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Human rights divided: structural topic modelling of South Korean media coverage, 2017–2022

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ABSTRACT

While human rights are often regarded as universal and nonpartisan, this article demonstrates how their meanings are contested through domestic media discourse. Drawing on a corpus of 46,262 articles from four major South Korean newspapers – two progressive and two conservative – this study examines how political orientation shapes human rights coverage. Using Structural Topic Modeling (STM), we identify statistically significant patterns of ideological divergence: progressive outlets are more likely to emphasise economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as minority rights, including labour, women's, and LGBTQ+ rights. In contrast, conservative media show a stronger tendency to focus on civil and political rights, as well as global human rights issues such as procedural protections and North Korean human rights – though progressive outlets devoted greater topical attention to certain civil and political rights, particularly democratic rights. This study advances both empirical and theoretical understandings of human rights polarisation by systematically validating and conceptualising this phenomenon. It situates the polarisation of human rights within broader political, cultural, and technological transformations. It also underscores the importance of examining the consequences of contested human rights discourse – not only as a challenge to normative consensus, but also as a potential catalyst for reflection and renegotiation.

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Introduction

The relationship between political orientation and human rights has long been a focal point in both political science and human rights scholarship (Douzinas, 2007; Galli & Modesto, 2025; Moghaddam & Vuksanovic, 1990; Mutua, 2017). Numerous studies have shown that political beliefs strongly predict individuals' support for different types of human rights (Gerber et al., 2010; Koo, 2017; McFarland & Mathews, 2005). In many contexts, liberals or left-leaning actors tend to express greater support for social and economic rights, whereas conservatives or right-leaning actors often emphasise civil liberties, procedural justice, security, and national sovereignty (Mutua, 1996).

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These ideological divides also shape how political actors and institutions – including governments – frame human rights. Yet less is known about how legacy newspapers, despite increasing media fragmentation, continue to function as institutionalised arenas of elite discourse in which the meaning of human rights is constructed, contested, and politically differentiated.

Although human rights are often conceived as universal and nonpartisan, media portrayals frequently diverge from this ideal. A labour strike, for instance, may be framed in one outlet as a fundamental human right and in another as a threat to public order. These conflicting portrayals are not merely editorial choices; they shape public perceptions, influence political discourse, and may weaken public consensus around the normative ideal of human rights as universal (Donnelly, 2013; O’Callaghan, 2019). This study asks: How do news media with differing political orientations construct and convey the meaning of human rights? And what do these portrayals reveal about the ways universal rights language is selectively attached to different issues, groups, and political projects?

While several studies have explored ideological framing of human rights in the media (Koo & Choi, 2019; Yin, 2007), the field lacks systematic, large-scale empirical research grounded in rigorous methodology. Much of the existing literature has relied on qualitative case studies, single-issue analyses, or research designs that make it difficult to compare systematically how different ideological outlets allocate attention across multiple categories of rights (Brosius et al., 2019; Ramos et al., 2007). To address this gap, the present study investigates the ideological polarisation of human rights coverage in South Korea’s print media using Structural Topic Modeling (STM), a computational method applied to a large corpus of 46,262 news articles.

South Korea provides a particularly compelling case. As a consolidated democracy with a dynamic and ideologically divided press environment, it offers a useful setting for examining how universal rights language becomes embedded in domestic political conflict. The Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022) provides an especially important temporal window because human rights discourse during this period intersected with labour policy, gender equality debates, anti-discrimination controversies, prosecutorial reform, pandemic governance, and renewed attention to North Korean human rights amid inter-Korean diplomacy. Moon’s background as a human rights lawyer and his administration’s rights-oriented rhetoric further heightened the visibility of human rights as a politically contested language.

This study analyzes coverage from four major national newspapers – two progressive outlets (*Hankyoreh*, *Kyunghyang*) and two conservative outlets (*Chosun*, *JoongAng*) – to examine whether, how, and to what extent political orientation shapes the framing of human rights reporting. In doing so, it contributes to the growing literature on media polarisation, human rights discourse, and computational content analysis. By applying STM to 46,262 articles from four ideologically distinct national newspapers, this study provides systematic evidence of how political orientation is associated with variation in the media’s topical construction of human rights. More broadly, the findings suggest that contested human rights discourse should be understood not only as a threat to normative consensus, but also as a site where the meanings, boundaries, and priorities of human rights are publicly renegotiated.

Theoretical background

History of contested rights

The foundation of modern human rights discourse can be traced to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, which sought to unify civil and political rights (first-generation) and economic, social, and cultural rights (second-generation) under a single framework (Bollen, 1986; Moravcsik, 2000; Moyn, 2012). First-generation rights emphasise individual freedoms such as speech, religion, and voting, and have their roots in Enlightenment ideals of limiting state power. Second-generation rights, by contrast, focus on collective entitlements like education, healthcare, and labour protections, reflecting post-Industrial Revolution calls for state intervention to address systemic inequalities (Marks, 1980; Woods, 2004; Zohadi, 2004).

The subsequent adoption of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1966 institutionalised this distinction, while also revealing the political contestation surrounding the prioritisation of rights. During the Cold War, civil and political rights and economic, social, and cultural rights were often associated with competing ideological projects, although these alignments were neither complete nor uniform. Liberal democracies tended to emphasise individual liberties, political freedoms, and limits on state power, whereas socialist and many postcolonial states placed stronger emphasis on socio-economic guarantees, redistribution, and development. The significance of this divide lies not in the rejection of one category of rights by either side, but in the different ways political actors ranked, framed, and mobilised rights claims.

From the 1970s onward, neoliberalism and changing global political conditions reconfigured these divisions rather than resolving them (Rao, 2018). Conservative and market-oriented governments, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, placed greater emphasis on individual freedom, property rights, market autonomy, and limits on state intervention (Falk, 2002; Leys, 2001; Whyte, 2019). By contrast, progressive movements and governments more often treated social welfare, labour protection, health, housing, and equality as central components of rights-based politics. For example, socio-economic rights have been constitutionally recognised in post-apartheid South Africa, whereas rights such as healthcare and unionisation have remained more contested in the United States (Ignatieff, 2001; Liebenberg, 2005).

Influenced by neoliberalism and its emphasis on a capitalist free market, many international organisations and NGOs during this period also began to reflect these divergent priorities in their advocacy agendas and rights framings (Landy, 2013; Nash, 2019; Schneiker, 2019). For instance, institutions like Amnesty International historically focused on political prisoners and freedom of speech, whereas others, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), emphasised labour rights and economic justice. In recent years, Amnesty has broadened its mandate to include economic and social rights, such as the right to healthcare and housing. Nonetheless, longstanding ideological imprints remain: many Western-based INGOs continue to prioritise civil and political rights, while INGOs rooted in the Global South more often emphasise economic and social rights. These enduring divisions continue to shape the global human rights landscape, reinforcing ideological cleavages in which left-leaning actors advocate for an

expanded rights agenda, while conservative groups tend to resist what they perceive as deviations from core liberal principles.

Since the early 2000s, intensifying political polarisation and increasingly fragmented media environments have further sharpened these distinctions. Left-leaning actors often invoke human rights in relation to social justice, democratic accountability, minority protection, and state responsibility (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2021), whereas right-leaning actors more often emphasise individual liberty, procedural fairness, law and order, national security, religious freedom, and state sovereignty. The rise of right-wing populism has further intensified rights contestation, as conservative actors selectively invoke human rights in relation to sovereignty, national identity, religious traditionalism, and opposition to perceived liberal or globalist agendas (Baxi, 2017; Terman & Búzás, 2021).

In recent decades, human rights discourse has become increasingly personalised and ideologically segmented, as individuals, advocacy groups, and media outlets encounter, select, and circulate rights claims through politically differentiated information environments (Hintz et al., 2018). The rise of social media platforms in the 2010s further amplified this tendency by enabling actors to disseminate rights claims aligned with their ideological preferences (Meriläinen & Vos, 2013; Sharma et al., 2017). As a result, progressive actors have often highlighted LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, climate justice, and minority protection as central human rights concerns, whereas conservative actors have more frequently emphasised religious freedom, free speech, national sovereignty, and opposition to abortion. These patterns illustrate how universal rights language is increasingly attached to competing ideological agendas.

This segmentation reflects broader shifts toward individualism, political polarisation, identity-based politics, and populist backlash. As media environments have pluralised, ideologically differentiated outlets have increasingly articulated distinct interpretive frames rather than converging on a shared understanding of human rights. Right-wing populist movements have further intensified this process by reinterpreting human rights through nationalist, anti-globalist, and exclusionary lenses. In this reframing, rights language is selectively invoked to defend sovereignty, religious traditionalism, and national identity, while claims related to migrants, reproductive freedom, and LGBTQ+ protections are often delegitimized (Baxi, 2017; Reuter & Frick, 2024; Terman & Búzás, 2021; Terman & Byun, 2022).

Recent global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have further demonstrated how competing ideological camps invoke human rights to defend divergent priorities such as public health, individual liberty, economic stability, and state authority (Cheng, 2022; Koo, 2022; Peng, 2022). These developments suggest that human rights contestation should not be understood simply as a rejection of human rights, but as a process through which different actors redefine which rights, groups, and threats deserve priority. In South Korea, North Korean human rights exemplify a particularly important fault line: conservative media have often framed them as critical violations requiring international attention, whereas progressive media have tended to approach them more cautiously in relation to inter-Korean dialogue and peace politics (Chung, 2009; Kim & Noh, 2011; Koo & Kim, 2016). While such contestation can weaken normative consensus, it can also create opportunities to reassess the boundaries and priorities of human rights (Koo & Murdie, 2022).

Contested rights literature and the role of political leanings

We introduce the notion of contestation of human rights, emphasising how their meanings and boundaries are continually challenged and redefined. Films and other forms of art are increasingly seen as channels through which rights are articulated and disseminated (Gupta, 2022; Nash, 2018; Tascon, 2012). Similarly, the growing attention to sports has positioned athletes as figures deserving dignity and rights (Giulianotti, 2014; Messing et al., 2021; Tuakli-Wosornu & Kirby, 2022). Domestic processes, particularly ideological competition, significantly drive this conflict-laden diffusion of human rights. Ideological cleavages frequently emerge as a key source of contention, exemplified by debates surrounding labour rights (Moravcsik, 2009; Mutua, 2017). Despite the universalistic aspirations of human rights, their practical interpretation often aligns with the policy priorities of left-wing or centre-left political ideologies (David, 2020; Engle, 2006). For example, the recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals as deserving fundamental rights remains highly controversial and is often tied to the level of political consensus within national contexts. In South Korea, for instance, strong opposition from Protestant churches against LGBTQ+ rights and anti-discrimination laws highlights the deep-rooted ideological and cultural conflicts that shape this debate.

The study of human rights in the media has uncovered consistent ideological patterns that mirror broader societal divisions (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018; Engel, 2013; Pöyhtäri et al., 2021). Scholars observe that liberal media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, prioritise narratives centred on social justice, systemic inequality, and collective rights (Caliendo et al., 1999; Cole, 2010; Krumbein, 2017). These outlets often frame human rights violations within a global context, emphasising international solidarity and institutional accountability.¹ Conversely, conservative outlets, including *The Wall Street Journal*, frequently underscore themes of individual freedom, state sovereignty, and economic stability, framing human rights in terms of national interest and policy pragmatism (Goldman et al., 2024). For instance, during international crises, left-leaning outlets tend to focus on the humanitarian aspects, advocating for inclusive policy solutions, while right-leaning outlets highlight economic and security implications, such as the costs of intervention or the risks posed by immigration (Carnibella & Wells, 2022; Chen et al., 2023).

In South Korea, however, left-leaning parties and their affiliated media exhibit a lower degree of internationalisation compared to their counterparts in other countries. Historically, the left and centre-left have prioritised domestic social, economic, and political issues, while the right and centre-right have focused more on international relations and diplomatic networks, particularly the South Korea–U.S. alliance. Consequently, the right has framed national reunification within the broader context of global society and the pursuit of international recognition, whereas the left has viewed it primarily as a matter of direct dialogue between South and North Korea. This pattern contrasts with the U.S., where ideological divisions over global human rights issues follow an opposite alignment.

Research indicates that newspapers often prioritise specific human rights issues based on their ideological leanings (Eilders, 2000; Engel, 2013; Sanford et al., 2016; Van Dijk, 1995). For example, Koo and Choi (2019) showed how media's political leanings accentuate divisions, particularly in the coverage of economic, social, and cultural issues,

including minority rights. Their analysis of over 100,000 South Korean newspaper articles reveals significant differences in how progressive and conservative outlets portray human rights, offering nuanced insights into the evolution of human rights narratives. However, this study is limited in that the claims regarding divisions between media outlets were not statistically validated due to the lack of sophisticated methodological techniques.

Our primary goal in this article is to rigorously examine how the political leanings of news media influence their coverage of human rights, focusing on South Korean news reports from 2017 to 2022. This study employs key methodologies of STM to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Progressive news outlets are more likely to highlight issues related to economic, social, and cultural rights, and minority protection, whereas conservative media are more inclined to emphasize civil and political rights, and global human rights.

Data and methods

Data

This study examines how human rights were framed and politicised in South Korea during the Moon Jae-in administration by analyzing patterns of coverage in major daily newspapers. The analysis spans from May 2017, when President Moon Jae-in took office, to February 2022, immediately before the March 2022 presidential election. Focusing on legacy newspapers as a central arena of elite political discourse, we collected articles from the official websites of four major national newspapers: *Chosun* and *Joon-gAng* on the conservative side, and *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang* on the progressive side. Using Python-based web crawling, we collected articles from the official websites of these newspapers that contained the Korean term for human rights (*‘ingwon’*).

While this study initially collected 55,732 news articles through web crawling, we then screened the initially collected articles and excluded irrelevant items according to three criteria. First, many articles focused on personnel announcements – such as the appointment of heads or senior officials of the National Human Rights Commission – without addressing substantive human rights issues. Second, reports on ceremonial events (e.g. award ceremonies) hosted by the Commission were excluded due to their limited relevance to human rights discourse. Third, articles mentioning personal names containing the same syllables as *ingwon* (*‘human rights’*), such as actor Kim In-kwon and musician Jeon In-kwon, were excluded. After this process, this study analyzed a total of 46,262 articles.

To optimise text mining outcomes, several preprocessing steps were applied to the collected articles. General procedures included the removal of symbols, numbers, and overly common words often found in newspaper articles, which were designated as stopwords. Because Korean is morphologically rich and newspaper articles contain many inflected forms, noun extraction is commonly used in Korean topic modelling to reduce sparsity and improve the interpretability of topics (Handler et al., 2016; Martin & Johnson, 2015). To facilitate this process in Korean, the Python library *kiwipiepy* was employed for morphological analysis and noun extraction.

Figure 1 presents the number of articles mentioning human rights during the Moon Jae-in administration. The descriptive trend shows an overall increase in human rights-

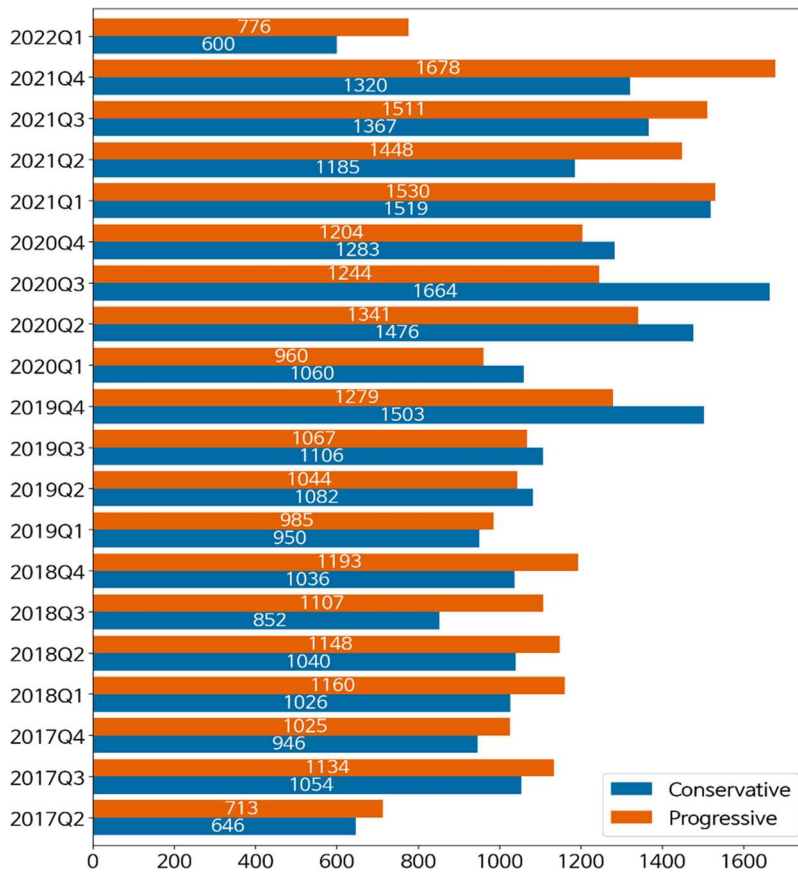


Figure 1. The number of newspaper articles mentioning human rights, 2017–2022.2

related coverage, with progressive outlets producing a larger volume of articles across most of the period. A notable increase appears in the fourth quarter of 2019, followed by a decline in the subsequent quarter. Coverage rises again in the second quarter of 2020, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened public attention to public health, state authority, and rights-related concerns. The number of articles declines in the first quarter of 2022, although this pattern should be interpreted cautiously because the dataset ends in February 2022. Conservative outlets produced more human rights-related coverage than progressive outlets from the fourth quarter of 2019 through the fourth quarter of 2020, a period marked by heightened attention to judicial and prosecutorial processes. These descriptive patterns provide an initial overview of temporal and ideological variation in coverage, while the STM analysis below examines whether such variation corresponds to systematic differences in topic prevalence.

Structural topic model

Text mining builds on the assumption that textual content can be understood through its underlying statistical patterns (Turney & Pantel, 2010). With the explosive growth of digital texts and computational progress in recent years, text mining has become an

interdisciplinary field that seeks to extract meaningful information and uncover hidden patterns from large volumes of unstructured textual data. Scholars have actively applied text mining in human rights research (Bagozzi & Berliner, 2018; Fariss, 2019; Koo & Choi, 2019), while researchers in economics and accounting - fields traditionally grounded in quantitative and structured data - have also used text mining to develop indicators for forecasting economic trends and to generate insights in budget studies (Baker et al., 2016; Shirata et al., 2011).

Among various text mining techniques, this study employs topic modelling, which is well suited for analyzing large collections of documents. Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) is one of the most widely used topic modelling approaches. It treats documents as mixtures of latent topics and topics as probability distributions over words (Blei et al., 2003). In topic modelling, a corpus is constructed from the documents under analysis, and the model identifies recurring patterns of word co-occurrence across documents. Based on these patterns, topics - latent variables represented by sets of words with high probabilities of appearing together - are estimated, and each document is represented as a mixture of these topics. Topic modelling is particularly useful for complementing qualitative interpretation by identifying recurring patterns in large corpora that would be difficult to examine manually (Boyd-Graber et al., 2017; DiMaggio et al., 2013).

In this study, we use STM among various topic modelling approaches (Bail et al., 2017; Curry & Fix, 2019; Roberts et al., 2014). Unlike earlier topic models that do not directly incorporate document-level metadata into the estimation of topic prevalence, STM allows researchers to estimate how topic prevalence - the proportion of each topic in a document - varies as a function of observed covariates (Roberts et al., 2016). STM can also model topical content, or the distribution of words within topics, when researchers specify content covariates. This makes STM particularly valuable in media and communication studies, where researchers are often interested in understanding how public discourse, media coverage, or user-generated content varies in relation to social, political, or cultural contexts (Chandelier et al., 2018; Walter & Ophir, 2021).

In this study, the political orientation of the media outlet is used as the main topic prevalence covariate and is coded as a binary variable: 0 = progressive and 1 = conservative. Accordingly, the key quantity of interest is the estimated prevalence of each topic within each document, defined as the expected proportion of a document devoted to that topic - a continuous variable bounded from 0 to 1. This allows STM to model associations between media ideology and topic prevalence, rather than assuming the same topic prevalence structure for all documents as in conventional LDA. As illustrated in Figure 2, STM estimates the topic distribution θ_d for each document using a logistic normal distribution, which allows topic proportions to vary systematically according to document-level covariates (Roberts et al., 2016). In this framework, document-level covariates such as publication date, media source, or author characteristics can be incorporated into the estimation of topic prevalence, and, when specified, topical content. In the present study, this feature enables us to examine whether conservative and progressive outlets differ systematically in the expected prevalence of specific topics.

By leveraging this approach, STM makes it possible to estimate and visualise how observed document-level covariates are associated with the prevalence of specific topics across the corpus. This enables hypothesis testing regarding whether political orientation is linked to systematic differences in topic usage. The integration of covariates

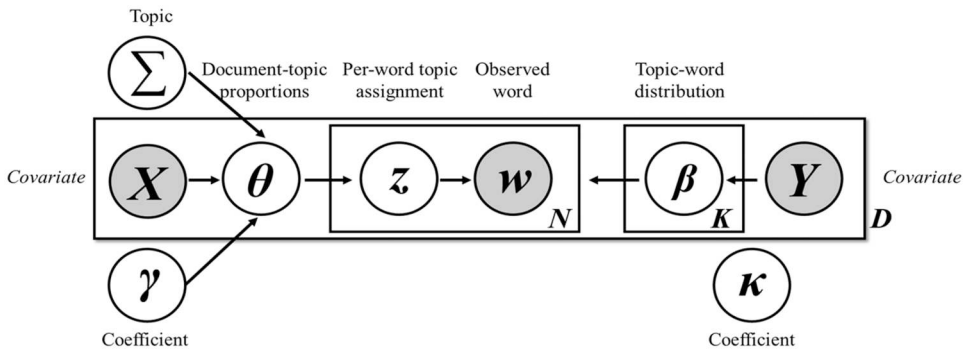


Figure 2. Graphical notions for STM. (Source: Roberts et al., 2016).

into the STM framework enhances the explanatory value of topic modelling by bridging unsupervised learning with the inferential logic of statistical analysis, while still requiring substantive interpretation of the estimated topics.

Results

We selected the number of topics by comparing models with different topic numbers using diagnostic metrics such as semantic coherence, held-out likelihood, and residuals. In this study, after comparing each metric for different topic numbers, we determined that 27 topics provided the best balance between diagnostic performance and substantive interpretability. By utilising metadata in the STM, the study aims to examine whether polarisation in human rights reporting can be observed based on the political orientation of the media, and if discrepancies are found, to identify which issues contribute to such polarisation.

Table 1 clusters the 27 topics into four categories: civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, minority rights, and global human rights. This categorisation builds upon the framework provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2012) with several modifications. Widely recognised as the most comprehensive and authoritative reference, the OHCHR document translates the broad principles of human rights into measurable, analytically robust standards. It classifies human rights into key domains – civil and political rights; economic, social, and cultural rights; and the rights of specific groups – while offering clear methodologies for evaluation and implementation. Drawing from this universal human rights framework, we organised the 27 topics into four categories based on both the substantive content of rights (civil and political; economic, social, and cultural; and minority rights) and their implementation mechanisms. Furthermore, a global dimension was integrated into the analytical framework to account for the dynamic interplay between global and national conceptions of human rights, as theorised in the literature (e.g. Landman, 2003).

First, civil and political rights address electoral and judicial processes, the rights to association and assembly, and personal information. Eleven topics from the total 27 (11/27, 40.74%) were classified as belonging to this first generation of human rights.

Table 1. Topic-keyword distribution in human rights articles.

	Topic keyword	Topic Name	Framework
1	society, politics, Korea, human, freedom, importance, democracy, citizen, value, reality, human rights, power, era, generation	Individual Freedoms in Society	Civil and Political Rights
2	peace, history, people, war, nation, president, Republic of Korea, world, country, unification, freedom, revolution, Korean Peninsula, government	Peace on the Korean Peninsula	
3	court, trial, lawyer, judge, ruling, justice, lawsuit, judiciary, sentence, charge, bench, chief justice, judgment, claim	Judicial Procedures	
8	president, candidate, politics, election, presidential election, people, Moon Jae-in, Blue House, Democratic Party, government, administration, political party, policy, reform, conservatism	Elections & Politics	
10	information, disclosure, media, individual, video, data, photo, article, internet, filming, phone, news, illegal, verification	Information & Privacy	
11	democracy, citizen, campaign, Gwangju, human rights, Seoul, organisation, solidarity, society, investigation, commemoration, torture, activity, truth	Democratization	
17	human rights, constitution, regulation, government, protection, rights, system, prohibition, decision, infringement, amendment, Human Rights Commission, freedom, guarantee	Duty to Protect	
19	parliament, National Assembly, representative, Democratic Party, candidate, committee, Democratic Party, chairperson, statement, bill, meeting, people, criticism, floor leader	Parliament & Legislation	
20	police, assembly, protest, National Police Agency, investigation, scene, Seoul, police officer, human rights, arrest, citizen, opposition, organisation, suppression	Protests	
26	prosecution, investigation, prosecutor, minister, Ministry of Justice, chief prosecutor, Corruption Investigation Office, reform, suspicion, inquiry, inspection, Supreme Prosecutors' Office, indictment, human rights	Prosecutorial Processes	
27	professor, Seoul National University, minister, graduate school, research, centre, student, activity, intern, Cho-Kuk, thesis, public interest, admission, president	Cho-Kuk Scandal	
4	coronavirus, hospital, patient, mental health, medical care, treatment, quarantine, health, infection, vaccine, isolation, doctor, confirmed case, hospitalisation	COVID-19	Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
5	worker, labour, labour union, employment, wage, company, regular position, work, duty, Samsung, workplace, dismissal, employee, factory	Labor Rights	
18	corporation, economy, society, policy, business, environment, industry, technology, government, development, support, market, climate, growth	Business & Economy	
22	movie, writer, story, Black people, broadcast, director, America, work, photo, beginning, actor, child, appearance, friend, love	Movies & Arts	
23	education, student, school, child, teacher, adolescent, kid, human rights, parent, class, abuse, grade, Ministry of Education, superintendent	Schooling & Rights	
6	victim, damage, sexual violence, investigation, perpetrator, violence, report, sexual harassment, sexual assault, woman, crime, punishment, assault, MeToo	Victims of Sexual Violence	Minority Rights
9	Human Rights Commission, investigation, Ministry of National Defense, military service, human rights, Korea Army, committee, unit, soldier, petition, military duty, sergeant, discharge, private	Human Rights in Military	
12	person with disabilities, support, facility, disability, welfare, community, centre, society, Seoul Metropolitan Government, human rights, resident, operation, elderly, housing	Disability Rights	
15	athlete, Olympics, sports, physical education, competition, human rights, representative, game, coach, leader, violence, Korean Sport & Olympic Committee, winter, Pyeongchang	Sport & Human Rights	
25	women, discrimination, male, minority, hatred, society, equality, feminism, woman, movement, gender, Korea, human rights, transgender	Women & LGBTQ+	

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Topic keyword	Topic Name	Framework
7	United States, president, Trump, China, diplomacy, Biden, Korea, summit, relations, talks, minister, security, policy, alliance, administration	Presidential Summit	Global Human Rights
13	North Korea, human rights, United Nations, North-South relation, government, Kim Jong-un, sanctions, United States, South Korea, talks, chairman, international, denuclearisation, leaflets	North Korean Human Rights	
14	Myanmar, government, Taliban, Afghanistan, Russia, human rights, United States, Syria, military regime, president, international, Iran, protest, United Kingdom	International Conflicts	
16	Japan, comfort women, grandmothers, victims, government, Japanese military, Korea, forced, resolution, agreement, human rights, damage, history, remembrance	Comfort Women	
21	refugee, Korea, foreigner, migration, family, entry, government, recognition, resident, stay, application, Vietnam, nationality, marriage	Refugees & Migrants	
24	China, Hong Kong, government, United States, protest, human rights, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Beijing, protesters, authorities, nation, democracy, Xi Jinping	Democratic Movement in China	

The topics with the highest topic weights include Individual Freedoms in Society (Topic 1), Elections and Politics (Topic 8), Judicial Procedures (Topic 3), and Prosecutorial Processes (Topic 26).

The second category concerns economic, social, and cultural rights, representing the second generation of human rights, which require government interventions and/or resource allocation for realisation. Five topics (5/27, 18.52%) are classified within this category, including COVID-19 (Topic 4), Labor Rights (Topic 5), Business and Economy (Topic 18), Movies and Arts (Topic 22), and Schooling and Rights (Topic 23).

The third category involves minority rights, which address dignity and non-discrimination for vulnerable populations in society. This category includes not only women and children but also the LGBTQ+ community and even sports players or athletes. The Universal Human Rights Framework acknowledges the need to protect socially vulnerable groups and individuals and to ensure non-discrimination against them. Five topics (5/27, 18.52%) belong to this category, including the Victims of Sexual Violence (Topic 6), Human Rights in the Military (Topic 9), Disability Rights (Topic 12), and Sports and Human Rights (Topic 15).

The fourth category concerns rights issues related to global society. These include globally sanctioned implementation mechanisms, bilateral talks and negotiations between nations, and conflicts and violence in world regions. Topics under this category may relate to citizenship or socioeconomic rights, but they require separate consideration due to their occurrence outside the country. Six topics (6/27, 22.22%) belong to this global dimension of rights, including Presidential Summit (Topic 7), North Korean Human Rights (Topic 13), International Conflicts (Topic 14), Comfort Women (Topic 16), Refugees and Migrants (Topic 21), and Democratic Movements in China (Topic 24).

Figure 3 illustrates the dynamic evolution of media coverage of human rights in South Korea, highlighting differences between progressive (in orange) and conservative outlets (in blue). The Y-axis represents the expected topic proportions, while the X-axis tracks the time dimension measured by quarters during the Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022).

Figure 3 highlights the divergent coverage patterns between progressives and conservatives across various rights issues. Civil and political rights, in particular, exhibit notable disparities. For example, coverage of Prosecutorial Processes (Topic 26), which involves the roles of criminal justice institutions like the Prosecutors' Office as rights advocates, began relatively uniform in 2017 and 2018. However, the gap between progressive and conservative outlets widened significantly in 2019 and 2020, with progressives advocating for curbing the perceived abusive power of the Prosecutor's Office, while conservatives reaffirmed the legitimacy of its mandates. This divergence remained pronounced throughout the observation period, with conservative outlets consistently allocating a higher proportion of their coverage compared to their progressive counterparts.

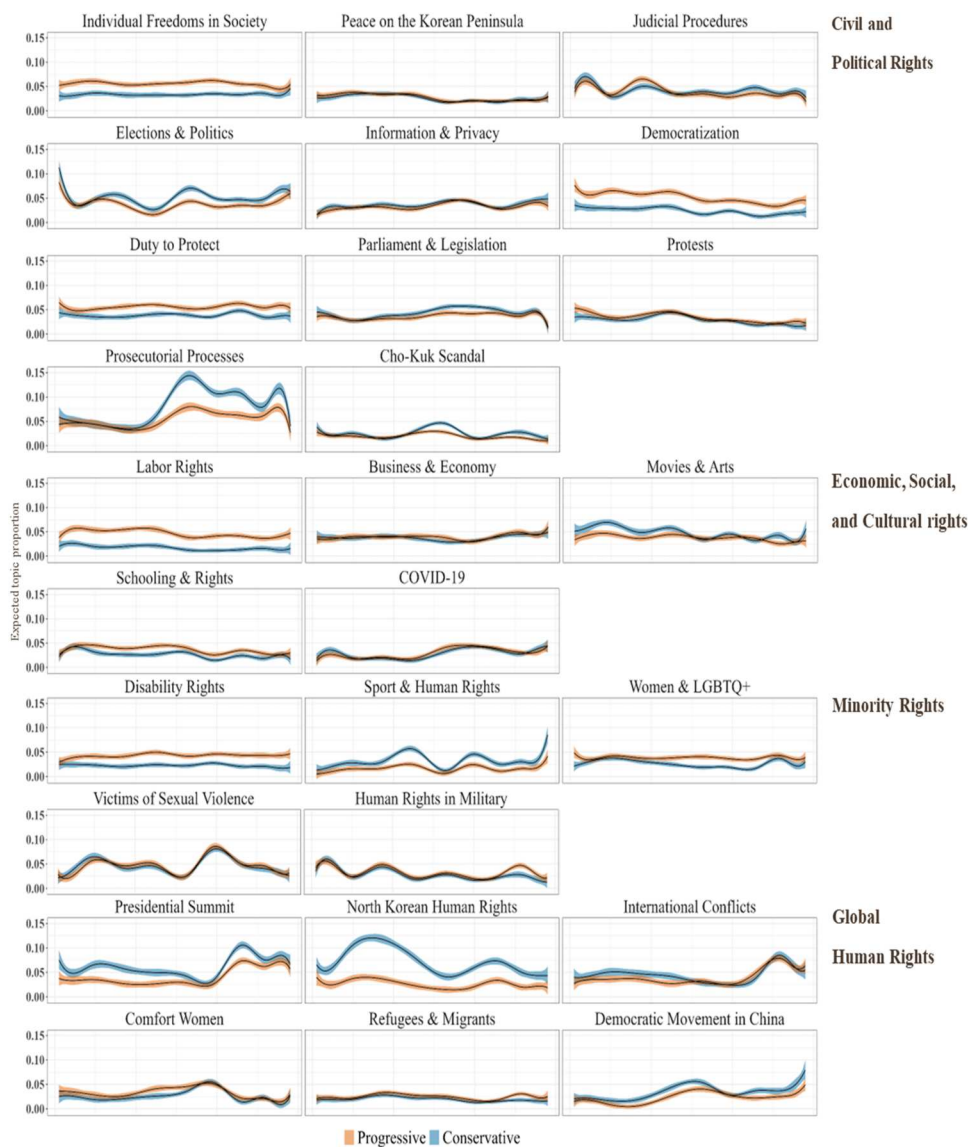


Figure 3. Topical trend of human rights issues.

A similar pattern is observed for Elections and Politics (Topic 8), where conservative outlets consistently display higher topic prevalence. This topic, comprising keywords related to presidential governance, the ruling progressive party, and elections, suggests that conservative newspapers devoted more coverage to themes surrounding elections and executive politics during the period. In light of prior research showing that conservative media in South Korea frequently frame progressive administrations and ruling parties more skeptically (Kim et al., 2019; Lee & Park, 2018; Park, 2020), the greater prominence of this topic may be interpreted as reflecting a greater emphasis on contested political issues.

In contrast, progressive outlets led the coverage of topics such as Individual Freedoms in Society (Topic 1), Democratization (Topic 11), and the Duty to Protect (Topic 17). Individual Freedoms in Society emphasises democratic values, civic participation, and political engagement, while Democratization encompasses narratives of democratic uprisings and truth-seeking efforts, including those related to the Gwangju Uprising in 1980. For both topics, progressive media ran significantly more stories than their conservative counterparts, highlighting their emphasis on promoting democratic values, fostering civic participation, and advocating for the restoration of historical justice. Duty to Protect also appears to be a topic more frequently covered by progressive outlets compared to conservative ones. This topic highlights the government's responsibility in preventing rights infringements, with particular emphasis on constitutional protections and the role of the national human rights commission.

Figure 3 highlights significant disparities in media coverage of economic, social, and cultural rights. Progressive outlets consistently prioritised Labor Rights (Topic 5) more than their conservative counterparts, as indicated by substantially higher topic proportions throughout Moon Jae-in's presidency. The keywords associated with Labor Rights include workers, unions, employment, and compensation. A similar trend is evident in the coverage of Schooling and Rights (Topic 23), where progressive outlets consistently took the lead. This topic primarily addresses students' rights in schools, which are frequently depicted in both media and academic literature (Kim, 2019; Kwon et al., 2017) as being in tension with teachers' authority. In South Korea, the issue is frequently framed not simply as a matter of rights protection but as a source of broader social tension. An emphasis on students' rights and freedom of expression is often perceived as contributing to classroom disorder, including incidents of violence or a lack of respect toward teachers and their authority. In contrast, conservative media devoted more attention to artistic genres such as movies, novels, and photographs compared to progressive outlets. Notably, civil rights movements, particularly those associated with African Americans, emerged as a central theme in this artistic coverage.

Regarding minority rights, progressive outlets demonstrated a stronger focus on women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights (Topic 25), and disability rights (Topic 12). In contrast, conservative outlets emphasised rights associated with athletes and sports players (Topic 15). Notably, the rights of sports players have gained recent attention, despite being insufficiently addressed in key international human rights documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Interestingly, conservative media have brought this emerging aspect of rights protection to the forefront.

Global human rights remain a contentious domain between progressive and conservative media outlets. A striking disparity is evident in coverage of North Korean Human Rights (Topic 13). In 2005, when North Korea officially admitted to possessing nuclear weapons, conservative media strongly condemned these provocative actions and called for both national and international efforts to address human rights abuses in North Korea (Koo & Kim, 2016). Ever since, North Korean human rights have remained a central focus of scrutiny for conservative media. In contrast, progressive outlets provided relatively limited attention to these issues, emphasising the importance of strengthening peace on the Korean Peninsula and avoiding actions that might provoke North Korea. In the Korean context, North Korea has consistently served as a fault line, sharply dividing conservatives and progressives in their perspectives on human rights. Given the ideological alliance between China and North Korea, it is unsurprising that conservative outlets place greater emphasis on conflicts, protests, and human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and mainland China. This focus is reflected in their consistently higher coverage of Democratic Movement in China (Topic 24).

Human rights issues frequently emerge as key topics during presidential summits or other governmental negotiations. The analysis of Presidential Summit (Topic 7) reveals that conservative media are more inclined to report on rights-related issues arising from talks between the South Korean government and the US. This pattern may reflect the tendency of conservative outlets to connect human rights discourse to foreign relations, alliance politics, and international negotiations.

Figure A1 illustrates the extent to which progressive and conservative news outlets differ in their coverage of the four dimensions of human rights discussed earlier. Distinct patterns emerge in the coverage of economic, social, and cultural rights, minority rights, and global human rights: progressive media predominantly focus on economic, social, and cultural rights as well as minority rights, whereas conservative outlets emphasise global human rights. However, this distinction is less pronounced in the domain of civil and political rights. While progressive outlets led coverage in the earlier period, conservative outlets took the lead during the later years of the Moon administration.

Figure 4 presents estimated differences in topic prevalence by media ideology. A confidence interval that does not include zero indicates a statistically significant difference in expected topic proportions between progressive and conservative outlets. This method allows for testing the hypotheses regarding whether the observed differences in coverage by media outlets with distinct political orientations are statistically significant. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the topics that visually showed differences during the analysis period were further validated by statistically significant variations. Table A1 presents the statistical results corresponding to Figure 4.

In the domain of civil and political rights, among the 11 topics, four (36%) were more strongly associated with conservative media outlets, while three (27%) were more likely to be highlighted by progressive newspapers. This suggests that civil and political rights were internally differentiated by subtype, rather than dominated by either ideological camp. In contrast, within the areas of economic, social, and cultural rights and minority rights, each comprising five topics (total 10 topics), four and two topics respectively showed stronger associations with progressive media. Notably, no topics within these categories exhibited statistically significant associations with conservative news outlets. Regarding global human rights, three out of six topics (50%) were more prominently

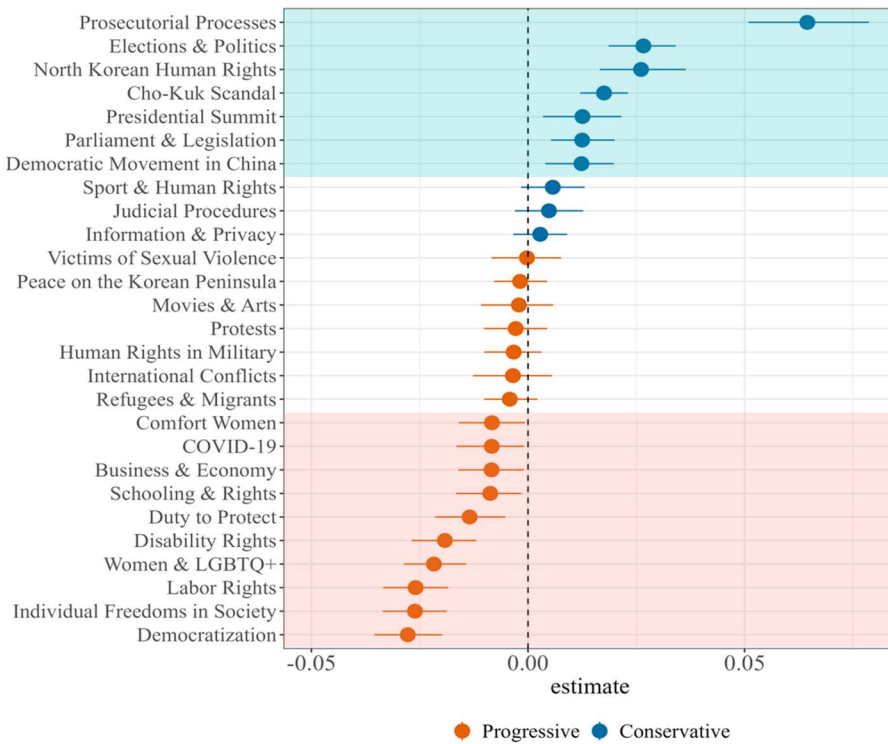


Figure 4. Contrast in topical prevalence by political orientation.

covered by conservative outlets, whereas only the comfort women topic was significantly associated with progressive media. Taken together, these results broadly support the hypothesis proposed in this study, suggesting that civil and political rights, along with global human rights, tend to receive greater emphasis in conservative newspapers, whereas economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as minority rights, are more frequently highlighted by progressive outlets.

The polarised nature of media coverage is evidenced not simply by the presence of differences, but by the systematic and structured division in topic emphasis. Of the 27 topics identified, a substantial number are more strongly associated with either progressive or conservative outlets, suggesting limited overlap in the relative emphasis placed on certain issues. Conservative-leaning newspapers exhibited a higher estimated probability of covering topics such as North Korean human rights and prosecutorial processes, whereas progressive-leaning outlets were more likely to be associated with topics like labour rights, women and LGBTQ+ rights, and other minority issues. This pattern, identified through structural topic modelling, reflects two largely distinct media agendas, each aligned with divergent political worldviews and values. The strong association of certain issues with one media orientation illustrates structured polarisation, rather than random variation or marginal difference.

These findings suggest that South Korea's media landscape exhibits a dual structure of human rights discourse, with topic emphasis systematically aligned with the political orientation of each outlet. Notably, conservative outlets in South Korea show greater

attention to global human rights topics – a pattern that contrasts with findings from U.S. media, where progressive outlets more often frame such issues as urgent moral imperatives (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005; Kenix & Jarvandi, 2019; Manoff, 1998). Regarding civil and political rights, neither progressive nor conservative outlets show overall dominance, although each has specific areas of emphasis.

In sum, polarisation in South Korean human rights coverage is observed in the systematic, consistent, and mutually reinforcing separation of news values and agenda-setting between progressive and conservative newspapers. This dual structure supports our interpretation that the observed patterns reflect polarisation in the media's approach to human rights, rather than isolated or random differences in coverage.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper demonstrates how human rights discourse becomes politicised and polarised through domestic media coverage. Domestic actors do not always contest human rights by explicitly rejecting them. More often, conservatives and progressives diverge in the categories of rights they emphasise, the groups they recognise as rights-bearing subjects, and the political contexts in which they invoke human rights. These differing priorities can generate competing understandings of human rights, legitimising some sets of rights while marginalising others.

Our analysis of South Korean daily newspapers during the Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022), using STM, reveals clear distinctions in how progressive and conservative media allocate attention to human rights issues. Progressive outlets placed greater emphasis on economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as minority rights, including labour, women's, and LGBTQ+ rights. Conservative outlets devoted greater attention to global human rights issues, including North Korean human rights, and to selected civil and political rights, particularly those related to procedural protections. At the same time, progressive newspapers also showed greater attention to certain civil and political rights, especially individual freedoms and democratic rights.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of the global diffusion of human rights, as they underscore the role of contentious domestic processes in challenging and reshaping international human rights norms and standards. Central to this dynamic are the stark differences between progressive and conservative media outlets in the kinds of human rights issues they emphasise. As Hopgood (2013) and Sikkink (2017) argue, the politicisation of human rights at the domestic level can significantly complicate the implementation of international human rights frameworks. Recognising and analyzing these ideological differences is therefore essential to understanding how domestic discourse shapes the broader landscape of human rights advocacy and interpretation. Although global human rights norms continue to diffuse, they are far from omnipotent; rather, they are continually contested, negotiated, and reconfigured through domestic political and social processes.

While STM identifies systematic cross-outlet differences in topic prevalence and thematic structure, it cannot by itself adjudicate the evaluative valence or stance through which those issues are articulated. Accordingly, we interpret the ideological implications of these topic differences in light of prior scholarship and the specific political and media contexts of South Korea, rather than as direct model-based estimates of evaluative tone.

Future research could strengthen this inference by triangulating topic prevalence with complementary measures of stance, such as sentiment analysis and targeted frame coding with reliability checks.

The polarisation of human rights at the domestic level has the potential to complicate global human rights discourse and institutions in multiple ways (Cole & Ramirez, 2013; Risse & Sikink, 1999; Zhou, 2015). For example, the treatment of North Korean human rights at UN forums clearly illustrates this divide: progressive South Korean governments often withdraw support for UN-led resolutions on North Korean human rights, while conservative governments actively endorse them (Mosler & Chang, 2019). This intra-national divergence reveals the extent to which human rights issues – especially those related to international accountability – are shaped by domestic political polarisation. Similarly, debates over ILO-led labour reforms reflect persistent domestic tensions over the legitimacy and scope of workers' rights, including the rights to association and assembly and the empowerment of labour unions. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate how domestic political and media dynamics can fragment global human rights consensus and impede coordinated international action.

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the growing literature on the relationship between political ideology and human rights by highlighting the role of legacy newspapers in complicating the global diffusion of human rights norms (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Krumbein, 2017; Maier, 2021). More importantly, it seeks to theorise the cultural and institutional processes through which political orientation increasingly shapes public understanding of human rights (Joshi & Kay O'Dell, 2017; Loveless, 2009; Swindle, 2023). The paper engages with broader forces that have intensified the contestation of human rights, including political polarisation, right-wing populism, the segmentation of discourse through social media and echo chambers, and external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Pérez-Curiel, 2020; Schroeder, 2019; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024).

Theoretically, we emphasise that divergent understandings of human rights are grounded in distinct value frameworks (Djupe et al., 2014; Mutua, 2017). Progressive media tend to emphasise social justice, sensitivity to inequality, and democratic accountability, while conservative media prioritise law and order, national security, and state sovereignty. These contrasting value systems shape how different political camps construct human rights agendas. Progressive outlets focus on an expanded rights framework, highlighting economic justice and the equal rights of marginalised individuals and social groups. In contrast, conservative outlets emphasise rights aligned with classical liberal principles, such as religious freedom and freedom of speech. Thus, the contribution of this study lies not only in its empirical rigour – demonstrated through the use of STM with document-level covariates – but also in its theoretical advancement of how and why human rights become contested terrains shaped by ideological commitments.

Further reflection is needed on how sovereign states assert cultural values and national priorities in response to global human rights norms. Within the global human rights regime – understood both as a set of norms and as an institutional arena – disagreements and conflicts frequently arise, often framed as clashes between the values and priorities of states. Some countries, such as China, have invoked notions of 'Asian values' to challenge the universality of human rights (Dallmayr, 2017). Others have employed culturally relativist arguments, drawing on cultural or religious traditions to justify the reframing – or even the restriction – of universal human rights principles (Aidonojie et al., 2021; Bagu, 2011).

Importantly, challenges to universality are not confined to non-Western contexts. As Jessica Whyte demonstrates, neoliberal ideologies have long shaped struggles over the meaning of human rights within Western democracies by privileging capitalist free markets over popular sovereignty and economic self-determination – principles historically championed by many postcolonial states. In this process, human rights discourse has increasingly emphasised individual civil liberties while marginalising collective, social, and economic rights, thereby narrowing the scope of universality itself. Navigating such tensions is inherently political, and compromise is often elusive. As Humphrey 1984, (p. 25) aptly noted, ‘in a sense nothing could be more political; and it would have been quite unreal had the great international debate on human rights not reflected the deep differences which divide nations and groups’.

Similar conflicts also arise within domestic settings, where disputes over human rights are shaped not by state sovereignty per se but by competing political ideologies, values, and priorities among domestic actors (Bob, 2010; Hildebrandt et al., 2013). In such contexts, media representations and public opinion serve as key arenas in which human rights are debated and contested. Just as politicisation in the international sphere is virtually inevitable, the polarisation of human rights discourse at the national level has likewise become a defining feature of their contemporary evolution. The contestation of human rights does not necessarily weaken the global human rights regime. A more balanced perspective recognises that the ongoing politicisation and polarisation of human rights can have both positive and negative consequences (Bailliet, 2024; LeBas, 2018).

A healthy level of ideological competition between media outlets can foster meaningful debate about the legitimate boundaries of human rights and the prioritisation of specific rights (Klein, 2011). Conservative coverage of human rights abuses abroad may pressure progressive actors to engage more seriously with global human rights concerns, while progressive coverage of women’s rights and LGBTQ+ rights can broaden public understandings of minority rights and social inclusion. At the same time, excessive polarisation can fuel backlash, reinforce exclusionary norms, and weaken cross-ideological support for rights protection (Jones, 2024). As a result, human rights are under increasing pressure in highly polarised political environments. Building compromise and fostering coalitions across ideological divides may therefore be necessary to prevent polarised rights discourse from undermining the broader legitimacy of human rights.

Notes

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/29/world/middleeast/un-human-rights-gaza-israel.html>
2. 20172Q and 20211Q were respectively composed of May and June, and January and February, which results in a smaller overall volume of data.

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Appendix

Table A1. Topic labels from human rights issues.

Topic	Label	Estimate	CI.lower	CI.upper	Tendency
1	Individual Freedoms in Society	−0.0261*** (0.0038)	−0.0335	−0.0187	Progressive
2	Peace on the Korean Peninsula	−0.0018 (0.0032)	−0.0078	0.0044	Progressive
3	Judicial Procedures	0.0048 (0.004)	−0.003	0.0127	Conservative
4	COVID-19	−0.0084* (0.0041)	−0.0165	−0.0009	Progressive
5	Labor Rights	−0.0259*** (0.0039)	−0.0334	−0.0184	Progressive
6	Victims of Sexual Violence	−0.0002 (0.0041)	−0.0084	0.0076	Progressive
7	Presidential Summit	0.0126* (0.0047)	0.0034	0.0215	Conservative
8	Elections & Politics	0.0266*** (0.004)	0.0186	0.0341	Conservative
9	Human Rights in Military	−0.0033 (0.0035)	−0.0101	0.0031	Progressive
10	Information & Privacy	0.0028 (0.0032)	−0.0034	0.0091	Conservative
11	Democratization	−0.0277*** (0.004)	−0.0354	−0.0198	Progressive
12	Disability Rights	−0.0192*** (0.0038)	−0.0268	−0.0119	Progressive
13	North Korean Human Rights	0.0261*** (0.0051)	0.0166	0.0365	Conservative
14	International Conflicts	−0.0035 (0.0047)	−0.0127	0.0056	Progressive
15	Sport & Human Rights	0.0057 (0.0037)	−0.0016	0.0131	Conservative
16	Comfort Women	−0.0083* (0.0039)	−0.016	−0.0007	Progressive
17	Duty to Protect	−0.0135** (0.0042)	−0.0214	−0.0052	Progressive
18	Business & Economy	−0.0084* (0.0039)	−0.0161	−0.001	Progressive
19	Parliament & Legislation	0.0125*** (0.0038)	0.0053	0.02	Conservative
20	Protests	−0.0028 (0.0037)	−0.0102	0.0045	Progressive
21	Refugees & Migrants	−0.0042 (0.0032)	−0.0102	0.0022	Progressive
22	Movies & Arts	−0.0021 (0.0043)	−0.0108	0.0058	Progressive
23	Schooling & Rights	−0.0087* (0.0038)	−0.0166	−0.0015	Progressive
24	Democratic Movement in China	0.0123** (0.004)	0.004	0.0198	Conservative
25	Women & LGBTQ+	−0.0217*** (0.0037)	−0.0287	−0.0143	Progressive
26	Prosecutorial Processes	0.0645*** (0.0071)	0.0509	0.0787	Conservative
27	Cho-Kuk Scandal	0.0176*** (0.0028)	0.0121	0.0231	Conservative

Note: CI means confidence interval. Estimated coefficients represent the difference in expected topic proportions between the Conservative and Progressive groups (*Conservative* − *Progressive*) with standard errors in parentheses. Positive values indicate higher topic prevalence in the Conservative group.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

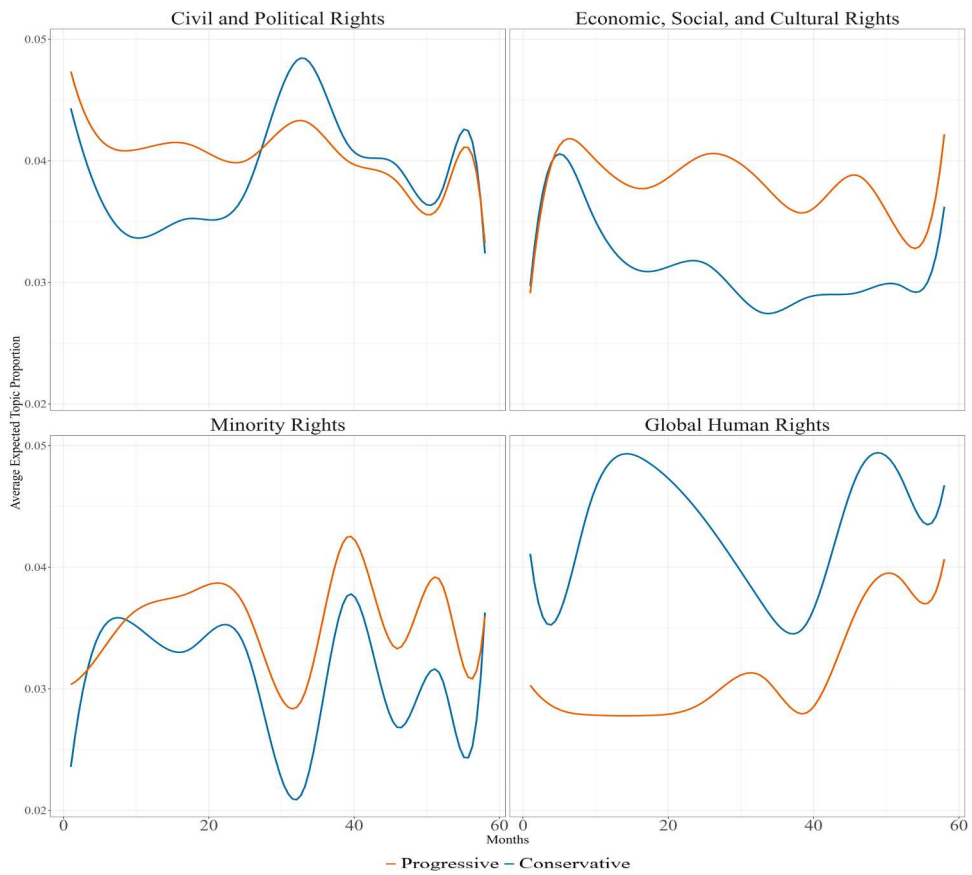


Figure A1. Topical change of four human rights themes.