

Why governments repress their citizens



New associate professor Benjamin Appel studies the human rights practices of governments - and how climate change and COVID-19 are linked to civil rights issues

The UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) is home to a number of top scholars of human rights, including [Emilie Hafner-Burton](#), [Barbara Walter](#) and [Stephan Haggard](#).

The opportunity to work with these scholars was a top draw for new associate professor [Benjamin Appel](#), who comes to GPS from Michigan State University.

“Of course, the beautiful weather and the beach helped as well,” Appel said.

Appel’s research focuses on the human rights practices of governments - specifically, why governments repress their citizens. One of Appel’s recent papers focuses on how COVID-19 has affected the human rights practices of states.

“I find that the pandemic has led to greater human rights abuses among states, especially among those with a history of committing repression,” Appel said.

He is also working on a project to study the relationship between climate change and human rights.

“Climate change and, specifically, both excessive rainfall and droughts are linked with more human rights abuses,” Appel said.

Appel studies the causes of democratic backsliding and, in conjunction with former undergraduate student Langston Thomas, has found that the inclusion of historically repressed minorities in the political sphere is associated with greater polarization, which in turn is a primary cause of democratic erosion. His forthcoming book from Oxford University Press, co-written with Christian Davenport at the University of Michigan, looks at the causes and consequences of large-scale, severe state repression.

“Understanding the causes and consequences of human rights, I believe, has real-world implications,” Appel said. “Basically, we need to understand and predict the causes of human rights abuses and democratic backsliding in order to further prevent both from taking place.”

Appel will be teaching quantitative methods and international relations courses at GPS, as well as [International Studies Program \(ISP\)](#) courses on human rights, international law and global governance.

Appel said he has two basic goals in the courses he teaches: instilling a passion for improving the world and showing the importance and benefits of empirical research.

“We live in a time with many challenges, and we can make a difference if we try to do so,” Appel said. “I often teach about climate change, extreme poverty, human rights, causes of war and so forth in my classes, and I make it clear to my students that they can help - if they want to. I encourage my students to get out there and do something positive for our world.”

Along with encouraging his students to make a difference, Appel said he believes that the scientific method and quantitative skills are necessary in today’s data-centric and high-tech world.

“I often explore various types of data in my classes, and show how data, when used responsibly, can help us to better understand some of the biggest issues we

face today, such as climate change, state repression and extreme poverty,” Appel said.

When not engaged in teaching and research, Appel said he loves to run and complete triathlons.

“I can’t wait to swim, bike and run here,” Appel said. “I pretty much love to watch and play all sports. As a proud Clevelander, I am a loyal and passionate Cleveland sports fan.”