

# Human Rights in the Congressional Record: Which, Where, and Who?

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### Abstract

The United States has long styled itself a protector of human rights, but how does the legislature of the most powerful country in the world discuss human rights? This important question has remained understudied. This paper adapts the research design of studies examining Congressional discussions of climate change and the National Science Foundation to discover how Congress talks about human rights and answer several pressing questions: who talks about human rights in Congress - members, leadership, NGO representatives, or others - and what do they talk about? What countries and issues are discussed (or not discussed) by Congress concerning human rights? In what formats does Congress mention human rights - floor speeches, hearings, or legislation? Does party identity (either of an individual speaking in Congress or of majority control in the chamber) matter when it comes to discussing human rights? To answer these questions, we conduct content analyses of the mentions of human rights in the Congressional Record in 2017, the first year of Congress immediately following the presidential election of Donald Trump.

### Literature Review

Human rights are frequently promoted by Western democracies, including the United States, on the grounds that human rights are an inherent, or natural, right given to all individuals by their humanity (Dembour, 2). However, as Donnelly (2013) mentions, while human rights may be deemed the successor to the concept of 'natural rights,' it is a term whose understanding requires greater explanation and definition (18). How powerful states use and define this concept in their legislatures is thus an important, though understudied, issue.

The U.S. approach to human rights as a policy priority originated in response to ethical concerns raised during the 1970s, notably amidst events such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal (Cohen, 2), but it is sometimes critiqued as being more instrumental than objective. There remains a disconnect between the prioritisation of human rights in international relations and its implementation within the United States (Leyton-Brown, 2). There is also evidence that the US thinks of human rights as an exclusively international issue (Brandle 2018), despite human rights frameworks being applicable to all people, including those domestically within the US. As US officials navigate the complexities of foreign diplomacy, the discrepancy between rhetoric and action underscores the ongoing challenge of integrating human rights principles into both domestic and international spheres.

The US Congress holds significant power in shaping foreign policy, including legislating, ratifying treaties, and allocating funding, all of which could possibly be used to advance (or hinder) human rights causes. The Congressional Record is a repository documenting the proceedings of Congress. This record is published daily when Congress is in session, providing a comprehensive account of deliberations in both the House and Senate and recording legislative activity, member remarks, and communications from the President for citizens and scholars alike to review. There is some research on Congressional hearings, such as Liu et al on climate change and Lupia et al on the National Science Foundation, but Congress' human rights discourse has yet to be studied.

### References

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### Methods

#### Data Collection

To begin our research, we selected one year at the beginning of a presidential term to examine. We searched the Congressional Record on Congress.gov for "human right" or "human rights," which resulted in 818 entries in 2017. Because the data from Congress.gov is unstructured, we opted to conduct both digital and manual content analyses. Entries were read online for manual coding; html files were scraped using commands in Terminal for digital analysis.

#### WordStat Analysis

We used Wordstat 2024 to conduct digital content analysis of all entries. As human rights is a compound term, we computed phrase frequencies. Next, we used the Wordstat categorization dictionary from Brandle 2018 to determine what categories of human rights are discussed.

#### Codebook Development for Manual Coding

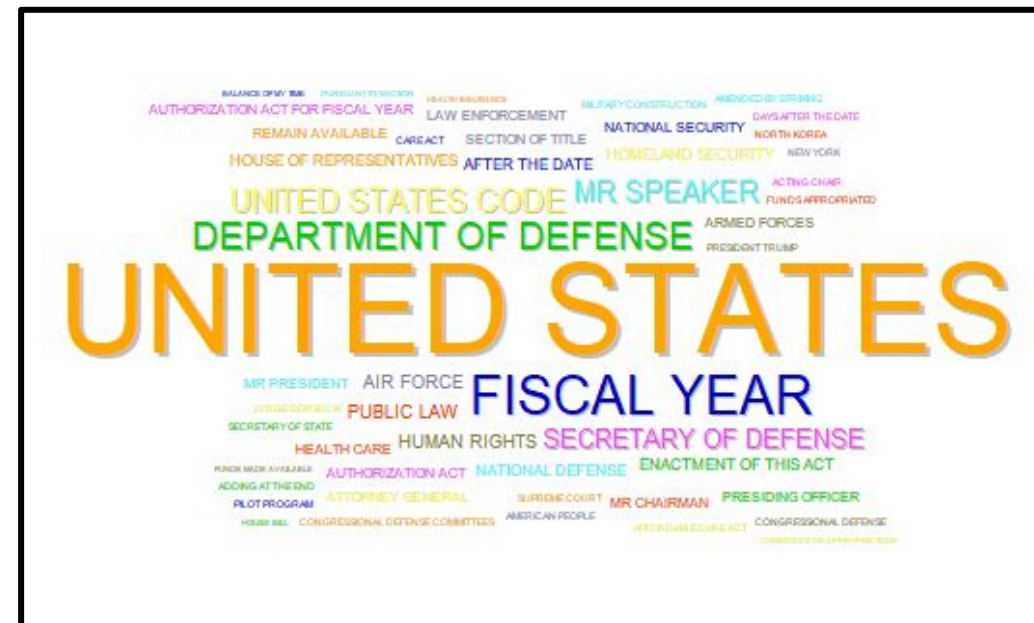
We used the codebook from Brandle (2018)'s study of as a starting point to develop the codebook for this project, using data from a year outside of the current study (2016) to develop and revise the codebook. Once we were satisfied with the coding schema, we conducted reliability testing using percent agreement.

Please scan the QR code to access our data source, codebook, and categorization dictionary



### How Much Human Rights Discussion in Congress?

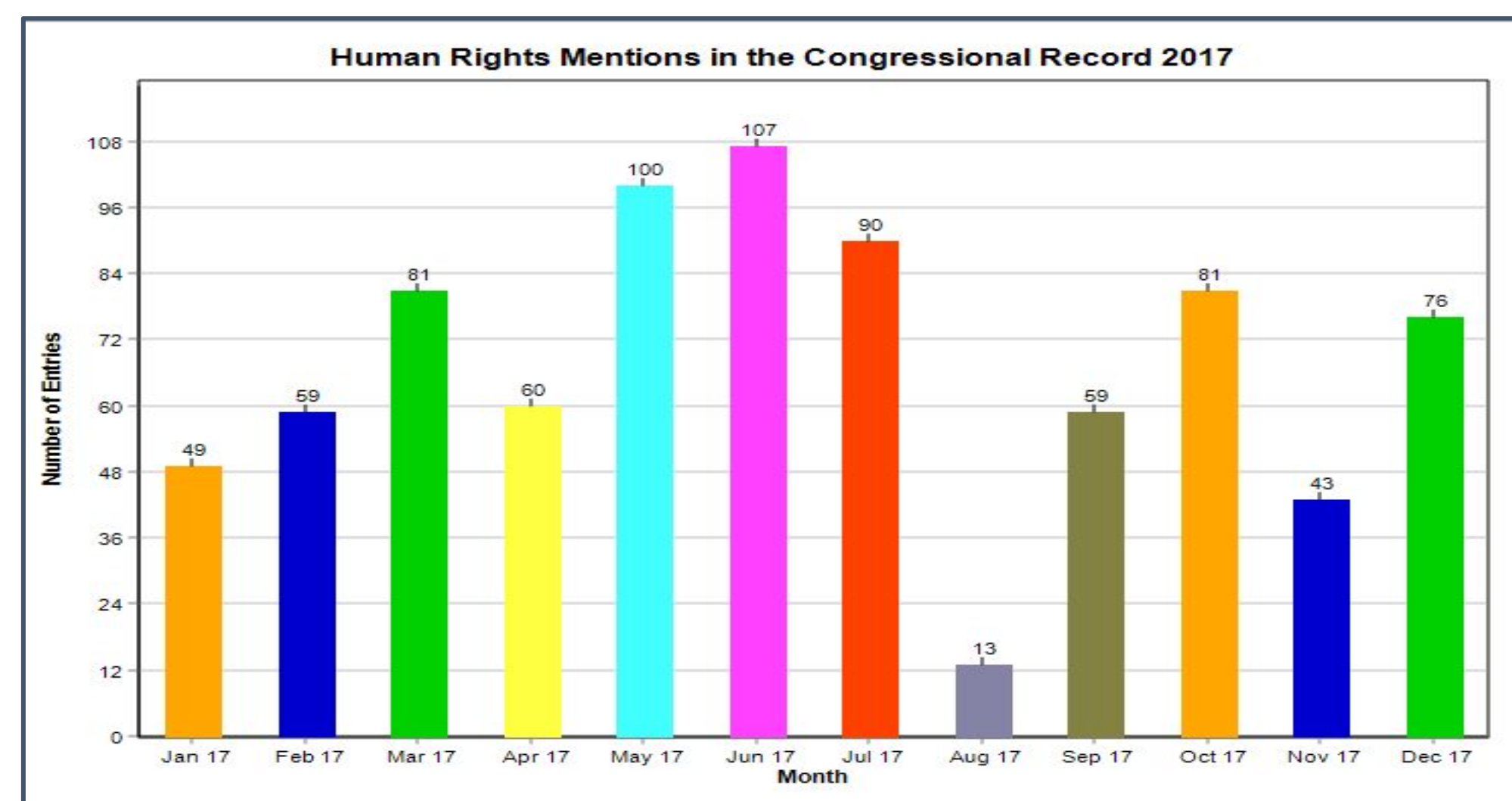
#### Case Frequency



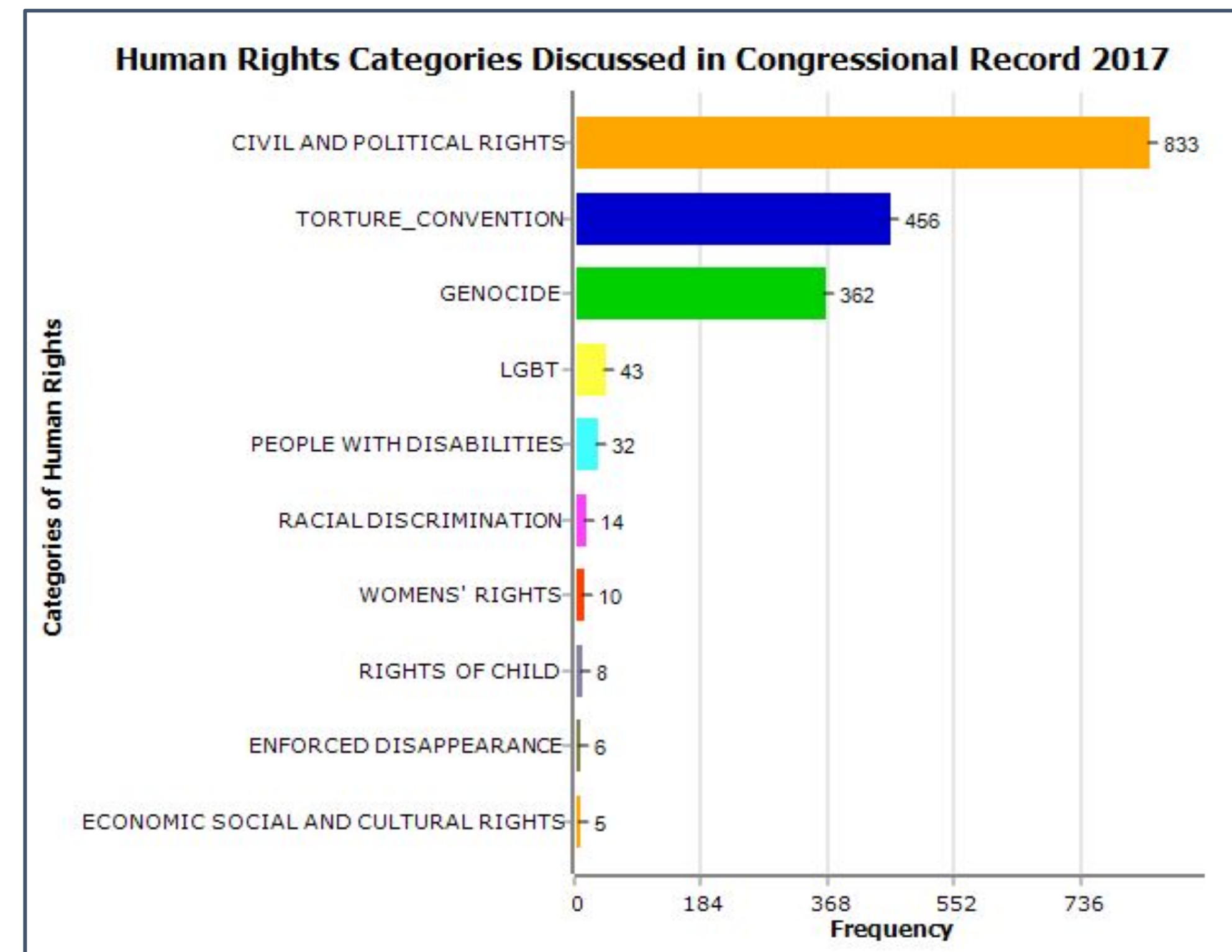
#### Phrase Frequency



When we compared the case frequency vs the phrase frequency, we found that the term "human rights" was relatively rare even in entries explicitly chosen for having that key term.



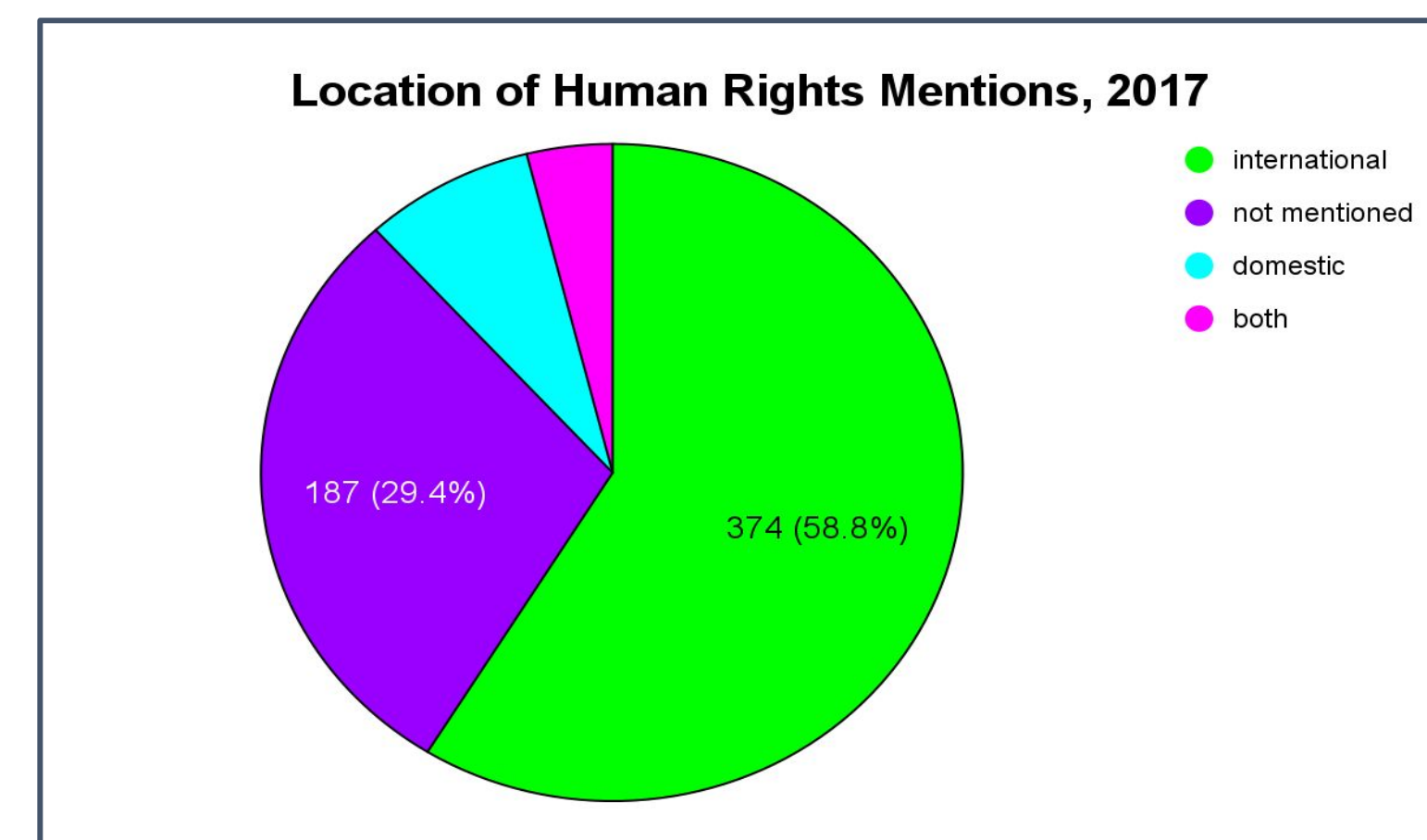
### Which Human Rights?



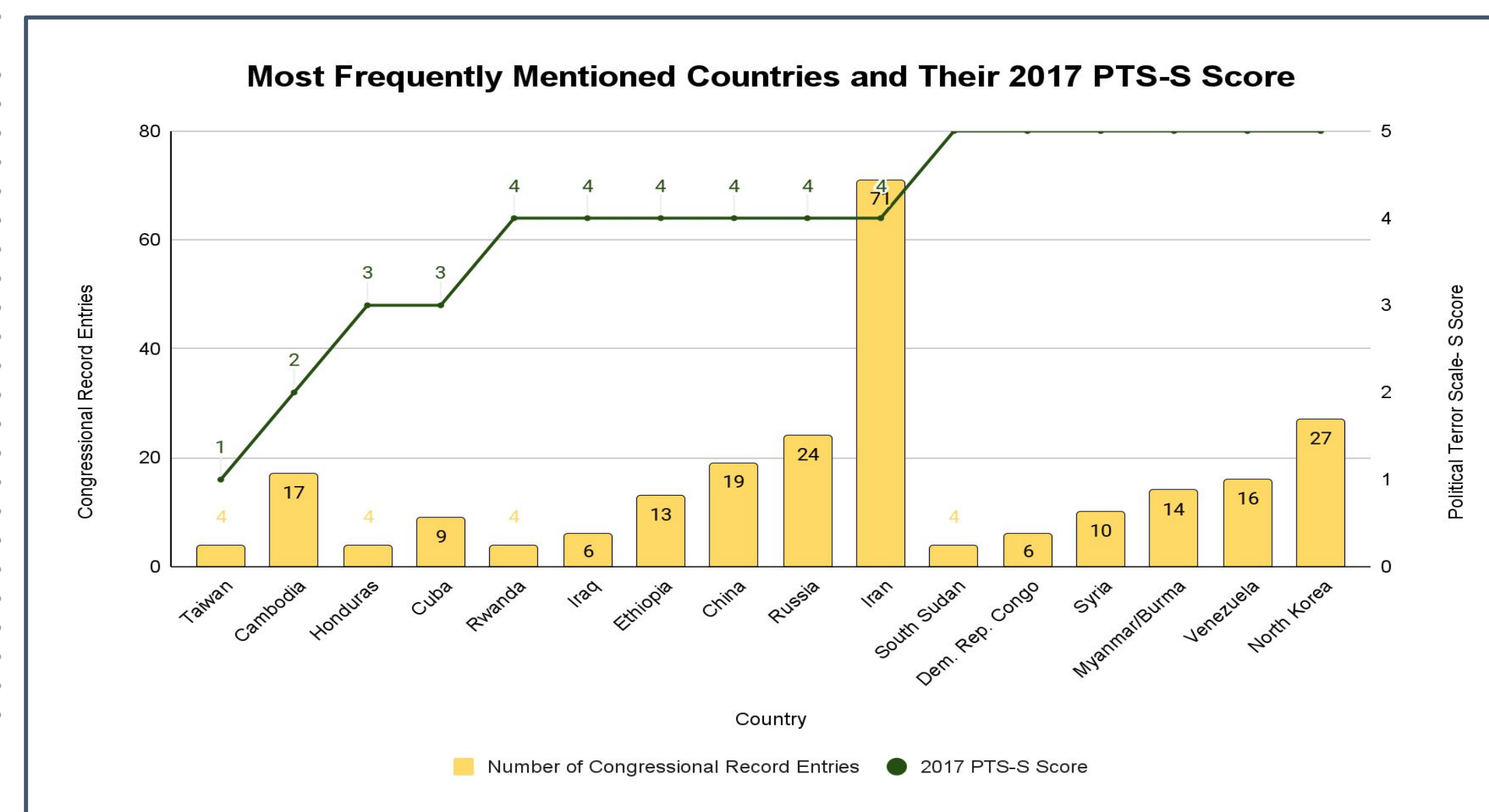
- Upon analysis of these entries, we found a notable emphasis on civil and political rights with minimal mention of economic, social, and cultural rights. This suggests a limited focus on certain types of human rights in the Congressional Record.

### Human Rights Where?

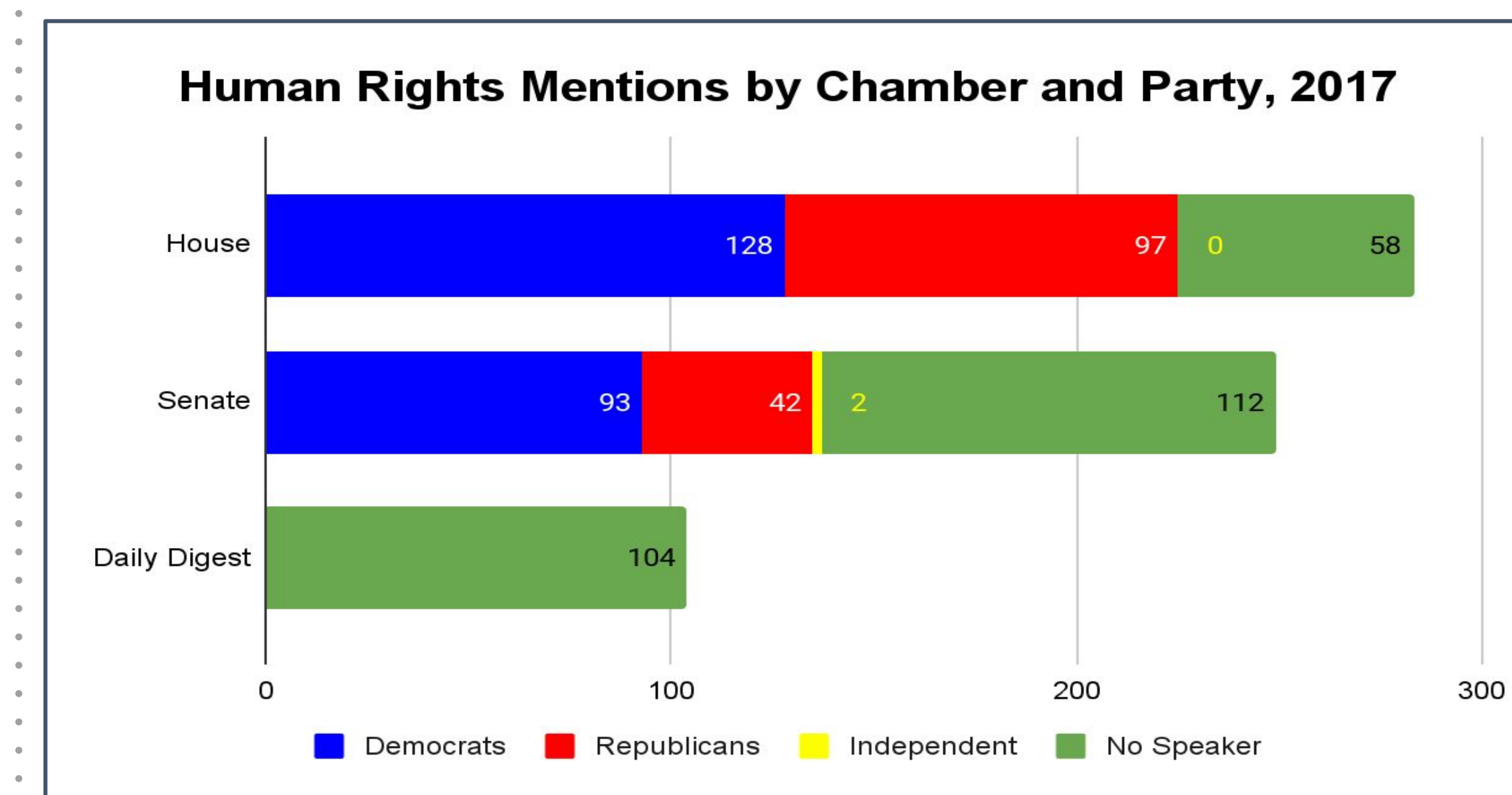
- The majority of discussions mentioning human rights refer to international issues, not domestic ones.



- Each entry was coded for the country discussed with human rights, and the most common country was "no country mentioned" (171), followed by "multiple countries mentioned" (62).
- The severity of human rights violations in a country does not appear to be related to the amount it is discussed in Congress, even when using the Political Terror Scale ranking based solely on the U.S. State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Gibney, Haschke, Arnon, Pisanò, Barrett, Park, and Barnes (2023))



### Who is Talking?



The Democratic party was the minority party in both parts of the legislature in 2017. Yet they were the most vocal about human rights. There were significant amounts of entries where there were no affiliated speakers present such as the Daily Digest.

### Expanding the Present Coding

- Digging more into the context of the mentions
  - Differentiating between types of entries:
    - Non-binding resolutions
    - Announcements of Hearings
    - Legislation (and tracking outcomes)
    - Budget allocations
    - Tributes
    - Nomination Proceedings
    - Executive Orders received by Congress
- Extending the expanded coding to more years: **2021, 2009, 2001**, as well as the years in between

### Future Avenues for Research

- Analyzing the content of Congressional hearings that discuss human rights
- Analyzing the whole Congressional Record for human rights content (using TF\*IDF)
- Interviewing the most frequent mentioners of human rights, to explore what their understanding of human rights is and their reasons for bringing human rights up in Congress
- Expand television and print media content analyses of human rights to see if/how it relates to Congressional mentions
- Investigating human rights language used on non-human rights issues

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