



Paying Attention to Human Rights in the 2008 Presidential Campaigns

Human rights issues have rarely, if ever, been a principal focus of political campaigns for President or even for Congress. This reflects the fact that human rights are often perceived to be matters involving people far away whose needs and interests have very little relevance to our own.

Over the past few years, however, human rights questions have played an increasingly central role in how the United States is perceived around the world. One of the rationales cited by President Bush for the war in Iraq, for example, was the need to establish a democratic state in the heart of the Middle East.

Many U.S. actions have colored the attitude of the international community toward America and thereby implicated U.S. national interests quite directly: the “unsigned” of the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court; the U.S. prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; the denial of habeas corpus to certain prisoners; revelations regarding U.S. use of torture. Moreover, the continuing saga of unstaunched death and destruction in Darfur, Sudan, has cast a pall over the reputation of every country that has failed to stop it.

One might assume that human rights would have been more central to the 2008 presidential campaigns to this point than in years past given the relationship of human rights controversies to US policy and interests—the fact, for example, that how the world regards this country can have a very direct impact upon America’s national

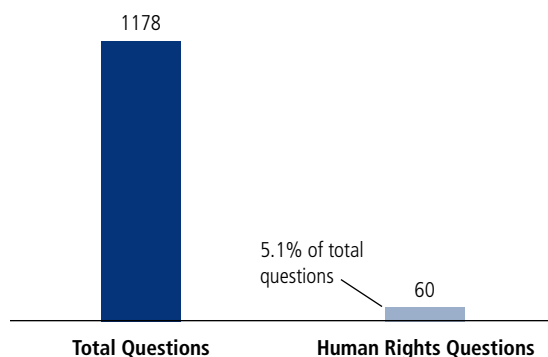
security and the need, in light of Iraq and Darfur, to clarify when in the future the United States should commit its blood and treasure to countering regimes that abuse human rights.

The Center for American Progress Action Fund tracked the percentage of times candidates for president were asked questions about human rights in the presidential debates through December 2007 and has sought to ascertain the positions of all active candidates on seven key human rights questions.

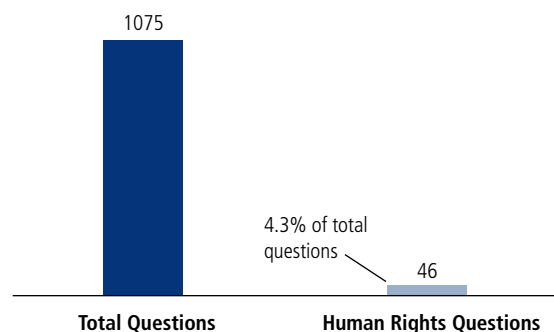
While we have no statistics from past campaigns with which to compare the current ones, we have determined that only about 5.1 percent of the questions posed to all candidates concerned human rights (using a generous interpretation of what constituted a human rights question) as contrasted, for example, with 8.6 percent about immigration, 10.7 percent about so-called “moral issues” (same-sex marriage, abortion, etc.), 15.6 percent about economic issues, and 18.1 percent about general political questions. Indeed, of 2,253 questions asked in all Democratic and Republican debates, only *one* concerned the International Criminal Court despite the fact that that court is beginning to undertake prosecutions and that its performance could arguably have a profound effect upon the need for future military interventions to stop genocide and crimes against humanity.

With many debates still to be held both during the primaries and the general election, to say nothing of press

QUESTIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES

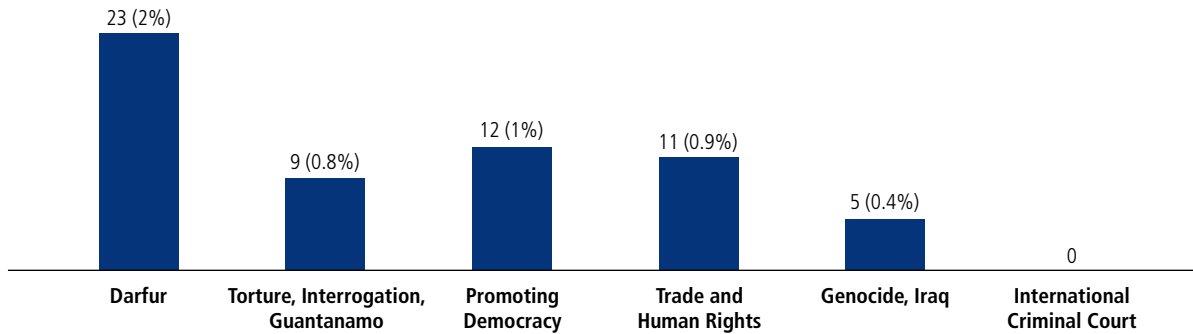


QUESTIONS FOR REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES



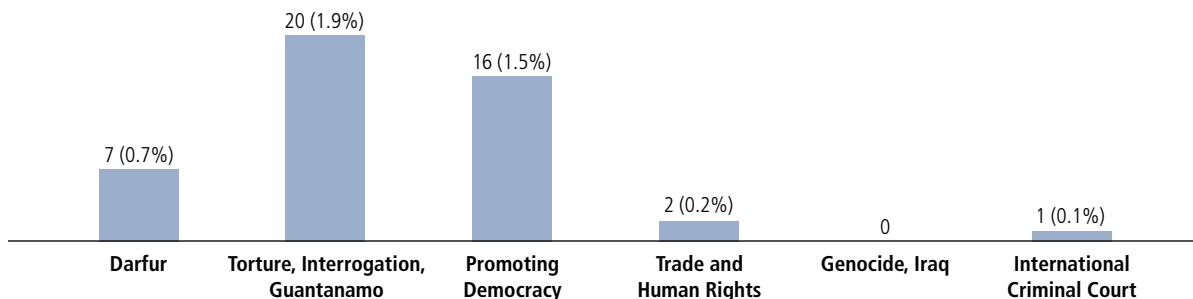
COMPARISON OF HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTIONS ASKED OF DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES

Questions for Democrats



**Percentages out of 1,178 total questions asked of the candidates at the Democratic Debates*

Questions for Republicans



**Percentages out of 1,075 total questions asked of the candidates at the Republican Debates*

conferences and one-on-one interviews, CAPAF believes that the national interest would be well-served if the media and other questioners were encouraged to ask candidates such questions as those we have tracked here, including the following:

- What should the United States do to stop the genocide in Darfur?
- When, if ever, should the United States engage in military action to stop genocide or ethnic cleansing?
- Should the United States close the prison camp in Guantanamo? If so, what should be done with the prisoners?
- Are there any circumstances when torture or extreme techniques of interrogation are appropriate?
- Should provisions regarding labor rights be included in future trade agreements?
- How can the United States best promote democracy abroad?
- Should the United States ratify the treaty on the ICC?

Other human rights questions that should be asked, but that we did not track specifically, include:

- Should habeas corpus be extended to prisoners at Guantanamo?
- Should the United States stop the practice of ‘extraordinary rendition’?
- How can the United States best promote human rights in places like China, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan?
- How would you maintain or restore America’s reputation as a human rights leader in the eyes of the world?
- Do you favor or oppose a moratorium on the death penalty in the United States?

Human rights may well never claim a top spot among issues Americans care about when it comes to electing presidents, but they are significant enough—even under some circumstances to the point of being matters of life and death—that they surely warrant more attention than they have to this point received. This study is designed in part to encourage that more robust attention.

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