The Effect of Government Intervention on the Operational Decisions of NGOs: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Three Electoral Autocracies[*]

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Abstract

Over the last decade, increasingly repressive governments have applied a mix of coercion and accommodation to NGOs. Yet the impact of government actions on NGO behavior remains under-explored. We distinguish three types of government action and three NGO response strategies. Using unique survey experimental data of directors of 425 NGOs in Cambodia, Uganda, and Serbia, we measure how government actions impact *where* and *how* NGOs prefer to work and *which* actors they prefer to engage with. We find that government repression and cooptation can restrict and isolate NGOs, but also fuel civic action. NGOs prefer to avoid communities where local governments deploy more repression, cooptation, and anti-NGO rhetoric. We also find that coercion reduces NGO collaboration and public involvement but amplifies public mobilization. Panel data from Cambodia suggests repression also increases public mobilization in self-reported real-world behavior. These findings have important implications for NGOs navigating and shaping political landscapes amidst democratic backsliding.

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1 Introduction

Across developed and developing countries, democratic backsliding continues to constrain and reshape civic space. Integral to these shifting dynamics are non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which play a variety of social and political roles that can both benefit and threaten incumbent governments. On one hand, NGOs engage in activities that enhance state legitimacy. Many provide goods and services that generate meaningful improvements in citizen well-being (Banks and Hulme 2012). These improvements for citizens can yield significant political benefits for incumbent government actors and create incentives to facilitate NGOs' work (Springman 2022). NGOs can also engage in political advocacy that strengthens ties between citizens and the state (Teets 2014) or bolsters states' international standing (Bush 2015). On the other hand, NGOs are a powerful force for democratic accountability and political change in many countries (Carothers 2020; Gilbert 2020; Gilbert and Mohseni 2018). This creates incentives for governments, especially those with suspect democratic credentials, to coerce NGOs through repression, co-optation, or delegitimizing rhetoric (Robertson 2009; DeMattee 2022).

Governments use a variety of tools to accommodate or coerce NGOs (Bratton 1989; Plantan 2020, 2022), and the use of these tools is increasing across a broad cross-section of countries (Heurlin 2010; Smidt et al. 2021). However, we still understand relatively little about how NGOs respond to increasing government intervention. How do accommodative and coercive government actions affect NGO behavior? Are different tools more or less effective at influencing NGOs's decision-making? Can NGOs resist government influence by leveraging or creating connections with other civic actors? As efforts to control NGOs have increased dramatically in recent years (Youngs and Echagüe 2017; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014), it is important to understand how different government actions affect NGO behavior.

We focus on three key categories of accommodative and coercive tools employed by governments to influence the activities, locations, and partnerships of NGOs. Operational interventions which involve direct government interference, both coercive (such as arrests or disruptions) and accommodative (providing administrative or financial support), rhetorical interventions which occur through public statements aiming to sway public attitudes toward NGOs, and cooptation which involves governments offering favorable treatment to gain influence over NGO decision-making. We expect that NGOs will strategically avoid communities where governments coerce, co-opt and/or rhetorically threaten NGOs. We further analyze how NGOs respond to government coercion using three resistance strategies: localization, formal partnerships, and public mobilization.

We test our expectations in an online survey of directors and managers from 425 NGOs in Cambodia, Uganda, and Serbia. These cases were chosen to represent countries at different levels of repression within the category of electoral autocracies, with Uganda and Cambodia at the higher end of repression and Serbia at the lower end. We employ a conjoint experiment to examine how common government interventions affect the operational decisions of NGOs. Specifically, we present respondents with two profiles describing hypothetical communities where their NGO could work. We randomly vary salient characteristics of each community, manipulating differences in the extent to which local government authorities[1] (henceforce, LGAs) repress or facilitate NGO activities, use cooptation to influence NGO activities, and disseminate pro- and anti-NGO rhetoric. To shield responses to sensitive questions and provide benchmarks, we also vary the amount of funding for project activities and levels of development and geographic accessibility.

We then present respondents with a series of questions asking which community their organization would prefer to work in and which community they would be more likely to involve the public in project planning or activities, partner with a range of civic actors, or mobilize public action. In doing so, we seek to understand how government behavior impacts NGO choices about where, how, and with whom they work.

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[1] We use the term ‘local government authorities’ to refer to government officials associated with lower-level administrative units. We focus on *local* government interventions because most interactions between NGOs and government officials occur at this level.

We show that LGA interventions have a large impact on NGO operational choices. Broadly, LGA repression and cooptation restrict and isolate NGOs, but also fuel public action. NGOs prefer to avoid communities where LGAs repress NGO operations, where LGAs attempt to coopt NGOs, and where LGAs publicly use anti-NGO rhetoric. By contrast, LGAs' accommodative interventions increase willingness to work in a given community. Notably, administrative support is preferred over direct material support, which respondents may associate with cooptation.

LGA actions also have important effects on NGOs' resistance strategies. We find that NGOs are less likely to involve the public in planning project activities or pursue partnerships with other NGOs when working in communities where cooptation is prevalent. Thus, coercion both reduces the willingness of NGOs to operate in communities and isolates them from other civic actors when they do. However, intermediate levels of operational repression actually *increase* NGO preferences for organizing public action. NGOs appear to see public mobilization as an effective strategy to resist some forms of repression. Importantly, this pattern holds across NGOs operating in three very different electoral autocracies, NGOs with more and less confrontational relationships with governments, and NGOs operating in different sectors. Finally, we exploit panel data measuring self-reported real world behavior among Cambodian NGOs to show that this pattern extends beyond a simulated survey-experimental environment.

These findings have implications for the ability of NGOs to create meaningful political change in repressive countries. The ability of LGAs to influence NGO preferences over where they conduct activities may limit whether NGOs work in the communities where they are most needed, especially politically marginalized communities. LGA interventions that influence whether NGOs involve the public in planning or partner with other civic actors are equally concerning. Civil society scholars have long theorized that horizontal ties with other organizations and vertical ties with communities can insulate NGOs against government repression (Suárez and Marshall 2014; Brechenmacher 2017). Drawing on these arguments, donors have invested heavily in localization efforts and NGO networks in countries with narrowing civic space (Springman, Hatano, et al. 2022).

We also also contribute to the large literature on democratic backsliding (Waldner and Lust 2018). This literature has looked closely at how central government efforts to repress and channel opposition in elections (Corrales 2020; Hanley and Vachudova 2018), in institutions (Bauer and Becker 2020; Haggard and Kaufman 2021) and in the streets (Barrow and Fuller 2023) have worked. Here we deepen the analysis by showing in detail how local government interventions also work to shape NGO strategies and decisions, helping to isolate NGOs from one another and so making it potentially harder to resist backsliding and autocratization.

Furthermore, data on interactions between NGOs and local governments are scarce, and specific instances of government coercion often coincide with broader attacks on democratic institutions, making it difficult to identify their effects on NGO behavior. Our research design overcomes these challenges, joining a small but growing literature applying experimental methods to the study of civil society (Davis 2023; Springman, Malesky, et al. 2022; Springman 2022; Springman, Hatano, et al. 2022). The paper also leverages a conjoint survey design to shield answers to highly sensitive survey questions (Horiuchi, Markovich, and Yamamoto 2021) and corrections for multiple hypothesis testing shown to improve inference from conjoint analysis (Liu and Shiraito 2023).

2 NGOs and Closing Civic Space

NGOs can be both beneficial and threatening to incumbent political leaders. On the one hand, NGOs fill gaps in government programs by providing services to under-served communities, due in part to the influence of development aid and private philanthropy (Cammett and MacLean 2014, 2011). Randomized evaluations of NGO service delivery interventions often show positive effects on health and education across aid-receiving countries (Tsai, Morse, and Blair 2020; Bold et al. 2018; Björkman Nyqvist et al. 2019; Croke et al. 2016; Bhushan and Schwartz 2004).

These improved service outcomes can generate benefits for incumbents. For instance, there is evidence that the provision of high-quality services by NGOs can result in lower levels of protest (DiLorenzo 2018; Springman 2019) and generate political credit for local and national political incumbents (Brass 2016; Guiteras and Mobarak 2015; Springman 2021; Brass and Jock 2022). Recent evidence from a randomized control trial even suggests that parallel service provision by NGOs can build state capacity and increase political support for incumbents without damaging government legitimacy (Springman 2022).

However, NGOs can also pose significant risks to incumbents. For example, Boulding (2014) and Boulding and Gibson (2009) find that NGOs in Bolivia mobilized higher levels of voter turnout and political protest, and reduced the vote share of local incumbents. Furthermore, NGOs have been credited with sparking instances of popular mobilization ranging from local land disputes all the way to regional 'colour revolutions' (Gilbert 2020; Gilbert and Mohseni 2018). In fact, there is even evidence that NGOs focused narrowly on service provision can generate higher levels of political mobilization among their beneficiaries (Brass 2022) and are themselves often the targets of repression by LGAs (Springman, Malesky, et al. 2022).

To manage these trade-offs, governments try to influence where NGOs work, the activities they implement, and with whom they engage. Over the past 15 years, government efforts to restrict civic space have increased dramatically (Youngs and Echagüe 2017, p. 9). As illustrated by Figure 1, between 2009 and 2019, 63 OECD aid-recipient countries passed at least one law imposing significant restrictions on NGO operations.

Importantly, the policies governing the NGO sector are often implemented by local authorities, including politicians, law enforcement officers, and bureaucrats, and involve both legal and extra-legal methods (Springman, Malesky, et al. 2022; DeMattee 2022). For example, LGAs working in politically competitive constituencies are often tasked with using coercion on behalf of the central government (Hassan 2020). At the same time, some LGAs can benefit from facilitating NGO operations in areas controlled by opposition politicians

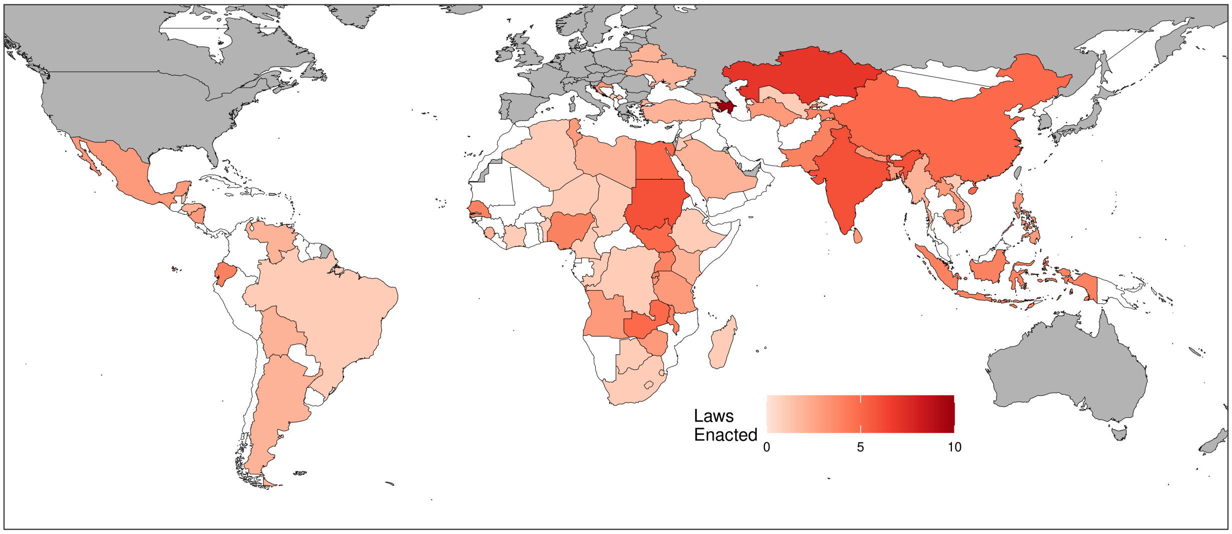

Figure 1: This map shows the number of laws implementing restrictions on the NGO sector enacted between 2009 and 2019 in aid-receiving countries. White indicates countries did not enact any restrictive laws over this ten year period. Source: original dataset with global coverage compiled by PDRI-DevLab from the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law NGO Law Tracker and the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index.

(Bueno 2018). As a result, there is often substantial variation in levels of accommodation and coercion of NGOs by LGAs across administrative units within countries (Sullivan 2020; Teets 2014; Robertson 2009, p. 528).

In this study, we focus on a range of accommodative and coercive tools that LGAs use to regulate where, how, and with whom NGOs work. Our main expectation is that NGOs will avoid communities where LGAs utilize coercive tools and favor communities where LGAs utilize accommodative tools. There are three categories of interventions we consider: operational, rhetorical, and cooptation. First, LGAs may intervene directly in the operations of NGOs in coercive ways, by physically disrupting NGO meetings or arresting NGO staff, and in accommodative ways, by helping NGOs navigate administrative requirements or providing financial or in-kind support to NGO projects. We refer to this as "operational intervention".

Second, LGAs may indirectly interfere with NGOs by seeking to encourage or undermine public support through rhetoric about the NGO sector. This can happen either through direct public statements from LGAs or through rumors on social media. We refer to this as "rhetorical intervention". We expect that NGOs will avoid implementing activities in communities where LGAs employ less accommodative and more coercive operational and rhetorical tools. We further expect the strength of this avoidance to increase for more severe forms of coercion (arresting staff vs disrupting meetings).

Third, LGAs often try to coopt NGOs; "cooptation" involves favorable treatment in exchange for greater influence over NGOs' decision-making (Hemment 2012; Heurlin 2010). This may undermine NGO objectives and their legitimacy. We therefore expect that NGOs will prefer to work in communities where LGAs treat NGOs equally relative to communities where LGAs engage in cooptation.

We further expect that LGA interventions will affect the activities NGOs engage in and the actors they engage with. In communities with more coercion, we expect NGOs may try to deploy strategies that make them more resilient to or less likely to be targeted for coercion. We identify three such strategies: localization, partnering, and public mobilization.

First, 'localization' – involving community members in activities and planning – strengthens the legitimacy of NGOs in the communities where they work, increasing popular support and raising the political cost of attacks (Brechenmacher and Carothers 2018). Second, NGOs extend their capacity through formal partnerships with external organizations, including other NGOs, local citizen associations, or religious and traditional leaders. The ability to form partnerships relies on being part of a broader network. Networks connect their members to material, legal, social, and political resources (Cruz, Labonne, and Querubin 2020), and can be vital to building organizations' resilience to government coercion (Springman, Hatano, et al. 2022). Third, NGOs sometimes organize public action by circulating petitions, holding demonstrations, or encouraging citizens to directly contact government officials. This mobilization of the public may allow NGOs to demonstrate community support or forcibly resist physical coercion. We are agnostic about whether the use of these strategies will increase or decrease as coercion increases. However, we argue that increased use of these strategies suggests NGOs view them as effective for mitigating coercion, while decreased use suggests NGOs view them as exacerbating coercion.[2]

3 Research Setting

To study the impact of government interventions, we collect data on operational decisions from NGO directors and managers in Uganda, Cambodia, and Serbia. To increase confidence in the generalizability of our findings, we selected three electoral autocracies with significant government intervention in the NGO sector that has increased in recent years, but which are otherwise very different. These countries are on separate continents, speak different languages, and have very different historical experiences with the NGO sector. However, in all three countries, NGOs enjoy relatively unfettered access to international funding. Nonetheless, new legislation has increased administrative requirements and restricted permissible activities, coinciding with the growing use of extra-legal violence and intimidation. While we believe that this sampling approach increases the generalizability of our results across electoral autocracies, it is important to note that variation in the characteristics of NGOs across countries may be due to the different sampling strategies employed by the research team rather than variation in the composition of countries' NGO sectors.

Figure 2 plots the V-Dem CSO Repression (v2csreprss) variable from 2000–2021. The variable is on a five-point scale ranging from No repression (4) to Severe repression (0) of civil society organizations. According to V-Dem, repression in all three countries has been increasing over the past decade, although repression is significantly more severe in Uganda and Cambodia relative to Serbia. Furthermore, LGAs in all three countries exercise discretion in the governance of the NGO sector. For example, the V-Dem's Pandemic Enabled Backsliding data classifies the extent to which the enforcement of COVID-19 related emergency measures varied subnationally, ranging from almost no variation to enforcement being almost entirely different across administrative units. Less than 25% of countries have almost no subnational variation, while the median country was coded as having some variation, including Uganda, Cambodia, and Serbia. In all three cases, the coders documented substantial differences in the extent to which emergency measures were abused by security forces and local defense units in different parts of the country.

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[2] See Appendix B for a full list of our hypotheses as stated in the pre-analysis plan (PAP). While the PAP states hypotheses with a directional expectation, the tests being conducted have not changed.

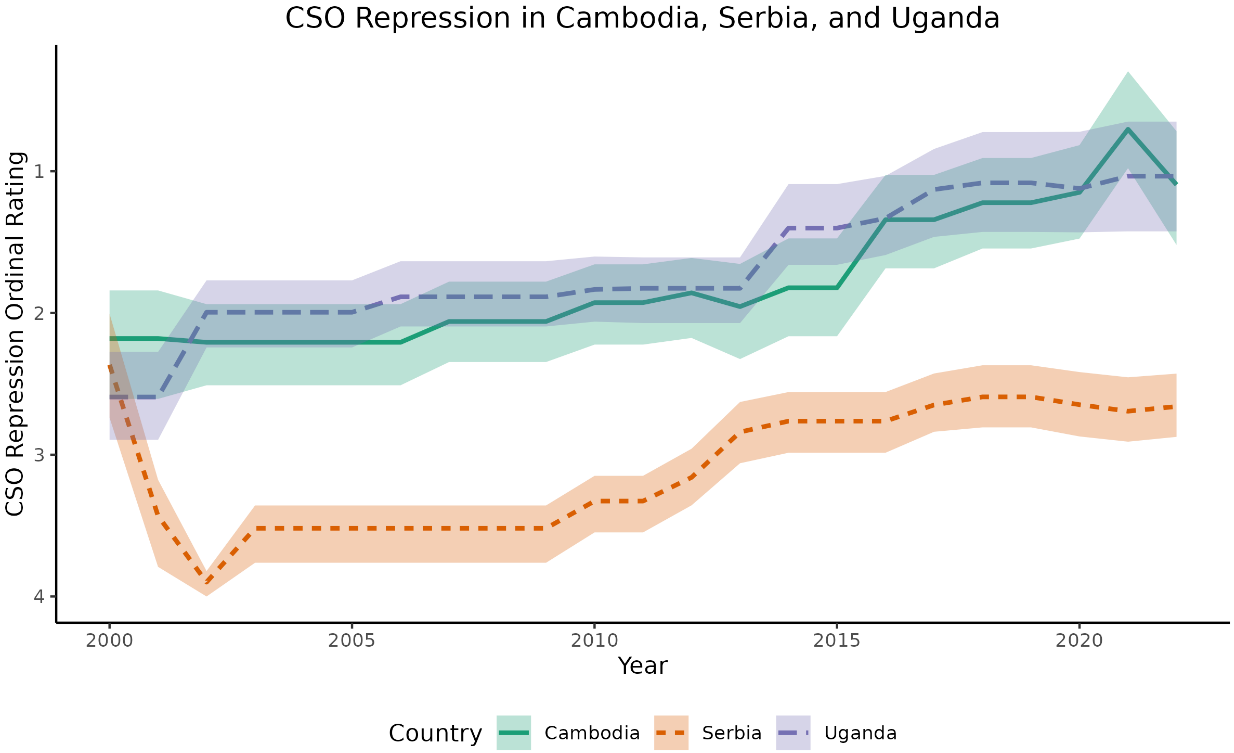

Figure 2: V-Dem CSO Repression (v2csreprss) indicator from 2000-2021. The indicator is on a five-point scale ranging from No (4) to Severe (0) government repression of civil society. The y-axis is reversed so that higher levels correspond with greater repression.

Cambodia has been classified by V-Dem as an electoral autocracy since 1981, but autocratization has intensified in recent years. This process accelerated in 2017 when the main opposition party was dissolved by the Supreme Court following accusations of being an agent of the United States (Leang 2021; USAID 2022a; U.S. Department of State 2022). Between 2000 and 2021, Cambodia's CSO Repression V-Dem score fell from Moderately to Substantially repressive. Opposition parties, trade unions, environmental organizations, and independent media groups have been shut down, and prominent activists and NGO workers have received long prison sentences or been assassinated. Reporting suggests that LGAs regularly search the offices of NGOs without cause, inconsistently enforce requirements to obtain permits for public demonstrations, deny permits selectively, shut down meetings, detain or arrest NGO staff and community representatives, and require them to sign promises to cease activities.[3]

The Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO) also creates a restrictive environment for NGOs, including a requirement to remain politically neutral (USAID 2022a). One directive requiring that NGOs secure permission from local governments before conducting activities was eventually dropped, but the practice remains *de facto* law in many areas of the country.[4,5] At the same time, a recent push to attract young voters to the ruling party has resulted in the cooptation of former NGO workers into government positions (Khmer 2023). Most NGOs are reliant on international donors for funding (Suárez and Marshall 2014), and government authorities use this reliance to attack the legitimacy of NGOs and justify repression. Accusing NGOs of serving foreign interests has been a common tactic for the regime, and NGOs funded by the United States have been accused of participating in a "US interference network" (USAID 2017).

According to V-Dem, Uganda has been classified as an electoral autocracy since 1996, when the country first held presidential elections. However, the past 10-years have seen a significant deterioration of the country's democratic institutions. Since 2000, Uganda's CSO Repression V-Dem score has fallen from Moderately to Substantially repressive. This change captures a marked escalation in crackdowns on NGOs. In the months before and after the 2021 elections, Ugandan civil society experienced arbitrary arrests and kidnappings, crackdowns on public gatherings, curtailment of speech, harassment of journalists, and policing and shutdowns of NGOs at levels not seen in decades (Watch 2021; USAID 2022c).

In August 2021, the country's National Bureau for NGOs shuttered 54 NGOs without warning, citing lack of compliance with registration requirements. Most of the shuttered

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[3] "2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cambodia." U.S. Department of State, 2019.

[4] Dara, Mech. 2017. "Ministry Ups Scrutiny of NGOs." The Phnom Penh Post, October 10, 2017.

[5] Khorn, Savi. 2019. "Adhoc: Local Authorities Restricting Right to Gather." The Phnom Penh Post, August 8, 2019.

NGOs focused on human rights and election monitoring (Watch 2021; USAID 2022c). Earlier that year, the government suspended the Democratic Governance Facility, a multilateral funding mechanism providing substantial support to dozens of Uganda's most prominent NGOs focused on strengthening democracy and human rights. NGOs must now seek permission from LGAs before operating in any district in which they are not formally registered, and district authorities can ban NGOs[6] or halt their operations.[7] Furthermore, NGO offices often experience break-ins where administrative records are kept.[8] Like Cambodia, Uganda's NGO sector relies heavily on foreign funding, which has lead to frequent attacks by government officials and popular commentators labeling NGOs as foreign agents (Mugisha, Kiranda, and Mbale 2020).

In Serbia, NGOs were seen as key agents in the country's transition to democracy (Hayman et al. 2013). After the first elections in 2000, Serbia experienced significant political liberalization. However, the country returned to electoral autocracy in 2014 after a prolonged effort by the ruling party to undermine electoral institutions. Most opposition parties boycotted the 2020 elections, leaving parliament stacked with ruling party MPs that ramped-up attacks on NGOs and the media. After a brief period in which Serbia's CSO Repression V-Dem score indicated No repression, Serbian civil society is now seen as Weakly repressed. This deterioration has included strident legal actions against NGOs justified by anti-terrorism laws and verbal attacks on the sector by prominent politicians and state media (USAID 2022b).

Recent protests have also seen activists in cities across the country attacked by hooligans with suspected ties to the ruling party, targeted with excessive force by police, and charged with misdemeanor offenses. In many cities, police selectively deny permits for public events and have visited activists at their homes or offices threatening legal action for participation in protests. Members of Parliament have accused several NGOs of being "foreign mercenaries" or “traitors” during parliament sessions and on social media, and state agencies have been accused of leaking data about NGOs to media outlets associated with the ruling party (USAID 2022b).

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[6] Muhereza, Robert. "RDC Bans NGO Over Poll Debates." Daily Monitor, April 9, 2016.

[7] Okori, Alexander. "Amuria to kick out briefcase NGOs." New Vision, September 29, 2016.

[8] "NGOs petition Kayihura over office break-ins." Daily Monitor, October 7, 2016.

In all three countries, NGOs are experiencing increased coercion as part of a broader trend of democratic backsliding and narrowing civic space. This coercion is often experienced at the hands of LGAs, at sites where projects and activities take place. At the same time, NGOs in all three countries often work with local governments that value certain non-confrontational activities.

4 Research Design

To understand how government harassment shapes NGO behavior, we employ a factorial discrete choice survey experiment to identify the effect of common government interventions on the preferences of NGO leaders over operational decisions. To minimize concerns about social-desirability bias, respondents were informed that the survey was anonymous and the survey was conducted online and fully self-administered (Nanes and Haim 2021), and additional attributes were included in the profile descriptions to mask the variables of interest.

We focus on the preferences of NGO leaders because they control substantial resources in aid-receiving countries and have significant influence over where NGOs conduct their activities and what kinds of strategies they engage in (Davis 2023). We present respondents with two profiles describing hypothetical communities where their NGO could work. We randomly vary seven attributes of each community. Each of these attributes and their values are presented in Table 1. This includes the extent to which LGAs engage in operational intervention, including directly providing support for or engaging in repression of NGO operations, rhetorical interventions, including praising or criticizing NGOs either in public statements or indirectly through rumors on social media (criticism only), and cooptation, including equal or preferential treatment for NGOs that cooperate with LGAs. These attributes focus on sensitive issues related to government treatment of NGOs.

Including only these attributes would make the research topic obvious to respondents and provides less shielding of how sensitive attributes affect choices (Horiuchi, Markovich, and Yamamoto 2021). To guard against potential bias, we also manipulate the community's level of development, geographic accessibility, and the amount of funding for project activities. In addition to obscuring the research question and shielding answers, these attributes provide important insights into how NGOs view the role of community need and convenience in shaping preferences. We generally expect that organizations will be more likely to choose communities with more need and that are less remote, as more remote communities will be harder and more expensive to reach (Brass 2012).

Attribute	**Values of Attribute**
Community Development	• [the community] is more economically developed than most of its neighbors • . . . has a similar level of economic development to most of its neighbors • . . . is less economically developed than most of its neighbors
Community Accessibility	• [geographically, the community is] very difficult for your NGO to access • . . . somewhat difficult for your NGO to access • . . . easy for your NGO to access
Operational Intervention	• [LGAs] frequently offer financial or in-kind support to NGOs • . . . frequently help NGOs obtain approvals and documentation to make NGO work easier • . . . frequently disrupt or shut-down NGO meetings, trainings, and other events • . . . have detained NGO staff in recent years for alleged legal violations
Cooptation	• [LGAs] generally treat all NGOs the same • . . . give preferential treatment to NGOs that give them an unofficial say in their activities
Government Rhetoric	• [earlier this year, local authorities made public statements] labeling NGOs as valuable local partners • . . . accusing NGOs operating in the community of being foreign agents • . . . accusing NGOs operating in the community of being corrupt
Public Rumors	• [in recent months, rumors circulated on social media] accusing NGOs operating in the locality of being foreign agents • . . . accusing NGOs operating in the locality of being corrupt
Project Value	• [your organization will have] \$60,000 to fund the activities • . . . \$40,000 to fund the activities • . . . \$20,000 to fund the activities

Table 1: Conjoint attributes and their possible values. Text in brackets is repeated for each subsequent attribute value. Rows highlighted gray represent attributes related to governmental intervention. Unhighlighted rows represent control attributes.

To introduce the forced choice task and present descriptions of two communities, respondents are presented with the following text:

> We want to understand how organizations like yours make decisions. We will now ask you to consider hypothetical choices between different communities where your organization could work. Please tell us about the decisions you believe your organization would make.
>
> Imagine that your organization is planning to implement some activities associated with one of its existing programs. Before getting started, your organization must choose between two communities where these activities could take place. These communities are similar in many ways, but they have several important differences.
>
> In Community A, [randomized values for each attribute].
> In Community B, [randomized values for each attribute].

We then present respondents with a series of questions asking which community their organization would prefer to work in and in which community their organization would be more likely to incorporate various forms of external engagement into project activities, such as organizing public actions, partnering with other organizations, or partnering with the local government. Each respondent completes seven of these forced choice tasks, resulting in each respondent seeing a total of 14 hypothetical community profiles. The questions are presented as follows, with the options to select either "Community A" or "Community B" as the answer for each question:

> - Knowing these facts, which locality would your organization be more likely to choose?
>
> Thinking of what you know about Community A and Community B, if you were working in both communities, in which community would you be more likely to choose the following engagement strategies:
>
> - Involve members of the public in the design or implementation of project activities
> - Organize public action. Public action could include petitions, demonstrations, or contacting government officials

- Partner with other NGOs in the design or implementation of project activities
- Partner with local citizen associations or community-based organizations in the design or implementation of project activities
- Partner with religious or traditional leaders in the design or implementation of project activities
- Partner with local government officials in the design or implementation of project activities

Due to the large number of attributes and outcomes employed in this design, the number of hypotheses being tested is quite large.[9] To account for this, we use the adaptive shrinkage (Ash) method described by Liu and Shiraito (2023), Stephens (2017), and Gerard and Stephens (2020). Ash uses a spike-and-slab prior to generate "*post hoc* regularization of estimated coefficients" (Liu and Shiraito 2023, 384). Because of this empirical Bayesian approach, Ash, unlike other forms of multiple hypothesis testing correction, produces new coefficient estimates and can result in non-symmetrical confidence intervals. As all of our outcomes are closely related, we pool all estimated conjoint coefficients across all seven outcomes together before applying the Ash correction. This may result in some false negatives as outcomes may be highly correlated, but means that we avoid as many false positives as possible.

5 Data and Sample

Our survey was embedded in a self-administered online Qualtrics survey. The survey included questions about organizational makeup, budgets, funding sources, and interactions with the government. In Cambodia, this experiment was included in the endline survey of a three-year randomized capacity building intervention funded by USAID. Data was collected between April and June 2022 and respondents received $40 for their participation. Questions were available in English and Khmer. All registered NGOs in Cambodia were eligible to participate in the intervention, and invitations were distributed widely on social media and through established NGO newsletters and networking organizations.

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[9] 20 attributes for each of 7 outcomes = 140 total tests.

In Uganda, our sample was drawn from two sources. First, we drew a stratified random sample of 300 NGOs from the Ministry of Internal Affairs' (MIA) list of all 2,000+ registered NGOs in the country. Combining additional information recorded in the MIA list and hand-coding of certain characteristics, we excluded NGOs that do not implement projects (such as think tanks) or do not operate in multiple locations (such as those operating a clinic or school in a single village). We over-sampled NGOs working on political advocacy and NGOs based outside of the capital city Kampala.[10] We then found contact information for each NGO and contacted their leadership to encourage their participation in the survey. We received responses from ≈90 of the 300 NGOs in the randomized sample. Second, we collected contact information provided by several partner NGOs working across a range of sectors. We received responses from ≈108 NGOs recommended by our partners. Data was collected between May and August 2022 and respondents received \$25 for their participation.

In Serbia, we worked with a local NGO to to collect contact information for a sample of 225 NGOs. Questions were available in English and Serbian. Criteria stipulated that no more than 40% of NGOs in the sample could be focused exclusively on service delivery and no more than 40% could be based in the capital Belgrade. Data was collected between January and March 2023 and respondents received \$30 for their participation. We received responses from 136 NGOs.

From the combined sample, 51% of our respondents reported being the executive director of their organization while another 19% reported being in a management position. The remaining 32% reported occupying some other position. The median NGO was founded in 2007, had five full-time employees, a designated financial manager and governing body, two offices, had a total revenue of \$103,388 USD in 2021, and worked in three provinces in Cambodia (out of 25), four districts in Uganda (out of 136), and 1.5 districts in Serbia (out of 29).

Figure 3 shows how our samples vary across countries according to the distribution across

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[10] Because the vast majority of NGOs are based in Kampala, this allowed us to get a much more diverse sample of organizations.

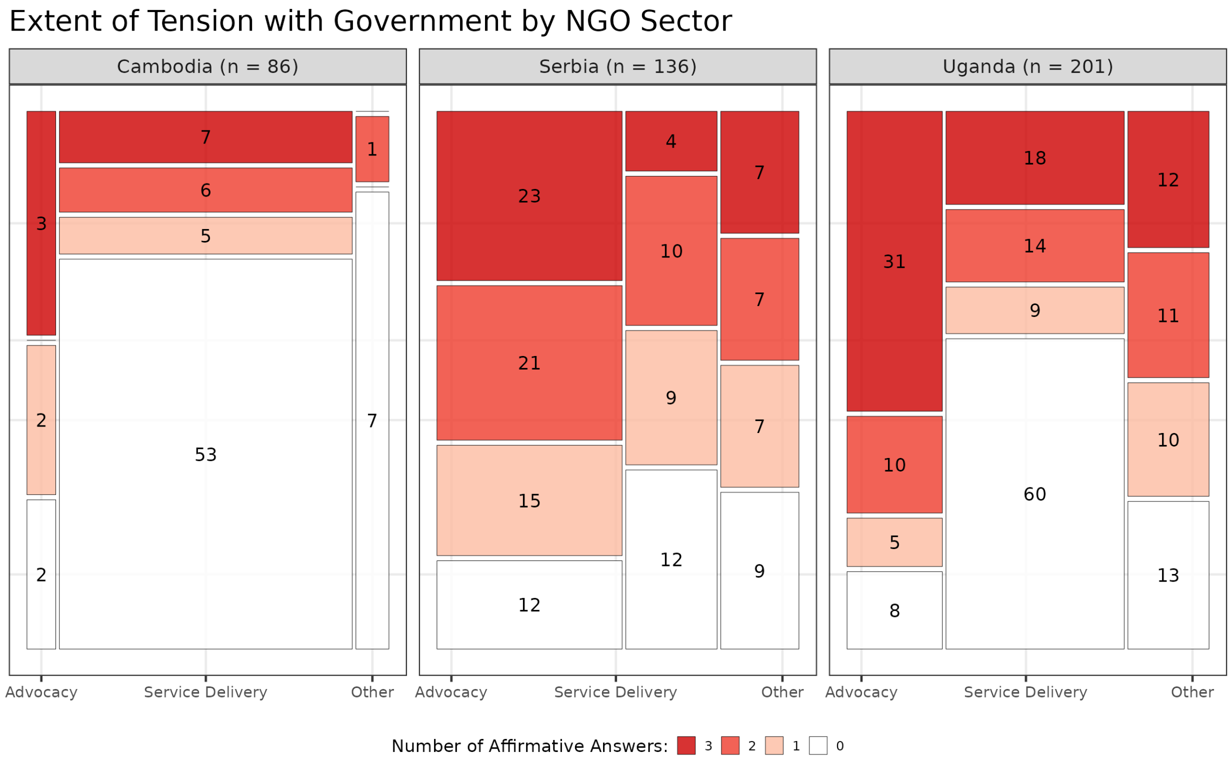

Figure 3: This plot shows the distribution of NGOs according to the number of questions about tension with government that they responded 'Yes' to. The width of columns and height of rows correspond to the share of NGOs in each cell. NGO sector is defined by the main area of activity that respondents report as the primary activity their organization focuses on.

activity sectors and the extent to which they experience tensions with the government. In both Cambodia and Uganda, the majority of NGOs report Service Delivery as their primary sector, although the share of NGOs working on Advocacy is noticeably larger for the Uganda sample. Across all countries, the extent of tension is smaller for NGOs focusing on Service Delivery relative to those focused on Advocacy or some 'Other' sector. However, even among those focused on Service Delivery, tension with government is relatively common, especially in Serbia. For more information about the survey questions used to create this figure, see Appendix A.

Looking at the specific types of tensions with government that NGOs report most frequently, we see 22%, 71%, and 54% of NGOs in Cambodia, Serbia, and Uganda, respectively, report doing work that is considered politically sensitive by government. 19%, 52%, and 44% report experiencing tensions because of the type of work they do, and 19%, 31%, and 38%

report experiencing tensions with government because of the specific communities that they serve.

Respondents in all three countries that report such tensions are typically engaged in advocacy, demands for transparency and accountability from state institutions, demands for legislative and policy change, and raising community awareness. These all appear to be activities that increase NGO visibility to state authorities. NGOs that experience tensions with governments because of the communities they serve typically serve marginalized communities like at-risk women, youth, and sexual minorities. This contrasts NGOs that do not experience tensions with governments. Such NGOs typically engage in service delivery activities while not questioning state institutions.

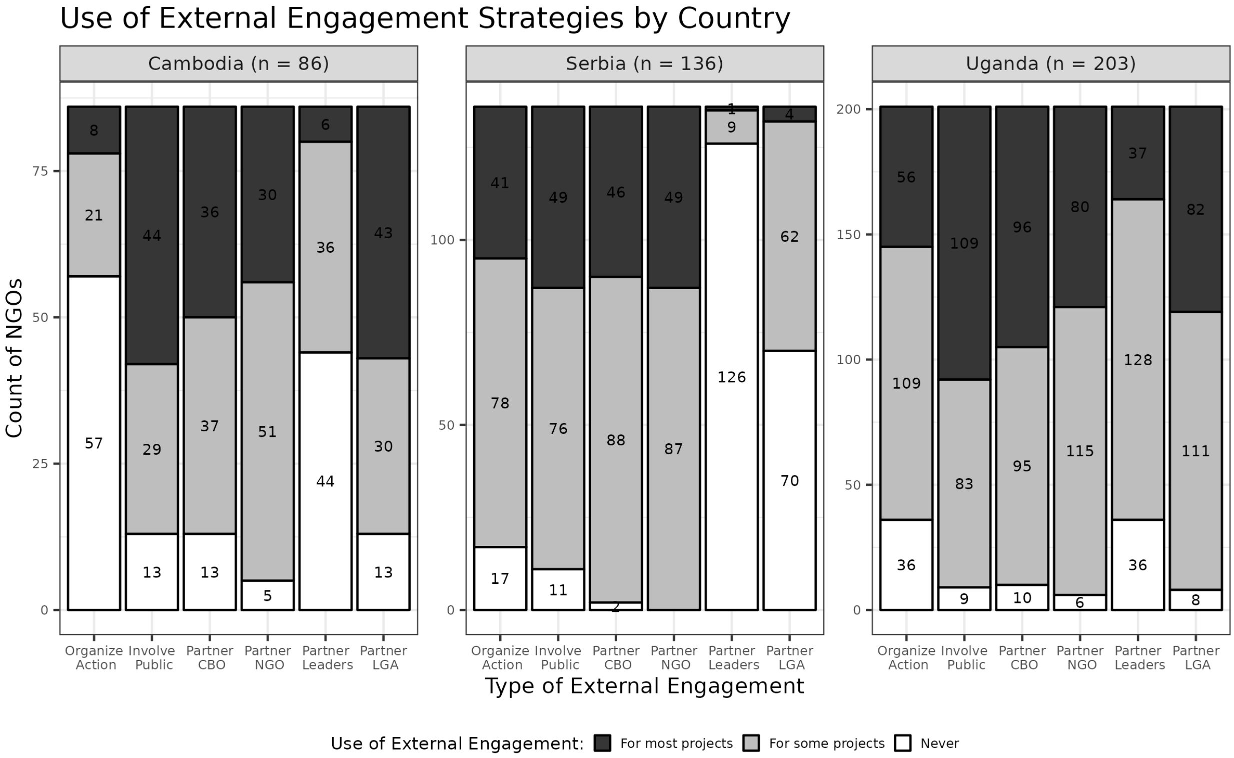

Figure 4: This plot shows the distribution of NGOs according to the frequency with which they involve the public in planning, partner with external actors, and mobilize public action.

Figure 4 reports the distribution of NGOs according to their use of our outcome measures described in Section 4: public mobilization (Organize Action), localization (Involve Public), and partnerships (Partner CBO, NGO, Leaders, LGA). To establish that these strategies are used by NGOs in their everyday operations, we asked how frequently each strategy was used prior to asking about these strategies as outcomes in the experiment. We see that the use of each engagement strategy is relatively common across countries. Partial exceptions include the relatively infrequent use of public mobilization ('Organize Action') in Cambodia (likely due to the very small number of advocacy NGOs in our sample shown in Figure 3) and partnering with religious and traditional leaders ('Partner Leaders') in Serbia.

Finally, we investigate the association between our three measures of tensions with government and NGOs' use of the strategies we use as our outcome measures. In Appendix Table 1, we see evidence that being involved in politically sensitive work as associated with significantly higher numbers of partnerships and public mobilization, while working with politically sensitive communities is associated with fewer partnerships and a reduced frequency of partnering with local government. Although this cross-sectional data allows us to see patterns in behavior, it does not allow us to make inferences about whether NGOs' behaviors cause tensions, or vice verse. To address this shortcoming, we turn to the results of our conjoint experiment.

6 Findings: Main Results

We report results pooling our data from Uganda, Cambodia, and Serbia. Each of the 452 survey respondents completed seven forced choice tasks in which they were presented with prompts describing two communities and were asked to choose the community in which they would prefer to work, involve the public in project planning and implementation, organize public action, and partner with local government, CBOs, other NGOs, or religious or traditional leaders. The unit of analysis is the community profile. Thus, the total sample size for each outcome is 5,950 (seven choices between two community profiles by 425 respondents).

We present results as average marginal component effects (AMCEs). AMCEs give the estimated marginal effect of each attribute value on community selection relative to a baseline category. AMCEs significantly greater than zero indicate attribute values that have a positive causal effect on community selection, while AMCEs less than zero indicate attribute values that have a negative causal effect on community selection. As discussed above, all coefficients and confidence intervals are Ash regularized after pooling all coefficients across all seven outcomes (Liu and Shiraito 2023). Following Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2020), we present marginal means for each outcome in Appendix F. We also include AMCE estimates comparing Ash with more traditional MHT correction methods.

Figure 5 reports the impact of each attribute on the probability of the community being selected by respondents for each of our seven outcomes. We omit coefficients for attribute values for which no coefficients were significant after Ash corrections; this may be driven by unclear question wording or by a genuine feeling that geographic remoteness and public rumors do not interfere with operations. We also drop the Community Accessibility and Public Rumors attributes from this figure because no attribute value coefficients across any outcome were significant after Ash corrections. Across most outcomes, this is the result of small coefficient estimates rather than less precise estimation of these values relative to other attributes. These nulls may be driven by unclear question wording or by a genuine feeling that geographic remoteness and public rumors do not interfere with operations.

Beginning with the first facet capturing preferences over which community to work in, we find that NGO leaders prefer to work in less developed rather than more developed communities. Moving from a more to less developed community has a larger substantive impact on probability of community selection than any other movement across attribute levels, suggesting the level of need in communities is the single most important factor for NGOs when determining where they would prefer to work. Unsurprisingly, they also prefer working in communities where their projects will have more rather than less funding.

We also find strong evidence that government interventions affect NGO behavior. Communities in which NGO staff are frequently arrested by LGAs have a 0.07 (7%) lower probability of community selection relative to the most desirable form of operational intervention (LGAs frequently providing administrative support). This is similar to the negative impact

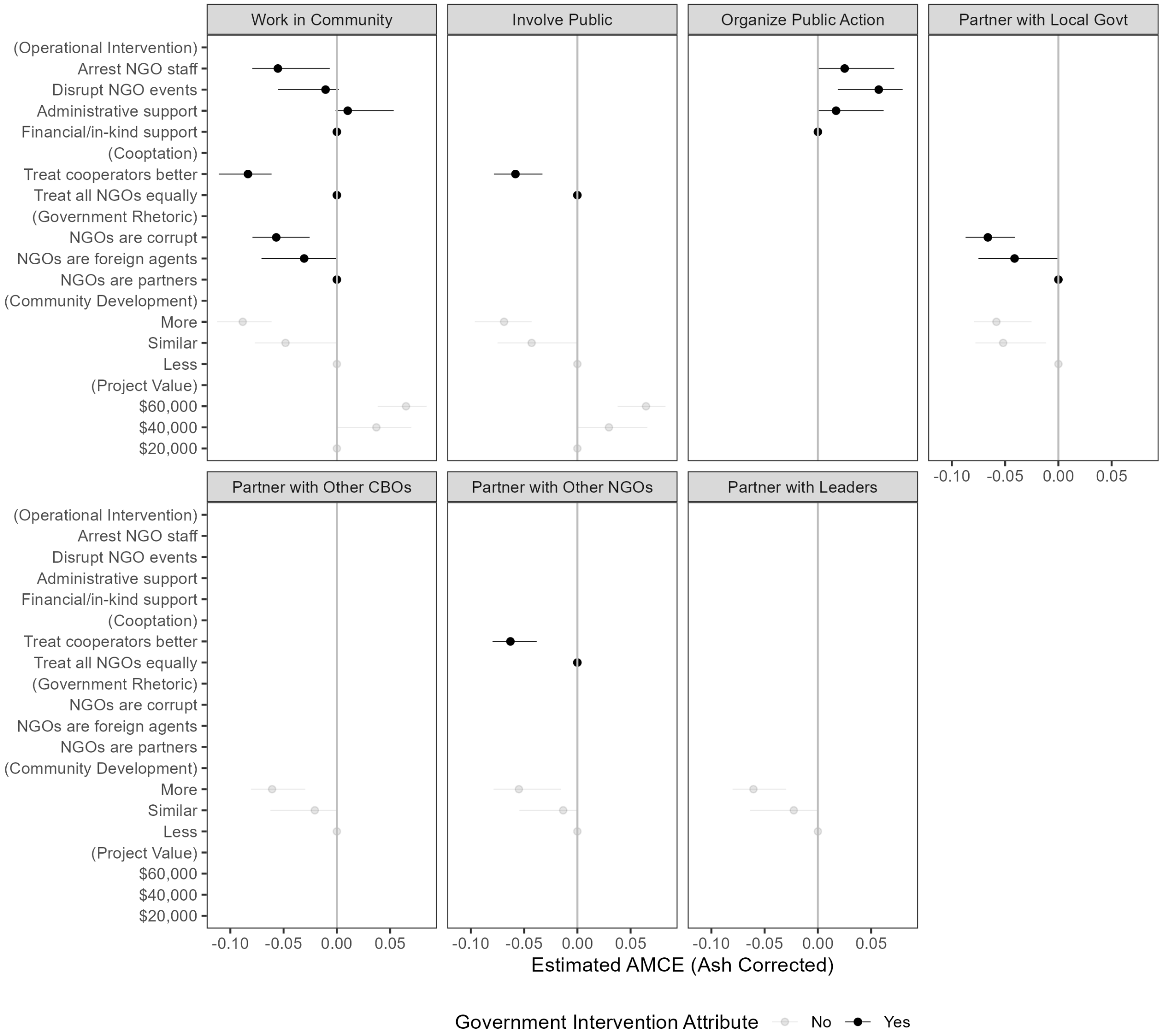

Figure 5: AMCE estimates with adaptive shrinking corrections. Points to the left of the grey line indicate a negative causal effect of the attribute on community selection relative to the baseline category (on average). We drop attributes for which no attribute value coefficients were significant after Ash corrections across any outcome. We omit coefficients for attribute values for which no coefficients were significant after Ash corrections. Attributes are rearranged from Table 1, with attributes of direct theoretical importance listed first using dark points and control attributes listed second using lighter points.

of moving to a $20,000 project value from $60,000 (0.07, or 7%). This implies that NGO managers are willing to forego approximately $40,000 in project funding, or 39% of their total annual revenue, to avoid working in communities with the most severe form of operational repression.

Cooptation also has a large, negative impact on community selection. For communities where LGAs give preferential treatment to NGOs that allow LGAs to influence their activities, NGO leaders decrease selection by 0.08 (8%) relative to communities where LGAs treat all NGOs equally. Similarly, negative government rhetoric also decreases the probability of community selection (relative to LGAs describing NGOs as valuable partners) by 0.03 (3%) for accusations of being foreign agents and 0.06 (6%) for accusations of NGOs being corrupt.[11] Again, the size of these coefficients relative to other important attribute values, such as the level of community development or the amount of project funding available, suggests that NGO leaders consider these factors heavily when making operational decisions.

Our other outcome measures show that community-level factors also affect the engagement strategies chosen by NGO leaders. We see that higher levels of community development consistently decrease NGO leaders' preferences for involving the public in project planning or partnering with LGAs or other organizations. Although larger amounts of funding (Project Value) appear to increase leaders' preferences for involving the public in project planning, it does not impact preferences for organizing public action or engaging in partnerships.

In addition to reducing the leaders' willingness to work in a community, LGAs engaging in cooptation also reduces NGO leaders' willingness to involve the public in projects or partner with other NGOs by about 0.06 (6%). Taken together, these results suggest that the practice of cooptation likely undermines trust among NGOs and between NGOs and the public.

Alternatively, while negative government rhetoric from LGAs significantly reduces NGO leaders' willingness to work in a community, we do not see evidence that rhetoric affects operational decisions about engaging with the public or other civic actors. Negative rhetoric only decreases the reported preference for partnering with LGAs (0.07 for accusations of being a foreign agent and 0.04 for allegations of corruption). Importantly, this suggests that negative government rhetoric may understandably reduce NGO willingness to partner with government, but it does not appear to be as effective at undermine their ability to form ties with the public or other local institutions.

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[11] Although the difference in the size of these AMCEs is substantively large, the difference between them is not statistically significant.

Finally, we see evidence that organizations respond to some operational repression by seeking to organize public action. When working in a community where LGAs frequently disrupt NGO events, NGO leaders preference to organize public action increases by 0.06 (6%) relative to a community with an accommodative LGA. Interestingly, this effect appears weaker (and falls just below statistical significance) for communities where LGAs arrest NGO staff; a more severe form of operational repression. This supports the idea that organizations distinguish between different levels of repression when making operational decisions. This also suggests that mobilizing the community can be, at least in part, a response to coercion rather than a cause of it.

7 Findings: Heterogeneous Effects

Following our pre-analysis plan, we tested for heterogeneous treatment effects by country, sector, and NGOs' experience of confrontation with government. To measure whether NGOs experience tensions with government, we ask each NGO three questions about the extent to which they experience tensions. If an NGO's leader responds "Yes" to at least one of these questions, their relationship is classified as contentious.

We first used F-tests to test for the *existence* of heterogeneous treatment effects for each of our outcomes. As this entailed a total of twenty-one tests (seven outcomes along three types of heterogeneity) we once again used multiple hypothesis testing correction on the F-test p-values, using the Holm and Benjamini-Hochberg (BH) corrections.[12] The outcome-heterogeneous variable pairs (e.g. Work in Community – Country or Involve Public – Confrontational) that survive the weaker BH correction are shown in Table 2. We see heterogeneity in responses across the country where NGOs operate, their relationship with the government, and the sector that they operate in, although not for all outcome variables. Only Work in Community (our main outcome), Involve Public, and Partner with Other NGOs show heterogeneity along multiple dimensions, with Work in Community and Partner with NGOs showing different response patterns by all three variables of interest.

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[12] The Ash is not appropriate for this process because it requires the statistics to have standard errors.

Choice	By	p	p Holm	p BH
Work in Community	Country	0.0053	0.0848	0.0186
Work in Community	Sector	0.0013	0.0260	0.0098
Work in Community	Tension with Government	0.0069	0.1035	0.0207
Partner with Local Govt	Country	0.0014	0.0266	0.0098
Involve Public	Country	0.0102	0.1428	0.0268
Involve Public	Tension with Government	0.0211	0.2743	0.0449
Organize Public Action	Country	0.0010	0.0210	0.0098
Partner with Other NGOs	Country	0.0025	0.0450	0.0131
Partner with Other NGOs	Sector	0.0214	0.2743	0.0449
Partner with Other NGOs	Tension with Government	0.0036	0.0612	0.0151
Partner with Other CBOs	Tension with Government	0.0235	0.2743	0.0449

Table 2: Heterogeneous treatment effects F-Test p-values with multiple hypothesis testing correction. Table only shows results that are statistically significant after applying the Benjamini–Hochberg procedure.

The corrected F-tests indicate that organization characteristics are associated with differences in how NGOs respond to government interventions. However, these F-tests cannot tell us *how* they operate differently. For the outcome-heterogeneous variable pairs in Table 2, we also calculated the difference in marginal means between all levels of the heterogeneous variable. We then pooled all of these differences together and use the Ash for multiple hypothesis testing correction. The vast majority of these subgroup effects do not survive our corrections for multiple-hypothesis testing, most likely because of the limited size of the subsamples. However, those that do withstand Ash corrections suggest that NGOs in Serbia are much more responsive to operational intervention than those in Uganda (see the results in Appendix G). This may be the result of differences in the composition of these samples (such as the great prevalence of advocacy NGOs in Serbia shown in Figure 3) or Uganda's more repressive regime.

8 External Validity: Evidence from Panel Data

Although our conjoint experiment provides evidence on the preferences of NGO leaders when making hypothetical choices designed to simulate real-world decisions, we must be cautious about extrapolating inference from survey experiments to real-world behavior (Barabas and Jerit 2010; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015). To strengthen our confidence that these results correspond with behavior, we leverage panel survey data from the sample of NGOs from Cambodia.[13] The panel survey contains several questions that may be used to measure levels of government coercion and NGOs' public mobilization, community involvement, and partnering with other NGOs.

Our experimental results suggest that organizing public action is at least, in part, a response to coercion rather than a cause of it. In Cambodia, we have panel data tracking NGOs' perceptions and behavior over two different years. We ask: when coercion decreases (increases), is there a decrease (increase) in public mobilization, an increase (decrease) in partnerships, or an increase (decrease) in community engagement?

We consider Cambodia a particularly hard test of this expectation. Of our three countries, Cambodia has the highest levels of repression and the sample has a much lower share of NGOs that report work on advocacy or experiencing tensions with the government. However, it is important to note that COVID was a positive shock to coercion in the first wave of the panel. The second wave of the panel was collected after this repression died down. We see this reflected in survey data, with responses at endline reporting a decline in most forms of coercion.

To measure coercion, we draw on two binary questions asking whether respondents face the following challenges:

- Harassment or direct attacks by the government on the civil society sector

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[13] As discussed in Section 5, the conjoint experiment was included in the endline survey of a three-year randomized capacity building intervention. Baseline data collection took place between April 20 and July 10, 2020.

- Restrictions on the types of speech or activities NGOs can engage in

To measure whether NGOs are engaging in more or less public mobilization, we draw on questions asking respondents to identify the share of the organization's time dedicated to the following activities:

- Advocacy or raising awareness: Mobilizing affected groups around specific issues, building political awareness, or trying to influence policy

To measure whether NGOs are involving the community in project activities or planning, we also draw on questions asking respondents to identify the share of the organization's time dedicated to the following activities:

- Community outreach and communication: Communicating with current or potential beneficiaries or promoting your organization's work to the public

To measure whether NGOs are entering into more or fewer partnerships with other NGOs, we rely on a question asking:

- How many NGOs did your organization partner with in the last 12 months? This includes local and international NGOs, CBOs, religious organizations, and foundations

While none of these questions correspond perfectly with the behaviors measured in the conjoint, they provide a convincing analogue for our key outcomes and attributes. The full question wording for these measures is included in Appendix H.

We assess the extent to which NGOs' report changes in the extent of coercion over time and whether these changes are associated with the changes we would expected based on the conjoint. While the conjoint manipulates spatial variation in the extent of coercion, this design exploits temporal variation.

We fit one-way fixed effects (by organization) regressions. This allows us to interpret the coefficients on the Harassment and Restrictions variables as effects *within* units, over time.

Table 3: Panel OLS with NGO Fixed-effects

	Share of Time: Advocacy	Count: NGO Partners	Share of Time: Outreach
Harassment	6.560*	−0.357	−0.631
	(2.694)	(1.458)	(5.204)
Restrictions	−1.286	−1.619	4.012
	(1.905)	(1.031)	(3.680)
Num.Obs.	168	163	168

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Relatively few NGOs in our sample report a change in the extent of coercion: only 12 of 84 NGOs report a change in Harassment, while 24 report a chance in Restrictions. However, the limited amount of variation across these features allows us to compare the changes in the outcome variable for NGOs where there was no change in repression with NGOs where there was a change.

The coefficient on Harassment is significant, indicating that an increase (decrease) in harassment results in almost 7% more (less) time spent on advocacy. Because of the model construction, the inverse is also true: a decrease in harassment over time results in less time spent on advocacy. This provides some evidence that the patterns from conjoint responses showing that NGOs avoid communities with more repression are mirrored in NGOs' self-reported behavior in the real world. We do not see a similar result for increases in Restrictions on speech, which corresponds less directly with the harassment attribute level used in the conjoint.

The effects on the number of NGO partners and share of time spent on outreach are not significant. However, this is not surprising. In the conjoint, harassing NGOs (arresting staff or disrupting events) also does not impact these outcomes. Unfortunately, we do not have a measure of NGO cooptation in our panel data, preventing us from assessing correspondence between panel and experimental data for these findings.

9 Conclusion

In many countries, NGOs control access to valuable resources and exert significant political influence. Because NGO activities can either benefit or threaten political incumbents, governments have dramatically increased their efforts to influence NGO operations in recent decades. For these reasons, it is important to understand how different government actions affect the operational decisions of NGOs.

Using a conjoint experiment involving leaders from 425 NGOs in Cambodia, Uganda, and Serbia, we examine how common government behaviors affect NGOs. We find that government interventions have a large impact on operational decisions, even relative to other important factors like the amount of project funding available.

We show that LGA interventions have a large impact on where NGOs prefer to work, even relative to factors like levels of development and the amount of project funding available. NGOs prefer to avoid communities where LGAs repress NGO operations, where LGAs attempt to coopt NGOs, and where LGAs publicly use anti-NGO rhetoric. By contrast, LGAs' accommodative interventions increase willingness to work in a given community, although administrative support is preferred over direct material support, which respondents may associate with cooptation.

We also find that NGOs are less likely to involve the public in planning or pursue partnerships with other NGOs when working in communities where cooptation is prevalent. Thus, coercion both reduces the willingness of NGOs to operate in communities and isolates them from other civic actors when they do. However, intermediate levels of operational repression actually *increase* NGO preferences for organizing public action. Thus, NGOs appear to see public mobilization as an effective strategy to resist some forms of repression. Importantly, this pattern holds across NGOs operating in three very different electoral autocracies, NGOs with more and less confrontational relationships with governments, and NGOs operating in different sectors, as well as in panel data measuring self-reported real-world behavior.

These findings have implications for the ability of NGOs to create meaningful political change in repressive countries. The ability of LGAs to influence NGO preferences over where they conduct activities may limit whether NGOs work in the communities where they are most needed, including politically or economically marginalized communities. LGA interventions that influence whether NGOs involve the public in planning or partner with other civic actors are equally concerning. Civil society scholars have long theorized that horizontal ties with other organizations and vertical ties with communities can insulate CSOs against government repression (Suárez and Marshall 2014; Brechenmacher 2017). Drawing on these arguments, donors have invested heavily in localization efforts and NGO networks in countries with narrowing civic space (Springman, Hatano, et al. 2022). Our results cast doubt on the efficacy of this strategy.

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