

Contentions Over World Culture

Contentions over World Culture: The Rise of Legal Restrictions on Foreign Funding to NGOs, 1994–2015

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The last two decades have witnessed an unprecedented rise in government restrictions on foreign funding to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Often in the name of defending the nation from outside influences, over 60 countries have implemented laws limiting foreign funding to NGOs. We use event history analyses to evaluate domestic and global explanations for the adoption of these policies over the period 1994–2015. Prior work has argued that funding restrictions result from real or perceived threats to political regimes, especially in countries with competitive elections. We add to this story by situating it in a larger global and cultural context: new funding laws are part of a growing backlash against the liberal international order, which has long sponsored international and domestic NGOs devoted to issues such as human rights and the environment. In an era of increasing resistance toward globally linked civil society groups—the primary carriers of liberal world society—NGO funding restrictions are now diffusing widely across the international system. We argue that restriction policies will be most common among countries that are linked to illiberal or anti-Western organizations and discourses in the international community. Moreover, adoption will accelerate as more countries do it, representing a growing “wave” or backlash against the liberal international order. Findings support the prior literature as well as our new arguments regarding illiberal international organizations and global backlash.

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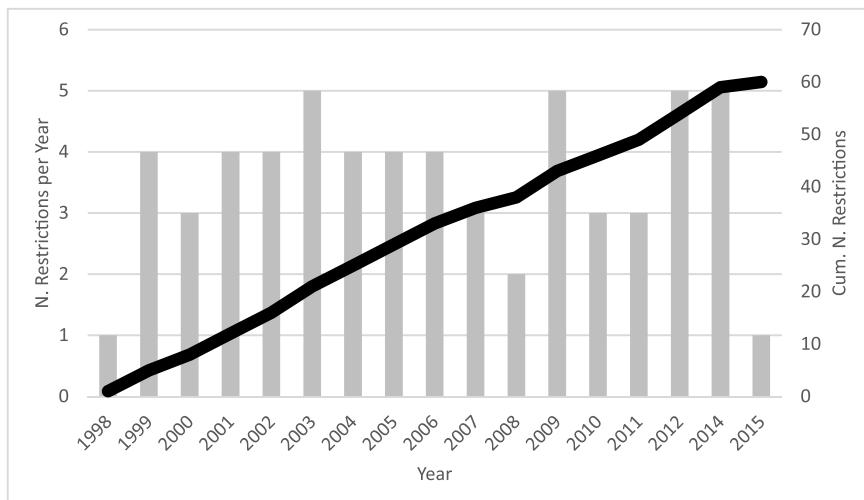
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Introduction

Backlash continues to grow against the liberal international institutions that have dominated the globe for decades (Guillén 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). International institutions, such as the United Nations and the EU, continue to extol the virtues of integrated global markets, democracy, and human rights, but a variety of challenges—rooted in oppositions like populism, nationalism, and/or authoritarianism—are increasingly common. On the economic front, critiques of the free-market, privatization, and deregulation policies of neoliberal capitalism are on the rise, especially since the financial and economic collapse of 2008 (Kotz 2015). Even mainstream economists at the International Monetary Fund now report that the benefits of neoliberal capitalism have been “oversold” and may contribute to increasing inequality (Furceri et al. 2016). On the political front, we see a decline in liberal democracy and representative government worldwide (Fukuyama 2012; Kurlantzick 2013). For instance, Freedom House reports that 2016 marks the eleventh consecutive year of overall declines in liberal democratic freedoms, including declines of press freedom and the undermining of civil society (Freedom House 2017).

We explore the social and cultural dimensions of this recent backlash against the liberal world order by examining government regulation of foreign funding to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The monumental rise of nongovernmental organizations has been described as “one of the most spectacular developments of the twentieth century” (Boulding 1989, p. 244). More than 20 percent of all bilateral aid flows through NGOs (OECD 2015), and grants from foreign donors can be vital for organizational survival in the sector (Burger and Owens 2013). Yet, nearly a third of all countries have adopted policies to regulate, restrict, or even cut off these key sources of revenue as part of a broader wave of reaction against global liberalism. One vivid example is Hungary, which in 2017 passed legislation requiring NGOs receiving more than 24,000 euros annually to register as “foreign supported” and disclose their donors, a law also known as the “Stop Soros” bill. The bill, which was central to Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s far right effort to turn Hungary into an “illiberal state,” was seen by the European Union, human rights organizations, and donors as an attempt to crack down on immigration and refugees by suppressing the freedom to associate. Three years prior, Norway suspended its donations in protest after NGOs such as Roma Press Centre and the Labrisz Lesbian Association reported being “audited” by Hungarian authorities (The Economist Website 2014). The law was similar to ones passed in Egypt and Russia, the latter of which requires NGOs receiving foreign funds to register as “foreign agents” with the government (Dupuy et al. 2016).

At least 60 countries have implemented similar laws at least once in recent years (see figure 1), and several have enacted multiple kinds of restrictions (e.g., India, China, and Russia) (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). The most extreme cases have adopted a de facto or total ban on foreign funding (e.g., Eritrea and Saudi Arabia). Other countries limit funding in a variety of ways such as by placing a cap on how much of the budget can be foreign funded

Figure 1. Rise of Restrictions on Foreign Funding to NGOs, 1994–2015 (n = 60).

(e.g., Ethiopia), imposing substantial taxes on foreign grants (e.g., Russia), or restricting foreign funding for certain political or human rights activities (e.g., Ethiopia, India, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe). And still other governments adopt burdensome requirements such as mandatory government approval of foreign funding (e.g., Algeria, Jordan, and Nepal), a requirement to channel funding through the state or certain bank accounts (e.g., Uzbekistan), or extensive reporting requirements (e.g., Bahrain, Bangladesh, and Indonesia). Such restrictions can be consequential; according to a recent report, the registrations of more than 18,000 NGOs in India were canceled between 2011 and 2017, and foreign funding to NGOs fell more than 60 percent between 2016 and 2017 (Chauhan 2017; see Jalali 2008 for an in-depth case study of India). In Ethiopia, a 2009 proclamation introduced a new classification of NGOs as well as monitoring mechanisms for those receiving foreign funds; by 2011, the number of registered international and local NGOs had fallen by 45 percent (Dupuy et al. 2015). And in a study of 134 developing countries, Dupuy and Prakash (2018) find that bilateral aid drops by 32 percent among countries that adopt more restrictive laws.

Regulation and restriction is neither an entirely new phenomenon nor solely driven by hostility to liberal institutions, as evidenced by a handful of restrictions that emerged before the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s.¹ In part, simple administrative expansion is at work, linked to the massive growth of civil society. But, the obvious explanation that restrictions arise as a benign regulatory matter in tandem with the growth of the NGO sector in the 1990s does not fully account for these new laws.² For one thing, it is not just the countries with the largest civil society sectors who adopt restrictions. For another, there are large incentives to permit foreign funding: restrictive policies or regulation perceived as burdensome

to potential donors could plausibly generate reputational or resource losses (e.g., in the form of other aid). We posit the trend is partly driven by a growing “anti-world society” movement whereby countries are increasingly resisting or outright rejecting globalized liberal and neoliberal world culture, despite possible repercussions (Meyer et al. 1997).

There has always been some degree of resistance and opposition to global neoliberalism (see the discussion of “rampant inconsistencies” and “conflicts of interest” in Meyer et al. 1997, p. 172; see also Bell 1976; Kymlicka 1995; Bowles and Gintis 2012). A central explanation for the persistence of oppositions despite the hegemonic status of neoliberalism in the current world order is that one of liberalism’s core tenets is to uphold the legitimate rights and interests of many actors (individuals, organizations, and nation states). Thus, an inherent feature of the liberal system is that it provides few grounds for curtailing conflicting views, except insofar as limiting actors’ interests from overly infringing on each other’s rights. At times, it even promotes these differences: associated economic imageries valorize free market competition and democratic societies celebrate pluralism. Thus, in itself, opposition, conflict, and competition of competing goals and interests within liberal and neoliberal culture is unsurprising. But what is notable about the current era—and the central focus of our paper—is a dramatic and unexpected increase in the levels of opposition since the 1990s.

We use event history analyses to evaluate domestic and global explanations for country adoption of policies restricting foreign funding to NGOs over the period 1994–2015. Our findings show evidence of a growing anti-world society movement that seeks to restrict foreign funding to civil society groups—often thought of as primary carriers of liberal ideology and discourse in world society (see Boli and Thomas 1997, 1999; Schofer and Longhofer 2011). Our study makes several contributions to research examining the expanding opposition to global liberal and neoliberal institutions. Empirically, we extend existing data on civil society restrictions to 2015 and go beyond prior statistical analyses with an expanded set of explanatory factors. Conceptually, we contribute to understanding the social and cultural dimensions of a growing backlash against the neoliberal world order, to complement prior studies on the political and economic factors.

Prior Research

Our paper is motivated by the dramatic rise and global spread of policies that seem counterintuitive to the neoliberal project that has for decades celebrated the participation of private actors and, more specifically, nongovernmental organizations. We first review prior research on funding restrictions, much of which has situated the phenomenon in the context of domestic politics, especially around threats to state control. Because these prior arguments are now well established in the literature, we do not discuss them at length or present formal hypotheses but, rather, briefly summarize them here. We then turn to our more

global argument—that the rapid diffusion of these restrictive laws has origins in world society.

To begin, political scientists have demonstrated that domestic political and economic forces play a key role in why a country restricts foreign funding to NGOs. In the most rigorous analysis to date, Dupuy et al. (2016) examine 39 restrictions adopted by 153 low- and middle-income countries over the period 1993–2012. They show that foreign aid flows are associated with increased risk of adopting a restrictive law, and this risk is further increased in countries where there are competitive elections. The authors argue that international aid flowing to domestic civil society can threaten a regime's political control, particularly if there are competitive elections. That is, domestic governments perceive foreign aid as potentially supporting political opponents and threatening their power, and thus try to restrict channels for foreign intervention such as financial support for NGOs. Similarly, in a study of more than 100 countries, Christensen and Weinstein (2013) find that regimes restrict foreign support to civil society when they feel vulnerable to domestic challenges.

The argument that foreign funding is seen as a potential political threat certainly carries weight in a number of cases. For example, Dupuy et al. (2015) describe the case of Ethiopia, where, in 2005, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's government misrepresented the number of opposition members who were elected to the national parliament. The government suppressed the protests that followed, which it claimed were "spurred by outside actors and funds, and in 2009, passed a law dramatically restricting the foreign funding to locally operating NGOs" (Dupuy et al. 2016, p. 301). The authors also recount the case of Zimbabwe, where, in 2008, President Robert Mugabe claimed that foreign funds were being "channeled through nongovernmental organizations to opposition parties, which are a creation of the West" (Dupuy et al. 2016; also Dugger 2008). The fear of outside meddling is exacerbated when a country has competitive elections because civil society groups can support opposition parties.

In other cases, restrictions on foreign funding are part of a more general autocratic crackdown on civil society and liberal democratic institutions. That is, it is not foreign-funded opposition movements in particular, which are considered a threat to ruling parties, but free association in general. Civil society organizations—that is, organizations that are voluntary and neither part of the market nor the state—have been growing rapidly around the world since the 1990s (Schofer and Longhofer 2011), and have long been seen in part as a counterbalance to state control. Particularly in countries with larger domestic sectors, political leaders may view civil society organizations as a potential threat to government authority and seek to curtail activities (Diamond 1994). For example, *The Economist* describes how more "autocrats" are placing increasingly severe restrictions on NGOs, particularly by barring foreign funding, as evidenced by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's declaration: "We're not dealing with civil society members, but paid political activists who are trying to help foreign interests here" (*The Economist* 2014). Another report documents that a Malaysian government publicly decried foreign funding for fear it would cause the country "to become agents of foreign powers" and

“be forced to create lies to destabilize the country” (quoted in Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014, p. 12). Another study describes an investigation of NGOs in Egypt due to complaints about “foreign money coming into Egypt to “promote American and Israeli interests” (Christensen and Weinstein (2013), p. 77). Similarly, Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014), p.16 describe how “attacks on freedom of association are often coupled with wider legal and political measures aimed at suppressing freedom of expression and assembly” in Algeria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Sudan, and Zambia. Funding restrictions have also been justified as national security measures, particularly with regard to armed conflict and terrorism (Dupuy et al. 2016; though, see Koo and Murdie 2018 for evidence that civil society restrictions fail to prevent terrorist attacks).

At the same time, some countries may seek to promote civil society, yet nonetheless expand regulation as the sector expands. There is a long tradition of envisioning a vibrant civil society as integral to nation states by serving as a “schoolhouse for citizenship” (Clemens 2006), providing a channel or “mediating structure” between citizens and their state (Berger and Neuhaus 1977), and increasingly as a tool for the state to provide social services via contracting arrangements (Lipsky and Smith 1989). It is well documented that the outsourcing of social services to nonprofit organizations or NGOs generates a flood of regulatory activities (Evans et al. 2005; Cho and Gillespie 2006). Increased regulation in this case is intended to provide a form of accountability to governments when they outsource services, indicating a cooperative relationship with government rather than a conflictual one (Boris and Steuerle 2006). Thus, even when seen as supportive of government rather than a threat, the expansion of domestic civil society could generate increased regulation for straightforwardly administrative purposes. Regardless of whether the goal is restriction or regulation, an expanded domestic sector is likely to be associated with foreign-funding laws.

Based on the prior literature, we thus expect that the adoption of foreign-funding restrictions should be more likely in countries where threats to state control are greater (i.e., states highly dependent on foreign aid, regimes with competitive elections, and states that have recently experienced armed conflict or terrorism) and in countries attempting to crackdown or regulate civil society (i.e., nondemocratic regimes; states with large civil society sectors).

Global Arguments

The post-World War II era witnessed a dramatic expansion and elaboration of international organizations and global culture, or what neoinstitutional scholars have called a “world society” (Meyer et al. 1997). The institutions and culture of world society support and propagate norms around issues such as democracy, human rights, educational expansion, and environmentalism, along with scripts or templates for how nationstates, organizations, and individuals should enact and uphold these norms (Frank et al. 2000; Schofer and Meyer 2005; Cole 2005, 2012; Hironaka 2014). As Boli and Thomas (1997) and Meyer et al. (1997) note,

world society is a cultural order built on broad ideas of progress, universalism, and individualism. Prior research has shown that world society spurs both a tremendous amount of civil society activity (Schofer and Longhofer 2011) as well as foreign aid (Swiss 2016). Applying conventional world society arguments, one would expect that countries more embedded in world society would be less likely to adopt policies banning foreign funding to civil society organizations (Dupuy et al. 2016).

Hypothesis 1: Restrictions on foreign funding are less likely in countries that are more embedded in world society organizations.

While conventional world society scholarship emphasizes the isomorphic pressures emanating from liberal international organizations, scholars are increasingly recognizing instances of heterogeneity and conflict in world culture and fragmentation or regionalism among international organizations (e.g., Beckfield 2010; Boyle 2005; Boyle et al. 2015). Furthermore, scholars have identified a small but growing number of international organizations that espouse illiberal or oppositional discourses and ideologies (Hadler and Symons 2018; Motadel 2018; Schofer et al. 2018).

During the Cold War, socialism constituted a major cultural alternative to the liberal, capitalist-democracy model at the world level. But other oppositional organizations, cultures, and ideologies were sharply restrained in a bipolar world. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the globalization of a neoliberal binge gave these oppositions new force as in, for example, organizing against neoliberal economic policies in much of the liberal world (e.g., the Battle in Seattle). In part, the growing hegemony of neoliberalism generates reactions against its influence, and in part the end of the Cold War liberated all kinds of discourses that were severely restrained in a bipolar world.

Part of our contribution is to attend to a growing backlash of internationalized illiberal ideologies and organizations and that directly criticize the dominant liberal norms of world society. International oppositions to liberal world culture may take many forms, such as solidarity between socialist countries seeking alternatives to capitalism, groups of countries rooted in traditional religious systems with more collective and spiritual aims, or alliances of autocratic regimes. Even nationalist movements, paradoxically, form international alliances and organizations (Motadel 2018). We discuss concrete examples of illiberal international organizations below. Although we generally think of country ties to international organizations as an indicator of linkage to world society and liberal global norms, memberships in substantively illiberal organizations suggest a cross-nationally organized rejection of world cultural values. Countries linked to such organizations may be those that espoused illiberal views at the outset, but illiberal organizations may also serve to institutionalize and propagate oppositional ideologies across world society.

We argue that country membership in substantively illiberal organizations indicates resistance to liberal world society and thus a greater likelihood of restricting foreign funding.

Hypothesis 2: Restrictions on foreign funding are more likely in countries with memberships in illiberal international organizations.

In addition, a central contribution of our paper is to help account for the fact that a growing number of instances of NGO restriction laws do not fit the model of aid-dependent, electorally competitive systems that are distantly connected to world society. Some laws have been adopted in wealthy donor countries that are not particularly vulnerable or undemocratic. Canada, as one example, placed restrictions on certain types of foreign funding in 2012; Austria and Australia have recently followed suit. In addition, the expansion takes place during a particular historical moment. Beyond the possibility of a direct political threat and/or authoritarian rule, we argue the wave-like opposition to foreign funding of NGOs since the 1990s arises as part of a broad reaction to the expansion of world society over and above national characteristics.

In the wake of World War II, an early international system emerged, most formally in the creation of the United Nations system ([Meyer et al. 1997](#)). This system, however, was geopolitically split by the two dominant superpowers, preventing a single ideology from dominating global discourse. The United States and other countries attempted to use NGOs as vehicles for spreading democracy, but civil society sectors more generally did not expand rapidly in much of the world until the 1990s ([Schofer and Longhofer 2011](#)). After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, there were few checks on the globalization of a cultural model now dominated by neoliberal ideologies arising especially from the United States and UK. Starting in the late 1980s, international norms promoted NGOs, giving them legitimacy even in countries that had previously suppressed the voluntary sector ([Reimann 2006](#)).

As the international NGO sector expanded and globalized, particularly since the 1990s, these voluntary associations began to possess, for the first time, the potential to fundamentally reshape national societies—not as agents of a particular government, but as collectives of autonomous individuals, promoting their private vision of the public good. At the root of this, neoliberal ideology is a reconceptualization of individuals worldwide as empowered, rational actors ([Meyer and Jepperson 2000](#)). That is, by liberal and neoliberal principles, the individual is assumed to be “someone who can, may and should act globally” ([Boli and Thomas 1997](#), p. 180). In earlier thinking, a robust civil society worked hand-in-hand with government in a thriving liberal democratic society. But with the neoliberal shift, the discourse became more competitive, emphasizing that private action was more efficient and effective than government. NGOs became viewed not only as tools for monitoring government, but also as replacements for large swathes of government services. Importantly, these principles are not thought to be rooted in a particular society, but imagined as universalistic—potentially applying to all people everywhere. Although the ideologies are universalistic, there are of course many oppositions to neoliberalism in practice. As the strength and authority of civil society expands, governments seek to maintain control. And as more countries regulate or

restrict foreign funding, the practice becomes normalized and others are more likely to follow suit. In classic pattern, density of adoption legitimates and thus accelerates subsequent adoption (e.g., [Strang and Soule 1998](#)). Thus, we expect:

Hypothesis 3: Restrictions on foreign funding are more likely as the density of countries with such policies grows.

Data and Methods

Our outcome variable of interest is whether—and when—countries adopt their first legal restrictions on foreign funding for NGOs. We constructed a new database of legal restrictions, building upon lists compiled by [Dupuy et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Christensen and Weinstein \(2013\)](#). In order to extend the dataset to 2015, we consulted the ICNL Law Monitor, looking particularly at the years 2011–2015, but also cross checking the cases in existing data sources including Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, CIVICUS State of Civil Society Reports, USAID Annual CSO Sustainability Reports, World Politics Review, NGO Monitor, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and various legal texts.³ See [table 1](#) for a list of the countries that have adopted restriction policies.

Control Variables

Our statistical models include factors known to affect country adoption of NGO restrictions, as well as the controls that were used in prior studies.

Gross Domestic Product (p/cap, log) is included to control for a country's level of economic development ([World Bank 2018](#)). Poor nations may be particularly vulnerable and more likely to see externally funded NGOs as a potential threat to the regime.

Human rights violations are measured based on the Political Terror Scale database ([Gibney et al. 2017](#)). States that are engaged in human rights violations may be likely to crack down on the civil society sector ([Dupuy et al. 2016](#)). We also examined Fariss' ([2014](#)) latent human rights score and found highly similar results, but the measure only goes up to 2013, so we present results using the Political Terror Scale.

Terrorist attacks are measured by annual counts of domestic terror attacks in the Global Terrorism Database from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism ([2017](#)). States threatened by terrorism may respond by restricting opposition groups and civil society, and such legislation is justified as a national security measure (however, see [Koo and Murdie 2018](#) for evidence to the contrary).

Armed conflict is measured using a dummy variable indicating the presence of a conflict involving 1,000 or more casualties, from the *UCDP/PRIOR Armed Conflict Dataset version 18.1* (see [Gleditsch et al. 2002](#); [Pettersson and Eck 2018](#)). [Dupuy et al. \(2016\)](#) suggest that armed conflict may prompt states to impose restrictions on opposition groups and NGOs, a national security

Table 1. First Restrictive Legislation on Foreign Funding to NGOs, 1994–2015 (n = 60)

Year	Country	Year	Country	Year	Country
1998	Mozambique	2003	Uzbekistan	2009	Sierra Leone
1999	Equatorial Guinea	2004	Azerbaijan	2009	China
1999	Ukraine	2004	Qatar	2009	Uganda
1999	Burundi	2004	Uruguay	2010	Venezuela
1999	Cameroon	2004	Indonesia	2010	India
2000	Yemen	2005	Panama	2010	Somalia
2000	Thailand	2005	Eritrea	2011	Ecuador
2000	Oman	2005	Afghanistan	2011	Israel
2001	Malawi	2005	Sri Lanka	2011	Tunisia
2001	Libya	2006	Peru	2012	Nepal
2001	Belarus	2006	Moldova	2012	Rwanda
2001	Singapore	2006	Sudan	2012	Tajikistan
2002	Angola	2006	Myanmar	2012	Canada
2002	Tanzania	2007	Bhutan	2012	Algeria
2002	Egypt	2007	Bolivia	2014	Cambodia
2002	Bahrain	2007	Zimbabwe	2014	Zambia
2003	Benin	2008	Russia	2014	Nicaragua
2003	Turkmenistan	2008	Jordan	2014	South Sudan
2003	Belize	2009	Vietnam	2014	Laos
2003	Pakistan	2009	Ethiopia	2015	Guatemala

justification somewhat akin to the prior idea that restricting civil society may prevent terrorist attacks.

Foreign Aid entering a country is measured as total aid in constant US dollars, logged ([World Bank 2018](#)), following prior work ([Dupuy et al. 2016](#)).

Competitive elections are measured using the Polity IV indicator for competitiveness of executive recruitment, which distinguishes between countries where executives (e.g., the President) are designated versus being chosen through open and competitive elections ([Center for Systemic Peace 2018](#)). We constructed a dummy variable coded as 1 for countries with highly competitive executive recruitment.⁴

Democracy is measured using the Freedom House index that is a sum of a 1–7 scale of civil rights plus a 1–7 scale of civil liberties, rescaled so that higher values indicate more democratic countries ([Freedom House 2018](#)). We also examined results using the Polity IV democracy measure; it yielded strikingly similar results ([Center for Systemic Peace 2018](#)).

Domestic NGOs are measured by a count of domestic organizations in a country (logged, to reduce skewness) coded from the Gale Group's *Associations Unlimited* dataset ([Schofer and Longhofer 2011](#)). The measure is a sample

of all formal, private, noncommercial, self-governing, and voluntary organizations in each country over time, which may include development NGOs, human rights organizations, arts and recreational clubs, and professional associations, to name a few. The advantage of this measure is its geographic and longitudinal variability, and although it captures a broad swathe of organizations, the measure also correlates highly with more sector-specific organizational directories (see Schofer and Longhofer 2011, p. 554). Because the legislation examined in our analysis tend to target (at least formally) any organization eligible to receive foreign funds, we decided that a more general measure of civil society organizations was most appropriate for our analysis. Still, we acknowledge that the measure is likely biased toward larger and more established organizations.

Key Independent Variables

International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) memberships are the conventional measure of a country's links to world society and exposure to global culture and international norms (Boli and Thomas 1999). The measure, collected from annual editions of the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, captures the number of different international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) that have individual members in each country (Union of International Associations 1990–2016).

Illiberal Inter-Governmental Organization (IGO) membership is measured with a dummy variable that reflects country membership in a set of international organizations that are associated with (varying degrees of) cross-nationally organized opposition to the liberal world order in their discourse and/or policy positions. Scholars have increasingly noted polarization among international organizations (Beckfield 2010), and the rise of organizations that espouse illiberal or antiliberal ideologies in world society (e.g., Hadler and Symons 2018; Schofer et al. 2018). Drawing on Schofer et al. (2018), we use annual country membership in international organizations that have taken stances against key elements of the liberal order as proxy for the general trend of cross-national, antiliberal organizing. The organizations are:

- Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): The SCO was formed in 2001 by six countries, People's Republic of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The organization is a multilateral security organizations, where states cooperate to defend themselves against global democratic trends (Ambrosio 2008). For example, the 2009 Anti-Terror Treaty, signed by SCO members, violates liberal international human rights norms by expanding state authority to infringe on citizens' rights (Cooley and Schaaf 2017). Our measure includes the six founding members, plus two new acceding members, India and Pakistan, as well as four observer nations and six dialogue partners who share the SCO's goals and principles.
- Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS): The CIS was formed in 1991 by ten of the post-Soviet republics to foster cooperation in social, economic, and political spheres. It has become best known for attempting to legitimize

sub-standard democratic election practices amongst its members (Kelley 2010), as well as promoting international agreements that violate civil rights in the name of national security (Cooley and Schaaf 2017).

- Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC): The OIC aims to protect the economic, social, and political interests of the Muslim world. Established in 1969, its membership has grown from thirty founding countries to fifty-seven countries on four continents. Historically, the OIC advocated principles that conflict with international law. For example, the 1990 Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam formulated a set of specifically Islamic human rights that conflict with essential principles of the UN Declaration on Human Rights by stipulating that all rights are subject to the Islamic Shari'ah (rather than being universally and inalienably possessed by all individuals) (Kayaoglu 2013, Petersen 2012). In recent decades, the OIC has shifted toward finding alignment between Islamic and international principles, but the centering discourse is one of threat to Islam and the fear of potential subjugation of Muslims by non-Muslims (Ahmad 2016; Kayaoglu 2015). Hadler and Symons 2018 specifically identify the OIC as espousing illiberal discourses that are contrary to conventional liberal world society norms on issues such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights.
- Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA): ALBA was founded in 2004 in Havana. It advocates a socialist vision of regional economic integration in Latin America structured around goals of mutual economic aid, bartering, and social welfare. For example, the eleven member countries have established initiatives to ensure hydrocarbon access for members and to provide consolidated news and media through the region. Scholars describe it as the “most explicit, consistent and comprehensive articulation and institutionalization of these counter-hegemonic efforts [against neoliberalism]” (Muhr 2013, p. 1).

Global adoption of NGO funding restriction laws is measured by the cumulative number of countries that have imposed restrictions on foreign funding of NGOs, lagged one year. The measure captures the increasing wave of restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs, potentially emboldening other nations to follow suit. We take the natural log, both to reduce skewness and because the substantive impact of successive policy adoptions may diminish.⁵ That said, an unlogged measure yields similar results.

Descriptive statistics for variables used in the analyses can be found in Appendix A.

We analyze the timing of country policy adoption from 1994 to 2015 using event history analysis (Tuma and Hannan 1984; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004). In order to estimate effects of variables that vary across time but not country, such as our measure of cumulative policy adoptions, we necessarily employ a parametric event history model. Specifically, we use an exponential model, which models temporal variation in the hazard rate purely as a function of covariates rather than any baseline time trend (Cleves et al. 2016). However, Cox models

(which make no parametric assumption about the time trend of the hazard rate) produce similar results (not presented; available upon request). We addressed possible left-censoring arising from a small number of extremely early adopters (noted above) by conducting analyses that started in the 1970s and included early cases. Findings were consistent. Finally, we examined diagnostics and to evaluate the proportionality assumption of our event history model and identify outliers/influential cases; we did not find significant issues.

Findings

In [table 2](#), we present an event history analysis examining country adoption of legal restrictions of the foreign funding of NGOs. In Model 1, we show the results for the first set of control variables. We include a measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (p/cap) (log), as it is standard in cross-national research. We do not find evidence of an association between national wealth and legal restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs. Common rhetoric, especially in the media, suggests that armed conflict and terrorist activity may increase the likelihood of funding restrictions ([Worstall 2014](#)). [Dupuy et al. \(2016\)](#) also speculate that armed conflict may prompt states to impose restrictions on opposition groups and NGOs, generally. However, when looking across all cases, we find little evidence of an association between terrorist activity or armed conflict and restrictions on foreign funding, and the positive association between human rights violations and restrictions fades after including our central explanatory measures. There may be particular cases that fit this narrative, but we do not find evidence of a consistent relationship across a large sample of countries.

Model 2 addresses competitive elections. [Dupuy et al. \(2016\)](#) argued that vulnerable regimes are more likely to adopt restrictions, measured by competitive elections and high levels of foreign aid. The associations are generally in the expected direction, but not consistently significant. In Model 3, we consider an interaction between competitive elections and aid and find support for prior research ([Dupuy et al. 2016; Christensen and Weinstein 2013](#)), although the associations are weaker in our study. There are several possible reasons the statistical associations we find are weaker; we have expanded the sample in two ways, to include donor countries as well as aid recipients and updated the data through 2015, and we include additional variables with substantial explanatory power.⁶

The prior literature has also suggested that restrictions on foreign funding can be part of a general pattern of authoritarianism. Starting in Model 4, we find a robust, negative association between democracy and restrictive policies that holds across subsequent models. In these cases, bans on foreign funding appear to be one part of a broader authoritarian repression of civil society and other democratic freedoms. Related, the prior literature has also proposed that regimes with larger domestic NGO sectors would be more likely to restrict foreign funding, either because states are more apt to regulate large civil society sectors, or because they perceive a large sector as a potential threat. In Model

Table 2. Event History Models: Effects of Domestic and Global Factors on National Adoption of Policies Restricting Foreign Funding of NGOs, 1994–2015 (*n* Country Years = 2,618, *n* Countries = 146)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
GDP (log, p/cap)	−0.15	0.05	0.02	0.05	−0.04	−0.01	−0.06	−0.06
	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.19)
Human rights violations	0.45**	0.31	0.29	0.10	0.03	0.05	0.10	0.02
	(0.16)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.23)	(0.23)
Terror attacks (log)	0.00	0.02	0.04	0.06	0.00	0.00	−0.04	0.03
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.10)
Armed conflict	−1.33	−1.26	−1.22	−1.35	−1.21	−1.22	−1.19	−0.90
	(0.91)	(0.94)	(0.94)	(0.87)	(0.86)	(0.87)	(0.82)	(0.81)
Foreign aid (log)	0.09+	−0.02	−0.01	−0.02	−0.02	−0.01	−0.03	
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)	
Competitive elections	−0.18	−2.89+	−1.33	−1.94	−1.90	−1.55	−1.66	
	(0.33)	(1.50)	(1.73)	(1.39)	(1.47)	(1.45)	(1.26)	
Aid* comp elections		0.14+	0.11	0.15*	0.14*	0.13+	0.14*	
		(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)	
Democracy			−0.22***	−0.26***	−0.25***	−0.21**	−0.26**	
			(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	
Domestic NGOs (log)				0.31**	0.35*	0.50**	0.51**	
				(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.17)	(0.17)	
INGO membership (log)					−0.12	−0.24	−0.38	
					(0.29)	(0.31)	(0.33)	
Illiberal IGO membership						0.96**	0.80*	
						(0.34)	(0.35)	
Global adoption of NGO							0.51***	
Funding restriction laws (log)							(0.12)	
Constant	−3.84**	−6.64***	−4.36*	−3.42+	−3.08+	−2.87+	−3.08+	−2.92+
	(1.20)	(1.69)	(1.78)	(1.96)	(1.72)	(1.71)	(1.75)	(1.76)

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.001$ ** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$ + $p < 0.10$

5, we find strong evidence of a positive association between size of the domestic sector and adoption of foreign funding. In an effort to disentangle the difference between restrictive and regulatory goals of foreign funding legislation, we further considered an interaction between size of the domestic sector and level of

democracy. The logic is that the “threat” rationale is more likely to exist in less democratic countries as it entails an oppositional relationship with the state, while a regulatory rationale may appear in more cooperative contexts in more democratic states.⁷ These checks, however, did not yield any conclusive results and so are not presented here. Anecdotally, we did not find cases that seemed purely regulatory, although in theory they could exist. In Canada, for example—a thriving liberal democracy with a large civil society sector and large administrative state—the adoption of laws was as a reaction to foreign funding of environmental protests in opposition to a government plan to build an oil pipeline. A fertile direction future research would be to examine case studies that unpack the regulatory and restrictive dimensions of such laws and analyze the content of various legal changes to consider those that seem to be harmful to NGOs in some fashion versus those that more oriented toward managing the sector.

In Model 6, we turn to the first of our indicators of a global cultural shift. We argued in *hypothesis 1* that citizens’ memberships in international NGOs can be seen as an indicator of linkage to global liberal culture; more memberships suggest embeddedness in world society and a decreased likelihood of adopting restrictions on foreign funding. The association is in the direction we expect, but is not significant. In part, the weakness of the association may be explained by our argument in *hypothesis 2*—membership in illiberal international organizations increases the likelihood of foreign-funding restrictions. The point is that not all international civil society organizations have a liberal mission. Although it is not feasible to substantively classify huge numbers of organizations, we identified several illiberal organizations and in Model 7, we find state membership in any of these organizations massively increases the likelihood of adopting a ban on foreign funding. In a robustness check of this index, we examined results for each organization individually and find separately they all increase the likelihood of adopting restrictions.⁸ The similar associations found across these highly diverse organization support our conception of these memberships as jointly representing a general trend of cross-national, antiliberal organizing (also see Motadel 2018).⁹ Overall, a population’s membership in more international NGOs in general decreases the risk of restricting foreign funding, but the association is weak; and state membership in an explicitly illiberal international organization substantially and significantly increases the likelihood of adopting restrictions.

Lastly, we measure the general diffusion of opposition to world culture through a count of the total number of countries with foreign funding restrictions worldwide (Model 8). This variable captures a sea change in the legitimacy of adopting illiberal foreign-funding laws, indicating that it is increasingly acceptable to impose these restrictions. As more countries adopt restrictions, any given nation is more likely to restrict foreign funding to NGOs. This shift in the global ethos helps account for increasing adoptions even among wealthy, democratic countries. A recent case study of Venezuela provides some textured insight into the statistical associations we observe, pointing out that forces

outside domestic politics are a key part of understanding the timing of the adoption of anti-NGO legislation:

“Historically, political sociological theories, including pluralist and neo-Marxist theories, have focused on domestic factors and looked to the composition of government, namely the legislature, to understand legislation. However, *chavistas* had dominated the AN since 2000. This indicates that forces outside of the legislature convinced the government, at least for a time, to reconsider this law and that international factors played a significant role in the eventual passage of anti-NGO legislation” (Gill 2016, p. 31).

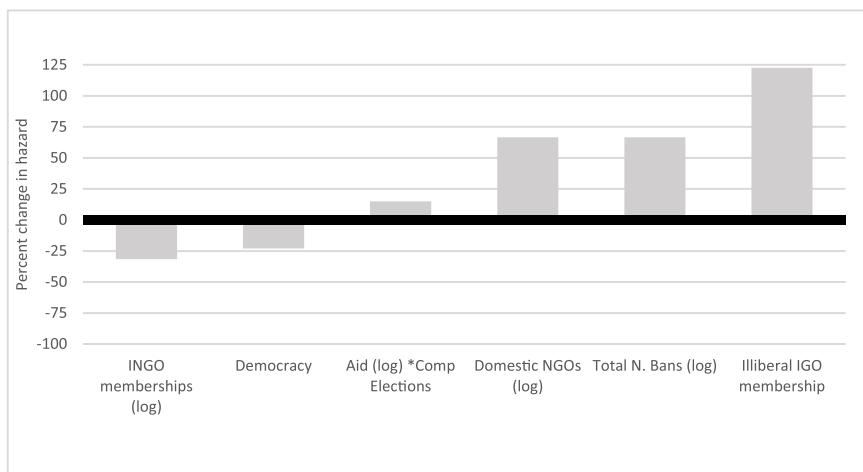
To further highlight the importance of global forces in shaping domestic NGO restrictions, we illustrate effect sizes in figure 2, which shows the change in the hazard rate of adopting a ban on foreign funding for a one-unit change in the statistically significant variables in our final model (Model 8). Effect sizes are particularly striking when we consider the scale of the variables. Most dramatically, membership in an illiberal international organization increases the likelihood of adopting restrictions by just over 120 percent. A one-point increase in the cumulative number of prior adoptions (logged) corresponds to more than a 65 percent increase in the hazard rate. For example, a one-unit increase in log INGO memberships (which for a country at the mean equates to an increase in the count from around 725 to roughly 2,000 memberships) is associated with over a 30 percent decrease in the hazard of adopting restrictions. Our point is not to deny the importance of domestic factors, which have sizeable effects as well (especially if one considers the effect of multiple-unit changes; for instance, democracy has a standard deviation of roughly 6). Rather, our point is that international forces are also extremely important for understanding NGO restrictions and have not yet been considered in empirical research. Overall, our findings provide evidence the recent rise of restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs is due in part to a growing backlash against world culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

Liberal ideologies dominated the globe following the end of the Cold War. Emerging gradually over the latter half of the twentieth century in the Anglo-American world and its allies, these ideologies became even more aggressive in the 1990s. Market-oriented solutions of privatization and decentralization, such as in the World Bank’s structural adjustment programs, proliferated despite contention. At the same time, countries around the world democratized and domestic associations diffused rapidly across the globe, even to countries that historically had very weak civil societies (Schofer and Longhofer 2011), and despite suspicion of the overt use of NGOs to promote democracy worldwide and doubts about their efficacy (e.g., Edwards and Hulme 1995, 1996). Critical voices could always be found but were marginalized during the initial period of excitement about the possibilities of a new world order.

We are now witnessing, however, a growing chorus of oppositions to liberal world culture. Such opposition was perhaps most visible, initially, at the

Figure 2. Percent Change in the Hazard Rate for Key Independent Variables. Note: based on a one-unit increase in each independent variable



anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 as failures of the economic tenets of neoliberalism (such as decentralization and deregulation) came to the fore. Likewise, newly democratic countries (e.g., in the former Soviet Union) faced unanticipated challenges, and disillusionment with liberal democracy began to grow throughout the 2000s. Today, the world is less free than it was 20 years ago (Freedom House 2017). This disenchantment with the core elements of world culture is generating, today, a growing backlash against it.

Our study shows that above and beyond domestic factors—such as the electoral vulnerability of regimes in aid-dependent countries—it has become more globally legitimate to oppose world society by restricting funding to its key carrier: NGOs. The social and cultural processes involved in diffusion of the restrictions, the wide range of countries involved, the particular historical timing of the increase of these restrictions, and the uncertainty around the likely effects of such regulations support our argument that a general cultural backlash is at work.

Still, our findings suggest only a relative, rather than absolute, decline in the authority of the liberal system. Plausibly, perhaps a relative decline indicates we are moving toward a more polarized world on multiple fronts, where liberal world society remains one strong worldview but others are increasing in strength. One argument in support of this view is that countries tend to restrict foreign funding, but outright bans are rare, suggesting states increasingly seek to buffer themselves but are unable or unwilling to fully shut out these possible carriers of world culture.

Alternatively, we could be moving toward an erosion and eventual collapse of the liberal order with fragmented opposition coming from multiple kinds of countries. An argument in support of this view is that restrictions are now arising in multiple kinds of countries on multiple grounds (even, now, by some

liberal democracies like Canada and Australia), with little evidence of consolidated poles of opposition. Rejection of globalized liberalism can come from many fronts—populism, the return of “traditional” family values, nationalism, religion, and so on—but there is little evidence suggesting global consolidation around a single or unified frame.

Whether it is an indication of polarization or erosion, the current wave of funding bans is likely to be consequential. Even in a more polarized world, there could continue to be substantial material consequences for violating world cultural norms depending on their strength. For example, as Dupuy et al. (2016), p. 299 note that “governments recognize that such laws [restricting foreign funding] harm their international reputations for supporting democracy and may invite donor punishment in terms of aid reductions.” Similarly, Christensen and Weinstein argue that “worries about international retaliation can restrain such behavior [restricting foreign funding] if governments believe that clamping down will cost them more than it is worth” (2013, p. 77). In the context of a cultural backlash, even international development projects may be seen as politicized, not because of their effect on domestic elections, but because NGOs more broadly are increasingly viewed as part and parcel of a decreasingly legitimate liberal world culture. Notions of international development, emerging after World War II, are deeply rooted in Western cultural ideologies of progress and justice (Chabbott 2013) and are now recognized as carrying particularly Western meanings of science and expertise often disguised as apolitical and objective (Ferguson 1990).

The consequences of this growing backlash remains a key area for future research, especially as better data become available. In some countries, there are specific examples where aid is channeled to domestic NGOs that threaten a governing party, or autocratic leaders are threatened by the free association of civil society. However, as a global, longitudinal phenomenon it is currently implausible to track funding flows for a large sample of organizations, and even less feasible to then statistically ascertain the causal effects of particular sources of NGO funding on election outcomes. In many countries, we cannot even get a precise measure of the size of the civil society sector, and let us alone convincingly document the multiple sources of funding to any given nonprofit organization.

But growing opposition does not necessarily indicate the wholesale unraveling of the global liberal order, and in fact may point to the opposite—liberal and neoliberal ideologies prompt a reaction because they are influential. Carothers and Brechenmacher similarly observe:

“It is worth noting that this broader trend toward closing civil society space in many countries is occurring at the same time as but very separate from notable progress on open government norms and civil society participation at the multilateral level. Two years after the launch of the Open Government Partnership, 62 countries have joined the partnership and committed to working toward greater accountability, transparency, and government responsiveness. However, there is only a little overlap between those countries that have joined, most of which are located in North America, Europe, and Latin America, and

those engaging in pushback against democracy and rights support and limiting space for civil society more broadly” (2014, p. 16).

Thus, the rise of opposition may go hand-in-hand with increasing influence of civil society as resistance to world culture becomes more organized. But in part, aside from a shared antiliberal sentiment, there is little ideological or cultural coherence among the countries with the strongest reactions, suggesting fragmentation rather than cohesive polarization. There is not yet a clear, consolidated alternative to world culture, and thus the current backlash appears mainly unified by a shared rejection of liberal universalism.

Notes

1. We know of only seven instances of foreign-funding laws that pre-date the 1990s, with the earliest being Syria (1956), followed by a small burst in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Bangladesh, Bermuda, India, Mauritius, and Vanuatu), and Chile (1990). We are indebted to Kendra Dupuy for sharing her data on these adoptions.
2. We wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.
3. In our data collection effort focused from the 1990s onward, India is coded as adopting regulations in 2010. India is one of the rare cases that had a prior law in place; alternative analyses using the earlier adoption date (or excluding India entirely) yielded results that were consistent with our main tables.
4. [Dupuy et al. \(2016\)](#) used a measure from the NELDA dataset, which is arguably more precise as it covers the electoral process more generally beyond executive recruitment; but it is not available after 2012.
5. Early adoptions represented a notable challenge to liberal international norms; the 50th adoption may further undermine global norms but arguably not to the same degree as the second or third.
6. Corollary analyses (available on request) suggest that the aid-elections interaction has a larger coefficient in earlier years and a smaller coefficient recently. The inclusion of later years in our study is largely responsible for our weaker findings. One interpretation is that that foreign aid and electoral vulnerability are more important in explaining early adopters but a growing global wave of backlash is now leading to adoption across a more diverse group of countries.
7. As an additional way to consider whether the issue is more about regulation in ‘NGO-friendly’ states, we also considered an interaction between size of the welfare state and size of civil society—per a ‘regulation’ argument, larger civil society sectors in larger administrative-welfare state systems might be more likely to regulate civil society as a managerial matter. The interaction is positive, but not significant; thus, we did not find strong evidence supporting this interaction.
8. The significance of the associations when looking at each organization individually are not as robust as for the index. Nevertheless, when examined

individually, each organization is positively and significantly associated with the rate of policy adoption, with the exception of the OIC (which has an effect in the predicted direction, but is not quite significant). Importantly, we use these state memberships as a rough proxy for a broadly ‘anti-world society’ orientation of the state rather than an instrumental view envisioning direct effects of any single organization. As an additional check, we also examined whether our measure holds up beyond regional indicators, as there is some (but not complete) overlap between membership in each organizations and world region: membership in illiberal organizations retains its explanatory power.

9. We wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

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A. Appendix. Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in the Analyses (n Country Years = 2,618, n Countries = 146)

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
GDP (p/cap, log)	9.00	1.24	5.92	11.66
Human rights violations	2.40	1.09	1.00	5.00
Terror attacks (log)	1.11	1.48	0.00	8.28
Armed conflict	0.03	0.18	0.00	1.00

(Continued)

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Foreign aid (log)	14.59	8.41	0.00	23.15
Competitive elections	0.54	0.50	0.00	1.00
Democracy	7.52	3.69	0.00	12.00
Domestic NGOs (log)	3.75	1.61	0.69	8.71
INGO membership (log)	6.60	0.96	3.43	8.38
Illiberal IGO membership	0.33	0.47	0.00	1.00
Global adoption of NGO	2.26	1.57	0.00	4.13
Funding restriction laws (log)				

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