

Foreign Agents? Public Attitudes Toward Nongovernmental Organizations in a Backsliding Democracy

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Abstract

In a backsliding democracy, antidemocratic politicians often vilify nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and impose restrictions that make it harder for them to form, advocate, or obtain funding. Do *citizens* consider NGOs as a threat? Do they support regulatory measures to restrict NGO activities? We focus on two factors that may influence citizens' attitudes toward NGOs: these groups' reliance on foreign funding and their ideological leaning. In a preregistered survey experiment in Israel, we find that citizens perceive foreign-funded NGOs as slightly more threatening, but they are not more likely to support restrictions on these groups than on groups relying on local funding. The ideological bent of the NGOs has a much stronger effect: People perceive NGOs on the other side of the political aisle as more threatening and support restrictions on their activity. Antidemocratic leaders might exploit this type of partisan-motivated reasoning to silence civil society.

Keywords

nongovernmental organizations, civil society, public opinion, democratic backsliding, survey experiment, Israel

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Democratic backsliding has been one of the defining trends of global politics over the past two decades. In multiple regions of the world, democracy is retreating while autocracy has been ascending (Carothers and Press, 2022; V-Dem, 2023). Governments seeking to grab power and erode democracy typically target countervailing institutions that might thwart their antidemocratic intentions. Civil society is among those institutions.

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Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), especially those that are funded by foreign sources, might fuel public resistance against the subversion of democracy or bring pressure on the antidemocratic government from outside (Bakke et al., 2020). The antidemocratic project thus typically involves official rhetoric that demonizes NGOs and shapes their public perception as foreign agents or a threat to society. This rhetoric, in turn, serves to justify the imposition of burdensome regulatory restrictions that make it harder for NGOs to form, advocate, or fund their activities from foreign sources (Chaudhry, 2022). From India through Turkey to Brazil, NGOs have faced increasing hostility from governments that perceive them as a threat (Jones, 2021; Purohit, 2022). In this article we ask: Do *citizens* in a backsliding democracy consider NGOs as a threat? Do they support regulatory measures to restrict NGO activities? The answers to these questions carry significant implications for the viability of democracy. If citizens accept that NGOs are a menace to be suppressed, politicians may be able to get away with dismantling democratic institutions without facing backlash from voters. By contrast, if citizens oppose the crackdown on NGOs, politicians may find it harder to subvert democracy and grab power.

In examining public attitudes toward NGOs, we bridge two separate bodies of research. One body of scholarship examines the causes and consequences of governments' efforts to stifle the activity of NGOs, especially those that draw on foreign funds. Since the early 1990s, Western countries and multilateral organizations have funded and supported NGOs worldwide, and various studies explain why governments pushed back against these organizations (Bromley et al., 2020; Dupuy et al., 2016; Dupuy and Prakash, 2022; Heinzl and Koenig-Archibugi, 2023; Smidt et al., 2021). Since restrictions on NGOs occur primarily under autocratic or hybrid regimes (Glasius et al., 2020: 453), *democracies* that crack down on NGOs have received less attention in this literature. Yet, various countries under democratic rule—including Austria, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Turkey—have indeed imposed restrictions on NGOs (Chaudhry, 2022). Perhaps due to the focus on autocratic/hybrid regimes, democratic public opinion on NGO suppression has seen little study. The views of the public enjoy a more prominent place in a second body of research, which examines whether citizens can check antidemocratic behavior and respond to various democratic transgressions (Albertus and Grossman, 2021; Carey et al., 2022; Graham and Svulik, 2020; Svulik, 2020). While these studies assess the public's attitudes toward democratic backsliding, they do not specifically examine citizens' response to the suppression of NGOs.

Linking these bodies of literature, this article examines citizens' attitudes toward the silencing of NGOs: a crucial step in the incremental process of backsliding, as governments prepare the groundwork for an antidemocratic power-grab (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014; Clayton, 2022). Governments typically restrict NGOs that receive foreign funds; more broadly, they seek to curb the activity of pro-democracy NGOs that might be a source of dissent against a government holding the opposite ideology (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014). We therefore focus here on two factors that may influence citizens' attitude toward NGOs: these groups' reliance on foreign funding, and their ideology.

While citizens may approve of the work of foreign-funded NGOs to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, they may not detect the antidemocratic impact of restrictions on such NGOs: This is a relatively subtle democratic transgression that might fail to raise alarm. Furthermore, attacks on foreign-funded NGOs might be disguised as an effort to defend democracy against groups that promote foreign agendas and interests (Bromley et al., 2020; Russell, 2022). We suggest that, in a backsliding democracy,

citizens may indeed fail to recognize the antidemocratic nature of a crackdown on NGOs (Krishnarajan, 2023). They might also buy into the threatening view of foreign-funded NGOs and support government efforts to suppress their activities. Citizens thus likely hold a more negative perception of NGOs that receive foreign funding, compared with NGOs that receive funding from local sources; they are also more likely to approve of regulatory restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs. In other words, the foreign funding likely taints NGOs in the eyes of citizens, resulting in a more negative attitude toward these organizations.

To evaluate how ideology affects attitudes toward NGOs, we examine both liberal NGOs, committed to democracy and human rights, and conservative groups promoting causes such as family values and antimigrant policies. Following a large literature on partisan-motivated reasoning (Claassen and Ensley, 2016; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Tomz and Weeks, 2020), we argue that an ideological incongruence between citizens and NGOs raises the negativity of attitudes toward the latter: Left-wing citizens are likely more apprehensive about conservative NGOs, while right-wing citizens more strongly object to liberal groups.

Israel serves as our site of empirical investigation. Long an established democracy, Israel has experienced democratic backsliding under successive right-wing coalitions during the 2010s: a trend that reached its zenith in a 2023 government plan to curtail the powers of the courts and undermine their independence (Kingsley and Kershner, 2023; Mordechai and Roznai, 2017). The weakening of Israeli democracy has also involved the denunciation of foreign-funded NGOs and attempts to curb their activities and influence (Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), 2019).

An online survey experiment among a sample of 2613 Israeli respondents finds strong support for the ideological-incongruence hypothesis: Citizens hold more negative views of NGOs whose ideology is different from their own, and they express stronger support for restrictions on those NGOs, compared with ideologically congruent NGOs. The foreign-funding hypothesis, by contrast, received only partial support. Citizens indeed view foreign-funded NGOs slightly more negatively than locally funded NGOs. Yet, when it comes to regulatory restrictions, citizens see no distinction between foreign-funded and locally funded NGOs: They favor similar restrictions on NGOs irrespective of their source of funding. These findings add an important public-opinion perspective to the above cited literature on governments' policies vis-a-vis civil society. These findings also carry important implications for governments wishing to crack down on NGOs and for NGOs seeking to thwart restrictions. Foreign-funded NGOs may argue that there is little public support for singling them out for restrictions.

Governments' Concerns About NGOs

In their attempt to erode democracy, power-grabbing governments seek to weaken or eliminate institutions that constrain their authority. They typically set their sights on state institutions, such as an independent electoral commission, an independent judiciary, or a democratic constitution; they also target nonstate institutions such as universities, the media, the business sector, and civil society (Carothers and Press, 2022: 16). Democratically committed, liberal civil society poses a particularly significant threat to a government bent on grabbing power. NGOs might educate citizens and minorities about the implications of the government's efforts to increase its power, and they may encourage public protest and resistance against the subversion of democracy. Indeed, NGOs might seem as

potent challengers of the power-grabbing government—capable of mobilizing the public against the democratic erosion and empowered by new means of communication that can facilitate acts of dissent (Bromley et al., 2020: 285; Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014: 28; Efrat, 2013, 2015). When the NGOs are funded by crossborder flows of money that are hard to control, and when they answer to actors outside the state’s boundaries, governments’ sense of threat further intensifies: The foreign funds could make NGOs more independent, influential, and vocal in opposing the government’s antidemocratic measures (Dupuy et al., 2016: 302). Transnationally linked NGOs pose yet another threat: They might use their ability to gather local information to expose the antidemocratic nature of the government’s policies, to shame the government for its violation of democratic principles before domestic and international audiences, and perhaps to bring pressure on the government from outside (Bakke et al., 2020; Heinzl and Koenig-Archibugi, 2023; Smidt et al., 2021).

The role of NGOs as guardians of democracy has led antidemocratic governments to try and muzzle them. Indeed, the suppression of these NGOs constitutes an important expression of democratic backsliding (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1098). Consider India. India began its crackdown on NGOs with the passage of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act 2010 (FCRA), which restricts the access of NGOs to foreign funds. Particularly troublesome for NGOs, the FCRA prohibits entities of a “political nature” from receiving foreign funds, and it also prohibits the receipt of foreign funds for “any activities detrimental to the national interest.” Following the BJP’s rise to power in 2014, India’s democratic backsliding intensified (Varshney, 2022). In 2020, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act established additional hurdles for NGOs (Purohit, 2022). The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, expressed her concerns, arguing that the FCRA “has been invoked over the years to justify an array of highly intrusive measures, ranging from official raids on NGO offices and freezing of bank accounts, to suspension or cancellation of registration . . . [The Act] is indeed actually being used to deter or punish NGOs for human rights reporting and advocacy that the authorities perceive as critical in nature” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2020).

Other backsliding democracies have similarly witnessed measures and rhetoric that are hostile toward NGOs. Brazil’s democracy, which eroded under President Jair Bolsonaro, is a case in point (Milhorance, 2022). Upon entering office in 2019, Bolsonaro announced that the funding of NGOs working in Brazil would be tightly controlled (Reuters, 2019). An executive order authorized the Office of the Government Secretary to “supervise, coordinate, monitor and accompany the activities and actions of international organizations and nongovernmental organizations in the national territory” (Stargardter, 2019). Poland, whose democracy has been eroded by the Law and Justice Party (Przybylski, 2018), has also become increasingly inhospitable for NGOs. A 2017 law gave the authority over the distribution of civil society funding—including European Union funds—to a government-controlled body. This made NGOs’ access to financial resources more challenging. NGOs operating in Poland have also complained of smear campaigns, threats, police brutality, and criminal charges against them (Amnesty International et al., 2022). NGOs have faced a similar crackdown in Turkey, whose democracy has experienced significant backsliding under Erdogan (Jones, 2021; Oder, 2021).

These examples illustrate some of the means that governments may use to suppress the activity of NGOs and prevent them from thwarting the democratic erosion. More generally, Chaudhry (2022) identifies several categories of anti-NGO tactics and measures.

Barriers to entry include legal restrictions that discourage, burden, or prevent the formation of NGOs—for example, through increased complexity of the registration process. Through barriers to funding, governments threaten the lifeblood of NGOs: their ability to receive and use foreign money (Bromley et al., 2020: 282–283; Dupuy et al., 2016: 300). Finally, barriers to advocacy limit the ability of NGOs to engage in free expression and public advocacy by outlawing certain types of speech, publication, and activity.

Governments typically employ four types of arguments to justify their attacks on NGOs and undermine the legitimacy of civil society. First, NGOs are self-appointed rather than elected, and therefore do not represent the popular will. Second, foreign-funded NGOs are beholden to external rather than local constituencies, and they serve foreign interests and agendas. The government's smear campaign often highlights the organizations' ties to foreign providers of funds, implying that they serve as vehicles of outside powers (Brechenmacher, 2017: 92). Third, NGOs are partisan political actors seeking to achieve political goals while being disguised as nonpartisan civic actors. Fourth, NGOs are elite actors out of touch with the concerns of ordinary citizens, as evidenced by the high salaries and frequent foreign travel of activists (Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2018).

This rhetoric, and the repressive measures it serves to justify, clearly indicate that power-grabbing governments perceive democracy-supporting NGOs as a threat. The NGOs' pro-democracy ideology is at odds with these governments' antidemocratic ideology, making the NGOs a potential force against democratic erosion. NGOs funded through foreign sources could similarly threaten the governments' efforts to undermine democracy. We now turn to examining whether the public, in a backsliding democracy, feels similarly threatened by NGOs based on their ideology or reliance on foreign funds.

The Public Perception of NGOs in a Backsliding Democracy

Do citizens in a backsliding democracy hold a negative view of foreign-supported NGOs? Do they favor the restraining of these groups? On one hand, citizens may not share their government's concerns regarding NGOs. Rather, citizens may appreciate the contribution of foreign-backed NGOs to society. This is certainly the case for NGOs that provide services. Health-focused NGOs, for example, benefit the population's health through the improvement of health services on the ground, the diffusion of medical knowledge and best practices, and advocacy for more effective health policies (Chaudhry, 2022: 561; Heinzl and Koenig-Archibugi, 2023). Citizens may similarly approve of the work of NGOs to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, especially when democratic institutions are threatened by an antidemocratic government. Against a government bent on centralizing power and dismantling checks and balances, NGOs' work carries particular importance in calling attention to democracy-eroding conduct and protesting it (Boulding, 2014). Citizens may thus hold a positive view of foreign-backed NGOs, and, accordingly, they will tend to oppose restrictions on these organizations. Even if they do not view the NGOs favorably, citizens may at least believe that they should be allowed to operate freely: basic democratic principles—freedom of association and speech—give civil society organizations the right to educate, advocate, and protest, using the funds that they raise, including from foreign sources (Ndulo, 2015). Citizens' commitment to democratic values could make them wary of restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs.

Citizens may also hold a realistic assessment of the power and influence that foreign-supported NGOs possess. Governments may portray NGOs as the dangerous political

tentacles of wealthy countries or individuals, seeking to meddle in the country's domestic affairs and promote foreign ambitions. But citizens may see this threat as inflated. They may realize that civil society organizations, even backed by resources from abroad, can wield limited influence through their educational, assistance, or advocacy efforts. These organizations are hardly capable of fueling national protest movements or otherwise blocking measures that the government is determined to enact (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014: 27). Given NGOs' modest impact, restricting their activities might seem unnecessary.

On the other hand, there are good reasons to expect that citizens might buy into the threatening view of foreign-funded NGOs and support government efforts to suppress their activities. First, citizens may not recognize the antidemocratic impact of restrictions on NGOs. Indeed, several studies suggest that voters might fail to check authoritarian behavior since they are unaware that democracy is being threatened. As citizens often demonstrate low sophistication in their understanding of democracy, they may not grasp the true intention behind an antidemocratic measure or may underestimate the extent of democratic transgression. Infringements of democracy may, in fact, line up with citizens' understanding of how democracy should work (Carey et al., 2022; Grossman et al., 2022; Krishnarajan, 2023; Luo and Przeworski, 2023; Miller, 2021; Wunsch et al., 2022). The incremental nature of democratic backsliding compounds this problem. The undermining of democracy typically begins with subtle policy changes or institutional reforms that lay the groundwork for a future power grab (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Citizens might be oblivious to the subtle measures, failing to understand their significance and overall impact (Clayton, 2022). Restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs fall into the category of subtle antidemocratic measures that might not alarm citizens. A coup or a suspension of the constitution clearly spells a breakdown of the democratic government, which citizens can easily recognize. By contrast, the stifling of the activity of foreign-funded NGOs seems to be of minor significance, as citizens might not grasp these organizations' importance for democracy and the dire consequences of suppressing them.

Furthermore, NGOs' promotion of democracy or human rights might be viewed as foreign meddling that undermines local traditions and practices (Ping, 2022; Steinberg and Wertman, 2018). Several bodies of literature indeed suggest that citizens tend to view foreign meddling unfavorably. When international actors shame a country's human rights violations, citizens often remain unpersuaded; in a backlash effect, they might even rally behind their government (Efrat and Yair, 2023; Greenhill and Reiter, 2022; Gruffydd-Jones, 2019). Popular resentment of international courts rests on their view as illegitimate constraints on national sovereignty: foreign institutions in foreign locales, whose decisions subvert the will of the government and of the people (Chapman and Chaudoin, 2020; Voeten, 2020). Foreign interference in national elections may also meet the disapproval of citizens critical of the intrusion into the most sacred practice of democracy (Shulman and Bloom, 2012; Tomz and Weeks, 2020). Citizens may similarly view foreign-funded NGOs—and their efforts to influence the country's politics and society—as an external threat to national autonomy and national identity. Concerned for sovereignty and for local values and practices, they might buy into the government's portrayal of the NGOs as a menace to be suppressed.

We anticipate that citizens' inclination to resist foreign interference will outweigh the considerations working in favor of foreign-funded NGOs. While, realistically speaking, these groups possess limited power, citizens might still view them as foreign intruders that interfere in the country's domestic affairs. When learning that an NGO receives

funding from a foreign source, citizens are therefore more likely to view this organization negatively: they will more likely believe that the NGO's agenda is inimical to their country's interests. Accordingly, citizens will tend to support the imposition of regulatory restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs to inhibit them from carrying out their agenda. They may see these restrictions as necessary measures for the protection of sovereignty, while showing little awareness of their corrosive impact on democracy. This brings us to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Citizens hold a more negative view of NGOs that receive foreign funding than of NGOs that receive funding from local sources.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Citizens more strongly support restrictions on NGOs that receive foreign funding than on NGOs that receive funding from local sources.

Beyond the source of funds, ideology may also shape public attitudes toward NGOs. These organizations' agenda and activities often bear a clear ideological orientation and may be politically controversial. How does ideological (in)congruence moderate citizens' attitudes toward NGOs? Do citizens' own political views lead them to look differently at liberal NGOs compared with conservative NGOs?

Before answering these questions, we must briefly distinguish between the two types of organizations and clarify what conservative NGOs are. Indeed, the literature often highlights NGOs advancing liberal causes, such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the environment (Natil et al., 2019; Teegan et al., 2004). But the sphere of NGOs also includes groups that promote conservative causes, such as traditional family values, looser gun control, antimigration or anti-refugee policies, and even restrictions on the fundamental rights of individuals and minorities (Bob, 2012). Existing literature sometimes labels them as anti-rights groups or uncivil society (CIVICUS, 2019; Kopecký and Moode, 2003; Pousadela and Perera, 2021). We label these actors as "conservative groups"—to contrast them with rights-promoting, liberal groups.

Conservative groups draw their inspiration from diverse sources, including social conservatism, religious tradition, nationalism, and ethnicity. Although separate from the state, these groups sometimes receive formal or informal support from the state or collaborate with state authorities (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2021). They typically lobby policymakers to avoid the implementation of rights-oriented policies, to establish illiberal policies, or to exclude liberal NGOs from policymaking processes. Indeed, conservative groups often target liberal activists—discrediting their causes, tarnishing their image (e.g. labeling them as Western puppets or enemies of the country), and accusing them of undermining society's foundations (Pousadela and Perera, 2021). According to CIVICUS, a global alliance of liberal NGOs, conservative groups "are now more confident, more visible and better resourced" (CIVICUS, 2019: 2).

In a civic space occupied by both liberal and conservative groups, do citizens' own ideologies shape their attitudes toward NGOs? Are left-wing citizens more apprehensive about conservative organizations, while right-wing citizens more strongly object to liberal groups? A large literature on partisan-motivated reasoning would lead us to answer these questions in the affirmative. This literature suggests that citizens tend to apply "partisan double standards": They discount negative information about co-partisans but more harshly evaluate members of the opposition (Claassen and Ensley, 2016; Taber and Lodge, 2006). For example, voters may punish democratic norm violations committed by

the opposite party, but not by members of their own party (Albertus and Grossman, 2021; Clayton, 2022; Graham and Svulik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Tomz and Weeks, 2020; Yair and Sulizeanu-Kenan, 2018).

We argue that partisan-motivated reasoning colors citizens' attitudes toward NGOs. NGOs whose values conform to one's ideology would seem benign. When citizens sympathize with the groups' values and goals, they would treat these groups as legitimate and express weaker support for restrictions on their activities. By contrast, citizens would be much less accepting of NGOs with an ideology opposite to their own. Civil society organizations on the other side of the political spectrum are more likely to be seen as foreign agents that violate national sovereignty or as unelected actors that undermine democracy. In other words, citizens likely hold a more negative view of the NGOs, and express greater support for regulatory restrictions, when they consider organizations with the opposite ideology, compared with organizations aligned with their own views. We formally state as follows:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). Citizens view NGOs more negatively, and express greater support for NGO restrictions, when the NGOs are not aligned with their ideology. Right-wing citizens show greater concern about liberal groups, whereas left-wing citizens exhibit greater alarm about conservative groups.

Israel as a Backsliding Democracy

We examine public attitudes toward NGOs in Israel, a democratic country that has experienced incremental backsliding during the 2010s and into the 2020s. This backsliding resulted from a confluence of trends, including the ascendance of the right and the decline of the left in Israeli politics, the increasing political power of the religious-Zionist community, the inability to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the concentration of power in the hands of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Benn, 2016; Chazan, 2020; Pedhazur, 2012). Seeking to entrench their power and to implement a nationalist-inspired agenda, successive right-wing coalitions—in power for most of the time since 2009—have taken a variety of steps that downgraded Israeli democracy. These include attacks on the judicial system and efforts to curtail the powers of the Supreme Court to strike down legislation and to review government action (Kingsley and Kershner, 2023; Mordechay and Roznai, 2017: 253–254); growing delegitimization of Arab citizens and questioning of their loyalty (Chazan, 2020: 96; Gutman and Tirosh, 2021; Rekhess, 2020); and efforts to enhance governmental control of the media (Dor, 2015) and to undermine public broadcasting (Balint, 2023). In 2018, the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) enacted Basic Law: Israel—The Nation State of the Jewish People. This law defines Israel as the nation state of the Jewish People while omitting the principle of equality for non-Jews, opening the door to discriminatory policies (Barak-Corren et al., 2022; Ben-Joseph Hirsch, 2022; Waxman and Peleg, 2020).

The democratic erosion in Israel has also included attacks on civil society and on the foreign funding that undergirds its activity. The values that liberal, foreign-funded NGOs promote are at odds with those of the right-wing coalitions in power since 2009. Furthermore, the NGOs have come to be seen as a security threat: By exposing Israel's human rights violations, they presumably delegitimize Israel, abet terror, and provide evidence that might facilitate the prosecution of Israeli officials in foreign courts. Indeed, the NGOs have been viewed as participants in a global campaign aimed at undermining

the State of Israel (Gordon, 2014). To counter the perceived threat, the right-wing coalition took a variety of measures. At the rhetorical level, some NGOs faced harsh condemnations and smear campaigns aimed at delegitimizing them. They were denounced as foreign agents disloyal to Israel (ACRI, 2019; Ben Shitrit, 2016). For example, right-wing leader Bezalel Smotrich, a few weeks before his appointment as Minister of Finance in 2022, said that “human rights organizations are an existential threat for Israel that the incoming government should tackle.” He urged the government to “put its hands” on the NGOs’ money and to establish security and legal measures against them. Member of Knesset Amichai Chikli argued that European Union funding for two liberal NGOs has, in fact, turned them into European organizations. “I sincerely hope that a future government will put an end to the circus that Europe is running in the State of Israel” (Shpigel, 2022).

NGOs operating in Israel have indeed been facing growing restrictions. In 2011, the Knesset established the so-called Boycott Law¹ as a first step toward silencing the NGOs. This law prohibits individuals or groups from publicly calling for economic, cultural, or academic boycotts on Israel. A 2018 law prevents NGOs from conducting educational activities at schools if these organizations put Israeli soldiers at the risk of political or legal retribution abroad² (Lis, 2018). Other laws aim at tainting the NGOs by highlighting the foreign sources of their funding. A 2011 law requires an NGO that received funding from “a foreign governmental entity” to publicly report the source, amount, and purpose of the donation.³ According to a 2016 law, an NGO that receives most of its funding from foreign governmental sources must note this fact, in a prominent manner, in its publications and in any interaction with officials.⁴ The list of NGOs subject to the 2016 law largely included liberal NGOs that receive support from foreign governments or the European Union. Conservative NGOs, supported by foreign *private* donors, were excluded. Proponents of the law claimed it provided much-needed transparency for organizations that promote foreign interests. For critics, this law amounted to a political witch hunt of left-leaning groups, aiming to label them as traitors and chill their activity (Knesset, 2016; Lis, 2016).

The annual Freedom House index picked up on Israel’s democratic backsliding. Beginning in 2018, Israel has received lower scores for its protection of civil liberties and political rights, compared with the pre-2018 period. The different democracy indices from V-Dem similarly show an incremental erosion of democracy in Israel during the 2010s.

Against this background, Israel serves as a good testing ground for the microfoundations of democratic backsliding and, in particular, public attitudes toward civil society. In a country where liberal groups face official hostility and restrictions, do citizens share the government’s concern about NGOs? The fact that both liberal groups and conservative groups occupy the civic space in Israel (Sheizaf, 2015) allows us to test the motivated-reasoning hypothesis. Furthermore, the deep political polarization in Israel (Amitai et al., 2023; Gidron et al., 2022; Lev, 2023) should increase partisan-motivated reasoning (Donovan et al., 2020; Jones, 2020). The Israeli case can thus offer insight into the effect of polarization on public attitudes toward NGOs.

Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online survey, with an embedded vignette experiment, in Israel. The survey was fielded between 3 and 8 January 2023.

Sample

A total of 2613 respondents completed the survey. These respondents were recruited by *iPanel*, a company that conducts online surveys in Israel. While not fully representative, our sample is quite diverse and consistent with Israeli population benchmarks on several key demographic and political measures. The mean age in our sample is 41.4 (SD = 14.6), with women comprising 50.5% of the sample. In addition, those identifying as ideologically “right” (1–3 on a 1–7 ideological self-placements item) comprised 52.0% of the sample, while “centrists” (4 on that measure) comprised 25.7%, and “leftists” (5–7 on that measure) comprised 22.4% of respondents. Typical of online samples in Israel, our sample contains a lower percentage of Arab respondents (12.1%, compared with 21% in the general Israeli population). For more information on the sample, see Online Appendix Section A.

Procedure

Respondents read a short vignette (between 84 and 94 words in Hebrew) that provided basic information on the NGOs operating in Israel. The vignette also included three examples of NGOs working in Israel and concluded with a sentence identifying the funding source of “many of the NGOs.”

The experimental design involved a random assignment of the respondents to one of six conditions, each with a different type of information. Overall, our design included two experimental factors corresponding to (1) the source of the NGO funding, and (2) the ideological orientation of the NGOs. In the first factor (“funding source”), respondents were randomly assigned to read that the source of funding for many NGOs is either local or foreign. Specifically, the funding comes mostly from (1) several European governments (Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden); (2) the US government; (3) foreign private donors; or (4) donations of Israeli citizens. The first three options constitute “foreign funding,” while the fourth option constitutes “local funding.” In the second factor (“NGO ideology”), respondents were randomly assigned to receive information on either three liberal, left-leaning NGOs operating in Israel, or three conservative, right-leaning NGOs operating in Israel.⁵

Notably, while we created four conditions containing information on liberal NGOs that varied in the source of their funding, we established only two such conditions for conservative NGOs. Specifically, these latter two conditions depicted conservative NGOs as receiving most of their funding from either foreign private donors or from Israeli citizens. We chose not to present respondents with false information on right-leaning NGOs receiving funding from either European governments or the US government, as foreign-government funding typically flows to liberal NGOs (Sheizaf, 2015). The full text of all six vignettes is presented in Online Appendix Section B.

In keeping with the preregistration, we test our hypotheses using different experimental conditions. We used all six conditions in testing H1 and H2, but employed only four of the six conditions when testing H3, namely, those four conditions that depict either liberal or conservative NGOs as receiving most of their funding from either foreign private donors or from Israeli citizens. This created an equivalence between the conditions relating to liberal and conservative NGOs. In Online Appendix Section C we present balance tests showing that respondents in the different conditions are balanced on different demographic and political measures.

Measures

Following the short vignette, respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with eight statements. The first four items tapped respondents' perception of NGOs, while the last four items tapped respondents' support for regulatory restrictions on NGOs. All items were presented on a 5-point scale, labeled 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *both agree and disagree*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*.⁶

The four "perception" items asked respondents for their agreement with statements such as "NGOs promote foreign interests and not the interests of Israeli society" and "NGOs have too much influence over what happens in Israel." All items are presented in Appendix 1. The four items exhibited adequate inter-item reliability ($\alpha=0.79$), and they were scaled together to create our first dependent variable, *Negative Perceptions*, which varies between 0 and 1, with higher values denoting a more negative perception of NGOs ($M=0.52$; $SD=0.24$). The four "restriction" items asked respondents for their agreement with statements such as "NGOs should be prohibited from working on sensitive and controversial political matters" and "NGOs should be prohibited from participating in meetings of Knesset committees." These four items, presented in Appendix 1, also exhibited adequate inter-item reliability ($\alpha=0.74$), and they were scaled to create our second dependent variable, *Restrictions*, which varies between 0 and 1, with higher values denoting greater support for restrictions on NGOs ($M=0.61$; $SD=0.22$). The two dependent variables highly correlate ($r=0.67$; $p<0.001$), but they are not identical.

Estimation Strategy

We first test the effect of foreign versus local funding on citizens' negative perception of NGOs and their support for regulatory restrictions on NGOs (H1 and H2). Our analysis takes the following functional form:

$$Y_i = B_0 + B_1 * \text{Foreign-funded NGO} + e$$

Y_i denotes the two dependent variables, *Negative Perceptions* and *Restrictions*. *Foreign-funded NGO* is a dummy variable: conditions in which NGOs were presented as mostly funded by foreign sources were assigned 1, while conditions in which NGOs were presented as mostly funded by Israeli citizens were assigned 0. We expected the B_1 coefficient to be positive and statistically significant: funding from foreign actors was hypothesized to result in a more negative perception of NGOs (H1) and in stronger support for regulatory restrictions on NGOs (H2), compared with locally funded NGOs.

Our test of H3—the expectation of differential reactions from respondents to ideologically congruent and incongruent NGOs—takes the following functional form:

$$Y_i = B_0 + B_1 * \text{Rightist} + B_2 * \text{Liberal NGOs} + B_3 * \text{Rightist} * \text{Liberal NGOs} + e$$

Y_i denotes the two abovementioned dependent variables. *Rightist* is a dummy variable for right-wing respondents (assigned 1) versus left-wing respondents (assigned 0).⁷ *Liberal NGOs* is a dummy variable for the conditions presenting liberal (left-leaning) NGOs (assigned 1) versus conditions presenting conservative (right-leaning) NGOs (assigned 0).⁸ *Rightist*Liberal NGOs* is the interaction term between the two dummy

Table 1. The Influence of Foreign Funding on Attitudes toward NGOs.

Dependent variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Negative perceptions		Restrictions	
Foreign-funded NGOs	0.06** (0.01)	0.03* (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)
Liberal NGOs		0.05** (0.02)		0.03* (0.02)
Foreign-funded NGOs × Liberal NGOs		0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)
Constant	0.48** (0.01)	0.45** (0.01)	0.61** (0.01)	0.59** (0.01)
Observations	2558	2558	2553	2553
R-squared	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.01

NGOs: nongovernmental organizations.

The dependent variables vary between 0 and 1, with higher values denoting more negative NGO perceptions (Models 1–2) and more support for restrictions on NGOs (Models 3–4). The reference category for the *Foreign-funded NGOs* dummy variable is *Israeli-funded NGOs*. The reference category for the *Liberal NGOs* dummy variable is *Conservative NGOs*.

Standard errors in parentheses: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed test).

variables. We expected the B_3 coefficient to be positive and statistically significant: An ideological mismatch, that is, an incongruence between the respondent's ideology and the NGOs' ideological orientation, should result in a more negative NGO perception and greater support for restrictions on NGOs, compared with the case of an ideological congruence between the respondent and the NGOs.

Results

We begin by testing H1 and H2. In keeping with the preregistration, we estimate our treatment effects using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Given our directional hypotheses, we conduct one-tailed tests.⁹

Table 1 presents the results of preregistered regression models testing H1 and H2. Models 1 and 2 test H1, with *Negative Perceptions* as the dependent variable, while Models 3 and 4 test H2, with *Restrictions* as the dependent variable. In Model 1 we see that Israelis hold a slightly more negative perception of foreign-funded NGOs compared with locally funded NGOs. The regression coefficient of 0.06 is statistically significant ($SE = 0.01$; $p < 0.001$) and represents an increase of 0.23 of a standard deviation on the perception-negativity scale—a relatively weak effect. Panel A in Figure 1, based on Model 1, presents these results graphically: The negative perception of locally funded NGOs stands at 0.48, whereas the negativity of foreign-funded NGOs is slightly higher at 0.54 (on our 0–1 scale). This provides moderate support for H1: While Israelis show some wariness toward foreign-funded NGOs, compared with locally funded ones, the difference is modest.

Yet the difference between the two types of NGOs fades away when it comes to the imposition of restrictions. Contrary to H2, Model 3 in Table 1 presents no evidence that Israelis support stricter restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs compared with

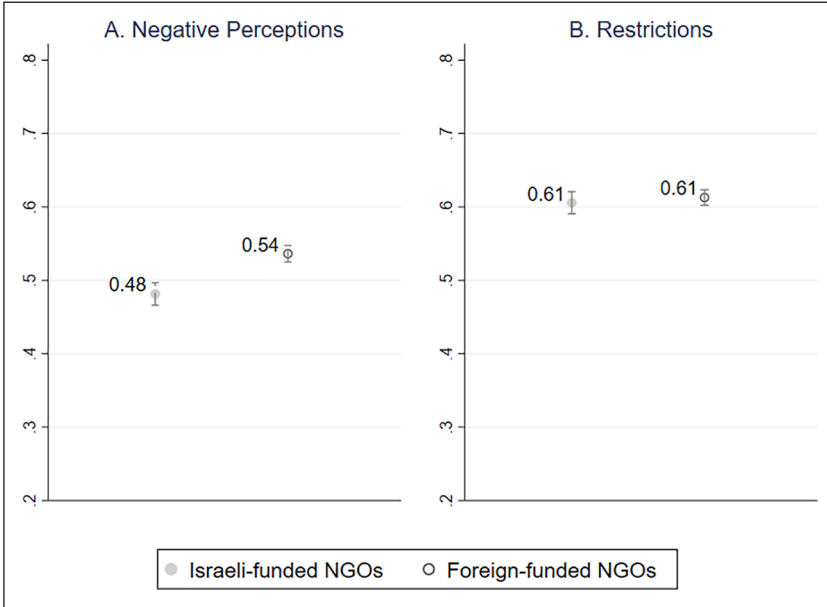


Figure 1. The Effect of Foreign Funding on Negative NGO Perception and Support for NGO Restrictions.

Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. Panel A presents the estimates for the *Negative Perceptions* dependent variable based on Model 1 in Table 1, while Panel B presents the estimates for the *Restrictions* dependent variable based on Model 3.

Israeli-funded NGO: the regression coefficient is very small ($b=0.01$) and statistically insignificant ($SE=0.01$; $p > 0.5$). Panel B in Figure 1, based on Model 3, makes the same point: Support for restrictions stands at 0.61 for both foreign-funded and locally funded NGOs. As we suggested above, the reluctance to more severely restrict foreign-funded NGOs may reflect Israelis’ democratic beliefs or their realistic assessment of the limited power that such NGOs possess.

Interestingly, the effect of the foreign funding is similar, in both Models 1 and 3, for liberal and conservative NGOs. In a preregistered robustness test, we added to these models a dummy variable for liberal NGOs and an interaction between that variable and the *Foreign-funded NGOs* variable. These results are shown in Models 2 and 4, respectively. We find that in both models, the coefficients of the interactions between the *Foreign-funded NGOs* dummy variable and the dummy variable for liberal NGOs are small ($b=0.01$ for both models) and insignificant ($ps > 0.5$). Thus, regardless of the ideology of the NGOs (i.e. liberal or conservative), foreign-funded NGOs are perceived slightly more negatively compared with Israeli-funded NGOs, but this negative perception does *not* translate to greater support for regulatory restrictions on NGOs.

While our primary focus is the distinction between foreign funding and local funding, we also examined whether the different sources of foreign funding, in the case of liberal NGOs, vary in their impact on citizens: Does it matter if the foreign money comes from European governments, the US government, or private donors? Our results suggest it does not matter. Respondents in all three conditions had almost identical mean score in both the *Negative Perceptions* dependent variable (Ms between 0.55 and 0.56; $F(2,$

Table 2. The Influence of Ideological Mismatch on Attitudes Toward NGOs.

Dependent variable	(1)	(2)
	Negative perceptions	Restrictions
Rightist respondent	-0.03* (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Liberal NGOs	-0.15** (0.02)	-0.13** (0.02)
Rightist × Liberal NGOs	0.33** (0.02)	0.27** (0.02)
Constant	0.50** (0.01)	0.58** (0.01)
Observations	1259	1256
R-squared	0.23	0.19

NGOs: nongovernmental organizations.

The dependent variables vary between 0 and 1, with higher values denoting more negative perceptions of NGOs (Model 1) and more support for restrictions on NGOs (Model 2). The reference category for the *Rightist respondent* dummy variable is a leftist respondent (centrist respondents are excluded from the analysis). The reference category for the *Liberal NGOs* dummy variable is *conservative* NGOs. The two conditions in which liberal NGOs receive most of their funding from either European governments or the US government are excluded.

Standard errors in parentheses; ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed test).

1311)=0.20; $p=0.820$, two-tailed test) and the *Restrictions* dependent variable (M_s between 0.61 and 0.63; $F(2, 1306)=0.43$; $p=0.650$, two-tailed test).

H3 concerns differential reactions of respondents to ideologically congruent and incongruent NGOs (i.e. NGOs that match or do not match respondents' own ideology). Table 2 presents the results of the two preregistered models: Model 1 for negative perceptions and Model 2 for restrictions on NGOs. These models include an interaction term between the NGOs' ideological orientation and that of the respondent.

As expected, the interaction coefficient in both models is positive (b_s between 0.27 and 0.33) and statistically significant ($p_s < 0.001$), providing strong support for H3: citizens hold a more negative perception of NGOs on the other side of the political spectrum and express greater support for restrictions on these NGOs. Rights-wing citizens show a more negative attitude toward liberal NGOs than toward conservative ones, while left-wing citizens are more negative toward conservative groups than toward liberal ones. The differential responses in negative perceptions and support for regulatory restrictions are clearly shown in Figure 2, Panel A and Panel B, respectively.

Both leftists and rightist respondents hold more negative perceptions of ideologically incongruent compared with ideologically congruent NGOs, by about 0.15 to 0.19 on the 0–1 scale ($p_s < 0.001$). Leftist respondents' negative perception of liberal NGOs stands at 0.35; the measure of negative perception rises to 0.5 when leftist respondents assess *conservative* NGOs, attesting to a rather large effect size (Cohen $d=0.73$). Rightist respondents' negative view of conservative NGOs stands at 0.47; the measure of negative perception reaches 0.65 when rightist respondents evaluate *liberal* NGOs, attesting to a large effect size (Cohen $d=0.92$). Similarly, both groups support more burdensome restrictions on ideologically incongruent NGOs than on ideologically congruent NGOs, by about 0.13–0.14 on the 0–1 scale ($p_s < 0.001$), attesting to

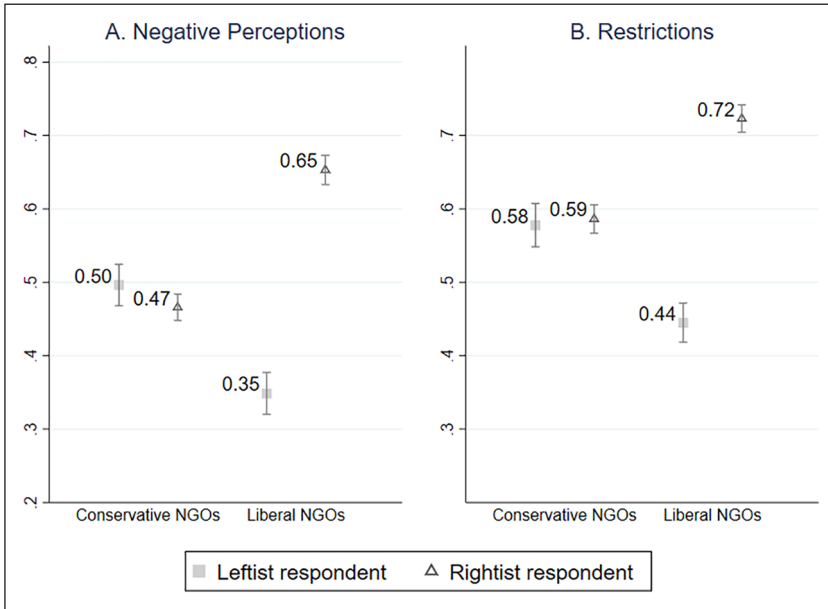


Figure 2. The Effect of Ideological Incongruence on Negative NGO Perception and Support for NGO Restrictions. Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. Centrist respondents are excluded. Panel A presents the estimates for the *Negative Perceptions* dependent variable while Panel B presents the estimates for the *Regulation* dependent variable.

moderate to large effect sizes (Cohen $d=0.67$ for leftist respondents and 0.68 for rightist respondents). Overall, the evidence clearly demonstrates partisan (or ideologically)-motivated reasoning with respect to NGOs. Citizens hold a more negative view of groups with the opposite ideology to their own, and they express a stronger willingness to restrict such groups.

We also conducted several robustness tests. Specifically, we reran the models in Tables 1 and 2 with several individual-level demographic and political control variables, and reran the Table 2 models with the addition of the two conditions excluded previously. As shown in Online Appendix Section D, the baseline results see little change.

Conclusion and Implications

This article contributes to a growing body of literature that examines the role of citizens in defending democratic institutions and norms. Indeed, preserving democracy from being undermined requires citizens committed to democracy who are willing to punish incumbents for their antidemocratic transgressions. Without this important check of ordinary citizens, democratic institutions might be hollowed out and democratic norms might be undermined or erased (Fossati et al., 2022: 564). We focus here on the public’s support for NGOs: informal institutions that serve as a key pillar of democracy, based on the right to free speech and the freedom of association. Vilifying and restricting NGOs, especially those relying on foreign funds, is a part and parcel of democratic backsliding: would-be autocrats seek to silence groups that might expose and criticize their intended power-grab

or otherwise constrain them (Bakke et al., 2020; Carothers and Press, 2022). Does the public share the negative views of NGOs? Do citizens support governmental restrictions that will sap NGOs' power and influence?

Our findings are mixed. Contrary to our expectations, respondents exhibited limited concern about the foreign funding of NGOs. They viewed foreign-funded NGOs slightly more negatively than locally funded NGOs; and they expressed support for similar restrictions on NGOs irrespective of the source of their funds. As we suggested above, the lack of support for harsher restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs may stem from a commitment to democratic ideals or from a realistic assessment of the limited powers that NGOs possess. Either way, this finding suggests that, for citizens, NGOs' foreign funds may *not* be an important cause for alarm or a justification for government crackdown. Governments may indeed seek to vilify foreign-funded NGOs and undermine their legitimacy, but they will have to overcome citizens' fundamental intuition that NGOs receiving foreign funds need not be singled out for repression.

Obviously, results obtained through a single-country design have their limitations, since citizens' attitudes toward civil society may vary across countries. Furthermore, results obtained in a rich democracy, such as Israel, may not necessarily hold in poorer democracies. Note, however, that Israel should have been a most likely case for demonstrating a negative public attitude toward foreign-supported actors that seek to shape domestic politics. As Israel often faces criticism from foreign governments or international organizations, Israelis often show little tolerance for such criticisms or for the actors voicing them. For example, across 19 advanced countries surveyed by Pew in 2022 (Wike, 2022), Israelis held the most negative view of the UN, with 70% expressing an unfavorable opinion about this institution. Several studies have, in fact, documented the backlash effect of foreign criticism: learning about external actors' denunciation of their government's conduct, Israelis tend to *increase* their support for the government (Cavari et al., 2024; Efrat and Yair, 2023; Grossman et al., 2018). The tendency to reject foreign interference should have led Israelis to demonstrate wariness and concern toward foreign-funded NGOs. That we have not identified such a concern in a most likely case means that publics elsewhere may present a similar attitude. This, however, should be verified in future studies.

But our second finding is more concerning: ideological considerations strongly shape one's attitude toward NGOs. Citizens hold a more negative view of ideologically incongruent NGOs and show greater support for the imposition of restrictions on them. This finding joins a growing body of research suggesting that ideological considerations or partisanship might erode people's support for democracy. Previous studies have examined the tradeoff between partisanship and democratic principles in the context of electoral choice (e.g. Carey et al., 2022; Graham and Svobik, 2020) or support for specific policies (Albertus and Grossman, 2021; Fossati et al., 2022). We show here that NGOs—which often insist they are *not* partisan actors (Brechenmacher, 2019)—are nonetheless the subject of partisan-motivated reasoning. NGOs from one's ideological camp receive a more sympathetic attitude than groups belonging to the opposite camp.

This finding carries ominous consequences for NGOs, whose appeal to citizens was long based on their nonideological quality and their removal from the dirty give-and-take of partisan politics (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014: 27). In a polarized environment, such as Israel's, even nonpartisan, "neutral" actors are viewed through a political lens: civil society groups, despite their claim to being nonpartisan, might be

seen simply as partisan political actors under camouflage. Interestingly, this effect works both ways. Typically, it is liberal groups that governments denounce as partisan and political and hence illegitimate (e.g. Njogu, 2018). In our study, right-wing respondents viewed liberal groups, more than conservative groups, as being political and tied to political parties; *but it is also left-wing respondents who considered conservative groups, more than liberal groups, as being political*. These results were obtained without exposing respondents to any explicit government criticism of NGOs or providing information on their ties to political parties. All this serves to demonstrate that, at the level of public opinion, the legitimacy of civil society is indeed being questioned on ideological grounds—a boon for governments that seek to weaken the NGO sector and erode democracy.

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Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

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Notes

1. Law to Prevent Harm to the State of Israel through Boycott 2011.
2. Amendment no. 17 to the National Education Law, 2018.
3. Law on a Disclosure Obligation for Those Supported by a Foreign Governmental Entity, 2011.
4. Law on a Disclosure Obligation for Those Supported by a Foreign Governmental Entity (Amendment), 2016.
5. The brief information presented on the different NGOs in the different vignettes did not contain any deception as these NGOs are indeed operating, at the time of this writing, in Israel.

6. A sixth, “don’t know” option was also offered to respondents. Those who chose it—between 3.1% and 10.5% across all eight items ($M=7.0\%$)—were removed from the respective analyses.
7. In keeping with the preregistration, centrist respondents (4 on a 1–7 ideological self-placement item) were excluded from the analysis of H3.
8. In keeping with the preregistration, the main analysis excludes the two conditions in which liberal NGOs receive most of their funding from European governments or the US government, as there are no equivalent “conservative NGOs” conditions. Still, assigning these two conditions 1 in the *Liberal NGOs* dummy variable and adding respondents assigned to these conditions to our analysis slightly strengthens the main results (see Online Appendix Section D).
9. In Online Appendix Section E we report a few minor deviations from the preregistration. The preregistration is available at: <https://aspredicted.org/s8ft9.pdf>. Replication materials are available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PGWEXB>.

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Appendix I

The Wording of Items Comprising the Two Dependent Variables

The Items Comprising the Negative Perceptions Scale

1. NGOs promote foreign interests, and not the interests of Israeli society.
2. NGOs have too much influence over what happens in Israel.
3. NGOs are not elected by the public, hence their efforts to influence policy are nondemocratic.
4. NGOs are presumably nonpolitical, but in fact they are political bodies tied to left-wing/right-wing parties (depending on whether the respondent read about liberal NGOs (conditions 1–4) or conservative NGOs (conditions 5 and 6), respectively).

The Items Comprising the Restrictions Scale

5. NGOs should be prohibited from working on sensitive and controversial political matters.
6. NGOs should be prohibited from receiving funding from foreign (non-Israeli) sources.
7. NGOs should be made more transparent, so that it is clear who stands behind them.
8. NGOs should be prohibited from participating in meetings of Knesset committees.