

Research statement

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My research blends international relations and public policy to explore the triangular relationship between domestic governments, domestic civil society, and international civil society, analyzing three related questions: (1) how states regulate and interact with domestic and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), (2) how domestic and international nongovernmental NGOs operate within the political contexts of their host countries, and (3) how domestic and international NGOs work with each and influence each other.

Over the past decade, international NGOs (INGOs) have become increasingly active in authoritarian regimes as they respond to emergencies, assist with development, or advocate for human rights. Though these services and advocacy can challenge the legitimacy and power of the regime, many autocratic states permit INGO activities and INGOs continue to work in these countries despite the sometimes heavy restrictions on their activities. In my dissertation, I theorize that this relationship between INGOs and autocrats creates a state of *amicable contempt*, where each party is aware that the other threatens—yet sustains—their existence. Autocrats and INGOs engage in a dance of cost-benefit calculus, each trying to advance their own agenda without upsetting their counterpart. Regimes work to set the optimal level of INGO regulations, maximizing the practical and reputational benefits that INGOs provide and minimizing the potential destabilizing costs of INGO activities. Meanwhile, INGOs work to find the optimal mix of programming within a country that allows them to pursue their principled objectives within the boundaries the regime has set—affecting as much change and providing as many services as possible without risking expulsion from the country.

I use a range of tightly integrated research methods to explore the factors driving the amicable contempt between autocrats and INGOs. Combining Bayesian statistical analysis of a cross-sectional dataset of 97 autocracies with more detailed process tracing in six autocracies (Egypt, Jordan, China, Myanmar, Russia, and Kazakhstan), I explore the determinants of authoritarian civil society restrictions, testing the effect of a regime's concerns of internal stability, external stability, and international reputation on its civil society regulatory environment. This environment constricts the longer an autocrat stays in power and in response to political instability and violent protests in the region. Importantly, however, there are conditions under which autocrats make concessions to INGOs—when autocracies become more politically stable and allow opposition parties to be more involved in domestic politics, and when regimes witness coups and nonviolent protests in neighboring countries, the regulatory environment for civil society can expand.

In the face of this regulatory uncertainty, INGOs must walk a fine line to stay active and effective in their target countries. I argue that INGOs must adjust their expectations and principles, increase their operational flexibility, or become essential for the regime in order to remain in an authoritarian country—organizations that fail to make these adjustments run a high risk of expulsion. Using the results from global survey of nearly 650 international NGOs and a dozen detailed case studies of education and freedom of expression organizations such as Save the Children, CARE International, Article 19, and Index on Censorship, I find that INGOs prefer to adapt to authoritarian regulations by making instrumental adjustments to their strategies. When facing increased restrictions, organizations will often shift their resources to less threatening programs, move their headquarters to a different region within the country, change how many foreigners are part of their in-country staff, or seek out less confrontational sources of funding. INGOs are far more resistant to changing their underlying principles—many would rather leave a country than fundamentally change their missions when the environment is no longer amenable to their work.

The findings from my dissertation research make two broader contributions to both political science and public policy and management. First, research on authoritarian institutions has shown that dictators are rarely omnipotent—autocrats must carefully balance external actors and institutions to remain in power. To do so, authoritarian regimes often adopt quasi-democratic political institutions such as free elections, an independent judiciary, or parliamentary councils to offset domestic pressure, boost internal and international reputation, and allow for a measure of institutional dissonance. My research advances institutional theory by demonstrating that international civil society should be treated as yet another institution that a regime must balance and reckon with. Second, newer research in international relations and public management has begun to explain and predict INGO behavior, identifying factors that influence the programming and advocacy that an organization might undertake, such as an INGO's internal decision making structures, its network ties with other organizations, or the managerial and philanthropic norms of its

home country. My research enriches this field by identifying how the regulatory environment and domestic politics of an INGO's target country affect its behavior. In attempting to change policies and improve human rights in authoritarian countries, INGOs put themselves at risk of being influenced by the very regimes they target. By outlining the conditions under which INGOs are controlled and by examining how these organizations work within and around regulations, I enhance our understanding of international relations theory, which has largely ignored the effect of state influence on foreign NGOs, and foreign policy and public policy theory, which has presumed that INGOs can influence reform and encourage development without being affected themselves.

I have published several articles related to the theoretical and empirical work in my dissertation. A coauthored essay in *International Studies Review* outlines a typology for organizing the field of research on international NGO behavior, identifying the internal, interactive, and institutional influences that shape INGO activities. A coauthored paper in *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* uses agent-based modeling and simulation to identify one of these behavioral influences—the effect of nonprofit collaboration. Another coauthored article in the *Journal of Human Trafficking* uses the survey methodology from my dissertation to investigate the global anti-human trafficking INGO community's relationship to the United States State Department, one of the sector's principal funders. I plan on publishing my dissertation itself as a standalone book so that INGOs, activists, and practitioners can benefit from my findings and conclusions. I also have several working papers awaiting revisions prior to publication—one offers an organizing framework for understanding the dual pressures of home and target countries on INGO activities, and another uses computational linguistics and statistics to analyze how state-owned and independently run media organizations in Egypt cover NGO actions.

My next research project will explore another aspect of the domestic government–domestic NGO–international NGO relationship. Given that foreign non-state actors can influence states, politicians in both autocracies and democracies frequently accuse INGOs of meddling in domestic politics. My future research will model and predict when governments publicly blame foreign NGOs and determine the effect of that public disapproval on the amount of funding INGOs receive. I plan to identify INGO scapegoating using computational linguistics and statistical modeling of media reports and public political statements, and I will use a set of survey experiments to identify the effect of an INGO's home country on its donations and perceptions of public approval. This research will enhance theories of how international actors are shaped by domestic politics, and its findings will help INGOs gain and maintain more positive reputations in the countries they target.

Beyond the contributions my research makes to theories of autocratic survival and international NGO behavior, my research provides useful policy guidance for international donors and transnational activists, providing mechanisms and strategies that can improve and enhance INGO effectiveness in authoritarian regimes. For instance, donors and foundations that support INGOs should worry about the domestic politics of the countries these organizations target, focusing in particular on the likelihood that regimes might capture or co-opt INGOs working there. When setting conditions for funding, donors should ensure that INGOs have more operational flexibility so they can more easily navigate the regulatory environment in their target countries.

Thus, by integrating a variety of research methods, I explore issues of international relations, authoritarian institutions, global governance, and NGO strategy, management, and policy. This work makes theoretical progress in each of these different fields and provides practicable policy guidance for practitioners. More information about my ongoing and future research can be found on my CV, andrewweiss.com, and ingoresearch.org.