The Strategic Determinants of U.S. Human Rights Reporting: Evidence from the Cold War

Nancy Qian

Harvard Academy, Brown University

David Yanagizawa

IIES Stockholm University[*]

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Abstract

This paper uses a country-level panel dataset to test the hypothesis that the United States biases its human rights reports of countries based on the latters' strategic value. We use the difference between the U.S. State Department's and Amnesty International's reports as a measure of U.S. "bias". For plausibly exogenous variation in strategic value to the U.S., we compare this bias between U.S. Cold War (CW) allies to non-CW allies, before and after the CW ended. The results show that allying with the U.S. during the CW significantly improves reports on a country's human rights situation from the U.S. State Department relative to Amnesty International.

1 Introduction

It is not uncommon for governments, non-governmental organizations and private firms to justify major economic decisions based on perceived human rights situations in countries that they deal with. In June, 2008, U.S. Commerce Secretary, Carlos Gutierrez, explained that the U.S. must continue its trade embargo on Cuba because the latter "systematically brutalizes its people".[1] For private firms, Blanton and Blanton (2007) found that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) decisions are correlated with U.S. State Department reports on the levels of human rights violations. Using human rights as a determinant of private investment and economic policy is not, *prima facie*, a cause for particular concern. However, critics of the U.S. State Department have complained that it unfairly biases its human rights reports against countries that have opposing ideologies and favors countries that are strategically valuable to the U.S.[2] It is perhaps surprising then that there are no studies in political economy examining the accuracy of human rights reports and the determinants for the potential biases of reporting agencies. This study aims to fill this gap by estimating the extent to which the U.S. State Department biases reports of human rights violations of developing countries depending on their strategic value to the U.S.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in economics in addressing the important question of whether primary information sources on human rights strategically biases their reports.[3] We build on numerous works in political science and international relations about the different factors associated with human rights reports. These are mostly qualitative. One exception is Poe, Carey and Vazquez's (2001) study, that examines factors that are correlated to the difference between Amnesty and U.S. human rights reports.

[1]Letters to the Editor, *Washington Post*, Monday, June 9, 2008; Page A16.

[2]For example, see Stohl and Carleton (1985), and Mitchell and McCormick (1988).

[3]The recent literature on media "slant" does not typically address the extent and the determinants of biases of primary source information that feeds the commercial media. Recent findings by Eisensee and Stromberg (2007) suggest that manipulating the media coverage of developing countries could have significant effects on the amount of aid that democratic governments such as the U.S. feel compelled to give. In this study, we are concerned that reporting agencies can manipulate the quality rather than the quantity of information covered by the commercial media.

They find that relative to Amnesty, the U.S. systematically reports its trading partners more favorably and "leftist" regimes less favorably. However, they cannot distinguish the possibility that the U.S. is biased against certain countries from the possibility that those countries do behave worse and that the U.S. has better information than Amnesty. A similar problem of omitted variables is faced by our study. Countries of strategic importance to the U.S. may actually have better human rights than other countries; and because they are U.S. allies, the U.S. has better access to information. In this case, the observation that alliance with the U.S. results in better human rights reports from the U.S. relative to other agencies will reflect superior information from the U.S. rather than strategic favoritism shown towards its allies.

The principal empirical contribution of this study is to address these difficulties. Like Poe, Carey and Vazquez (2001), we use human rights violations reports from Amnesty International as a measure of "unbiased" reports. And we interpret the difference between U.S. and Amnesty reports as the U.S. "bias". We use the Cold War (CW) and its abrupt end in 1990 for plausibly exogenous variation in strategic value to the U.S. During the CW, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. competed for alliance of developing countries. This competition effectively ended when the CW ended. Hence, we assume that the U.S. valued its allies more during the CW than afterwards. By comparing the U.S. bias for countries that ally themselves to the U.S. during the CW to those that do not, before and after the CW ended, we are able to measure the causal effect of strategic value to the U.S. on reporting bias. Our measure of alliance with the U.S. is the fraction of votes that a country voted in agreement with the U.S. in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) during 1985-89 on issues where the U.S. and U.S.S.R. disagreed. The differences-in-differences (DD) strategy addresses the problem that U.S. allies have better human rights in reality *and* the U.S. has better information for its allies. Note that our strategy does not require that Amnesty is unbiased in its reports. It only requires that any bias in Amnesty's reports does not change when the CW ends.

We use a panel data set of 112 low-income countries during 1976-2005 compiled from existing data on UNGA votes, human rights violations, and other country characteristics. The results show that the U.S. and Amnesty have similar reports for countries not allied with the U.S., and they show that these countries on average do not change over time. For U.S. allies, Amnesty reports them as similar to non-U.S. allies, with no changes over time on average. In contrast, the U.S. reports them more favorably during the Cold War, but show that they converge to non-Allies immediately after the Cold War. Interestingly, there is no difference between U.S. and Amnesty reports after the CW. The DD estimates show that if a country voted with the U.S. during to the Cold War 100% of the time, the U.S. will under-report human rights violations by 2.61 index points (roughly the differences between Zimbabwe and Sweden). Taken literally, this means that if Soviet-friendly Hungary had been as allied to the U.S. during the Cold War as U.S.-friendly Turkey, the U.S. would have under-reported Hungary's human rights violations by one index point relative to Amnesty, bringing it to the same level as Sweden.

The findings of this paper makes the point that the strategic determinants of biases of primary information sources is an avenue that should be seriously researched. Combined with previous studies which find that U.S. strategic variables are key determinants to U.S. foreign aid (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Kuziemko and Werker, 2006), our results suggest that the U.S. may manipulate its human rights reports in order to justify financially supporting its allies. Alternatively, they suggest that under-reporting of human rights violations of allied countries share the same political objectives as foreign aid. Depending on the extent to which firms and non-government organizations depend on the information provided by the U.S. State Department, this manipulation may have far reaching economic consequences.

This paper is organized as follows. Section two describes the background. Section three discusses the empirical strategy. Section four describes the data. Section five shows the empirical results. Section six offers concluding remarks.

2 Background

2.1 Human Rights Reports

The *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* are submitted annually by the U.S. Department of State to the U.S. Congress. The reports cover internationally recognized individual, civil, political, and worker

rights, as set forth in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.[4] Amnesty International, commonly known as Amnesty, is one of the only two international non-governmental organizations reporting on human rights abuses world wide. (The other is Human Rights Watch, a U.S. based organization). Officially, Amnesty has the same criteria and focus as the U.S. State Department in creating their Human Rights Reports. Amnesty defines its mission as "to conduct research and generate action to prevent and end grave abuses of human rights and to demand justice for those whose rights have been violated." Founded in the UK in 1961, Amnesty draws its attention to human rights abuses and campaigns for compliance with international standards. While Amnesty is often perceived as having left-leaning sympathies, the organization has actually received criticism for both alleged anti-Western and alleged pro-Western bias. Amnesty proclaims itself as an independent organization.[5]

2.2 Cold War

There is an extensive literature on the Cold War (CW) that is far beyond the scope of this paper to review. This section only seeks to show that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. competed strenuously for the alliance of developing countries. And that there is no reason for this competition to persist at the same intensity after the demise of the U.S.S.R. Hence, we interpret the end of the CW as a decrease in the strategic value of developing countries for the U.S.

Cold War is the term used to describe the state of conflict, tension and competition that existed between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. and their respective allies from the mid-1940s to the early 1990s. Direct military attacks on adversaries were deterred by the potential for mutually assured destruction using deliverable nuclear weapons. Instead, rivalry between the two superpowers was expressed through military coalitions, propaganda, espionage, weapons development, industrial advances, competitive technological development, and numerous proxy wars.

The CW spread to every region of the world, as the U.S., under the *Marshall Plan*, sought the "containment" and "rollback" of communism and forged myriad alliances to this end;and the U.S.S.R., under the *Molotov Plan*, fostered Communist movements around the world. The entire world was virtually split into alliance with either the U.S. or the U.S.S.R.[6] Europe was literally divided by the *Iron Curtain*, which divided East and West. There, the CW period was characterized by crises such as the Berlin Blockade (1948–49), the Berlin Crisis of 1961, and the NATO (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization*) exercise in November 1983. In the early 1950s, the U.S. expanded its *containment* into Asia, Africa, and Latin America, in order to counter revolutionary nationalist movements often led by Communist parties financed by the U.S.S.R.[7] In Africa and Central and South America, there were few official treaties. The CW often played a significant role through covert operations. Many countries in Northern Africa received Soviet military aid, while many in Central and Southern Africa were supported by the United States and/or its allies (e.g. France).[8]

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[4] http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/

[5] "We have a number of safeguards in place to protect our autonomy. We are: Independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion; democratic and self-governing; financially self-sufficient, thanks to the generous support of donations provided by individual members and supporters" For details, see http://www.amnesty.org/en/who-we-are/about-amnesty-international

[6] Some countries did not want to align themselves with either of the superpowers. The Non-Aligned Movement, lead by India, Egypt, and Austria, attempted to unite the third world against what was seen as imperialism by both the East and the West). See http://www.nam.gov.za/background/background.htm

[7] John Foster Dulles, a rigid anti-communist, aimed to "integrate" the entire noncommunist Third World into a system of mutual defense pacts, initiating the Manila Conference in 1954, which resulted in the SEATO pact that united eight nations (either located in Southeast Asia or with interests there) in a neutral defense pact. These alliances guaranteed the U.S. a number of long-term military bases in the Asia-Pacific (Byrd, 2003), which gave the U.S. significant military advantages during the Korean War (1950-53) and the Vietnam War (1959-75) (La Feber, 1991; Malkasian, 2001). This was soon followed by the Baghdad Pact (1955), later renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), uniting the "northern tier" countries of the Middle East—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan—in a non-communist defense organization. On the other side, countries such as Egypt, Syria, China, North Korea, and Vietnam chose to ally with the U.S.S.R.

[8] The U.S. involved itself in incidents such as the CIA-assisted removal of the Congo's Patrice Lumumba. And countries such as South Africa assisted the U.S. in funding insurgency movements in Soviet allied countries such as Angola and Mozambique during the 1970s. In Latin America, governments of countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay were overthrown or displaced by U.S.-aligned military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, the U.S. famously revealed itself to be covertly funding the Sandinistas in what was known as the Iran-Contra affair. Governments such as Peru, Columbia and Nicaragua faced problems of internal conflicts between communist and non-communist groups until the 1980s and 1990s. Famous revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevarra, and groups such as the Nicaraguan Sandinistas all received

The CW ended during 1989-91, when the Berlin Wall fell and the U.S.S.R. dissolved. For the purpose of our paper, we loosely interpret 1989-91 as the end of the CW.

3   Identification

The main identification issue when comparing countries that are of strategic value to the U.S. to countries that are not is that these two groups of countries may be different along other dimensions. For example, if countries that are valuable to the U.S. also have better human rights and are more willing to share information with the U.S., then an observed positive U.S. bias for these countries would reflect their actual superiority and the U.S.'s information advantage relative to Amnesty, rather than the U.S. showing favoritism. To address this problem, we exploit the variation in the strategic value of U.S. allies when the CW ended. We argue that competition with the U.S.S.R. caused the U.S. to highly value alliances with developing countries during the CW; and that the change in strategic value caused by the end of the CW is unrelated to any change in the countries themselves. Our strategy is conceptually similar to a differences-in-differences (DD) strategy where we compare the difference in human rights between the U.S. and Amnesty reports between countries that were allied with the U.S. and countries that were not, before and after the CW ended. Any differences between countries that do not change over time are controlled for by the comparison within countries over time. Any differences over time that affect all countries the same will be controlled for by the comparison across countries. Only the interaction of alliance with the U.S. and CW can be interpreted as plausibly exogenous.

We will have a continuous measure of U.S. alliance and yearly data from 1976-2005. Therefore, our first specification fully exploits all the variation in the data and investigate whether changes in the reporting bias for U.S. allies occurs when the CW ends. This specification also allows us to examine whether there are any pre-trends in how the U.S. may be biased towards its allies that may confound the DD estimates. Note that our measure of whether a country is an U.S. ally during the CW does not vary over time. Hence, we do not face any reverse causality problems that alliance may be affected by the CW ending.

$$U.S._{it} - Amnesty_{it} = \sum_{t=1976}^{2005} \beta_t(U.S.Ally_{ir} \times year_t) + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{irt} \qquad (1)$$

The difference in human rights between U.S. and Amnesty reports for country i in year t is a function of: the interaction between the extent to which it is allied with the U.S., $U.S.Ally_i$, and a year dummy variable, $year_t$; and year fixed effects, γ_t. The constant is omitted. Standard errors will be clustered at the country level. If strategic value due to the CW caused the U.S. to favorably bias its reports towards its allies, then $\beta_{1976-89} < \beta_{1990-2005}$. (Better human rights is reflected in lower scores).

To assess the magnitude and statistical significance of this effect, we then estimate the simpler specification:

$$\begin{aligned} U.S._{irt} - Amnesty_{irt} \quad = \quad & \alpha + \beta(U.S.Ally_{ir} \times ColdWar_t) \\ & + \rho U.S.Ally_{ir} + \gamma_t + \theta_{rt} + \varepsilon_{irt} \end{aligned} \qquad (2)$$

The difference in human rights between U.S. and Amnesty reports for country i in region r and year t is a function of: the interaction between the extent to which it is allied with the U.S., $U.S.Ally_{ir}$, and a dummy variable for the period 1976-89, $ColdWar_t$; the main effect for U.S. alliance, $U.S.Ally_{ir}$; region times year fixed effects, θ_{rt}; and year fixed effects, γ_t. Standard errors will be clustered at the country level. Note that this specification controls for the main effect of U.S. alliance rather than country fixed effects and has the added control of region-year fixed effects to control for differential changes over time across regions. The regions are Europe, East Asia and Pacific, Caribbean and Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and other. β is the effect of strategic value to the U.S. due to the CW on U.S. reporting bias. If the U.S. strategically favors its allies, then $\beta < 0$.

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support from the U.S.S.R. Tensions between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. peaked in Latin America during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) (Byrd, 2003).

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Our strategy does not require Amnesty to be truly unbiased. However, it requires that Amnesty does not change its bias when the Cold War ends. For example, if Amnesty favors left leaning countries during the CW and this favor disappears when the CW ends, then our estimates will overstate the true effect of strategic value to the U.S. on U.S. bias. In other words, the DD strategy fails only if the end of the CW also affected the reporting accuracy of the U.S. relative to Amnesty.

4 Data

For human rights violations, we use the Political Terror Scale (PTS). The PTS is an index constructed from human rights reports. Using the same rule, separate indices are constructed from Amnesty International reports and U.S. State Department reports.[9] Our measure of the U.S. bias is the difference between these indices from the two different sources. The PTS is based on a five-point scale with one being the best and five being the worst.[10]

This index is available for 183 countries over the period 1976-2006. This is not a balanced panel. A few countries are not reported for a few years. And some countries (typically former Soviet Republics) exist only after 1991. We include countries that existed both during and after the CW. Our reported estimates come from a sample where the Ukraine, Belarus and South Africa are excluded. The former were part of the U.S.S.R. before 1991. And the latter because it was "absent" from all UNGA sessions during the CW period we study. We further restrict the sample to country-year observations where the index is available for both Amnesty International and the U.S. State Department. Amnesty and the U.S. report identical PTS for 84% of the observations.

We construct a measure for U.S. alliance based on UNGA voting data generously provided by Erik Voeten[11]. For each year and each country, we calculate the fraction of votes that a country votes in agreement with the U.S. In order to capture relevant voting patterns we restrict the sample to resolutions where the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. voted in opposition of each other. Each year there are approximately 100-150 resolutions in the UNGA, of which approximately 70-90 resolutions per year are disagreed on by the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Our measure of alliance is the fraction of votes a country voted with the U.S. averaged over the period 1985-89.[12]

The two data sets are matched together at the country-year level. We restrict the sample to non-high income countries as defined by the World Bank. Our matched sample contain 112 countries for 30 years.

We divide the sample at the median country of the U.S. alliance distribution (which voted with the U.S. on 7% of the divided resolutions during 1985-89). Figure 1A plots Amnesty's PTS for U.S. allies and non-allies over time. The two groups appear similar, neither changing over time. Figure 1B plots U.S.'s PTS over time. It shows that the U.S. reports that human rights are gradually becoming worse in all countries over time during the CW. However, it consistently reports its allies more favorably. The bias which is represented as the gap between the two lines is constant over time during the CW, and disappears after the CW. This alleviates concerns that the empirical strategy will be capturing pre-trends in the extent that the U.S. biases reports for its allies.

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[9]See http://www.politicalterrorscale.org/about.html for details.

[10]Level 1: Countries operate under a secure rule of law. People are not imprisoned for their views and torture is rare or exceptional. E.g. Belize, 2000. Level 2: There is a limited amount of imprisonment for nonviolent political activity. However, few persons are affected and torture and beatings are exceptional. E.g. Czech Republic, 2000. Level 3: Imprisonment for political activity is more extensive. Politically-motivated executions or other political murders and brutality are common. Unlimited detention, with or without a trial, for political views is also commonplace. E.g. Albania, 2000. Level 4: The practices of level 3 affect a larger portion of the population and murders, disappearances, and torture are a common part of life. E.g. Angola, 2000. Level 5: The terrors characteristic of level-4 countries, encompass the whole population at level 5. The leaders of these societies place no limits 2 on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue personal or ideological goals. E.g. Sudan, 2000.

[11]The dataset is available (2008-09-01) at http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/ev42/UNVoting.htm

[12]The top three allies of the U.S. and the fraction of divided issues they voted with the U.S. durign 1980-84 are: Turkey (0.4), Belize (0.28) and Costa Rica (0.27). The bottom three allies are Mongolia (0), Lao PDR (0), and Czech Republic (0).

5   Empirical Results

The estimated coefficients from equation (1) and their 95% confidence intervals are plotted in Figure 2.[13] The figure clearly shows that during the CW, the U.S. favored its allies and this favoritism disappeared afterwards. This figure also shows that there are no visible pre-trends during the CW period which could confound the DD estimates. Table 1 shows the results from estimating equation (2). We first estimated this equation with U.S. reports and Amnesty reports as separate dependent variables. Column (1) shows that alliance with the U.S. has no effect on human rights reports from Amnesty, on average or during the CW. Column (2) shows that alliance with the U.S. has no effect on human rights reports from the U.S. on average. However, during the CW, being a full-time U.S. ally (voting with the U.S. 100% of the time) can improve a country's PTS report from the U.S. by 2.22 points. This estimate is statistically significant at the 10% level. Column (3) shows that alliance with the U.S. has no effect on the reporting difference between the U.S. and Amnesty on average. However, during the CW, being a full time U.S. ally will improve a country's PTS report from the U.S. by 2.62 points relative to Amnesty. This estimate is statistically significant at the 1% level. Since the most a country voted with the U.S. during the CW was 40% of the time (Turkey), the results are more meaningful if we interpolate them linearly. For example, Hungary voted with the U.S. only 2% of the time during the CW when its PTS score was two according to both Amnesty and the U.S. But if Hungary had voted with the U.S. as Turkey voted, the U.S. would have under-reported its PTS by approximately one index point relative to Amnesty, making it the same level as Sweden. Our estimates are robust to the inclusion of country-specific linear time trends. They are not reported for brevity.

5.1   Robustness

We consider the possibility that our estimates are also capturing the effects of the changes in American leadership. The pre-period, 1976-1990, was largely led by a Republican executive branch: Reagan during 1981-88 and George H. Bush during 1989-92. The end of the CW roughly coincided with a switch Clinton's Democratic presidency, which lasted from 1993 until 2000. To address this, we examine whether the U.S. alliance had a differential effect during the George H. Bush and Reagan administrations relative to the Carter administration (1977-1980) during the CW, and whether the George H. Bush and George W. Bush administrations (1990-92, 2001-2005) had a differential effects than the Clinton administration during the post CW period. We find that the effect of alliance does not differ between administrations during either periods.

6   Conclusion

This study presents evidence indicating that the U.S. shows significant favoritism towards countries that she values strategically. There is a caveat in interpreting the results. The empirical strategy fails if, after the Cold War, U.S. allies actually become worse *and* the U.S.'s information advantage relative to Amnesty disappears. There are no obvious reasons to think this is the case. But we leave it to future studies to address this identification problem directly. In the meantime, the empirical evidence provided here should hopefully make a convincing case that the accuracy of information we are receiving on human rights from primary sources are being strategically biased and that more research is needed on both the causes and the potentially far-reaching consequences of this bias. For example, future studies can investigate the extent to which this bias affects commercial media and information agencies, and financial decisions for firms, non-governmental organizations and governments.

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[13]We do not report the coefficients and standard errors due to space constraints.

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Figure 1A: Amnesty Human Rights Reports for U.S. Allies and Non-Allies
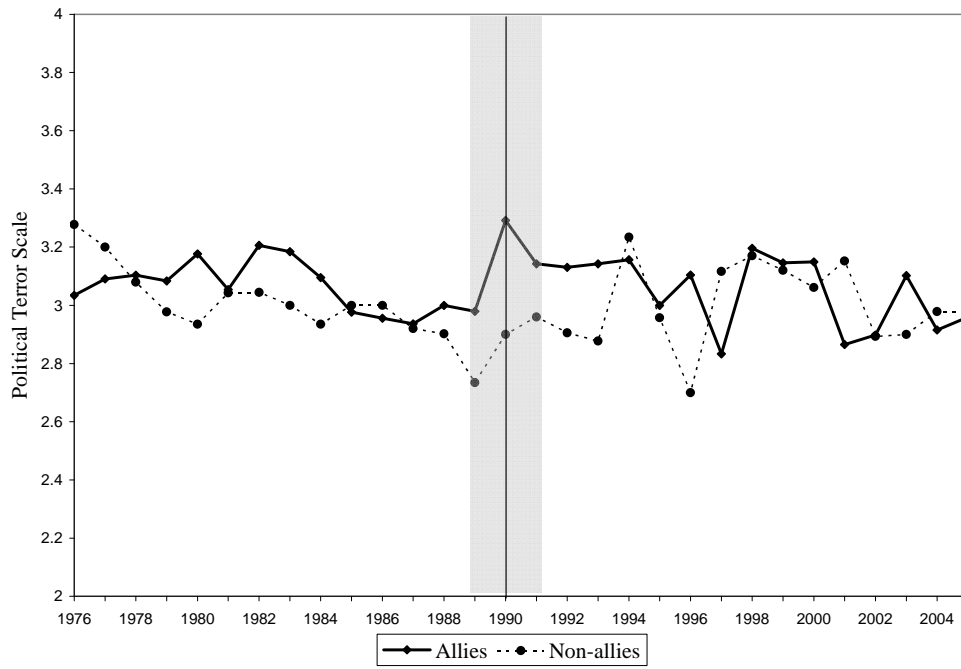

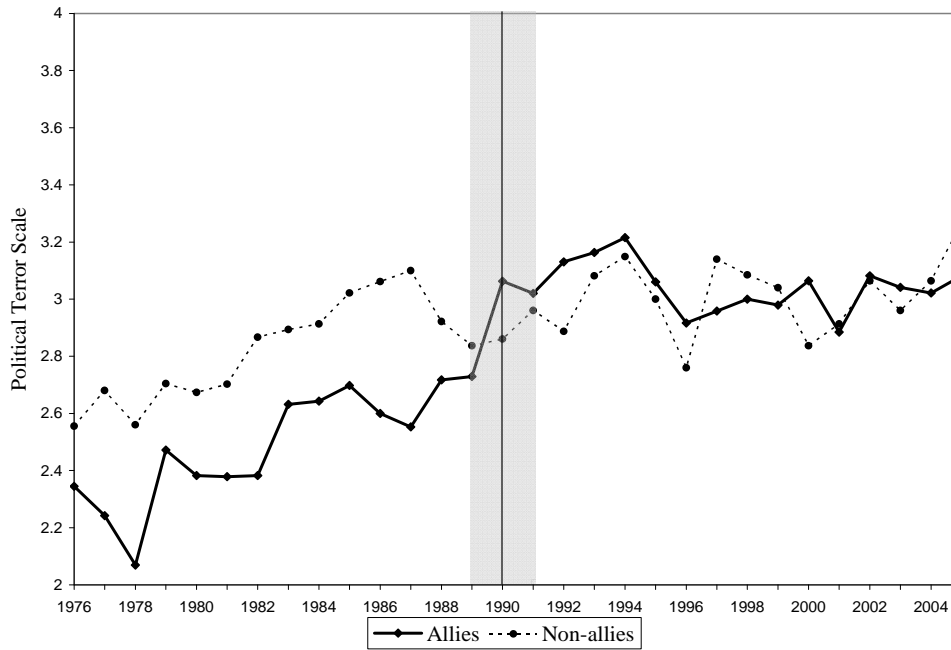Figure 1B: U.S. Human Rights Reports for U.S. Allies and Non-Allies

Figure 2: The Effect of U.S. Alliance on U.S. PTS – Amnesty PTS
The estimated coefficients of the interaction terms of U.S. alliance and year dummy variables
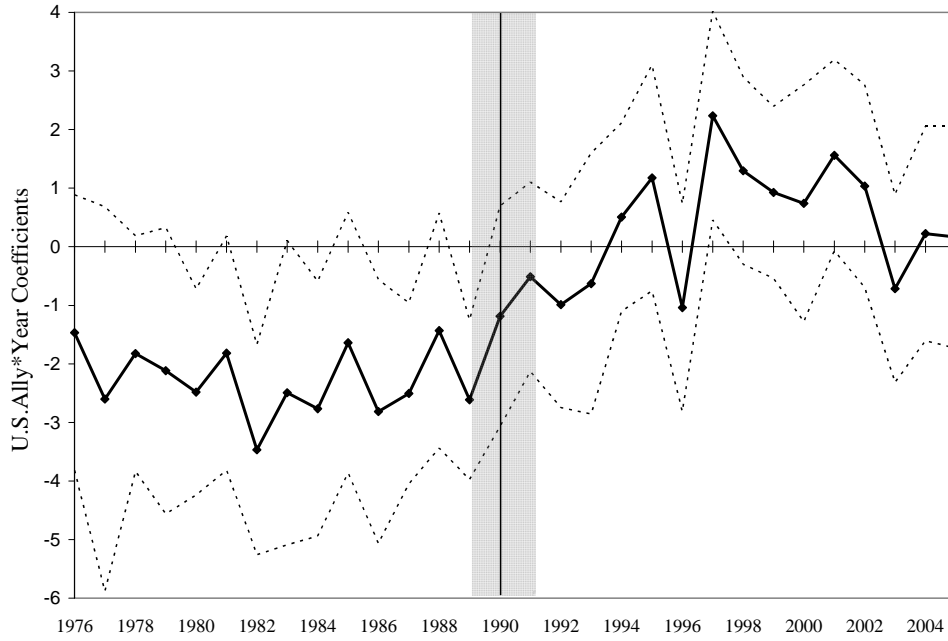and their 95% Confidence Intervals

Table 1: The Effect of Strategic Value to the U.S. on U.S. Reporting Bias
The coefficients of the interaction terms between U.S. alliance and a dummy variable for 1976-1989

Dependent Variable	(1) Amnesty Intl.	(2) U.S. State Dept.	(3) U.S. - Amnesty
U.S.Ally	0.100 (1.225)	0.405 (1.281)	0.305 (0.333)
U.S.Ally × ColdWar	0.387 (1.158)	-2.222* (1.295)	-2.610*** (0.517)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region-By-Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2676	2676	2676
R^2	0.08	0.10	0.15

Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the country level.
The sample consists of 112 developing countries with data from 1976-2005.
* Significant at 10%. ** Significant at 5%. *** Significant at 1%.