THE COUNCIL FOR GLOBAL EQUALITY
ADVANCING LGBTQI+ INCLUSION IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

FACT SHEET

How the "Natural Rights" Framework Narrows Longstanding U.S. Human Rights Policy — and Its Impact on Global Standing

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With the reorganization of the Department of State, Secretary Rubio's vision for U.S. human rights policy has taken a drastic and dangerous turn. After establishing an "Office of Natural Rights" within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL), the State Department is poised to elevate a new, limited set of rights they see as God-given and enumerated within U.S. founding documents, particularly the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, rather than those enshrined in international human rights law. This framework is designed to create divisions within the longstanding human rights framework and negate the rights of certain peoples – particularly those from marginalized populations – or types of rights as political and partisan efforts that defy a supposed moral order. The ramifications of this shift dismantle universal claims to human rights, undermine U.S. credibility, and embolden the world's worst human rights abusers.

What does the Trump Administration mean when using "natural rights"?

- Defines rights as God-given and enumerated within U.S. founding documents, particularly the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, rather than rights grounded in international law, international consensus or evolving norms.
- Anchors freedom in "objective moral order" – placing an emphasis on certain interpretations of moral, Biblical values –

rather than individual liberty or social evolution.
- Posits "unalienable" and thereby "natural" rights – often limited to life, liberty, property, and religious freedom – as the rights associated with U.S. success, those that are acceptably promoted, and inherent to national sovereignty.
- Rejects longstanding international human rights documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), to discredit the universality and indivisibility of human rights.

What does this framework exclude from longstanding U.S. human rights policy?

- Distinguishes "unalienable" and/or "natural rights" from "constructed," "invented," or "special" rights, thereby delegitimizing calls to uphold protections of human rights within the areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights, protections for marginalized populations, and environmental rights, among others.
- Posits that rights outside of those considered to be "natural rights" are often instrumental and/or ideological policy goals subject to administration whims rather than rights with associated obligations attached.
- Places an emphasis on the "moral order of natural law," relegating sexual and reproductive rights and the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons outside of what is acceptable or moral and contrary to a supposed "natural human dignity."
- Undermines longstanding consensus on collective and community rights such as indigenous, workers', or gender equality protections.
- Ignores or subordinates calls for the protection of human rights to religious freedom and national security counterarguments.

How will the State Department use this framework in practice?

- Prioritizing "natural rights" concerns by DRL and the broader State Department that preference "religious freedom," "conscience rights," and "family values" as the core of rights promotion, including within the State Department's annual Country Human Rights Reports.
- Voting and redlining of resolutions at the UN will feature consistent opposition to resolutions or language on the right to health, right to water, sexual orientation/gender identity, family "diversity" and reproductive rights.
- Cutting or placing restrictions on programs supporting women's health, LGBTQI+ protection, environmental defenders, and others will be labeled as "moral clarity" and protecting the national sovereignty of other countries.

What are the consequences for U.S. global standing?

- **Multilateral Isolation:** The U.S. diverges from allies in the EU, Canada, and many countries in Latin America who support universal and indivisible human rights. At the UN, U.S. increasingly aligns with

Russia, China, and authoritarian states undermining universality of the UDHR.

- **Erosion of Moral Credibility:** The U.S.'s ideologically narrow definitions of rights weakens our ability to condemn repression or discrimination elsewhere, particularly when the U.S. is seen as only protecting the rights of some at home on U.S. soil. The U.S.'s use of constitutional law, rather than international laws and norms, to find human rights "violations" by foreign actors, including close allies, severely undermines international standards, including human rights treaties the U.S. has ratified.
- **Undermines Human Rights Diplomacy:** The U.S.'s use of religious freedom and national sovereignty arguments shifts emphasis from universal dignity and alienates civil society partners in the Global South who rely on economic, social and cultural rights advocacy or who have long partnered with the U.S. under both Republican and Democratic administrations.
- **Long-Term Strategic Cost:** The U.S. role as guardian of human rights norms in global human-rights governance is reduced and rival narratives (China's "right to development," Russia's "traditional values") fill the vacuum. National sovereignty arguments lend implicit support to the long-standing legal defense of the world's worst human rights abusers.

The Council for Global Equality is a U.S.-based coalition of organizations working at the intersection of U.S. foreign policy and the human rights of LGBTQI+ people. We partner with civil society organizations, government officials, and multilateral institutions to advance a more coordinated, human rights-centered approach to protecting and promoting equality worldwide.