

Sikkink, Kathryn. 1993. "The Power of Principled Ideas: Human Rights Policies in the United States and Western Europe," Chapter 6 in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Ideas & Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Quick summary: *Ideas (principled and causal) regarding human rights influenced foreign policy after WWII. Europeans developed a multilateral human rights policy in response to WWII and as part of a larger process of European integration. The Cold War and anti-communism (more powerful idea) prevented the adoption of human rights policies in the United States until the mid-1970s when détente, public disillusionment with Vietnam, and the civil rights movement helped human rights ideas lead to changes in American foreign policy. These ideas have reshaped understandings of national interest.*

What is the central puzzle/question?

What explains the emergence of human rights as an international issue area in the years after World War II and later incorporation of human rights as an important aspect for bilateral foreign policy in both Europe and the United States? Why were human rights policies pursued in different ways in Europe and in the U.S.?

What is the central answer(s)?

Policy makers adopted new policies because their ideas had changed. Principled (whether human rights are a legitimate aim of foreign policy) and causal ideas (what kinds of foreign policies are most effective in promoting human rights) reshaped understandings of national interest. The adoption of human rights policies, therefore, is not the neglect of national interests but a fundamental shift in the perception of long-term national interests. The important role of a transnational human rights movement is briefly mentioned.

A comprehensive human rights policy encompasses two separate issues:

- (1) a multilateral human rights policy – a willingness to surrender a degree of sovereignty and submit internal human rights practices to some international review (multilateral supervision of internal practices).
- (2) an external human rights policy – the projection of human rights values internationally through explicit mechanisms for integrating human rights concerns into foreign policy and those mechanisms have modified foreign policy decisions in some way.

The U.S. is the only country to have an external policy but no multilateral policy. Most European countries have multilateral policies but no explicit external human rights policy. Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden have both.

Human rights ideas had a direct impact on policy in Europe after WWII, leading to the emergence of the European human rights regime. The impact of human rights ideas in the U.S., however, was delayed by the Cold War. For Europeans, the human rights issue related to the desire to prevent the abuses and repression of WWII from occurring again. Additionally, support for human rights policies was intensified by the widespread belief that the unification process depended on a normative agreement (embodied in the European human rights documents) – it became part of a larger process of building a unified Europe. Finally, Europeans wanted to set out unambiguously the rights Western countries guaranteed their peoples (vs. the East). European policies focus on Europe (hence, multilateral).

In the U.S., however, the adoption of both a multilateral and an external human rights policy was blocked by a cluster of more powerful ideas, most notably anticommunism. The convergence of détente, public disillusionment with Vietnam, and the initial successes of the civil rights movement helped human rights ideas lead to changes in American foreign policy in the mid-1970s. Human rights policies survived the opposition of key figures in the Reagan administration because human rights ideas had become institutionalized in the foreign policy apparatus. "The role of the Cold War as a block to human rights policies in the U.S. is substantiated by the nation's movement toward a multilateral policy in the early 1990s." (p. 170)

What are the alternative explanations? (addressed by Sikkink)

Realism take I: Realists would suggest that human rights policies are adopted to further the economic and security interests of a country. Expect human rights policies to be used against traditional opponents and not used against allies in a way that might undermine the stability of security arrangements. **Why wrong:** essence of multilateral human rights policy involves acceptance of uncertainty about future outcomes; U.S. used human rights policies most forcefully against authoritarian capitalist countries (not the communist bloc).

Realism take II: Human rights policies were used to create an ideological climate in which Western economic and security interests could flourish (indirect furthering of interests). **Why wrong:** cannot explain why human rights policy emerged when it did or the differences in timing and sequencing of multilateral and external policies.

Domestic politics: Constituent pressure on politicians in democratic countries.