too small to reveal contrasts among national publics, but not too large to refute our assertion of broad cultural and historical similarities between the countries. By sampling populations in all three countries, we pose a stronger test of hypotheses about the publics' views of HRO–U.S. government relations. If publics in these three countries hold similar views *despite* varying government-to-government relations, this strengthens our finding's generalizability, at least for Latin America.

Cross-Case Variations

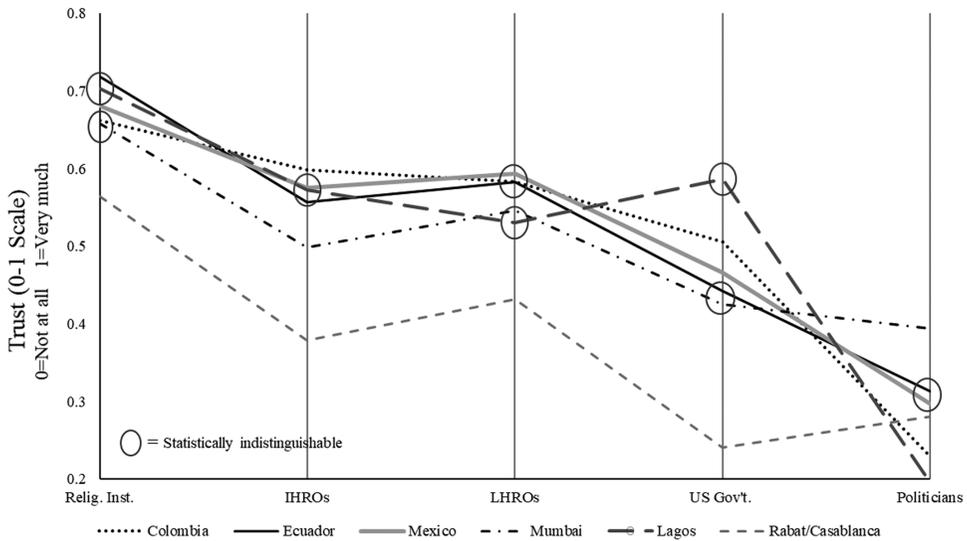
We draw our three additional cases from separate world regions: South Asia, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. If we discover cross-regional similarities, we have *prima facie* evidence of a potentially global trend. And since public attitudes are often influenced by elite opinion, we sampled from countries with different official relations with the United States. Until the Cold War's end, India's stance toward Washington was frosty, but diplomatic, economic, and military ties grew closer in the early 1990s.⁴⁴ In 2008, moreover, the two countries struck a landmark nuclear agreement.⁴⁵ Morocco has been a consistent U.S. ally, first against communism and then against radical Islam, receiving in return copious diplomatic support, while Nigeria is today one of the largest African recipients of U.S. aid (\$336 million in 2012), cooperating with U.S. forces against Islamist militants. Although Washington's relations with Abuja are not nearly as warm as with Bogotá or Delhi, they are better than with Quito. Our cases, in other words, run the gamut of U.S. relations, ranging from strong opponents (Ecuador) to close allies (Colombia).

There are other significant differences. Our three Latin American cases are largely Catholic and Spanish speaking, but Morocco is

⁴⁴C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Balance of Power," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (July/August 2006): 1–10.

⁴⁵Priya Chacko, "A New 'Special Relationship'?", *International Studies Perspectives* 15 (August 2014): 329–346.

FIGURE 1
Public Trust in HROs and US Government (Compared to Most and Least Trusted Actors) Across Four Regions



overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim and Arabic speaking, with a substantial French-speaking minority (45 percent of our sample). Lagos is split between (mostly evangelical) Christians (65 percent of our sample) and Sunni Muslims (34 percent), and its residents speak a variety of languages, including, for roughly 84 percent, the English of its former British rulers. Mumbai and its rural surroundings are largely Hindu (77 percent of our sample, weighted to local population totals), with smaller Muslim (13 percent) and Christian (2 percent) minorities. Dominant languages include Marathi (88 percent), Hindi (87 percent), and Gujarati (10 percent). (Percentages sum to more than 100 percent because many in Mumbai are multilingual).

All six of our cases thus conform to our basic scope conditions while otherwise varying on potential explanatory factors. As a result, any cross-case findings are particularly noteworthy. Furthermore, our Latin American cases allow us to probe the public’s assessment of the U.S. government and HROs in a region where U.S. political influence is likely to intensify this relationship. Having three cases from the same region, moreover, allows us to control for cultural similarities such as religion and language. But since the Latin American countries also differ in their relationships with Washington, they incorporate elements of a “most similar systems” design, in which cases are similar on all factors save one key variable. Our case selection thus includes a

Latin American “most similar” sample nested within a larger cross-regional “most different” sample.

DATA

Our Human Rights Perceptions Poll includes nationally representative face-to-face surveys in Mexico ($N = 2,398$), Colombia ($N = 1,698$), and Ecuador ($N = 1,499$), along with regionally representative face-to-face surveys in Rabat/Casablanca and their rural environs within a 70-kilometer radius ($N = 1,100$); in Mumbai and the rural areas of the surrounding Maharashtra State ($N = 1,680$); and in Lagos and the surrounding rural areas of Oyo and Ogun States ($N = 1,000$). We oversampled Christians and Buddhists in Mumbai and rural residents in India, Morocco, and Nigeria. We conducted the Ecuadoran (2012), Mexican (2012), and Colombian (2013) surveys through the Mexico City–based Americas and the World project, and we conducted the Rabat/Casablanca (2012), Mumbai (late 2012–early 2013), and Lagos (2014) surveys directly with private polling companies (see Appendix B for details).

In three cases, our reliance on subregional rather than national surveys limits our claims to those cities and their rural environs. These major city and surrounding area surveys are useful sites for investigation, however, because they are the countries’ most influential political and/or financial centers. As such, they are key sites for human rights lobbying, activism, public education, popular mobilization, and fundraising. If HROs seek public support *anywhere* in these three countries, their initial and most important points of entry are likely to include the strategically important cities of Mumbai, Rabat/Casablanca, and Lagos.

Dependent Variable: Trust in International and Local HROs

As noted above, only a handful of polls have asked publics for their attitudes toward, and trust in, domestic and international rights organizations. The World Values Survey (WVS) has asked representative samples in roughly 60 countries for their “confidence in charitable or humanitarian organizations,” but it has not asked specifically about HROs.⁴⁶ Cross-national survey researchers have ample experience, however, in probing public attitudes toward, and trust in, other important organizations and institutions.⁴⁷ Following the widely used,

⁴⁶Question V145 in Round 5 and question V124 in Round 6, accessed at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>, 10 March 2019.

⁴⁷See, for example, Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, “Confidence in Public Institutions. Faith, Culture or Performance?,” in Susan J. Pharr and Robert Putnam, eds., *Disaffected Democracies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 52–73.

cross-nationally validated format, we asked respondents to rate their trust in a variety of institutions on an ordinal 4-point scale. The question's wording was, "Please tell me, how much trust do you place in each of the following institutions, groups, or persons; a lot, some, a little, or none?" Each respondent was asked to rate roughly 15 institutions (randomized order), including "the U.S. government," the "[respondent's country] human rights organizations," and "international human rights organizations" (see Appendix C for details).

Figure 1 shows average trust in LHROs and IHROs, the U.S. government, and the most/least trusted actor in each country. Except where encircled by ovals, all differences between point estimates are statistically significant at the 95 percent level. Treating the ordinal response categories as equidistant (or "linear") and rescaling from 0 to 1, average trust in LHROs is highest in the three Latin American countries, in a statistical dead heat around .59 (Mexico) or .58 (Colombia and Ecuador)—all above the scale's midpoint of .5. It is lowest in Rabat/Casablanca and their rural environs, at .43 (below the midpoint). Mumbai (.55) and Lagos (.53), along with their rural environs, are tied in the middle. Average trust in local HROs across the six surveys is .55, with each sample weighted equally. The means for trust in IHROs are similar, with the three Latin American countries, plus Lagos and its rural environs, topping the list. Trust in these groups in Colombia is .60, slightly higher than in Mexico, Lagos (.57), and Ecuador (.56). Mumbai and its rural environs (.50) and Rabat/Casablanca and their rural environs (.39) round out the group. Overall, average public trust in international human rights groups is .54, with each sample weighted equally. Trust in HROs is thus comparatively high, closer to the broadly trusted religious institutions (with country averages ranging from .56 to .70 and an overall average of .66) than to the universally despised domestic politicians (range of .19 to .31 and an overall average of .29). Trust in LHROs and IHROs is similar, with local groups enjoying slightly more trust, on average, than internationals. Latin American trust levels cluster together, while trust in Morocco, across a range of institutions, is lower than elsewhere.

If trust in HROs is a meaningful measure, it should be broadly concordant with data from other surveys, and internally consistent with our other trust measures. Happily, this is the case. In Round 6 of the World Values Survey, public confidence in "charitable organizations" (rescaled from 0 to 1) averaged .58 for the same six countries, slightly higher than our .56 for local HROs, and .55 for IHROs. "Charitable organizations" are distinct from HROs, of course, and some of the WVS surveys were

carried out before ours. Still, the closeness of our figures to those of a similar item on the well-known WVS gives us confidence. In addition, our questions on trust in LHROs and IHROs correlate highly with our other trust questions, with “item-rest” correlations (that is, between a given item and a summated scale of all the remaining items) of .50 and .52, respectively. Indeed, internal consistency among all the 15 trust items common to the six countries surveyed is high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$, average inter-item correlation of .28).

The evidence clearly supports the existence of a single, latent trust variable; an exploratory factor analysis revealed a single factor that explained 90 percent of the variance. That is, respondents’ trust tends to be of a piece: one tends to trust, or distrust, institutions *in toto*. This also jibes with patterns in the WVS data: a single, latent disposition to trust undergirds the nine WVS manifest indicators that also appear in our Human Rights Perceptions Poll surveys, where a single factor explains 94 percent of the variance.

Trust in local and international rights groups, then, clearly fits well with other trust items in our polls and with the overall survey research tradition. But do people really know enough about human rights advocates and organizations to have reasonable opinions about them? Relatedly, given the diversity of organizations and policy areas, can researchers say anything worthwhile about so abstract a concept as “trust in HROs”? Again, we argue yes on both scores. People need not be experts on—or even especially knowledgeable about—a topic to have a meaningful opinion. That we can systematically predict trust in both LHROs and IHROs across different national contexts is revealing. Similar levels of trust across the culturally similar Latin American countries (Figure 1) buttress our confidence in the data. Further, our “trust in HRO” questions were neither difficult to ask nor difficult to understand. Members of our research team helped pilot the survey in all countries save Colombia and Ecuador, and they saw no noticeable hesitations after these questions. We verified through back translation that conveying the word “trust” in other languages was unproblematic; the meaning is similar enough across cultures to allow for generalizations. Item response rates were in line with other items; across all countries, 92 percent of respondents had a substantive answer for trust in LHROs and 87 percent for IHROs. This was not quite the 98 percent who responded for trust in the police, but more than those who responded regarding trust in multinational corporations (82 percent).

Given that the term “human rights organizations” encompasses a broad variety of types and topics, is asking about trust in these groups *in general*

meaningful? Which organizations and issues do people have in mind when they think about HROs? Survey researchers have long grappled with similar questions in related fields, concluding, for the most part, that generalizing about abstractions such as “trust” is indeed useful. In comparative democratization, for example, scholars have long debated the utility of the concept “satisfaction with democracy.” One prominent interpretation, however, is that satisfaction with democracy is a “summary measure” into which the specific components of democracy—politicians, policy outcomes, institutions, democratic principles—enter to a greater or lesser extent.⁴⁸ Parallel arguments apply to other overarching concepts, including “feeling thermometers”⁴⁹ and “presidential approval” ratings in U.S. electoral studies.⁵⁰ Both are multivalent concepts, yet both have empirically definable content and meaningful statistical associations, including causal ones, with important electoral and policy outcomes. Reasoning analogously, trust in HROs is also a general evaluation of the human rights sector, a sort of “weighted average” of different organizations and policy domains.

Independent Variable: Trust in the U.S. Government

Our main independent variable measures “trust in the U.S. government,” asked as part of the same trust battery that included questions on “trust in HROs.” Scholarship on public attitudes toward the United States demonstrates global ambivalence, with publics admiring American values, political institutions, technology, and cultural products—“what America is”—while often being sharply critical of its foreign policies—“what America does.”⁵¹ Views toward U.S. foreign policy fluctuate, moreover, dropping precipitously after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, especially in Muslim countries.⁵² Attitudes toward the U.S. government also vary across countries and national subgroups, making it more accurate to speak of “anti-Americanisms” in the plural.⁵³ Ways of asking about attitudes toward the United States are just as variegated, ranging from general questions that elicit “favorable” or “unfavorable” opinions about the “United States” (for example, the Pew Global Survey) to detailed batteries inquiring about specific U.S. characteristics and

⁴⁸David Crow, “The Party’s Over: Citizen Concepts of Democracy and Political Dissatisfaction in Mexico,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (Winter 2010): 41–61.

⁴⁹Shanto Iyengar, “Subjective Political Efficacy as a Measure of Diffuse Support,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44 (Spring 1980): 249–256.

⁵⁰Paul Gronke and Brian Newman, “FDR to Clinton, Mueller to?: A Field Essay on Presidential Approval,” *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (December 2003): 501–512.

⁵¹Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁵²Chiozza, *Anti-Americanism*.

⁵³Katzenstein and Keohane, *Anti-Americanisms*.

policies (for example, the Zogby Arab Opinion Polls). We chart a middle course between Pew and Zogby, asking about respondents' "trust in the U.S. government."

Figure 1 shows average public trust in the U.S. government across the six samples: .46 overall, with each sample weighted equally, ranging from .24 in Rabat/Casablanca to .58 in Lagos. All our arguments about the validity of our indicator of trust in HROs are applicable, *a fortiori*, to trust in the U.S. government. The item was easy to understand (item response rate above 94 percent); it correlates well with other items in the trust battery; and it is systematically associated with other correlates. The question, then, is whether, and how, "trust in the U.S. government" is related to "trust in HROs."

Hypothesis

If publics subscribe to the first interpretation of HRO–U.S. government relations, they view HROs either as "imperial handmaidens" or, more positively, as geopolitical allies of a benevolent U.S. government. If true, the data would show that the variable "trust in HROs" is positively and significantly associated with "trust in the U.S. government." When publics view HROs as allied with the U.S. government, those who trust the U.S. government should also trust HROs; conversely, those who distrust the U.S. government should also distrust HROs. We believe that publics endorse the notion of HROs as pitched *in opposition* to the policies of the U.S. government, viewing rights groups as counterhegemonic "soft balancers" against U.S. hegemony. Thus, we expect that "*trust in HROs*" is *negatively associated with "trust in the U.S. government."*

To be sure, this hypothesis could *also* hold if publics believe HROs to be geopolitical neutrals, or honest brokers. In this case, people might trust HROs because they believe these organizations make independent judgments in accordance with the facts. Some of these people, moreover, might also *mistrust* the U.S. government. In this case, these people would trust HROs as geopolitical neutrals while mistrusting the U.S. government for its perceived pursuit of selfish interests. The hypothesis is thus compatible with the notion of HROs as counterhegemonic soft balancers and as geopolitical neutrals. It is *not* compatible, however, with the notion that alignment HROs support U.S. government interests and policies. If the hypothesis is true, therefore, our interpretation should be that publics *reject* the notion that HROs are allied with the U.S. government and *accept* either the counterhegemonic or the geopolitically neutral interpretations of HROs.

Why not simply ask respondents, “In your view, are human rights organizations allied with the U.S. government’s international policies?” Many experts counsel *against* asking such potentially leading questions because they supply respondents with answers they may never have pondered, recommending instead that researchers infer relations by analyzing responses to separate questions.⁵⁴ In addition, a question (such as the one above) about the nature of the HRO–U.S. government relationship is cognitively burdensome; people may have a sense of their trust in HROs and, separately, in the U.S. government, but find a request to explicitly assess relations between the two confusing.

Control Variables

Other factors also shape public trust in HROs, including individuals’ tendency to be more or less trusting overall. Since trust in some institutions often predicts trust in others,⁵⁵ regressing the “raw” scores of trust in HROs on those of trust in the U.S. government may simply capture an individual’s tendency to trust *all* institutions. To isolate the specific effect of trust in the U.S. government, we average each respondent’s trust over all the institutions and actors in a country-specific trust battery, including “average trust” as a separate regressor. As a robustness check, we also perform our regressions with “means-adjusted” variables, which defines “trust in LHROs,” among others, by its deviation from the average trust mean (see Appendix C).

We further control for factors indicated by scholarship and common sense. Our first group of controls estimates the effect of trust in national and international political institutions, including the country’s chief executive and politicians, as well as in the United Nations. This helps us distinguish between attitudes toward national and international political authority writ large and toward the U.S. government specifically. Our second group of controls gauge respondent experience with rights language and organizations, including *exposure*, or how often respondents hear the phrase “human rights”; *contact*, or whether the respondent has ever met a “human rights worker”; and *participation*, or whether respondents have “participated in the activities of a human rights organization.” Exposure, contact, and participation are predictors of trust in LHROs, and they are generally considered relevant to opinion formation

⁵⁴Herbert F. Weisberg, Jon A. Krosnick, and Bruce D. Bowen, *Introduction to Survey Research, Polling, and Data Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 168.

⁵⁵Ola Listhaug, “Confidence in Institutions: Findings from the Norwegian Values Study,” *Acta Sociologica* 27 (April 1984): 111–122.

and trust building through social capital creation. Those who follow politics may also be more familiar with the rights sector and its issues, and this may shape their attitudes toward HROs (see Appendix C for details).

Our third group of controls relate to political partisanship, party identification, and party participation. Partisanship is important because citizens often use party preferences as information shortcuts, taking cues from party leaders to evaluate candidates and form positions on issues.⁵⁶ We classified respondents into those who identify with the party in power or with an opposition party, with “no party affiliation” as the reference category. We also asked whether respondents had “participated in the activities of a political party” to measure intensity of partisanship. Since political parties often take positions on human rights and the United States, party identification is a potentially important source of attitudes toward HROs and the United States. Opposition parties, in particular, may see HROs as *de facto* allies in their struggles with sitting governments and ruling parties.

A fourth group of control variables deals with religion. Some suggest *membership in specific religions* renders participants favorable or inimical to rights—for example, the legacies of liberation theology might predispose Catholics favorably toward rights or liberal democracy. Others suggest that Muslims may reject HROs for reasons of geopolitics, theology, or social mores.⁵⁷ Still others suggest religious opposition to gender equality, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ individuals are common to all religious traditions but vary by the *intensity* of religious sentiment. We therefore control for religious identity and intensity by asking respondents to self-identify in those terms and how important religion is in their lives.

FINDINGS

Table 2 summarizes regression results for LHROs and IHROs, respectively. The first column pools results over all respondents, weighting each country evenly. Table 3 presents the regression findings for our key independent variables. (The tables in Appendix A present the full results.)

Across six countries and four world regions, respondents clearly *do not* view HROs as U.S. allies. Instead, in Morocco and the three Latin

⁵⁶Samuel L. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7–21.

⁵⁷Ron Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “The True Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Policy* 135 (March/April 2003): 62–70.

American countries and for all respondents combined, the statistical association between “trust in LHROs” and “trust in the U.S. government” is significant and negative. This indicates that respondents regard local HROs as *either* opposed to U.S. policy *or* as geopolitically neutral, supporting our hypothesis. The same is true for IHROs in Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and the pooled model: when the public’s trust in the U.S. government is lowest, trust in HROs is highest. In short, in 9 of 14 regressions (64 percent; six countries plus the pooled regression \times 2 dependent variables), the results are statistically and substantively significant, demonstrating a negative relationship between “trust in HROs” and “trust in the U.S. government.” We find no support for the notion that publics view HROs as aligned with U.S. foreign policy. These results also hold when we use the means-centered version of the trust variables (see Appendix C).

Figures 2 and 3 present the substantive effects graphically, with pooled results represented by the thick black line. In both, the dependent and independent variables are scaled from 0 to 1, meaning that regression coefficients give the effect on trust in HROs as a percentage of the dependent variables’ range, produced by moving from the minimum to maximum independent variable values. In both figures, we hold all other variables to their means.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between trust in the U.S. government and trust in local HROs. We see clear evidence of a “Latin American effect”: coefficients and absolute levels of trust across the three countries are remarkably similar. In Colombia, moving from “no trust” to “very much” trust in the U.S. government is associated with a .24 drop, on average, in trust in local HROs (from .70 to .46); in Ecuador, a .21 drop (from .70 to .49); and in Mexico, a .21 drop (from .70 to .49), all significant at $p = .000$. In Morocco, the move from least to most trust in the U.S. government is associated with .15 reduced trust in local HROs,

TABLE 2
Summary of Relationship Between Trust in LRHOs/IHROS and Trust in U.S. Government

Dependent Variables	Trust in U.S. Government						
	Pooled	Colombia	Ecuador	Mexico	Mumbai	Rabat/Casablanca	Lagos
LHROs	negative	negative	negative	negative	n.f.	negative	n.f.
IHROS	negative	negative	negative	negative	n.f.	n.f.	n.f.

Source: Human Rights Perceptions Poll/The Americas and the World.
 Negative = negative relationship between independent variable and trust in HROs (e.g., more trust in U.S. government; in Colombia, this is associated with less trust in LHROs).
 n.f. = no finding (statistically insignificant at $p \leq .10$).

TABLE 3
 OLS Regression of Trust in Local HROs on Trust in U.S. Gov't and Belief that HRs "Promote U.S. Interests", Political Trust, and HR Exposure
 (P-Values In Italics)

Independent Variables	Pooled		Colombia		Ecuador		Mexico		Mumbai		Rabat/Casablanca		Lagos	
	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt
Trust in U.S. Gov't	-0.152***		-0.243***		-0.206***		-0.210***		-0.025		-0.153**		-0.010	
HRs Promote U.S. Interests	0.000	-0.083***	0.000	-0.097***	0.000	-0.050***	0.000	-0.052**	0.500	-0.131***	0.003	-0.063†	0.780	-0.074**
Average Trust (Individual)	1.399***	1.262***	1.566***	1.415***	1.442***	1.213***	1.435***	1.217***	1.079***	1.024***	1.497***	1.323***	1.222***	1.245***
Trust in Exec.	0.000	-0.048***	0.000	-0.043	0.000	-0.113***	0.000	-0.094***	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.042
Trust in UN	0.000	0.002	0.136	0.117	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.324	0.410	0.537	0.784	0.189	-0.007
Trust in Politicians	-0.027	-0.049**	-0.048	-0.121***	0.046	0.043	0.023	0.012	-0.077†	-0.076†	-0.175***	-0.243***	-0.008	-0.007
How Often Hears "HR"	0.105	0.003	0.000	0.000	0.154	0.219	0.324	0.621	0.053	0.059	0.001	0.000	0.816	-0.069***
Has Met HR Worker	-0.122***	-0.112***	-0.165***	-0.143***	-0.123***	-0.087***	-0.155***	-0.147***	-0.116**	-0.125***	-0.072	-0.026	-0.043	-0.069***
Has Part. in HR Org.	0.000	0.009***	0.008	0.014†	0.000	0.005	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.001	0.151	0.652	0.204	0.015
	0.010	0.013	0.253	0.055	0.019	0.047	0.490	0.442	0.352	0.608	0.545	0.817	0.116	0.039
	0.039***	0.042***	0.087***	0.079***	-0.017	-0.020	0.000	0.006	0.144**	0.151**	0.043	0.066†	0.039†	0.039
	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.515	0.459	0.997	0.719	0.006	0.004	0.222	0.070	0.100	0.061***
	0.050**	0.047**	0.022	0.035	0.088***	0.085***	0.030	0.022	0.024	0.031	-0.015	-0.028	0.069***	0.061***

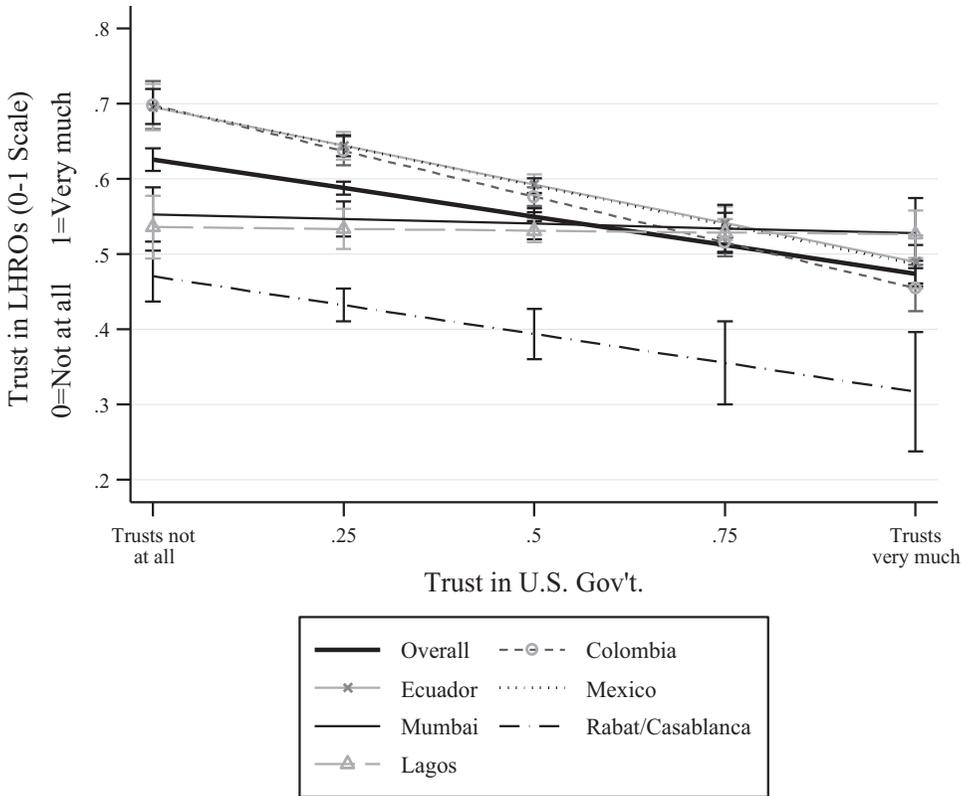
(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Independent Variables	Pooled		Colombia		Ecuador		Mexico		Mumbai		Rabat/Casablanca		Lagos	
	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt	USGov	USInt
N	0.002	0.003	0.480	0.259	0.025	0.040	0.281	0.457	0.552	0.451	0.854	0.736	0.022	0.022
R-Squared	0.423	0.413	0.507	0.501	0.443	0.415	0.458	0.429	0.249	0.262	0.457	0.426	0.385	0.383
Adj. R-Squared	0.420	0.410	0.498	0.491	0.430	0.401	0.451	0.421	0.219	0.232	0.434	0.396	0.365	0.363
RMSE	0.229	0.231	0.216	0.218	0.227	0.235	0.217	0.223	0.267	0.268	0.252	0.251	0.206	0.207

***p < .001;
 **p < .01;
 *p < .05;
 †p < .10

FIGURE 2
Predicted Values of Trust in LHROs at Different Levels of Trust in U.S. Gov't.



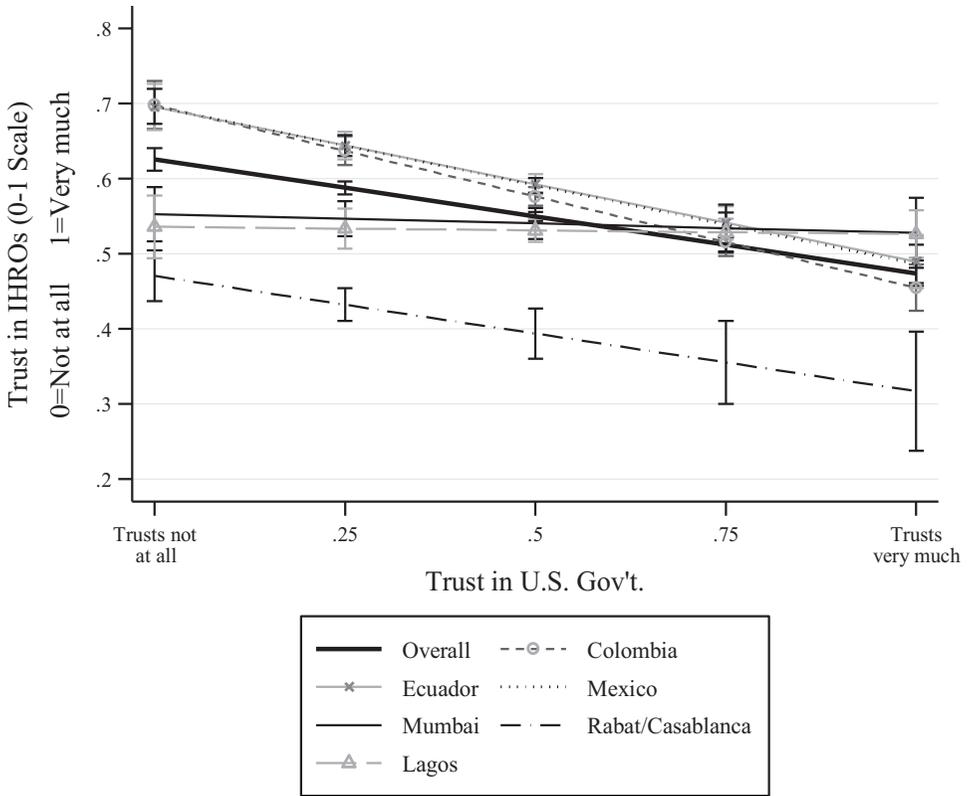
Source: HRRP/The Americas and the World

from .47 to .32 ($p = .003$). In the pooled model, trust in local HROs goes down by .15 points, from .62 to .47 ($p = .000$). Substantively, these effects are meaningful.

Figure 3 depicts our findings for IHROs. Once again holding all variables at their means, trusting the U.S. government is associated with a reduction of .18 trust points for international HROs in Colombia (from .67 to .49, $p = .028$), .19 in Ecuador (from .66 to .47, $p = .000$), and .19 in Mexico (from .67 to .48, $p = .000$). Pooling all data yields a decrease of -.10 (from .60 to .50, $p = .000$). Once again, these effects are both statistically significant and substantive.

The results for some control variables (see Appendix A) warrant comment. In all cases, individual trust averages are strong predictors of trust in

FIGURE 3
Predicted Values of Trust in IHROs at Different Levels of Trust in U.S. Gov't.



HROs and account for much of the relatively high R^2 values. In general, trust in domestic and international political authorities correlated negatively with trust in HROs. Greater exposure to rights concepts, and greater contact with and participation in rights organizations, predict greater trust in HROs. In our Latin American surveys, we combined nine general political knowledge questions into a 0–9 scale (see Appendix C). As Table A3 in Appendix A demonstrates, we interacted this scale with “trust in the U.S. government” and found that higher levels of political knowledge, when interacted with trust in the U.S. government, exacerbated the existing negative relationship with trust in HROs. This strengthens the evidence for our claim that publics—particularly those well informed and knowledgeable about political affairs—do *not* view rights groups as handmaidens of U.S. empire. Other control variables, also portrayed in Appendix A, had more sporadic effects.

CONCLUSION

Many believe international NGOs and their influential subset, IHROs, have an impact on world politics because of their independence from powerful states and special interests. Others, however, suggest HROs enjoy a close relationship with the United States, and while some consider this salutary, others say this represents U.S. government co-optation of human rights language and organizations. A third group says HROs are opposed to the U.S. government, because they are either positive counterweights *against* U.S. global hegemony or negative spoilers undermining a benign, U.S.-led world order. Implicit in all these claims are assumptions about global public *attitudes*. If HROs are indeed “honest brokers,” and if this reputation is indeed important for their power, many members of the public are likely to see them this way. And if HROs are either pro- or anti-U.S., publics should also perceive this. To suggest otherwise implies that HROs consistently and successfully mislead the public worldwide.

To investigate the relationship between public attitudes toward HROs and the U.S. government, we surveyed 9,380 people in six countries and four world regions, using face-to-face, pen-and-paper interview techniques. Overall, we find no evidence that the public regards either LHROs or IHROs as allies of the U.S. government. In fact, across world regions, publics are more likely to *reject* this notion; the more members of the public *mistrust* the U.S. government, the more they *trust* HROs. This is particularly true for domestic HROs, but it is also true for international groups, in some cases. In none of our models were attitudes toward the United States positively associated with the public’s trust in either LHROs or IHROs. Thus, even if HROs *are* tacitly collaborating with the United States—and we make no claim that they are or are not—we find no evidence that publics perceive that. The evidence indicates that publics do *not* believe HROs are allies of the U.S. government, but it is not sufficiently nuanced to determine whether publics regard HROs as active opponents of the U.S. government or as principled neutrals. Either could be true, given our findings.

For practitioners, the issue is intensely salient. Allegations of pro-U.S. bias abound, and HRO leaders defend themselves with vigor, knowing that if opponents successfully paint them as “American agents,” their credibility, efficacy, and possibly fundraising will deteriorate. Distinguishing themselves from special interests is the bread and butter of human rights groups, and distinguishing themselves from the U.S. government in an era of American primacy is utterly crucial to their branding, self-identity, and political influence.

Several caveats are in order, however. First, our findings are based only on public perceptions toward HROs in general, not specific organizations or topics. More detailed probing may reveal cross-organizational or cross-topical variation. Second, the general public's views may differ from those of specific networks, communities, or elites. Human rights workers have more frequent contact with elites than the general public, and the former may assess HROs differently. Elite views, in turn, impact human rights practitioners more than those of the general public.

Our findings are also important for human rights scholars who believe HROs are influential either because publics recognize and respect their geopolitical neutrality, or because HROs stand with those opposed to U.S. hegemony. The evidence suggests that in many cases, and especially in Latin America, one or both of these views is likely true. Human rights scholars should also be pleased to learn of a new way of empirically engaging the long-standing debate over HROs' alleged "pro-" or "anti-" American orientation. And for scholars who believe HROs are either geopolitically neutral or "counterhegemonic," our findings should prove gratifying.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.