ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Governance WILEY

A red flag for public goods? The correlates of civil society restrictions

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Funding information
British Academy

Abstract

Governments increasingly restrict civil society organizations (CSOs). Different theories converge on the expectation that CSOs are important for public goods. A largely unexplored implication is that increased restrictions on CSOs will signal the under-delivery of public goods. Using data on government-imposed restrictions on CSOs for a global sample of countries, we test this implication. Controlling for unobserved cross-country heterogeneity, temporal shocks, and confounding variables, we find that the accumulation of restrictions on CSOs negatively correlate with public goods-oriented government spending and positively correlate with corruption and clientelism in the future. Our evidence also suggests that the mechanism underpinning these findings is that persistent restrictions on CSOs negatively correlate with engaged society and, to some extent, protest. While global governance actors warn of the negative consequences of restrictions on CSOs, our analyses provide evidence that restrictions are indeed a red flag for governments' failure to live up to their public goods commitment.

1 | INTRODUCTION

> The importance of ensuring the broadest possible civic space in every country cannot be overstated. That space for full, free public participation enables progress on all fronts, including sustainable development, and peaceful, fair societies. It ensures a safe future for our connected world.
>
> United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet (2018).

From theories of democracy (Putnam, 1993) to research on transnational advocacy networks (e.g., Brysk, 2013; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999), there is a consensus that the presence of unrestricted civil society organizations (CSOs) is a key condition for the delivery of public goods, such as security provision, infrastructure development, or environmental conservation, and for the realization of the goals of the United Nations (UN).[1] At the same time, recent research shows that some governments seek to curtail CSO activities (Bakke et al., 2020; Christensen & Weinstein, 2013; Dupuy et al., 2016; Glasius et al., 2020). Figure 1 suggests that since 1994, governments have increased restrictions on civil society's human rights defenders, including burdensome registration requirements, limits on foreign funding, smear campaigns, and the censorship of reports. If the theoretical consensus linking unrestricted CSOs to public goods is correct, then these restrictions imply a reduction in public goods delivery. We investigate this implication. Do restrictions on CSOs indicate a decrease in the delivery of public goods?

In principle, civil society facilitates deliberation, monitors government behavior, mobilizes domestic protest, and, most importantly for autocratic states, channels information to external networks that might hold governments accountable. Yet restrictions on CSOs may hamper this activity and increase government leaders' expectations that they can get away with poor performance. Restrictions likely relieve both immediate and anticipated pressures on governments
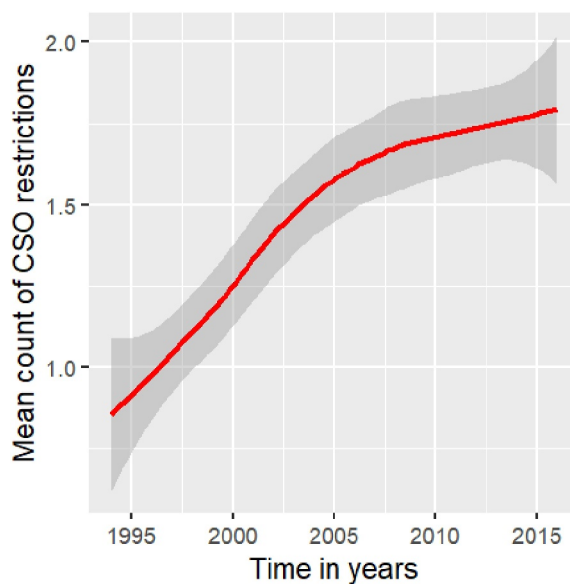

FIGURE 1 Mean number of different types of restrictions imposed on civil society organizations over time (data from Bakke et al., 2020).

to provide public goods now and in the future.[2] As restrictions accumulate over time, we expect that governments invest less in public goods, pursue more particularistic spending priorities, and increasingly yield to the temptations of corruption and clientelism, such as vote buying, to maintain power.

The proposed relationship between mounting restrictions and decreasing public goods delivery is not obvious. Restricting CSOs and providing *private* goods may be alternative strategies for staying in power. If restrictions are effective, buying support via particularistic spending, corruption, or vote buying may no longer be necessary. In this case, restrictions on CSOs would positively correlate with some public goods provision. Thus, ultimately, the relationship between restrictions and policy performance is an empirical puzzle.

We address this puzzle using a global sample of countries over the period 1990–2021, accounting for unobserved cross-country differences, yearly shocks, and other factors. We measure restrictions with two different datasets to ensure that our findings do not hinge on the source: Bakke et al., 2020 on restrictions on human rights CSOs and the V-Dem project on CSO restrictions more broadly (Bernhard et al., 2015; Coppedge et al., 2022; Pemstein et al., 2022). We also examine the mechanism-related implications of our argument and assess the predictive power of restrictions on public goods delivery.

We find that after controlling for regime characteristics, namely horizontal accountability institutions (such as parliaments) and vertical accountability institutions (such as elections), the accumulation of restrictions on CSOs over time correlates with more particularistic government spending, rather than public goods-oriented spending, and positively correlates with corruption and clientelism. Our evidence also supports two of the three mechanism implications, specifically reduced public engagement and protest. Our analyses further suggest that the accumulation of restrictions is a predictor of contemporaneous public goods delivery, with more predictive power than a prior trend in the regime characteristic variables. As CSO restrictions are visible and dynamic over time, they may be a useful red flag for the likelihood that governments will disrespect global standards of public goods delivery in the near future.

This article contributes to understanding the important consequences of CSO restrictions in four ways. First, we provide evidence for the theoretically expected benefits of civil society and, importantly, on the converse relationship between a *de*-activated civil society and the *under*-delivery of public goods. There is some recent evidence that restricting civil society worsens human rights (Chaudhry & Heiss, 2022), the quality of democracy (Smidt et al., 2024), and public health (Heinzel & Koenig-Archibugi, 2023). We investigate whether there is a broader trend connecting restrictions to more particularistic (rather than public goods-oriented) spending priorities, as well as corruption and clientelism.

Second, we draw on core theories of political science to spell out the implications for how restrictions on CSOs reduce public goods. Scholars have conceptualized the undelivery of public goods as "unintended side effects" of restrictions that "everyone, including the political elites, dislike" (Heinzel & Koenig-Archibugi, 2023, pp. 2, 16; Berger-Kern et al., 2021). While this description of restrictions is plausible for global health outcomes, restrictions on *advocacy* CSOs may also be a *deliberate* effort to avoid monitoring and blame for current or future particularistic spending priorities and the under-provision of public goods.

Third, studies show that CSOs adapt to restrictions and, in some cases, fend off administrative and legal limitations on their work (Berger-Kern et al., 2021; Fransen et al., 2021). Smidt et al. (2020) find that only severe restrictions de-mobilize civil society, while sporadic restrictions increase their engagement and international shaming campaigns directed against

repressive governments. Given some capacity for adaptation we investigate how the accumulation of restrictions affects pressures on governments, including international shaming and domestic protest.

Finally, following studies on the predictive power of restrictions on civil liberties for future respect of physical integrity rights (e.g., Chaudhry & Heiss, 2022; Gohdes & Carey, 2017), we test whether restrictions are a warning sign of public goods failures. Overall, the irony for untrustworthy governments is that restrictions designed to evade monitoring themselves provide a means for detecting non-compliance with global standards of public goods delivery.

2 | CIVIL SOCIETY AND PUBLIC GOODS

There is both a policy and research consensus that CSOs improve governments' accountability and the delivery of public goods. The involvement of civil society is seen as central by the World Bank (e.g., World Bank, 1997) and in the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), which is the only legally binding multilateral anti-corruption treaty.[3] The latter founded the UNCAC Coalition, a global network of some 350 CSOs whose mission is to "reduce corruption by supporting and empowering civil society to collectively promote transparency, accountability, and good governance."[4]

Likewise, research suggests the importance of civil society for public goods provision. For democratic theorists, civil society allows citizens to acquire independent information, engage in discussion, foster cooperation and social capital, and effectively participate in politics, as such putting pressure on governments between elections to provide public goods to society as a whole (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2017; North et al., 2009; Putnam, 1993).[5]

Beyond pluralist processes in democracies, CSOs affect public goods provision in non-democratic contexts by persuading governments to conform to international norms and deliver core public goods (e.g., Brysk, 1993; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999). This pressure from below (domestic activists) and above (transnational advocacy networks) can persuade governments to change their policies. Overall, the activity of CSOs leads governments to conform to global policy norms, including protecting human rights, upholding the rule of law, and battling corruption.

Beyond persuading states, CSOs supply information on the gap between what governments do and what global norms prescribe.[6] Indeed, numerous studies suggest that CSOs affect compliance through "naming and shaming". Domestic CSOs call out violations of human rights, leading other international actors and organizations to exert pressure, for example, through public criticism, threats of aid cuts, and other sanctions (e.g., Cole, 2005; Garriga, 2016; Krain, 2012; Lebovic & Voeten, 2009; Meernik et al., 2012; Murdie & Davis, 2012).

Monitoring by CSOs may also enable *domestic* accountability mechanisms, at least in democracies. McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) describe how organized interests provide efficient oversight of government policy delivery, or "fire-alarm" monitoring (see also Dai, 2005; Schattschneider, 1960). As human rights CSOs litigate in domestic and international courts as well as name and shame, they may also act as direct enforcers of international norms (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Sharman, 2021; Michel & Sikkink, 2013). Van Zyl (2014) describes the role of CSOs as "closing the gap between transparency and accountability."

In short, there is a striking theoretical convergence on the idea that CSOs persuade, police, and enforce compliance with norms of good governance, fostering the provision of public goods.

But the relationship between CSOs and governments is strategic and in response to pressures exerted by CSOs, governments have choices, other than improving governance: an under-researched implication is that governments' *interference* with CSOs may be a useful indicator for *failures in* public goods delivery.

3 | WHY RESTRICTIONS ON CSOs AND UNDER-PROVISION OF PUBLIC GOODS GO TOGETHER

If compliance is a consequence of pressures by CSOs, and not something governments do anyway, then they may choose to restrict CSO activities to avoid the expected costs of non-compliance. Beyond the very visible step of all-out bannning CSOs, governments have, for example, limited foreign funding for domestic CSOs, revoked CSOs' official registration, refused visas to international CSOs, and surveilled and harassed activists and their families (Chaudhry & Heiss, 2022; Christensen & Weinstein, 2013; Dupuy et al., 2016; Glasius, 2018, 2020). Theories of pluralist democracy, transnational advocacy, and compliance imply: if the presence of CSOs is associated with pressure to comply with international norms and provide public goods, then such government-sponsored restrictions on CSOs to reduce the pressure should serve as a red flag for governance failures.

3.1 | Causal mechanisms

Pluralist theory suggests that restrictions inhibit the ability and potential of different segments of society to coordinate and engage with the policy process to correct or forestall bad governance. Restrictions inhibit civic engagement and the flow of information to the public that can hold governments and politicians to account and ensure public goods provision. Similarly, scholarship on transnational advocacy and compliance suggests that physical restrictions such as arbitrary searches, arrests, and smear campaigns against activists and CSOs create a climate of fear, thereby diminishing protest and interfering with or even silencing international "naming and shaming" campaigns. Even seemingly "innocent" restrictions, such as foreign funding limitations or bureaucratic visa hurdles, make it harder to connect with the international advocacy networks, reducing the pressure to live up to the global norms of public goods delivery.

Take the introduction of the foreign agents bill in Georgia as an example of how restrictions can limit civil society engagement in ways that affect public policy. The draft legislation was first introduced in February 2023 and withdrawn following protests and negative international reactions. However, it was re-introduced in a slightly revised form in spring 2024 and, despite weeks of street demonstrations and negative international reactions (including warnings from Brussels that the law would be an obstacle to EU membership), it was controversially adopted in June 2024 (e.g., RFE/RL, 2024). Modeled on Russia's foreign agents law, which is widely considered a means to restrict civil society, the law imposes burdensome financial audit requirements for CSOs (and media organizations) that receive more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources and requires them to register as "organizations acting in the interest of a foreign power"—with penalties if they do not comply. Though it is too early to assess the

implications of the now adopted law, even the introduction of the draft legislation in 2023 had detrimental effects on state-CSO relations. It sowed distrust between CSOs and the state and CSOs ceased to support the state's assessment of its anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorist financing (CTF) measures (Phichkhaia et al., 2023; European Commission, 2023). Consequently, CSOs now exercise less oversight of corruption-related offenses. Georgia's 2023 AML/CTF risk assessment document (European Commission, 2023), which is important for ensuring compliance with international guidelines, was published without public discussion.

Yet, restrictions carry risks for governments as well. They may invite international shaming and alienate domestic publics, as in Georgia, suggesting that governments are likely to be careful and strategic about the use of retrictions, imposing them only when there is or will be policy failure. Moreover, governments may not only restrict CSOs to retrospectively cover up wrongdoing but also in anticipation of it. Thus, even if restrictions do not always work as desired (from the perpetrating government's perspective) and sometimes increase (rather than decrease) pressures, restrictions on CSOs *reveal* governments' interest in reducing domestic and international accountability costs and compliance pressures. Whether or not restrictions are successful, the evidence of interference with civil society is useful information, representing an indicator of governments' likely under-performance in policy delivery, both at present and in the future. For example, shortly after assuming office in 2019, the government of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro enacted the Provisional Measure No. 870, which "provided the Government Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic with the power to supervise, coordinate, monitor and follow-up on the activities of international and national CSOs in Brazil." During the following years of incumbency the Bolsonaro government neglected public goods, for example, under-provided Covid vaccines (ICNL, 2024).

While restrictions on CSOs are likely to be more severe under autocracy (e.g., Bernhard, 2020; Brechenmacher, 2014) and the public goods failures more apparent (e.g., Lake & Baum, 2001),[7] even under democracy, pluralist theorists expect that it is CSO pressure on governments between elections that holds them to their commitments. North et al. (2009, p. 139), who view unrestricted CSOs as a key check on governments, say: "Modern students of democracy overemphasize elections as the singularly essential feature of democracy." Similarly, Putnam (1993), examining policy performance in Italy, argued that "democracy worked" in regions with active civil society groups, civic engagement and social capital. Empirically, we expect that both electoral accountability and CSO restrictions have independent effects on the under-delivery of public goods.

3.2 | Observable implications

Our argument has several observable implications. First, if governments increase restrictions against civil society, then government expenditure increasingly departs from public goods commitments and moves toward more particularistic priorities. Second, we expect more corrupt and clientelist behavior by government elites. Third, in terms of underlying mechanisms, the implication is that restrictionsreduce civic engagement in society, reduce anti-government protest, and diminish the possibility of organizing international "naming and shaming" campaigns. Fourth, even if restrictions backfire and increase rather than decrease the above-mentioned pressures, they may still present a signal of executive willingness to depart from public goods commitments and, thereby, help forecast it. Lastly, we expect to find an impact of restrictions independent of regime type. Poor delivery of public goods is not simply down to the

spread of autocracy as it is usually defined, that is, with electoral indicators (Geddes et al., 2018; Svolik, 2012), but CSO restrictions have an independent effect.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

We test the implications of our argument across all countries (with a population of more than 500,000) for the period 1990–2021. Our unit of analysis is the country-year. Our analyses begin with the expansion of CSO activity in the third wave of democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. From the early 1990s, governments increasingly started to limit civil society. By the turn of the century, according to Chaudhry (2022), more than 130 states have imposed restrictions on CSOs' activity that go far beyond legitimate regulation.

4.1 | Dependent variables

For public goods delivery we use four interval-scaled variables from the V-Dem project, version 12 (Coppedge et al., 2022). These variables rely on multiple expert judgments, which are aggregated by country and year using Bayesian item response models. Our first dependent variable measures the degree to which social and infrastructural spending in the national budget tends more toward particularistic spending (narrowly targeted on a specific corporation, sector, social group, region, party, or set of constituents) or public goods-oriented spending (intended to benefit all communities within a society). Our second dependent variable captures executive corruption and, specifically, how routinely members of the executive, or their agents take bribes steal, embezzle, or misappropriate public funds or other state resources for personal or family use. Our third and fourth dependent variables are indicators of clientelism: one for the extent of election vote or turnout buying and one for the extent to which party linkages are based on exchange of goods, cash, and/or jobs. If political parties regularly buy votes or other forms of support, due to their access to state resources, government parties likely exploit clientelist strategies the most (Collier & Vicente, 2012).

4.2 | Independent variables

Our main independent variable is the accumulation or reduction of restrictions on CSOs over time. We sum year-to-year changes in restrictions over a period of 5 years (i.e., the change in restrictions from five to 4 years ago plus the change in restrictions from four to 3 years ago, and so forth) to capture systematic shifts in the operating environment of CSOs.[8] As existing research does not provide precise guidance on timing, we use a 5 year time window of net changes in restrictions (for longer and shorter windows, see Appendix A (Table A1–A4)).

We focus on the change rather than the level of restrictions for three reasons. First, we expect that governments' poor performance is a function of an increase in restrictions from a country-specific baseline level of restrictions. Second, our interest is in whether CSO restrictions can serve as a warning sign of when policy failure occurs. Thus, our measure of CSO restrictions must be dynamic, that is, record changes over time. Third, a steadily high level of restrictions on CSOs may not necessarily correlate with poor performance because CSOs can adapt. Appendix C shows that levels of restrictions are, indeed, less consistently related to our

dependent variables than changes in restrictions and increments in restrictions remain significantly related to our dependent variables when controlling for the level of restriction.

We measure restrictions with data from Bakke et al. (2020), which captures the operational (e.g., curtailing travel, harassing or surveilling civil society activists, censoring publications), bureaucratic (e.g., CSO registration or visa difficulties), and funding-related costs (e.g., limiting domestic or international funding) imposed on organized civil society based on US State Department reports. We construct a count of restriction types to measure their prevalence, which ranges from 0 to 12. We then create the sum of year-to-year changes in this count over the past 5 years.

These data are for restrictions on CSOs considered to be human rights defenders broadly defined, ensuring that the analytical focus is on organizations that speak out against government wrongdoing in line with pluralist, compliance, and transnational advocacy theories. The definition of human rights defenders is extraordinarily broad, extending across the public goods we examine in this analysis:

> Human rights defenders address any human rights concerns, which can be as varied as, for example, summary executions, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, female genital mutilation, discrimination, employment issues, forced evictions, access to health care, and toxic waste and its impact on the environment
> (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.).

The definition goes on to state that "some defenders focus on good governance, advocating in support of democratization and an end to corruption and the abuse of power." In short, and consistent with the relevant theoretical arguments, these data capture governments restricting CSOs working *across many policy sectors*.

As these data are from 1994 to 2016 only, and to show that the results are not dependent on a specific source, we also employ data on repression of CSOs from the V-Dem project, available from 1990 to 2021 (Bernhard et al., 2015; Coppedge et al., 2022; Pemstein et al., 2022). At the low end of the interval-scaled measure of repression are material restrictions such as burdensome registration requirements and indirect restrictions to crowd out independent organizations such as the introduction of "Government Organized Movements or NGOs" (GONGOs). At the high end of the scale, repression includes both material and indirect restrictions on CSOs and also physical interference with civil society *activists*, such as harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary arrests. Matching core theories of how CSOs pressure governments to deliver public goods (e.g., Putnam, 1993), the V-Dem measure has a wider definition of CSOs, including interest groups, social movements, and professional associations rather than only those CSOs that are considered human rights defenders. Again, we measure the sum of year-to-year changes in the level of repression against CSOs over the period of the past 5 years or shorter and longer periods in the Appendix A. Table 1 shows summary statistics of both measures of CSO restrictions.

4.3 | Identification strategy and control variables

The identificaton of correlations between accumulating restrictions and public good underdelivery alone is potentially useful for what it may signal about compliance with global standards. Yet to allow a directional interpretation of the correlations, we combine three strategies.

TABLE 1 Summary statistics of key variables.

Variable	N	Mean	St.dev.	Min.	Max.
DV1: Public goods orientation in national spending	4313	0.774	1.042	−2.475	3.440
DV2: Executive corruption	4313	0.487	0.308	0.004	0.978
DV3: Vote buying	4313	0.100	1.399	−3.197	3.052
DV4: Clientelist party linkages	4313	−0.412	1.307	−3.695	2.469
M1: Engaged society (sum of changes, 5 years)	4313	0.072	0.608	−4.569	4.564
M2: Intern. shaming (sum, 5 years logedg)	1750	0.474	0.839	0.000	4.344
M3: Protest (sum, 5 years logged)	3941	3.050	1.882	0.000	9.346
CSO restrictions (sum of net changes, 5 years)	2203	0.124	1.594	−9.000	8.000
CSO restrictions, V-dem (sum of changes, 5 years)	4313	−0.029	0.588	−3.000	3.000
Vertical accountability (mean, 5 years)	4313	0.714	0.642	−1.473	1.801
Horizontal accountability (mean, 5 years)	4313	0.474	0.929	−1.823	2.303
Conflict years (mean, 5 years)	4313	0.160	0.329	0.000	1.000
GDP (mean, 5 years, logged)	4313	24.268	2.078	18.971	30.588
Population (mean, 5 years, logged)	4313	15.964	1.646	11.162	21.037
Any populist leader (5 years)	4122	0.085	0.279	0.000	1.000

First, we use two-way fixed effects models with cluster robust standard errors. Thus, we estimate how an accumulation of restrictions in a given country is associated with the variation in public goods delivery in that country. The country fixed effects allow us to exclude time-invariant alternative explanations, such as historical legacies (e.g., military dictatorship) that may cause both CSO restrictions and public goods under-delivery. Moreover, as cross-national emergencies (pandemics or financial crises) may introduce government incentives to restrict CSOs and also undercut public goods delivery, we additionally include year fixed effects. Thus, we exclude global temporal shocks as alternative explanations for a correlation between accumulating restrictions and public goods failures.

Second, we control for time-varying potentially confounding factors, including regime characteristics. We use V-Dem's quality of vertical accountability institutions, such as elections, and the quality of horizontal accountability institutions, such as parliaments. The models additionally include an indicator for ongoing conflict reaching at least 25 battle deaths (Gleditsch et al., 2002) because violent conflict may increase civil society repression and inhibit public goods provision. Finally, we control for GDP and population size as measures of state capacity (World Bank, 2015), which can influence public goods and possibly the types of restrictions employed. To match our dependent variables, we take the rolling mean of each control variable over the previous 5 years. In Appendix B (Table B1 and B2), we also control for the onset of the incumbency period of populist state leaders using data from Kyle and Meyer (2020). Populist leaders are a predictor of corruption and may interfere with CSOs (Zhang, 2023).

Third, we test three mechanism-related implications of our argument. Specifically, we think that restrictions reduce three types of pressures (societal engagement, international shaming,

and protest) to live up to global commitments. If our argument about the effects of restrictions on public goods failure was not true, then we should be less likely to observe these negative correlations. As measures of the mechanism-related outcomes, we use V-Dem's interval-scaled measure of "engaged society" ranging from a society in which public deliberation (almost) never occurs to one in which ordinary people tend to discuss policies among themselves, in the media, in associations or neighborhoods, or in the streets. We also employ the logged count of "shaming events" directed against a specific government and initiated by a human rights organization, using data from Murdie and Davis (2012). Finally, we use the logged count of protest events from Clark and Regan (2016) and recently extended to 2020. For all three mechanism-related variables, we sum the year-to-year changes over a period of 5 years (i.e., the change in the variable from five to 4 years ago plus the change in restrictions from four to 3 years ago, and so forth). Table 1 shows the summary statistics of all variables.

While none of these strategies to identify a directional effect is perfect, together they give us more confidence in interpreting a correlation between accumulating restrictions and particularistic spending, corruption or clientelism as support for our argument.

5 | ANALYSES AND RESULTS

We first describe over-time changes in our outcome variables, tracing their average values from 10 years before the onset of a period with significantly increasing restrictions to 5 years after the onset of such a restrictions episode.[9] Matching our expectations, Figure 2 shows that average public goods spending starts to decrease 2 years before the onset of a restrictions episode and decreases more rapidly after the onset of a restrictions episode. Figures 3–5 suggest that average levels of corruption, vote buying, and clientelist parties increase after the onset of a restrictions episode.

For the multivariate analyses, Table 2 shows the summary of the two-way fixed effects models of public goods (rather than particularistic) orientation in national spending. The coefficient on CSO restrictions is consistently negative and significant at least at the 90% level. In substantive terms, based on Model 1a (1b), when governments increase restrictions by one standard deviation, then the public goods measure diminishes by about 2.5% (8.2%) of its sample standard deviation. By comparison, based on Model 1b, a standard deviation change in the quality of horizontal accountability institutions in the past 5 years explains about 21.6% of the sample standard deviation of the public goods orientation in national expenditure.

In Table 3, for executive corruption the coefficient on both measures of restrictions is positive and significant at least at the 99% level. In substantive terms, based on Model 2a (2b), one standard deviation increase in restrictions is associated with an increase in executive corruption by roughly 4.3% (7.5%) of its standard deviation. By comparison, a standard deviation change in the quality of horizontal accountability relates to a decrease in executive corruption by roughly 33.5% of its standard deviation.

In Table 4, for the models of vote buying and clientelist party linkages, the coefficients on restrictions are again consistently positive and significant at least at the 95% level. In substantive terms, based on Model 3a (3b) a standard deviation increase in restrictions explains an increase in vote buying by about 2.9% (3.3%) of its standard deviation. Moreover, based on Model 3a (3b), a standard deviation increase in restrictions corresponds to an increase in political parties' clientelist orientation by 2.4% (4.1%) of its standard deviation. One standard deviation increase in horizontal accountability explains less variation in vote buying (i.e., a decrease in vote buying
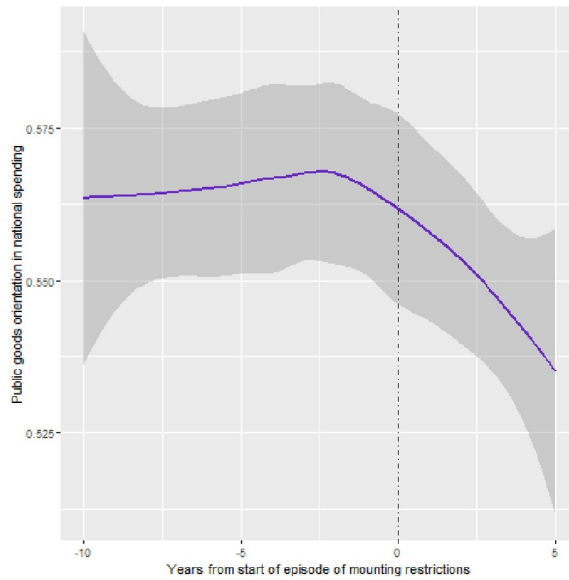
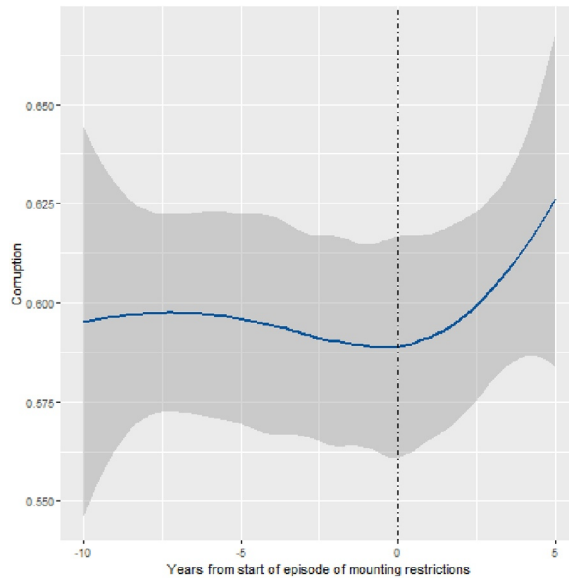**FIGURE 2** Changes in public goods spending.

FIGURE 3 Changes in corruption.

by 0.8% of its standard deviation based on Model 3a and no change based on Model 3b) than a standard deviation increase in restrictions. Yet, one standard deviation increase in horizontal accountability explains more variation in political parties′ clientelist orientation (i.e., a decrease in clientelism by 22.0 and 17.2% of its standard deviation based on Model 3c and Model 3d, respectively). Taken together, these results show that changes in restrictions on CSOs seem to have substantively important but small to medium-sized effects on the in-sample variation in measures of public goods delivery.
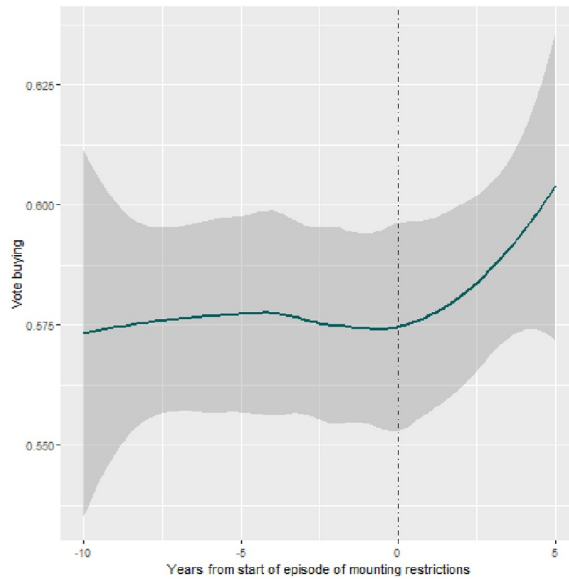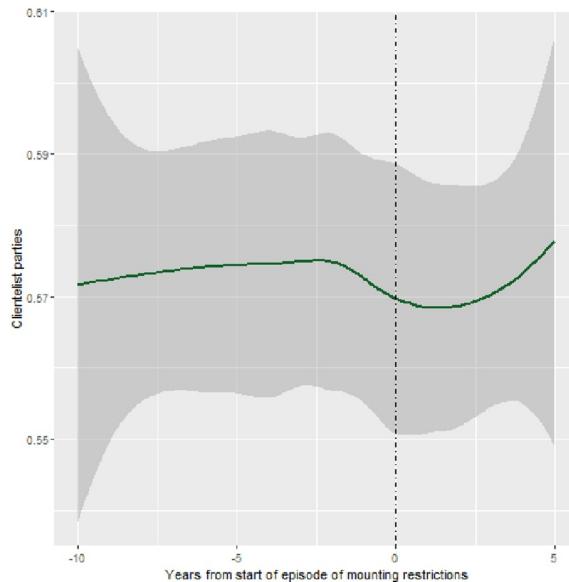
FIGURE 4 Changes in vote buying.

FIGURE 5 Changes in clientelist parties.

Examining the control variables, conflict is not associated with governments' public goods-oriented (non-particularistic) spending priorities but seems to dampen corruption and clientelism. Perhaps the threat of insurgency disciplines state bureaucracies. As expected, horizontal and vertical accountability institutions are more or less consistently associated with the public goods and governance measures. In other words, in line with decades of empirical work across the discipline, the more democratic the more beneficial policy outcomes. Finally, GDP per capita and population are not consistently associated with our outcome measures. In sum,

TABLE 2 Two-way fixed effects linear models of public goods orientation versus particularistic orientation in national spending.

	Dependent variable: Public goods orientation in spending	
	Model 1a	Model 1b
Restrictions on CSOs (sum of changes, 5 years)	−0.016*	
	(0.008)	
Restrictions on CSOs, V-dem (sum of changes, 5 years)		−0.145***
		(0.023)
Conflict years (mean, 5 years)	0.039	−0.093
	(0.090)	(0.114)
Vertical accountability (mean, 5 years)	−0.042	0.263**
	(0.112)	(0.104)
Horizontal accountability (mean, 5 years)	0.337***	0.242**
	(0.121)	(0.110)
GDP (mean, 5 years logged)	−0.007	0.086
	(0.132)	(0.096)
Population (mean, 5 years logged)	−0.320	−0.622**
	(0.283)	(0.251)
Observations	2203	4313
R-squared	0.932	0.877
Adjusted R-Squared	0.926	0.871

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$; cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.

restrictions on CSOs as well as vertical and horizontal limitations of government power seem better candidates for predicting public goods commitments than economic and demographic conditions.

5.1 | Mechanisms

Moving to the mechanisms, we regress the three mediators (i.e., engagement in society, naming and shaming, and protest) on restrictions.[10] In line with pluralist theory, the model of public engagement in society presented in Table 5 shows a negative and significant coefficient on accumulation of restrictions. Based on Model 4a (4b), a standard deviation increase of restrictions in the previous 5 years leads to decrease in engagement by 16.6% (48.8%) of its sample standard deviation.

Table 6 has the international "naming and shaming" models. Restrictions are not systematically associated with international shaming campaigns. Aside from limited data availability (the Murdie & Davis, 2012 dataset ends in 2007), the reason might be countervailing effects:

TABLE 3 Two-way fixed effects linear model of executive corruption.

	Dependent variable: Executive corruption	
	Model 2a	**Model 2b**
Restrictions on CSOs (sum of changes, 5 years)	0.008***	
	(0.002)	
Restrictions on CSOs, V-dem (sum of changes, 5 years)		0.039***
		(0.007)
Conflict years (mean, 5 years)	−0.054**	−0.035
	(0.022)	(0.022)
Vertical accountability (mean, 5 years)	0.007	−0.029
	(0.025)	(0.023)
Horizontal accountability (mean, 5 years)	−0.135***	−0.111***
	(0.031)	(0.024)
GDP (mean, 5 years logged)	−0.017	−0.051**
	(0.026)	(0.096)
Population (mean, 5 years logged)	0.119*	0.080
	(0.061)	(0.055)
Observations	2203	4313
R-squared	0.964	0.936
Adjusted R-Squared	0.961	0.933

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$; cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.

Restrictions may diminish CSO capacity for mounting international campaigns but amplify the incentives to do so.

Finally, Table 7 presents the models of protest events. The two measures of restrictions are negative, but only the V-Dem measure of restrictions is significant at conventional levels. The other measure just fails to reach significance (p-value = 0.209). Overall, the results suggest that restrictions—notably the physical and non-material dimension of them captured by the V-Dem data—may demobilize anti-government protest. Substantively, based on Model 6b, a standard deviation-increase of restrictions leads to a reduction in protest by 0.142 events, that is, 7.6% of the sample standard deviation of protest.

5.2 | Predictions

If restrictions on CSOs are a red flag then they should help forecast public goods delivery. We evaluate the out-of-sample predictive power of net changes in restrictions for governments' public goods orientation versus particularistic orientation in national spending using cross-validations. First, the full sample is portioned in four sub-samples. Then, one sub-sample is set aside as test set and the remaining sub-samples are used as a training set to estimate the

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TABLE 4 Two-way fixed effects linear model of indicators of clientelist relations.

| | Dependent variables: | | | |
| | Vote buying | | Clientelist parties | |
	Model 3a	Model 3b	Model 3c	Model 3d
Restrictions on CSOs (sum of changes, 5 years)	0.026**		0.020**	
	(0.011)		(0.009)	
Restrictions on CSOs, V-dem (sum of changes, 5 years)		0.078***		0.091***
		(0.028)		(0.020)
Conflict years (mean, 5 years)	−0.375***	−0.193	−0.062	−0.206**
	(0.142)	(0.132)	(0.100)	(0.099)
Vertical accountability (mean, 5 years)	−0.257*	−0.232**	0.080	−0.095
	(0.148)	(0.101)	(0.095)	(0.093)
Horizontal accountability (mean, 5 years)	−0.013	0.030	−0.319***	−0.243***
	(0.167)	(0.115)	(0.122)	(0.086)
GDP (mean, 5 years logged)	0.353*	0.198	0.289	0.096
	(0.189)	(0.121)	(0.189)	(0.103)
Population (mean, 5 years logged)	−0.352	−0.185	0.109	0.213
	(0.291)	(0.248)	(0.266)	(0.197)
Observations	2203	4313	2203	4313
R-squared	0.956	0.926	0.970	0.948
Adjusted R-Squared	0.952	0.922	0.967	0.946

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$; cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.

TABLE 5 Two-way fixed effects linear models of public engagement.

| | Dependent variable: Engaged society | |
	Model 4a	Model 4b
Restrictions on CSOs (sum of changes, 5 years)	−0.060***	
	(0.019)	
Restrictions on CSOs, V-dem (sum of changes, 5 years)		−0.504***
		(0.049)
Observations	2203	4313
R-squared	0.294	0.401
Adjusted R-Squared	0.233	0.372

Note: All models control for conflict years, vertical and horizontal accountability, GDP and population size.

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$; cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.

TABLE 6 Two-way fixed effects linear models of international shaming.

	Dependent variable: International shaming	
	Model 5a	Model 5b
Restrictions on CSOs (sum of changes, 5 years)	0.024	
	(0.017)	
Restrictions on CSOs, V-dem (sum of changes, 5 years)		0.032
		(0.049)
Observations	2203	4313
R-squared	0.865	0.729
Adjusted R-Squared	0.834	0.699

Note: All models control for conflict years, vertical and horizontal accountability, GDP and population size.

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01; cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.

TABLE 7 Two-way fixed effects linear models of protest.

	Dependent variable: Domestic protest	
	Model 6a	Model 6b
Restrictions on CSOs (sum of changes, 5 years)	−0.038	
	(0.030)	
Restrictions on CSOs, V-dem (sum of changes, 5 years)		−0.242**
		(0.095)
Observations	2203	4313
R-squared	0.706	0.660
Adjusted R-Squared	0.681	0.640

Note: All models control for conflict years, vertical and horizontal accountability, GDP and population size.

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01; cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.

model. Finally, we compare how well the estimated model including the net change in CSO restrictions (e.g., Model 1a) and the estimated baseline model excluding the net change in restrictions (e.g., Model 1a without CSO restrictions) predict the variation in public goods orientation in national spending in the sub-sample *not* used for model estimation (i.e., the test set). We use R-Squared as measure of predictive power of the models. The procedure of model estimation and model evaluation is repeated four times until each sub-sample has been used once as a test set. We then use the mean of the R-squared measures from the four rounds to capture out-of-sample predictive power for each model.

Figure 6 shows the change in predictive performance for the public goods-orientation in national spending when net changes in restrictions (over a period of 5 years) are added to the baseline model of public goods orientation in national spending.[11] Importantly, the predictive power of restrictions on CSOs outperforms that of horizontal and vertical accountability (which likely changes more slowly over time). While adding changes in regime institutions to the
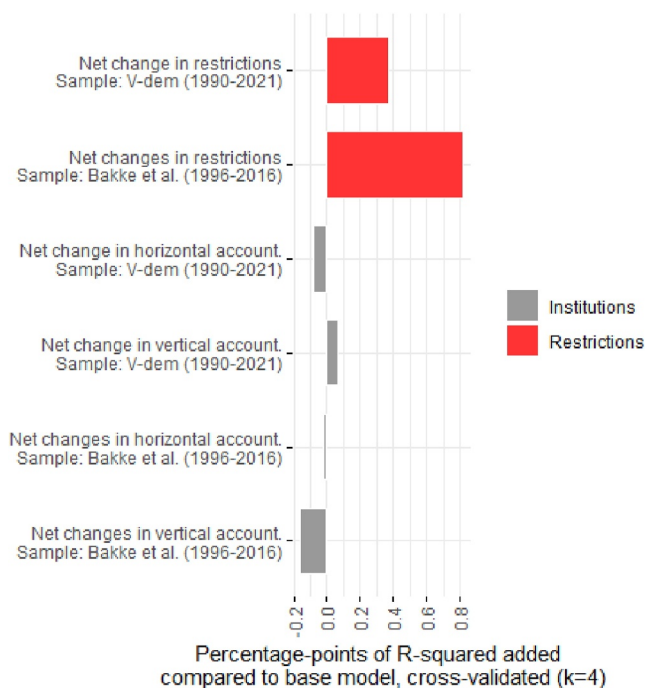
FIGURE 6 Predictive power of restrictions and regime institutions on public goods-oriented national spending.

baseline model only marginally improves or even reduces the explained amount of out-of-sample variation in the public goods orientation in national spending (R-Squared), adding restrictions increases the explained out-of-sample variation in by 0.4–0.8% points.

6 | CONCLUSION

We agree with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that "space for full, free public participation enables progress on all fronts, including sustainable development, and peaceful, fair societies." Our study examines what happens in the opposite case, when space for public participation is restricted. Our findings complement the major theories of the role of civil society in ensuring the delivery of public goods. We show that governments' restrictions on CSOs are a red flag for public goods under-provision, widespread executive corruption, and clientelism. The evidence suggests accumulating restrictions reduce engagement and public deliberation in society and demobilize mass protest against the government. Beyond data limitations, the lack of support for the international shaming mechanism might be due to countervailing influences: While interference with CSOs makes shaming harder due to the interrupted flow of CSO-provided information, it also provides incentives for shaming in the first place.

While we investigated the pluralist democracy and compliance arguments that emphasize the key role of an active civil society and the direct impact of restrictions on governance and public goods, restrictions have been contemporaneous with a decline in other characteristics of democratic regimes, sometimes termed backsliding or autocratization. A leader seeking to amass power likely relies on a combination of tactics to undermine accountability, including

weakening the separation of powers and manipulating elections as well as restricting the advocacy and transparency contributions of CSOs. As expected, we find the regime-defining measures of electoral and horizontal accountability are consistently and strongly associated with public goods commitments. Yet beyond these more standard regime variables, CSO restrictions have a separate, measurable effect on such commitments.

While disaggregating the dimensions of accountability (and the tactics leaders use to stay in power) aids analytical tractability, there is research to be done on the complex and reinforcing inter-relationship between the dimensions (cf. Bernhard, 2020; Mechkova et al., 2019). For example, restrictions on CSOs likely hamper parliaments and courts to constrain the executive (Smidt et al., 2024) and likewise silence critical messages at election time, and in these ways indirectly contribute to the under-delivery of public goods through further weakening horizontal and vertical accountability.

Moreover, restrictions perform well for signaling a worsening in public goods delivery. Indeed, the sum of year-to-year changes in restrictions over the past 5 years does better in predicting governance outcomes than the sum of year-to-year changes in the quality of vertical and horizontal accountability institutions. Restrictions are also a practically important heuristic for policy failure because CSO networks readily spread information on interference with their activity. Our study provides evidence in support of the theoretical consensus on the key role of civil society, of the usefulness of restrictions as a screening device for government failure in its core functions, and support for the policy priority placed on protecting civil society space and the calls to assist CSOs in developing resilience in the presence of government-imposed restrictions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All replication materials are available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/34ITJA.

ENDNOTES

[1] CSOs are organizations that are not part of the government or the for-profit sector and pursue shared interests in the public domain (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009); for UN goals see United Nations General Assembly, 2015.

[2] Our focus is advocacy CSOs, consistent with theories of democracy and compliance. CSOs may also provide services directly and while not the focus of our analysis, their capacity to provide public goods may also be affected by restrictions (see Heinzel & Koenig-Archibugi, 2023; Lian & Murdie, 2023; Murdie & Hicks, 2013). Restrictions on service delivery CSOs are less likely to reduce constraints on government wrongdoing leading to the under-delivery of public goods than restrictions on advocacy CSOs.

[3] Information available here: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CAC/.

[4] Information available here: https://uncaccoalition.org/about-us/about-the-coalition/.

[5] See Bernhard et al. (2017) for a review of the concept of civil society in comparative politics and the Varieties of Democracy approach to measurement.

[6] Raustiala (1997) shows that CSOs not only *pressure* states into compliance with international environmental institutions, but also provide them with services in this policy area, for example, offering expertise on policy options. Again, this argument presupposes that CSOs are not restricted.

[7] We follow the standard definition in the empirical literature and define autocracy by the absence of fair and competitive elections to choose government leaders (e.g. Svolik, 2012, p. 22; Geddes et al., 2018, p. 5).

[8] The source data for restrictions—annual reports—may include yearly fluctuations in descriptions of the situation of CSOs due to slight changes in reporting emphasis and events (e.g., Covid), which a five years-long time window addresses.

[9] The descriptive graphs include 103 (out of 175) countries, where a significant increase in restrictions on CSOs occurs. We define a significant increase as a value on 'Restrictions on CSOs, V-Dem (sum of net changes, 5 years)' that is one standard deviation above the mean of that variable. The episode of a significant increase in restrictions starts 5 years before we measure this value in a given country.

[10] We do not employ causal mediation analysis because of the demanding sequential ignorability assumption (i.e., exogeneity of mediator and outcome).

[11] The results are similar for the other dependent variables except the degree of clientelist parties, for which regime institutions outperform CSO restrictions regarding predictive power.

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How to cite this article: Smidt, H., Mitchell, N. J., & Bakke, K. M. (2024). A red flag for public goods? The correlates of civil society restrictions. *Governance*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12894