

Where Are Human Rights in the US Congress?

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The United States often uses the term “human rights” in press releases or Congressional briefings. But in what context are these terms stated? Our research examines how many times and in what context the US Congress mentions “human rights” in Congressional discourses, using The Congressional Record as our data source. The Congressional Record is a comprehensive repository of Congress’ proceedings that provides a daily account of Congressional activities and gives insight into the priorities of Congress.

We examine the 2017 Congressional Record as it was the first year of a presidential term, making it the least susceptible to electoral pressures in both the executive and legislative branches. We collected 818 total entries for “human right” or “human rights” in 2017 and used a combination of computer and manual coding to discover the category of human rights mentioned, the party identification of the speaker, and the countries mentioned concerning human rights.

Our findings revealed that out of 22,366 total entries in the Congressional Record, only 818 mentioned “human rights” in them. Human rights simply are not discussed that much in Congress. Upon analysis of these entries, we found that there was a notable emphasis on civil and political rights with minimal mention of economic, social, and cultural rights. A significant portion, 187 or 29.4%, of the mentions did not have enough information to be categorized as either domestic or international human rights issues, highlighting a lack of specificity in the discussions of human rights. Countries mentioned with human rights in the Congressional Record were often vague or generic, with Iran being the most frequently mentioned country. This was likely due to the discussion related to the 2017 US-Iran Nuclear Deal. Looking at the frequency of country mentions shows that countries with the worst human rights records (as measured by The Political Terror Scale’s indicator based on the US State Department human rights reports, PTS-S) were not necessarily mentioned the most frequently. Finally, while the Democratic party was the minority party in both parts of the legislature in 2017, the majority of human rights mentions in both houses came from Democratic Congresspeople. Overall, our findings suggest that Congress does not discuss human rights very much at all, and when they do, it may have less to do with the severity of any human rights crisis and more to do with US, constituent, or partisan interests.