

July 19, 2018. Please do not cite without permission.

# Charity During Crackdown: Analyzing the Impact of State Repression of NGOs on Philanthropy<sup>\*</sup>

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State crackdown on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly through legal restrictions on funding, has become increasingly common. How do legal restrictions on NGOs impact patterns of private philanthropic giving and individual donor decision-making? With reduced funding for NGOs working on contentious issues, and an absence of philanthropic culture in many developing countries, many NGOs rely on funds from private donors in Western countries. Using a survey experiment, we explore how this crackdown changes donors' preferences based on the issue area and funding sources of the NGO. We find that private donors are responsive to the legal difficulties international NGOs face abroad and are more likely to donate to legally besieged privately funded human rights NGOs. Additionally, already-likely donors give substantially more to legally restricted NGOs working on humanitarian issues. We conclude by discussing the implications for the sustainability of NGOs working abroad.

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<sup>\*</sup>We thank Mark Buntaine, Michael DeCrescenzo, Jeffrey Friedman, Thomas Leeper, and Tristian Mahr for their helpful comments and input. We also thank Samantha Camilletti and Joshua Duto for their excellent research assistance. This experiment received approval by the human subjects research committees at both Christopher Newport University (018.042) and Brigham Young University (E18104). We preregistered our hypotheses and research design at the Open Science Framework, and our preregistration protocol is available at <https://osf.io/dx973/>.

In January 2011, the Egyptian uprisings against Hosni Mubarak presented an opportunity for domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to leverage their knowledge and expertise to transform Egypt into a democratic state. However, just as these organizations began to take advantage of new levels of public engagement and civic freedoms, successive Egyptian governments passed laws restricting foreign funding for domestic NGOs. Subsequently, international donor agencies cut support for Egyptian NGOs out of concern that they would be accused of offering them illegal support (Brechenmacher 2017). Egypt is not alone in its non-violent crackdown on NGOs. India, Bolivia, Hungary, China, Russia, and others have required that funds to NGOs be routed through state-owned banks, mandated that funds cannot be used for “political” purposes, or prohibited NGOs from accepting any funds from foreign sources (Carothers 2015; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015).

These restrictive laws have had tangible consequences for NGOs worldwide. Official aid flows have decreased substantially in countries that have imposed restrictive anti-NGO laws (Chaudhry and Heiss 2018; Dupuy and Prakash 2018), and both large foundations and government agencies have reduced their contributions to NGOs in restrictive countries (Brechenmacher 2017). NGOs have thus increasingly turned to private donors to cope with the loss of funding from larger sources. In 2016, U.S. private philanthropy towards international NGOs amounted to \$22.06 billion (Giving USA 2017).

However, donations from *domestic* donors are unreliable and inconsistent. Citizens in many countries are often too poor to support local NGOs, may lack a culture of philanthropic giving, or may prefer to channel funds to groups working in non-contentious areas such as health and education (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015; Ron, Pandya, and Crow 2016; Brechenmacher 2017). This final point is particularly crucial, since as Bush (2015) points out, in order to maintain access to their target countries many democracy-assistance NGOs actually engage in easily measurable, non-confrontational, and tame programming.

Even when domestic donors wish to donate to NGOs working in contentious areas, they are often deterred by dismal tax incentives, threats to take away business permits, or have a general fear of retribution (Hudson Institute 2015; Baoumi 2016). Accordingly, NGOs working abroad have increasingly sought out funds from *foreign* individual donors in countries with institutions and regulations better suited for philanthropy. Given their increased importance in global civil society, how do individual donors feel about donating to legally besieged NGOs abroad? Do legal restrictions on NGOs influence the decisions of private donors to support these organizations?

Our results show that the domestic political and legal environments of NGO host countries can influence foreign private donor behavior. We demonstrate that private donors are generally responsive to the legal difficulties that NGOs face abroad.

In general, crackdowns do not have a strong effect on the likelihood of donation: donors are only substantially more likely to donate to privately funded human rights NGOs facing legal trouble. However, we find that already-likely donors tend to give more to legally restricted NGOs, on average donating 25% more to humanitarian NGOs, 43% more to privately-funded human rights NGOs, and 68% more to government-funded humanitarian NGOs.

## Theory and hypotheses

We investigate these questions by examining the structural determinants of private philanthropy. Substantial research has looked at the private motivations of donors, including altruism, reputational benefits, and alignment with personal values (Bilodeau and Slivinski 1997; Wiepking 2010; Bekkers and Wiepking 2011). While much work has explored the *individual* determinants of philanthropic-giving, less research has focused on the impact of *structural* factors on the choice to donate.

We argue that structural factors such as host country politics—in particular, restrictions on NGOs—serve as important heuristics to determine the trustworthiness of NGOs. While, in theory, perfectly rational donors would scrutinize each aspect of a nonprofit’s structure and effectiveness prior to donation, this rarely occurs in practice (Tremblay-Boire and Prakash 2017). Instead, literature has shown that donors rely on shortcuts and signals to determine the trustworthiness of NGOs. Donors make cursory judgments about an organization’s issue area, mission, vision, and values, and seek out supplementary information from friends, family, and acquaintances (Szper and Prakash 2011; Sloan 2009).

Structural factors are one such heuristic. Previous work has shown the impact of NGO geographies on philanthropic giving, showing that the location of NGO operations does matter, with donors more likely to give to local than international organizations (Rajan, Pink, and Dow 2009; Casale and Baumann 2015; Knowles and Sullivan 2017; Tremblay-Boire and Prakash 2017). However, if governments continue to impose legal restrictions on NGOs, the effect of these structural-level conditions may actually override individual-level motivations behind giving.

We test private donor responses to three different structural factors connected to legal crackdowns on NGOs. First, individual propensity to donate could be related to the *domestic politics* in the countries where international NGOs operate. The presence of legal crackdowns abroad can serve as a structural signal of NGO trustworthiness and deservingness. Legal restrictions could convey to donors that NGOs undertake important work, which is why governments perceive them as threatening. Therefore, we expect that government restrictions abroad will increase the likelihood of donation and the amount donated.

**H<sub>1a</sub>**: If NGOs face legal crackdowns abroad, individual foreign donors will be more likely to donate to them.

**H<sub>1b</sub>**: If NGOs face legal crackdowns abroad, individual foreign donors will donate more to them.

Second, legal crackdowns abroad are often related to the issues that NGOs work on. Because many states have restricted NGOs out of fear of Western influence in their countries (Chaudhry 2016; Carothers 2015; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016), the *contentiousness of NGO issue areas* could serve as an effective structural heuristic for private donors. NGOs focusing on human rights can often be viewed as contentious, especially when concentrating on work such as state-sanctioned abuses. Thus, they run the risk of getting shut down (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015), increasing the possibility of donors' resources being wasted. Therefore, we posit that donors will be more likely to donate to less contentious humanitarian issues because these are seen as uncontroversial, apolitical, and directed towards the most deserving of need. We expect that crackdowns abroad will amplify donor affinity for humanitarian NGOs, leading to our second hypothesis:

**H<sub>2a</sub>**: If legally besieged NGOs work on humanitarian issues, individual foreign donors will be more likely to donate to them.

**H<sub>2b</sub>**: If legally besieged NGOs work on humanitarian issues, individual foreign donors will donate more to them.

Third, *the source of NGO funding* could influence donor behavior. The distinction between private and government funding can signal an organization's deservingness. We hypothesize that donors who see that organizations are privately funded will feel that they can also contribute and help, while donors who see that organizations are funded by the government will feel less inclined to contribute, since the NGO does not need (or might not even typically accept) their donation, and since donors might perceive that their tax money already funds the organization. Moreover, it is possible that donors could punish government-funded NGOs that face restrictions, since legal trouble could fuel donor mistrust and signal improper use of tax money. As with contentiousness, we expect that legal crackdowns again amplify donor preference for privately-funded NGOs. This sets up our final hypothesis:

**H<sub>3a</sub>**: If legally besieged NGOs do not receive substantial funding from government sources, individual foreign donors will be more likely to donate to them.

**H<sub>3b</sub>**: If legally besieged NGOs that do not receive substantial funding from government sources, individual foreign donors will donate more to them.

## Methods

### Sample

We test each of these hypotheses with a between-subjects vignette-based survey experiment with participants recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Our target population is the portion of Americans hypothetically willing to donate money for human rights and humanitarian work abroad. Our convenience sample (March 2018,  $N = 546$ <sup>1</sup>) generally approximates the characteristics of our target population, since it is younger, more educated, wealthier, and more likely to donate to charities than nationally representative samples (see Tables S1 and S2 in the supplement).<sup>2</sup>

### Experimental treatments and outcomes

We presented participants with a short paragraph with three manipulated frames, each highlighting different factors that might influence patterns of private philanthropy. The vignette thus results in three manipulated variables: (1) crackdown versus no crackdown, (2) humanitarian assistance versus human rights, and (3) government funding versus private funding. We used the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as our example international NGO because its work easily applies to each possible frame. IRC provides humanitarian assistance and engages in human rights advocacy for refugees, more than a quarter of IRC’s income comes from both government grants and private donation, and IRC works in some countries that have passed anti-NGO laws, such as Egypt and Turkey, as well as countries with no such laws. We use a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subject factorial design, with participants randomly assigned to one of eight versions of the following vignette (see the CONSORT diagram in Figure S2).

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) focuses on *{humanitarian assistance for refugees | human rights for refugees}* *{and works in countries that have recently passed laws that harshly restrict nonprofit organizations | NOTHING}*. A substantial proportion of IRC’s funding comes from *{government | private}* donors.

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1. We used power analysis to determine our sample size (see section “Sample size” in the supplement for full details).

2. Figures and tables in the supplement are prefixed with “S”

We collected two outcome measures, which we use as our main dependent variables: (1) how likely participants would be to donate to IRC (measured with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Extremely likely” to “Extremely unlikely”), and (2) how much participants would hypothetically donate to IRC if they had an extra \$100. For the ease of analysis, we collapse the likelihood question into a binary variable measuring whether the participant is likely (“Extremely likely” and “Somewhat likely”) or not likely (all other responses) to donate. We also included a free response question for exploratory purposes, asking respondents to explain why they chose to donate the amount they indicated.

### Estimation

We test the effect of the three frames on these two outcomes by measuring the differences in the median amount donated and the median likelihood to donate across the crackdown versus no crackdown condition. We do this by fitting three regression models with indicator variables and interaction terms for each of the conditions.<sup>3</sup> We use Bayesian OLS regression for models measuring the amount donated, and we use Bayesian logistic regression for models measuring the likelihood of donation.<sup>4</sup> In model specification 1, we test only for the effect of legal crackdowns on the outcome measures; in specification 2, we test for the effect of legal crackdowns on outcomes, conditioned on the issue area the NGO focuses on; and in specification 3, we test for the effect of crackdowns conditioned on both the issue area and the source of NGO funding, yielding these simplified models:

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3. Typically, between-subjects factorial designs are analyzed with ANOVA. Using regression instead of ANOVA allows us to estimate differences in means and medians more easily and provides more flexibility when controlling for demographics or attitudes towards philanthropy. Table S3 demonstrates how to add each of the terms to estimate the average for each condition.

4. We use weakly informative prior distributions for both the coefficients and the intercepts (see section “Priors” in the supplement for full details). We use Stan (Stan Development Team 2016b) through R (Stan Development Team 2016a; R Core Team 2016) to obtain the posterior distribution of each dependent variable. We use the medians of the simulated values from the Monte Carlo Markov Chain (MCMC) samples as coefficient estimates and use the 90% highest posterior density as credible intervals.

$$\begin{aligned}
\mathcal{Y}_{\text{Model 1}} &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Crackdown} + \varepsilon \\
\mathcal{Y}_{\text{Model 2}} &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Crackdown} + \beta_2 \text{Issue} + \\
&\quad \beta_3 \text{Crackdown} \times \text{Issue} + \varepsilon \\
\mathcal{Y}_{\text{Model 3}} &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Crackdown} + \beta_2 \text{Issue} + \beta_3 \text{Funding} + \\
&\quad \beta_4 \text{Crackdown} \times \text{Issue} + \\
&\quad \beta_5 \text{Crackdown} \times \text{Funding} + \\
&\quad \beta_6 \text{Issue} \times \text{Funding} + \\
&\quad \beta_7 \text{Crackdown} \times \text{Issue} \times \text{Funding} + \varepsilon
\end{aligned}$$

## Results

We present the treatment effect of the crackdown condition on the propensity to donate and the amount donated across all three experimental conditions in Figure 1. To account for uncertainty in the aggregated estimates from these models, we base our inference on predicted values drawn from the posterior distributions of the regression coefficients, and we declare an effect statistically significant if the posterior probability of being different from zero is larger than 0.90.<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the predicted median estimate in the crackdown and no crackdown frames, conditioned by the issue area and funding source frames, with 90% credible intervals around each point estimate.<sup>6</sup> Because differences can be either positive or negative (i.e. in some frames, the crackdown condition causes greater donations; in others it causes fewer donations), we report the probability that the difference is not equal to zero. When the median value is negative, we report the proportion of predicted values that are negative, and when the median value is positive, we report the proportion of values that are positive.

### Likelihood of donation

When only looking at the difference between the crackdown and the no crackdown conditions, we find that respondents are not significantly more likely to donate to legally besieged international NGOs ( $H_{1a}$ ). As seen in Figure 2(A), those exposed to the crackdown condition tend to have a slightly higher probability of donating (46%) than those in the control condition (42.6%), but the difference in these medians is

5. Detailed regression coefficients are included in Tables S5 and S7.

6. Figures S3 and S4 and Tables S6 and S8 show the distributions and provide additional details about the differences in median effects.

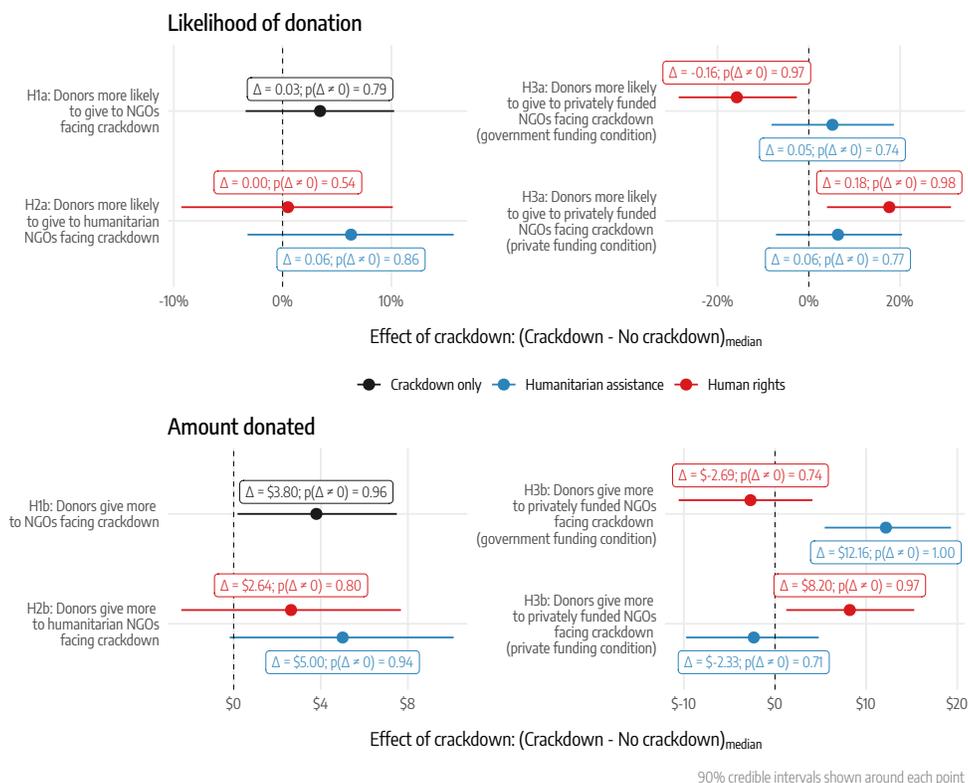


Figure 1: Effect of crackdown on likelihood to donate and amount donated, across issues and funding arrangements

not significant ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.79$ ).<sup>7</sup> We thus do not initially find evidence to support our hypothesis that crackdowns increase the likelihood of donating.

We find more nuanced results when conditioning the likelihood to donate on other experimental frames. Figure 2(B) shows the median likelihood to donate across crackdown conditions and NGO issue area frames. Individuals have the same median propensity to donate to human rights NGOs (42–43%) regardless of whether the NGOs face legal difficulties abroad. However, individual donors are slightly more likely to donate to humanitarian assistance NGOs facing crackdown (48%), than those without legal challenges (43.6%). However, the difference in medians is not significant ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.86$ ). We again find little support for our hypothesis that donors are more likely to donate to humanitarian assistance NGOs over human

7. Throughout this paper,  $\Delta$  represents the median difference in the value of interest between the “no crackdown” and “crackdown” conditions in 4,000 MCMC simulations (i.e.  $\text{Value}_{\text{Crackdown}} - \text{Value}_{\text{No crackdown}}$ ).

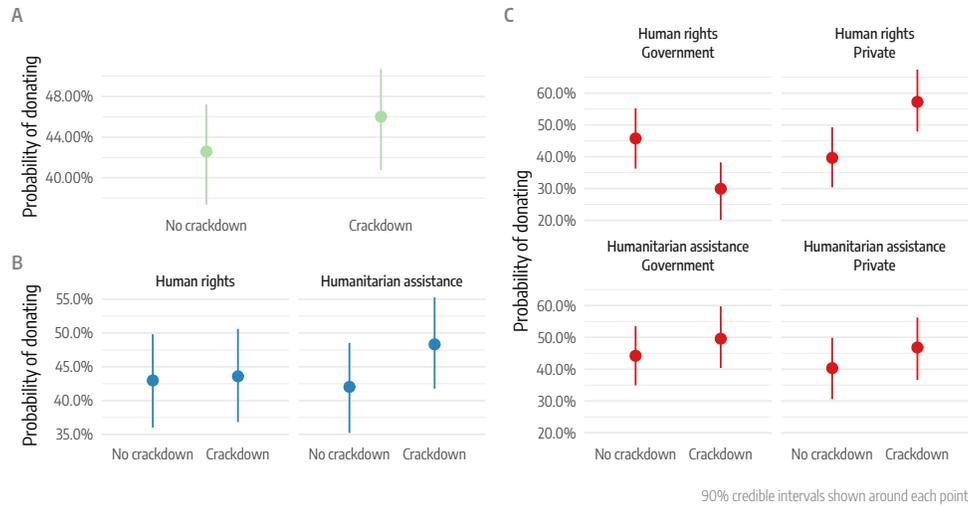


Figure 2: Median likelihood of donation in control and crackdown groups, conditioned by other experimental frames

rights NGOs. In general, donors are equally likely to donate to both, except for a slight increase in likelihood for humanitarian NGOs facing legal challenges.

While the crackdown frame had no effect on the probability of donating to human rights NGOs alone, conditioning this finding on the source of NGO funding uncovers competing trends. Figure 2(C) shows the median likelihood of donation across all three experimental conditions. When individual donors know that a human rights organization receives the majority of its funding from the government, they are significantly more likely ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.975$ ) to donate in the absence of crackdowns (46%) than when the NGO faces legal difficulties (30%). In contrast, when donors know that an organization receives most of its funding from private sources, they are significantly more likely ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.98$ ) to donate when there is a legal crackdown (57%) than when the NGO faces no legal hurdles (40%).

For humanitarian assistance NGOs, the source of funding appears to have no effect on the likelihood of donation across crackdown conditions. Individual donors have a 40–50% predicted probability of donating to humanitarian organizations regardless of the experimental condition, with no significant differences in medians.

These results give partial support to our third hypothesis. The source of funding has little influence on the propensity to donate to humanitarian NGOs, but on average, donors are substantially more likely to give to privately-funded human rights NGOs than government-funded organizations. However, the effect of crackdowns reverses across conditions, as donors appear to both punish government-funded human rights NGOs that face legal difficulties and rally behind privately-funded NGOs

facing those same hurdles. Many of the respondents described their reasoning for removing support for besieged government-funded organizations, explaining that “[i]f the non-profit works in countries where non-profit activities are heavily restricted there’s a good amount of waste and shortfalls in their activities and ability to assist others,”<sup>8</sup> and that accordingly, they would be less likely to contribute. Others explained that they would decrease their donations to government-backed organizations because of the bad optics of legal crackdown, with one stating outright that “I’m not exactly sure what they did was right or wrong, I think it just seems bad, so I’m less likely to want to donate to them.”<sup>9</sup>

While donors on average appear to punish government-funded human rights organizations, they increase their support to privately funded NGOs. Many respondents explained their motivation for being more likely to donate in moralistic, normative terms, reasoning that “[t]hey [IRC] obviously need it more than I do,”<sup>10</sup> or “[s]ince I was small child my parents thought [sic] me to help others,”<sup>11</sup> or “I would want to do the right thing.”<sup>12</sup> Another explained “[t]hey [IRC] are doing good work in countries where it is tough for groups like them to operate and they need all the help they can get.”<sup>13</sup> Private donors thus seem to be more willing to support besieged human rights organizations when they are unencumbered by government funds.

#### Amount donated

While crackdowns do not substantially influence donors’ *likelihood* to donate, they do increase the *amount* of money that respondents are willing to contribute (see the top left panel of Figure 3). Informing participants that IRC faces legal hurdles abroad increased donations by \$4 on average, an increase of 19% from the no crackdown condition ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.96$ ). This provides good evidence for  $H_{1b}$ —donors appear to give more money to besieged international NGOs.

This trend also holds true when accounting for the issue area of the NGO. As seen in the bottom left panel of Figure 3, the crackdown condition elicits higher donations for both the human rights and humanitarian assistance conditions, though with varying levels of significance. Emphasizing legal crackdown increased donations to human rights NGOs by \$2.60 above the no crackdown condition, but this difference is not significant ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.8$ ). In contrast, crackdowns significantly boosted donations to humanitarian assistance NGOs by \$5—a 26% increase—

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8. Response 3154467.

9. Response 8425616.

10. Response 3510738.

11. Response 6009603.

12. Response 9526638.

13. Response 3025921.

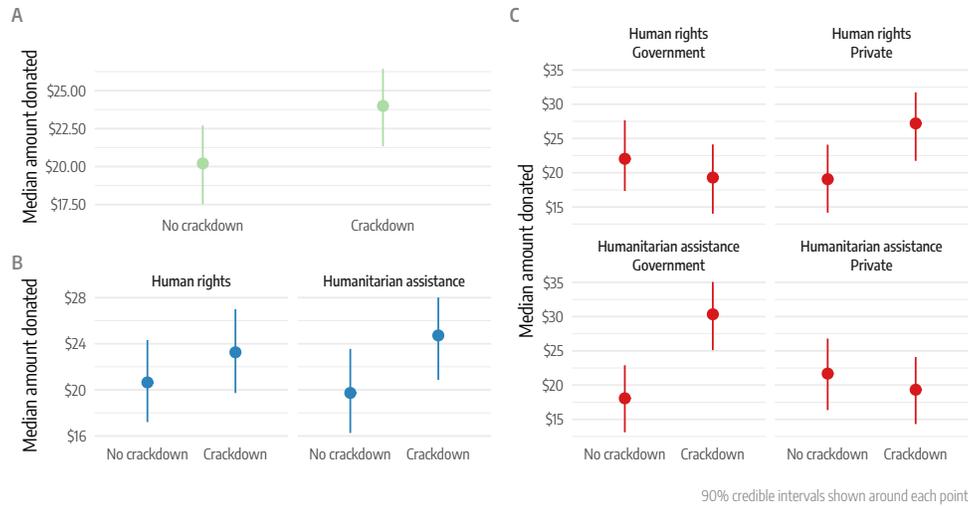


Figure 3: Median amount donated in control and crackdown groups, conditioned by other experimental frames

beyond the control condition ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.945$ ). We thus find moderate support for  $H_{2b}$ —that donors give more to besieged humanitarian NGOs. In general, informing donors about crackdowns causes them to give more to humanitarian NGOs facing legal difficulties abroad.

Finally, the source of NGO funding adds more texture to these results. We previously found that donors seem to (1) punish government-funded human rights NGOs and (2) reward privately-funded human rights NGOs when they run into legal issues. This finding also applies somewhat to the amount donors give. Respondents donated \$8 more to besieged privately-funded human rights NGOs compared to the no crackdown control condition ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.975$ ), increasing their donations by 43%. Anecdotally, many of the respondents explained that they chose to give additional money to privately-funded human rights NGOs precisely because “the country limits non-profits.”<sup>14</sup> The punishment mechanism found previously does not translate to the amount donated—while there is a slight decrease in median donations to government-funded human rights NGOs facing crackdown, there is no significant difference compared to the control condition ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.74$ ).

Of all the experimental conditions, donors were the most influenced by legal crackdowns on government-funded humanitarian assistance NGOs. Emphasizing legal difficulties increased donations to these types of organizations by 68%, or more than \$12 ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.99$ ). The crackdown condition caused this increase despite

14. Response 13685.

some notable hesitation from respondents, many of whom felt that government-backed NGOs do not need or deserve private donations. For example, many respondents explained there was no need to make individual donations, since IRC “is already receiving funding from governments, so funding from private individuals doesn’t seem as necessary. I’d prefer to give my money to an organization that is primarily run by private donations”<sup>15</sup> or because “[m]y tax paying dollars go to the government and if the government is helping to fund it then they are in turn getting some of my money.”<sup>16</sup> This hesitation was not universal, however, and in aggregate most respondents chose to give substantially more. Many echoed this respondent, who identified the crackdown condition as one of the reasons for giving the full hypothetical \$100: “I believe the work of such organizations has an urgency that affects many refugees and their families. If they can function without being affected by the harsh laws against non-profits, I would want them to have as much help as possible to do their humanitarian work.”<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, crackdowns had no substantial effect on the amount donated to privately-funded humanitarian NGOs ( $p(\Delta \neq 0) = 0.71$ ). None of the respondents in these conditions mentioned the importance (or non-importance) of funding sources when justifying their giving, and many explained that they would not give solely on the basis of the legal crackdown, including one who stated that they “would keep all \$100 because it would not even go to helping humanitarian efforts due to the new laws.”<sup>18</sup> It is possible that donors see government-funded humanitarian NGOs as more legitimate and more capable of handling difficult legal restrictions than privately-funded organizations. For instance, donors might assume that an international NGO that receives substantial money from USAID would ostensibly have the backing and support of the U.S. government when facing legal challenges, while an INGO funded by small donors would be less able to confront such challenges. Further research is needed to probe this trend.

## Conclusion

Dozens of countries have cracked down on foreign funding for NGOs over the last three decades. Between the lack of a local philanthropic culture, an increasingly authoritarian approach that restricts space for domestic philanthropy, and the withdrawal of official aid, many NGOs are forced to rely on foreign private donors. But how do such donors react to NGOs facing legal restrictions abroad? Legal crack-

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15. Response 6486084.

16. Response 9509936.

17. Response 1097165.

18. Response 8995923.

downs on NGOs have a moderate effect on the probability that a donor gives money initially, with a substantial positive effect in only one condition—donors are more likely to donate to privately funded human rights NGOs that face legal difficulties. Though crackdowns do not have a strong effect on the likelihood to donate, we find donors who are already likely to give tend to donate substantially more to legally restricted NGOs, in particular to privately-funded human rights organizations, government-funded humanitarian organizations, and humanitarian assistance NGOs more generally.

Our results have several implications for policy and future research. First, NGOs may benefit from publicizing government crackdown on such organizations. While this may not be enough to sway the average U.S. citizen, our results show that it can convince regular or already-likely donors to donate more to besieged groups. Second, our study highlights the importance of framing issue areas. Our results indicate that individual private donors are likely to view human rights NGOs with suspicion. However, human rights groups undertake a variety of programs and missions, and communicating the nature of their work and specifying the main target of the organization's efforts can allay the public's fears. Finally, if NGOs receive a majority of their funding from non-governmental sources and are public about it, they may be able to convince average donors that they are contributing to the NGO's ability to fight against the crackdown. Since private funders tend to be less known by people in recipient countries compared to major governmental funders, raising funds through them is less likely to attract the ire of authoritarian governments.

With increasing government repression of NGOs, these groups can no longer rely on a single funding source. However, these new and challenging scenarios create an opportunity for NGOs to rethink how to address different audiences and create a robust market for philanthropy towards besieged NGOs abroad.

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