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Political Polarization and Human Rights Violations



Adil Yıldız¹  

¹ The University of Mississippi, Department of Political Science, Oxford, Mississippi, United States

Abstract

Building on the extant literature, this study contends that higher political polarization, wherein opposing individuals or groups engage in hostile interactions over political differences, promotes vilification and a dehumanizing discourse. This in turn leads to an antagonistic and perilous political environment, putting human rights at risk. In such an environment, governments become better capable of prioritizing their political agenda over the rights of particular opposition groups, as these governments are also often supported by their polarized (i.e., entrenched) constituent base. To provide practical insights, this study illustrates Türkiye and Brazil as case examples, as both countries have experienced recent increases in political polarization with potential implications for the erosion of human rights due to a climate of hostility. The study tests the potential relationship between political polarization and human rights violations by employing time-series and cross-national data from the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem) and the CIRI Human Rights Data Project, encompassing over 4,250 observations across more than 165 countries from 1981-2011. Additionally, the study utilizes the recent Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI)'s Physical Integrity Rights Index, which provides data from 2017-2023. Both analyses reveal statistically significant correlations between increased political polarization and reduced respect for human rights. An upward change in political polarization results in lower levels of physical integrity rights. These findings imply that political polarization should be recognized as a serious factor contributing to the potential risks of human rights violations.

Keywords

Political polarization · Human rights · Physical integrity rights · Human rights violations · Human rights abuses



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✉ Corresponding author: Adil Yıldız ayildiz@olemiss.edu



Political Polarization and Human Rights Violations

Is political polarization associated with a higher risk of human rights violations? This question is crucial considering that many countries are presently dealing with increasing levels of political polarization. According to Piazza (2023, p. 477), the degree of political polarization surged by 26.2% within democracies worldwide between 2000-2018, as revealed using cross-national data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (Coppedge et al., 2021). For a specific example, Aydın Düzgüt (2019, p. 17) highlighted that Türkiye currently stands as one of the most polarized countries globally and underscored the consequential concerns and dangers of this polarization for the future of democracy within the nation. Similarly, the current article assumes the increasing trend of polarization to also pose risks to human rights. In highly polarized societies, individuals may not only become more entrenched in their political views, but this could also create a political climate where politicians exploit polarized sentiments to manipulate opposing groups. This can in turn lead to a slippery slope in determining legitimate policing practices without infringing upon individuals' rights.

Previous studies have associated polarization with several negative occurrences. For instance, individuals strongly aligned with polarized political factions tend to isolate, discriminate against, and penalize members affiliated with opposing parties. Additionally, they are inclined to avoid collaboration with members of rival political parties in joint endeavors aimed at tackling societal issues (Broockman et al., 2023; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Carlin & Love, 2013). Moreover, Crimston et al. (2022) provided empirical evidence that political polarization predicts a heightened attraction to authoritarian and populist political leaders. For example, during the populist leadership of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil was reported to have experienced a wave of violence with groups influenced by Bolsonaro's leadership (Boulos, 2022).

According to Piazza (2023, p. 484), Brazil witnessed a 33% increase in political polarization from 2000-2018. Given such a troubled political context with polarization, one might ask whether political polarization has potential implications for human rights in Brazil. In this regard, Brazil serves as a useful example for analyzing and illustrating insights into such a question. Similarly, Türkiye also has a political environment with serious political polarization (Aydın Düzgüt, 2019, p. 17). Both countries have entrenched political camps with constituent bases that perpetuate political rivalry and polarization. Therefore this article uses these countries as case examples to demonstrate how political polarization can lead to the erosion of human rights by fostering a climate of hostility, to the delegitimization of political opponents, and to violent tendencies. Through this, one can gain practical insights into the potential dangers political polarization poses to human rights.

The majority of studies on polarization have concentrated on examining the political, social, and economic factors contributing to polarization, as well as its impact on interpersonal relations and attitudes, such as lack of tolerance toward individuals from opposing groups (Yair, 2020). However, limited scholarly understanding is found regarding how political polarization correlates with outcomes such as human rights violations. No prior work has explored or tested the potential relationship between polarization and incidences of human rights violations on a global scale. To address this gap in the literature, this research article



examines the connection between political polarization and the incidence of human rights violations using time-series and cross-national data from the V-Dem Project (Coppedge et al., 2021) and the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Project (Cingranelli & Richards, 2012). This quantitative empirical analysis encompasses over 4,250 observations across 165 countries, spanning from 1981-2011. Top of Form Additionally, the article acknowledges the importance of using up-to-date data. In this regard, it includes an additional analysis based on the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI)'s Physical Integrity Rights Index. Together with V-Dem's political polarization measure, these datasets cover observations from 2017-2020 across 44 countries (Clay et al., 2023; Rains et al., 2023; Clay et al., 2020; Brook et al., 2020; Coppedge et al., 2021). This enables an analysis that provides more recent insights into trends regarding respect for human rights and regressed over political polarization.

The rest of the article has the following structure. The next section briefly discusses the literature on common conceptualizations of human rights and the factors explaining their violations. The article then proceeds to provide insights on how political polarization may facilitate a political environment where human rights violations are more likely. That section also briefly examines two cases (i.e., Türkiye and Brazil) to illustrate the political contexts experiencing high polarization with vilification and a dehumanizing discourse. This section leads to a positively directional hypothesis on the relationship between political polarization and the likelihood of human rights violations. After that, the article presents the research design of the empirical analysis, including descriptions of the variables used and their sources. Next, the article lays out the results of the empirical analysis, followed by a conclusion section with some brief remarks on the implications the findings have for future research.

Literature Review: Human Rights and Explanations for Their Common Violations

The common understanding of human rights suggests that every person possesses inherent, inalienable rights simply by virtue of their humanity (Donnelly, 2008, p. 1). In other words, these rights are inherent, cannot be surrendered, and hold equal validity for all individuals. These terms are employed by global legal bodies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which is tasked with upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR; United Nations [UN], 1948), as well as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These organizations characterize human rights as "...the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family..." (UN, 1948, pmb.), and "...inherent to all human beings, irrespective of nationality, sex, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, or any other status" (USAID, 2016, p. 6). While differing interpretations of human rights principles may occur, the concept is widely acknowledged and generally clear. However, numerous analytical discussions exist regarding the essence of rights, the prevalence of human rights abuses, and the empirical approaches utilized to assess and investigate them.

Although a wealth of literature covering a range of rights deemed fundamental is found on human rights, certain rights, particularly those concerning physical integrity, receive greater emphasis. These rights pertain to the absolute safeguarding of individuals from harm. For instance, governments are prohibited from subjecting individuals to physical violence, and individuals have the right to be free from injury or violence. In particular, actions such as political imprisonment, torture, extrajudicial killings, and disappear-



ances are frequent violations that breach the sanctity of the physical body (Cingranelli & Richards, 1999, p. 403). These behaviors resulting in physical suffering or affliction are commonly acknowledged by scholars (e.g., Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Sundstrom, 2005; Cordell et al., 2022) as typical interpretations of human rights infringements.

While recent research (e.g., Yildiz, 2023) has occurred focusing on the causes of leaders (as a unit of analysis) violating rights, the literature on human rights violations generally centers on violations committed by states and governments (countries as the unit of analysis), as these authorities possess the capacity to exert control over individuals. Resultantly, examining the factors behind human rights violations mirrors the inquiry into why certain authorities engage in more violations than others. Scholarly research has revealed numerous empirical insights that forecast the likelihood of governments violating human rights. For instance, Poe and Tate's (1994, p. 863) seminal piece provided empirical evidence of the presence of an inverse relationship for the rate of economic development and level of democracy in a country with its occurrence of human rights violations.

The rationale behind the finding regarding economic development appears straightforward. Governments experiencing extreme poverty where economic deprivation has led to notable social and political unrest are likely to be the most volatile and are thus more prone to employing authoritarian tactics to retain control (Mitchell & McCormick, 1988, p. 478). On the flip side, the ruling elites in highly developed countries where the majority of people are typically more satisfied can be assumed to need less suppression to maintain their authority (Henderson, 1991, p. 1226). Furthermore, electoral democracy provides citizens with the ability to punish potentially detrimental governments and leaders from office before they can become a significant menace. In addition, the freedoms intrinsic to democracy may facilitate citizens' ability to unveil instances of repression, prompting either the majority or the global community to oppose such governments and leaders who seek to misuse their authority (Poe & Tate, 1994, pp. 855–856).

Poe and Tate (1994) also discover the size of the population and the presence of armed conflicts to be positively correlated with human rights violations. A greater population enhances the likelihood of potential incidents of coercion from a mathematical standpoint, as well as imposes pressure on a country's resources and environment, ultimately resulting in a decrease in fundamental resources (Henderson, 1993, pp. 323–325). Alternatively, when confronted with the prospect of armed conflict, governments might turn to repression. The challenge to their power increases the probability of resorting to coercive tactics such as violence to address these challenges (Poe & Tate, 1994, p. 859). Moreover, these governments might exploit the chaos and unrest as a chance to bolster their power and silence dissenting opinions. By implementing such things as state-of-emergency regulations or military tribunals, they can bypass the usual legal procedures and suppress political opponents (see Gurr, 1986; Tilly, 1985; Davenport, 1995). Additionally, governments frequently prioritize or invoke national security to justify their actions, claiming that such measures are essential for safeguarding national security. This can potentially result in a lack of accountability for any misconduct by government forces at the expense of individual human rights (Wolff & Maruyama, 2023; Bae, 2022).



The Rationale Behind the Danger for Human Rights Amid Political Polarization

This article explores the potential influence political polarization has on human rights violations. As the preceding section has demonstrated, violations of rights are often perpetrated by states, governments, and the elites in power. In highly polarized political contexts and societies, governmental intimidation, which has the potential to result in violations, may escalate more easily. Before delving into how such escalations may occur, conceptualizing political polarization will be important. This study draws upon the definitions provided by Coppedge et al. (2021, p. 224), as it utilizes their measure for a statistical analysis. This framework illustrates how the degree of political differences between opposing groups affects political discourse. In a highly polarized political context, one should observe a reluctance among these groups to engage in friendly interactions and a willingness to adopt hostile behaviors. Thus, the study views political polarization as intergroup dissimilarities that may potentially culminate in antagonistic behavior toward out-groups.

How does political polarization potentially impact human rights? Polarization can potentially enable the vilification and devaluation of individuals associated with opposing groups (Piazza, 2023). In a scenario, particularly one where supporters of the incumbent government target rival groups, this can embolden the government to escalate its actions against those groups. That government may also initiate targeting, and support from its advocate groups can further reinforce the government's agenda against specific opposition factions. For instance, Martherus et al.'s (2021) and Piazza's (2020) studies illustrated how elite rhetoric facilitates the dehumanization of opposing groups, which is a pivotal aspect of polarization. Dehumanization diminishes tolerance toward members of opposing political groups, thus creating a pathway for the violation of social norms, which may include a government's adoption of violent strategies (Cassese, 2021). Consequently, dehumanized individuals are often met with distrust and become the targets of violent strategies and discriminatory actions (Vezzali et al., 2012; Kteily et al., 2015). In summary, political polarization can normalize a government's use of violent actions, as vilification and dehumanization have been made more acceptable for governments and their advocating constituents. Subsequently, this can result in a hostile and vulnerable political environment, potentially endangering human rights.

This discussion requires at least a few real-world examples, and this article concurs that the highly polarized political environments of Türkiye and Brazil could yield practical insights into how polarization might potentially implicate dangers for human rights. The first example is the polarization in Türkiye, where the split between religious and secular groups has resulted in polarization regarding the country's religious-versus-secular identity. For example, these groups are mirrored along the bases of the ruling (religious) Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the main opposition (secular) Republican People's Party (CHP; Aydın Düzgüt, 2019). The current political landscape in Türkiye has exhibited numerous characteristics similar to those found in other highly polarized electoral democracies, including zero-sum power politics, delegitimizing language toward political rivals, and online disinformation campaigns. Consequently, Türkiye's polarized political environment has fostered a vilifying and dehumanizing discourse (McCoy & Somer, 2019). Two separate surveys conducted by the TurkuazLab project in 2017 and 2020 offer support for this assertion. In both surveys, more than 70% of participants characterized opposing partisans as a threat to the nation, with between 30%-50% expressing support for limiting the political involvement of rival partisans and subjecting them to police surveillance (TurkuazLab, 2017, 2020).



Another example of political polarization with potential implications for human rights comes from Brazil. Based on data from V-Dem, Piazza (2023, p. 484) revealed that, between 2000-2018, Brazil had experienced a 33% increase in political polarization, which was further exacerbated during the tenure of the conservative President Jair Bolsonaro from 2018-2022. Throughout Bolsonaro's presidency, the political contrast between secular Brazilians and supporters of the conservative government intensified. Bolsonaro promoted this contrast by spreading online disinformation, making provocative comments on women's rights and sexual assault and demonizing LGBTQ people (Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019). Even after losing his presidency, Bolsonaro maintained his vilifying attitude toward rival groups, labeling them as fraudsters and further polarizing Brazilian citizens (Wirtschafter, 2022). This led to his supporters storming the Congress building in the capital of Brazil in January 2023 (Roy & Baumgartner, 2023). However, this incident was just a small part of the violent assaults. According to the Brazilian NGO Observatory of Political and Electoral Violence, over 200 politically motivated assaults resulting in 21 deaths had occurred during the 2022 election season (Faiola & Sá Pessoa, 2022). The above discussion on the potential implications of political polarization for human rights leads to the following hypothesis (H1): *Human rights violations are more likely to be observed in countries with greater political polarization.*

Deepening the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Perhaps expanding on the previous section would be useful for providing a clearer elaboration on the theoretical framework behind the hypothesis and the mentioned concepts. The previous section has discussed two main concepts: vilification and dehumanization. These concepts serve as theoretical links connecting political polarization to an increased likelihood of human rights violations. Therefore, to first elaborate on these concepts would be highly relevant and practical before integrating them into a theoretical framework that offers deeper insight into the reasoning behind the hypothesis, thus helping predict a potential relationship between political polarization and human rights violations.

According to the Queensland Human Rights Commission (QHRC, n.d.), vilification manifests in varying degrees and can have significant adverse implications for human rights. It fosters feelings of hatred and contempt toward individuals and groups, potentially subjecting them to discrimination, harassment, and other forms of harm and thereby degrading their rights. On the other hand, the European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS, n.d.) has identified dehumanization within the realm of political science as the discourse and actions that diminish the humanity of individuals or groups. Several scholars, including Hellström (2019), Bruneau et al. (2018), Lindén et al. (2015), Volpato and Andrighetto (2015), and Maoz and McCauley (2008), have highlighted the severe repercussions of dehumanization on human rights. They concur that dehumanizing attitudes can compel individuals to take aggressive actions against those they dehumanize, to endorse acts of violence, and to exhibit indifference when dehumanized groups are in need of assistance. Such perspectives may justify retaliatory measures, including violence and unequal treatment, even toward vulnerable populations. Consequently, the acceptance of differential treatment can normalize human rights violations that are evident within one's society.

Theoretically speaking, political polarization can exacerbate vilification and dehumanization in several ways. In an environment of heightened vilification and dehumanization, human rights are more likely to



be endangered. Polarization breeds a clear us-versus-them mentality, wherein individuals view those with differing political beliefs as adversaries rather than fellow citizens with valid differences of opinion, thus facilitating the dehumanization and vilification of opposing views (Dagnes & Dagnes, 2019; Holst, 2020). In such polarized environments, people tend to gravitate toward sources of information and social circles that reinforce their existing beliefs, creating echo chambers that amplify negative perceptions of the opposing political group. This type of environment also fosters in-group loyalty, leading individuals to justify negative attitudes and behaviors toward the out-group, including vilification and hostility (Barberá, 2020; Gillani et al., 2018; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2018; Nguyen, 2020). Moreover, political polarization often engenders distrust and demonization of the opposition, attributing malicious intent or moral flaws solely based on political affiliation, thus exacerbating dehumanization and vilification (Aydın Düzgüt, 2019; Schedler, 2023; Vallier, 2023). With the intensification of political polarization, extreme viewpoints can become normalized, further legitimizing dehumanizing language and attitudes toward the opposing group, thus exacerbating vilification and animosity (Harel et al., 2020).

Research Design

The CIRI Physical Integrity Rights Index

Are highly polarized political contexts associated with instances of human rights violations? Offering an empirical response to this examination requires data across countries regarding human rights, which serves as the dependent variable in the empirical analysis, and the level of political polarization, which functions as the independent variable. As discussed earlier in the literature review, rights pertaining to physical integrity have been pivotal within the realm of human rights, with their breaches typically described in scholarly works as instances of extrajudicial killings, disappearances, political imprisonment, and torture. These types of violations are the standard variables in the CIRI Physical Integrity Data spanning from 1981-2011 and as outlined by Cingranelli and Richards (2012). Therefore, this study employs these variables for an empirical examination of human rights. Within this dataset, the Physical Integrity Rights Index (ranging from 0 to 8) is derived by aggregating the ratings for extrajudicial killings (ranging from 0 to 2), disappearances (ranging from 0 to 2), political imprisonment (ranging from 0 to 2), and torture (ranging from 0 to 2). Higher scores indicate greater respect and fewer or no occurrences of such violations.

In order to have a measure for the independent variable, the variable of political polarization from the V-Dem data has been merged into the data used in this study (Pemstein et al., 2021). This variable measures the degree to which political disparities impact political and social interactions. Countries exhibit high levels of polarization when advocates of opposing political factions are hesitant to participate in amicable engagements. More precisely, political polarization is an ordinal variable gauging the degree to which supporters of rival political groups interact in either friendly or hostile manners, ranging from “not at all,” “mainly not,” “somewhat,” and “yes, to a noticeable extent,” to “yes, to a large extent.” Higher degrees indicate a more hostile manner, whereas lower degrees indicate a friendlier manner (Coppedge et al., 2021, p. 224).

Because the dependent variable is assessed on a continuous scale and numerous independent and control variables are found as detailed in the subsequent paragraph, this study has employed a multiple

regression analysis. More specifically, utilizing country-year as the units of analysis, the study examines 165 countries over a timeframe spanning from 1981-2011, encompassing a total of 4,251 observations. This makes the first model specification in which a regime type measure has been employed as a control, serving as an alternative to a civil society measure. When incorporating V-Dem's Core Civil Society Index as a control variable in the second model to replace the variable of polity used in the initial model from the Polity IV data, the number of countries analyzed and observations increase to 169 countries and 4,300 observations (Coppedge et al., 2021; Marshall & Jaggers, 2009). Employing country-year as the units of analysis, the study also employs country-fixed effects to accommodate country-level differences (i.e., to address unit heterogeneity), as guided by the results of the Hausman test (Amini et al., 2012).

The empirical models incorporate several control variables. As elucidated in the literature review, factors such as population size, GDP per capita, indicators of conflict, and regime type (e.g., indices of democracy) have been shown to influence human rights violations. Hence, this study encompasses all of these indicators, with population and GDP per capita data being sourced from the World Bank (2012) dataset, active armed conflicts and number of armed conflicts being retrieved from the UCDP/PRIO armed conflict dataset (Themner & Wallensteen, 2012), and regime type measures (e.g., polity) being obtained from the Polity IV dataset (Marshall & Jaggers, 2009). Civil society groups and organizations are also taken into account due to evidence suggesting these to be associated with human rights, as they play a crucial role in advocating for, safeguarding, and overseeing human rights (Buyse, 2018; Renshaw, 2012). To gauge the robustness of civil society, the study utilizes V-Dem's Core Civil Society Index (Coppedge et al., 2021).

Finally, to account for temporal dependence, the models incorporate a lagged dependent variable with a one-year delay, as determined by the findings of the serial correlation test conducted for the panel data. The empirical analysis utilizes the Stata command `xtserial`, which applies the Wooldridge test to identify serial correlation within panel data (Drukker, 2003, pp. 169–171). Lastly, two different model specifications are produced by taking into account the variance inflation factors (VIF), which signify the extent of multicollinearity in regression analysis (Marcoulides & Raykov, 2019). As indicated by the VIF analysis, a linear relationship exists between the variables of the Civil Society Index and polity, prompting their inclusion in separate models.

The Human Rights Measurement Initiative's (HRMI) Physical Integrity Rights Index

The data this article retrieved from the CIRI Physical Integrity Rights Index only exists up to 2011 (Cingranelli & Richards, 2012), raising the question of whether more up-to-date data could yield different results and insights. Therefore, this article has also obtained data from the Human Rights Measurement Initiative's (HRMI) Physical Integrity Rights Index, which provides data from 2017-2023 (Clay et al., 2023; Rains et al., 2023; Clay et al., 2020; Brook et al., 2020). However, the political polarization measure from the V-Dem data covers up to 2020 (Coppedge et al., 2021), which means that together they can provide matching measures through a country-year unit analysis from 2017-2020. This still provides results and insights from a much more recent time compared to the CIRI data.

The HRMI provides a variable called the physical integrity rights, which perfectly fits the needs of this article. This variable is a composite variable similar to the one from the CIRI database. Its measure is



aggregated based on arbitrary or political arrests and imprisonments, disappearances, death penalty executions, extrajudicial executions, and torture. The HRMI provides data on the intensity of respect for physical integrity rights, which yields mean values ranging between 2-9, with higher values indicating higher respect for physical integrity rights. For instance, Australia typically has values above 7, indicating high respect for rights, whereas Kazakhstan has values around 3, representing low respect (these two countries were chosen randomly just to illustrate). The data include a total of 44 countries (Clay et al., 2023; Rains et al., 2023; Clay et al., 2020; Brook et al., 2020).

Methodology

The empirical analysis of the CIRI Physical Integrity Index in this article utilizes the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression as its research method. A regression analysis appears reasonable to use considering that the Physical Integrity Index as the dependent variable is measured as a continuous variable on a scale ranging from 0-8. To elaborate further on OLS regression, it is a statistical method used for estimating the relationship between one or more independent variables (predictors) and one dependent variable (outcome) by minimizing the sum of the squared differences between the observed and predicted values of the dependent variable (Hanushek & Jackson, 2013, pp. 39–40). In addition to the continuously measured dependent variable, this article has also included several predictors, including both independent and control variables, in its empirical analysis, as discussed in the previous section.

Moreover, OLS regression assumes a linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, as well as independence among the predictor variables, meaning that they do not significantly affect each other (Hanushek & Jackson, 2013, pp. 47–51). In other words, this is referred to as multicollinearity, which occurs when two or more independent variables in a regression model are highly correlated with each other (pp. 86–93). To ensure this is not the case, the empirical analysis utilizes variance inflation factor (VIF) analysis, which is a statistical technique used to assess multicollinearity among independent variables in regression analyses (Shrestha, 2020, pp. 40–41). As such, the VIF analysis is used to ensure that none of the independent variables are correlated to a concerning degree with each other, thus ensuring that the OLS assumptions are met.

Lastly, due to the analysis using panel data, the study uses a combination of the characteristics of both the cross-sectional and time-series data with fixed effects based on the results of the Hausman test (Bell & Jones, 2015, p. 138) to ensure that time-invariant differences are captured and to control for unobserved heterogeneity across countries. To elaborate on this, country-specific effects might have influenced the dependent variable but had remained constant over time for each country. These effects could be unobserved characteristics regarding such as things as innate country characteristics, culture, or geography. Fixed effects alleviate the concern that such characteristics function as exogenous effects (Bell & Jones, 2015, pp. 135–136).

Additionally, in order to visualize the relationship between HRMI's variable of physical integrity rights and V-Dem's variable of political polarization, this article uses the twoway scatter and lowess commands in Stata (v17). The first command creates scatterplots, which are graphs showing the relationship between two variables (i.e., political polarization and physical integrity rights). These plots help one see patterns

and compare different groups of data (Tibbles & Melse, 2023, p. 266). The second command smooths out scatterplots to facilitate spotting trends or patterns in the data. It adjusts how much smoothing (this article applied 80% for a balanced illustration) is applied, letting one tailor it to get the best view of any underlying patterns. Overall, the `lowess` command provides a smoothed representation of the trend presenting the relationship between variables (Cox, 2015, p. 577).

Empirical Results

This article hypothesizes that countries with greater political polarization are more likely to witness human rights violations. Table 1 displays the outputs of the OLS regression models concerning physical integrity rights, disclosing significant findings regarding the likelihood of rights violations across two models. In support of the article’s hypothesis, both models demonstrate that countries with higher political polarization are more likely to exhibit less respect for human rights or more occurrences of violations of physical integrity rights. In other words, higher political polarization is statistically significantly correlated with less respect for human rights and the possibility of more occurrences of extrajudicial killings, disappearances, political imprisonment, and torture.

Table 1

The Effect of Political Polarization on Physical Integrity Rights (PIRs): 1981-2011

	Model1 Polity	Model2 Civil Society Index
Political Polarization	-0.302**	-0.294**
	-0.05	-0.049
Active Armed Conflicts	-0.896**	-0.881**
	-0.128	-0.128
Number of Armed Conflicts	-0.251**	-0.246**
	-0.086	-0.084
Polity/Regime Type	0.031**	-
	-0.008	-
Robustness of Civil Society	-	0.680**
	-	-0.178
Population	-0.599**	-0.618**
	-0.146	-0.15
GDP per capita	-0.203**	-0.189*
	-0.077	-0.076
One-year lagged DV	0.413**	0.414**
	-0.021	-0.021
Constant	14.519**	14.337**
	-2.345	-2.317
<i>N</i>	4251	4300
<i>R</i> ²	0.364	0.363
<i>Log-likelihood</i>	-6071.3	-6132.44
<i>SE adjusted for</i>	165 clusters	169 clusters



	Model1 Polity	Model2 Civil Society Index
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** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Note: To address autocorrelation effects, a lagged dependent variable is incorporated into each model. Additionally, to mitigate heteroscedasticity, robust standard errors are clustered by country utilizing Huber-White heteroskedastic-robust standard errors (Huber, 1967; White, 1980).

Source: This table was compiled using data from multiple sources, including the CIRI Physical Integrity Data (1981-2011) provided by Cingranelli and Richards (2012), population and GDP per capita data from the World Bank (2012), the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict dataset by Themner and Wallensteen (2012), the Polity IV data by Marshall and Jaggers (2009), and the V-Dem dataset by Coppedge et al. (2021). The analysis was performed using Stata and R software packages. All the data utilized in this study are publicly available.

To understand the magnitude of the statistical findings from Models 1 and 2, the high political polarization across more than 160 countries evidently indicates on average a statistically significant adverse impact on the respect for physical integrity rights. The coefficients of -0.302 and -0.294 (rounded to -0.3) indicate that, on average, increased political polarization correlates with a decrease of 0.3 points in the respect for rights, with other variables held constant. Physical integrity rights have been assessed on a scale ranging from 0-8, with 8 representing a higher level of respect. To grasp the extent of the change, importance is had in considering this full range. Hence, a decline of 0.3 could be deemed relatively minor in statistical terms, accounting for roughly 4% of the scale’s range (i.e., $0.3 / 8 = 0.0375$ or 3.75%). However, this should still amount to a substantive impact when considering the essence of physical integrity rights, which encompass extrajudicial killings, disappearances, political imprisonment, and torture. A one-unit increase in political polarization, indicating a shift toward more hostile interactions within countries, leads to approximately a 4% increase in these severe violations. Similarly, two units correspond to an 8% increase, three units to a 12% increase, and so forth.

Figure 1

Physical Integrity Rights (PIRs) Regressed on Political Polarization: 2017-2020

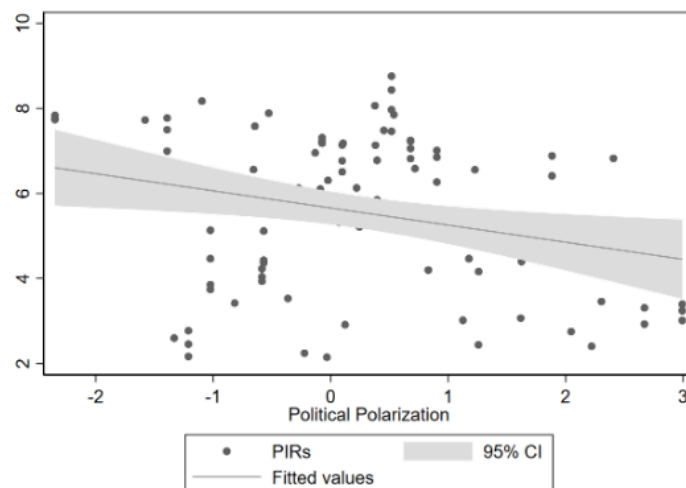


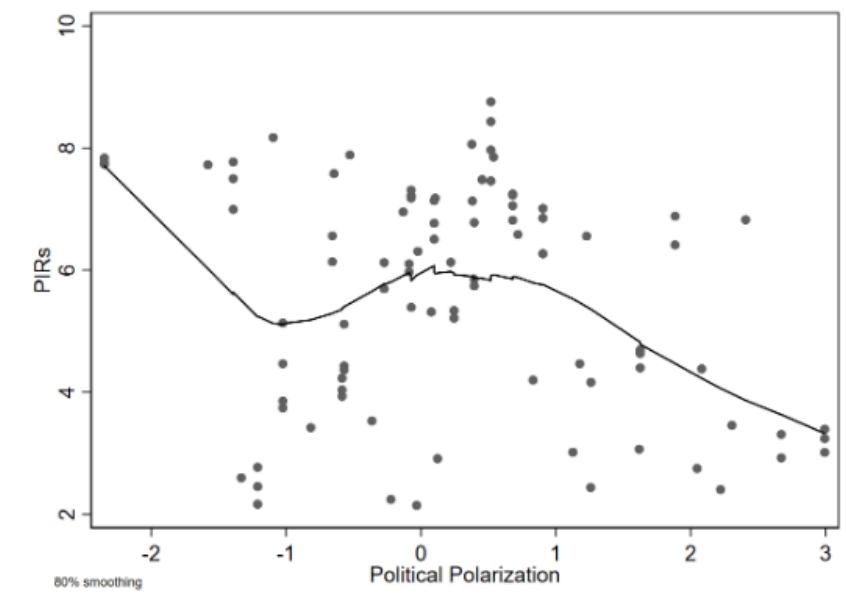
Figure 1 and Figure 2 visualize the relationship between political polarization (on the x-axis) and physical integrity rights (on the y-axis) using two different types of graphs. These are a scatter plot and a locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOWESS) plot. The scatter plot (Figure 1) shows a negative relationship



to exist between political polarization and physical integrity rights, indicating higher levels of polarization to be associated with lower human rights levels. However, the figure also demonstrates the slope as being not very steep, meaning that the relationship is not strongly linear. At a political polarization level of -2, the physical integrity rights level is around 7, and at a political polarization level of 3, the physical integrity rights level decreases to around 5. This suggests a negative trend, but the change in physical integrity rights for each unit change in political polarization is marginal.

Figure 2

Physical Integrity Rights (PIRs) Regressed on Political Polarization with LOWESS Smoothing Line: 2017-2020



In Figure 2, the trend seems to be smoothed out by ignoring outliers from datasets with an aim to enhance the visibility of underlying patterns within the data using the LOWESS technique. This reflects a more nuanced relationship between political polarization and physical integrity rights. Figure 2 presents a steeper slope at the extremes of polarization (from -2 to -1 and from 1 to 3), indicating that the relationship between political polarization and physical integrity rights is more pronounced in these ranges. However, when political polarization is between -1 and 1, the slope appears to flatten out, suggesting that a weaker relationship or even a plateau in physical integrity rights might occur within this range of political polarization.

More substantively and theoretically, one can more confidently assume that extreme political polarization may heighten the likelihood of human rights abuses. In highly polarized environments, a tendency might exist to prioritize other considerations over respect for human rights, potentially resulting in increased repression, violence, and suppression of dissenting voices (see Piazza, 2023). Conversely, very low levels of political polarization may render a society more susceptible to the influence of increased polarization compared to countries that are already moderately polarized. This susceptibility could be attributed to the sensitivity to changes in political dynamics or a lack of resilience in the face of heightened tensions (see Sørensen & Ansell, 2023; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). In contrast, moderate polarization may be seen as less concerning. In such cases, a balancing act might occur between competing political interests, leading

to a more stable environment for the protection of human rights. However, this does not necessarily mean that human rights are fully upheld; rather, a plateau might be present at the moderate levels where the level of polarization does not significantly impact the level of physical integrity rights.

Conclusion

This study proposes that countries with greater political polarization tend to show lower respect for physical integrity rights. This more specifically means that these countries are more likely to experience violations such as extrajudicial killings, disappearances, political imprisonment, and torture. The study has used cross-national and time-series data covering over 165 countries from 1981-2011 for its statistical analysis employing two models over physical integrity rights. The analysis supports this correlation, indicating a significant relationship between higher political polarization and diminished respect for human rights. More specifically, a unit increase in polarization (signifying a shift towards more intense and aggressive interactions among individuals and groups) results in roughly a 4% rise in human rights violations. Similarly, a two-unit increase corresponds to an 8% rise, three units to a 12% increase, and so on. While this effect might appear modest, its significance should not be underestimated, given the gravity of physical integrity rights, which include extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, political imprisonment, and torture. The findings of both empirical models reveal political polarization to not merely be a distressing extant phenomenon that renders political interactions less good-natured, less respectful, and less fruitful but to also make these interactions more perilous, possibly leading to dangers for human rights. Thus, political polarization should be considered as a crucial driver of the potential risks posed for human rights violations. By its nature, it is worthy of notice from decision-makers and the general public.

Additionally, this article has presented two different graphs based on the recent HRMI's Physical Integrity Rights Index. Regressing this index on political polarization has consolidated the findings from the OLS analysis. These plotted regression graphs also show a negative relationship between the levels of political polarization and physical integrity rights, although several refined insights come to light. While the scatter plot indicates a negative linear relationship between polarization and physical integrity rights, the relationship is not strongly linear. In contrast, the LOWESS plot shows a more nuanced relationship, with a steeper slope at extreme polarization levels and a flattened slope at moderate levels. This article concurs that extreme political polarization has dangers, as it can potentially more effectively increase the likelihood of human rights abuses. Similarly, very low polarization levels may also pose adverse implications if, for example, a mounting polarization occurs. These countries might be more vulnerable to increased polarization as they may be caught off guard, lacking resilience in the face of unusual levels of polarization. Moderate polarization appears to present a more stable environment, implicating a steadier environment for human rights maintenance. All in all, an upward change in political polarization results in lower levels of physical integrity rights.

Future studies should explore how political polarization may be alleviated for the purposes of diminishing human rights risks. Recent scholarship has offered several insights that deserve attention. Through social media platforms in particular, political elites play key roles in polarizing public opinion, often seeking to manipulate the general public according to their interests (Fine & Hunt, 2023). For example, Judge et al.'s



(2023, pp. 491–492) recent review article suggested that one strategy for coping with polarization would be to reframe issues that create polarization in line with certain political values that may bring individuals closer. Another effective method they offered was public participation, wherein people come together and openly and directly discuss polarizing issues. This deliberative bottom-up process might eliminate manipulations by the elite. More specifically, Combs et al.'s (2023) recent experimental study showed that well-designed social media platforms sensitive to the nature of polarization can indeed mitigate political polarization. After developing a mobile social media chat platform, they discovered that individuals participating in anonymous discussions about political issues experience significant reductions in polarization. Future research should investigate additional devices and mechanisms that could mitigate the level of political polarization, thus potentially reducing the threats posed to human rights and fostering a more peaceful political environment.



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Author Details **Adil Yıldız**

¹ The University of Mississippi, Department of Political Science, Oxford, Mississippi, United States

 0009-0005-0020-3726  ayildiz@olemiss.edu

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