

Density and Decline in the Founding of International NGOs in the United States

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Abstract

It is now commonplace for scholars to note that the number of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) has exploded. But in recent years, the growth rate of INGOs globally and in the United States has stagnated. We argue this stagnation can best be explained by changes in the environment in which INGOs work. Specifically, the now-dense population environment discourages new INGOs from being founded, while also encouraging competition. Analysis of a new, comprehensive dataset on American INGOs between 1992 and 2012 supports the argument, as do case studies of trends within the environmental conservation and democracy assistance sectors. The analysis suggests debates about INGO cooperation and competition overlook a key environmental factor that varies across and within populations of organizations: density. We draw out the implications of this approach for contemporary global governance.

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International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are central to contemporary global governance, often taking on roles states are unwilling or unable to fill. They monitor elections, provide relief after natural disasters, advocate for human rights, and protect thousands of endangered species. Yet INGOs did not always play substantial roles in world politics. Their number and influence dramatically expanded during the twentieth century (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 11). INGO growth was particularly rapid in the 1980s and 1990s, when shifting geopolitics, technological changes, and new international norms stimulated foundings (Boli and Thomas 1999; Reimann 2006).

But the story of INGOs did not end with the close of the 1990s. In fact, our data on global and American INGOs indicate this growth spurt was followed by declining growth rates in the early 2000s, and virtually stagnation by 2010. Meanwhile, critics have increasingly faulted INGOs for inefficiencies, ineffectiveness, and unprincipled behavior (e.g., Cooley and Ron 2002; Bob 2005). Why has the growth rate of INGOs stagnated? More generally, what explains variation in the foundings of INGOs? How do dynamics of INGO populations relate to global governance, which is increasingly “complex” and shaped by the actions of non-state actors (Alter and Meunier, 2009)?

Answering those questions is difficult in part because there are few systematic, cross-sectoral studies examining when and why INGOs emerge. Moreover, to the extent they have theorized INGO creation, scholars’ explanations do not offer satisfying accounts of decline and stagnation in INGO foundings. The need for INGOs’ services has continued, as INGOs have become central to the implementation of foreign policy (Dietrich 2016) and capture a “large and increasing share” of foreign aid (Büthe, Major and de Mello e Souza 2012, 571). Their role in global policymaking has also become more common, with inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) granting INGOs more access to policymaking (Tallberg et al. 2013). Thus, the decline and stagnation in growth rate is puzzling from the perspective of existing theory, necessitating new thinking.

We argue that INGO foundings have stagnated because INGO populations are now dense. This argument builds on foundational work by Cooley and Ron (2002), who pioneered the study of how density and competition affect INGO behavior. Their study and others in the political economy tradition shed light on how INGOs respond strategically to their resource environments. Though these studies offer a potential explanation for the stagnating growth rates we observe – INGO competition – they cannot explain early periods of development within the INGO sector, in which actors engage in mutual support and collaboration to expand the resources and legitimacy of the population as a whole. Thus, political economy explanations miss an important component of the population life cycle.

We draw on insights from organizational ecology from sociology. This theoretical tradition emphasizes the role of population-level factors such as organizational density. According to organizational ecology, whereas would-be founders in populations with low density can expect support from other actors in their field, encouraging new entries, potential founders considering entering a dense field can expect dissuasion and competition, deterring foundings. In other words, we complicate the prevailing wisdom from the political economy tradition, arguing density has *non-linear* effects on INGOs, with early foundings introducing less competition than later foundings. Our emphasis on the curvilinear effects of density draws on the theoretical tradition of organizational ecology. This theoretical integration enables us to explain *both* the rise of INGO foundings in the 1990s (a period of low population density) *and* the decline in recent years (a period of high density).

We test our argument using multiple methods. We first examine data on more than 4,000 American INGOs founded between 1992 and 2012. Our dataset includes nearly-complete founding and financial information on American INGOs registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). IRS data provide a unique perspective on American nonprofit activity that IR scholars have neglected in the past, although they are commonly used in public administration. Our results suggest founding rates are indeed density dependent, even controlling

for issue attention, domestic politics, and the international environment. We complement this analysis with case studies of democracy assistance and conservation INGOs, drawing on memoirs, document analysis, and interviews with INGO founders and long-time practitioners. The case studies illustrate how the experience of founders shifts as intra-population dynamics transition from mutual support to competition as density increases, providing additional support for our hypothesized causal mechanism. They also highlight some of the consequences of decreased foundings, such as bureaucratization and decreased innovation in the INGO population.

In developing and testing our theory about variation in INGO foundings, this paper makes several broader contributions. First, despite INGOs' centrality as global governors and service providers (Avant, Finnemore and Sell 2010), scholars have conducted few population-level studies concerning the origins, life cycles, and organizational strategies of this category of actor. For example, INGO scholars have extensively debated whether INGOs are primarily "principled" or "pragmatic" in nature, conducting case studies of INGOs in various sectors to support their claims.¹ Our cross-sectoral analysis speaks to how the extent of INGO competition or cooperation – and thus, perhaps, the extent to which INGOs seem to behave in principled or pragmatic ways – might vary over time and with population density. INGOs' abilities to live up to their principles and ideals may depend to a great extent on the environments in which they operate and the social processes through which they interact.

Second, the population dynamics we identify matter for how IR scholars study the effects of INGOs on service provision and policy change. For example, Murdie and Hicks (2013) found that the number of health INGOs per capita is positively associated with government spending on health. Likewise, Kim (2013) showed that countries with more INGOs are more likely to adopt national human rights institutions. Our analysis, however, suggests the effects

¹Stroup and Wong (2016, 140). Though see Sell and Prakash (2004, 149-152), Prakash and Gugerty (2010, 4), and Mitchell and Schmitz (2014) for a different approach.

of INGOs may well be non-linear. Because adding INGOs to an already-dense population increases competition, more INGOs will not necessarily lead to better services or more policy change. Additional theorization and tests of the effects of INGOs as populations become denser is a promising direction for future research. From a policy perspective, encouraging coordination among existing INGOs – as opposed to growth in their numbers – may be an important intervention to improve the performance of mature and highly-dense populations.

Finally, the paper takes a first step in outlining a broader research agenda examining population dynamics within global governance. Beyond a focus on INGO foundings, our theoretical approach could be extended to consider outcomes such as INGO mortality, viability, and behavior, as well as the rise of new challengers to INGOs. For example, if some populations become saturated, we would expect new actors to have higher mortality rates and to orient their activities towards smaller niches to survive. Moreover, as Abbott, Green and Keohane (2016) highlight, density in a population can create incentives for the creation of new organizational forms. These new forms – such as direct-giving campaigns or internet-enabled advocacy platforms – may introduce innovation in global governance, but also hold the potential for disruption. Thus, the density-dependent dynamic we theorize has important implications for not only the supply of actors participating in global governance, but also for those actors’ strategic choices, a point to which we return in the conclusion.

1 Three Decades of Scholarship on INGOs

The United Nations defines an NGO as “any nonprofit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national or international level.”² Which organizations meet these criteria is debatable; for example, scholars disagree over whether NGOs ought to be defined by legal status vs. actual practice in terms of separation from the state. We follow most of

²United Nations, Department of Public Information/NGO Relations, “About Us.” Available at <https://outreach.un.org/ngorelations/content/about-us-0> (accessed July 28, 2017).

the literature in privileging legal status (Stroup and Wong 2016, 139). In addition, INGOs are “international.” Following Murdie (2014, 1), we adopt an inclusive approach, defining INGOs as NGOs that are actively involved in at least two countries.

The first generation of IR scholarship on INGOs showed how they spread new norms and cooperated to address global problems (Wapner 1995; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Price 2003). For example, Keck and Sikkink described how the growing activity of networked INGOs influenced environmental and human rights policy. Their path-breaking study emphasized the functional advantages of transnational advocacy networks, characterizing them as being “lighter of their feet” than more hierarchical modes of organization (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 8). These studies roughly coincided with an intense period of INGO growth. To illustrate, Figure 1 presents annual data on the total number of INGOs in the world from the Yearbook of International Organizations (YBIO), demonstrating remarkable expansion in the number of INGOs in the 1980s and 1990s.

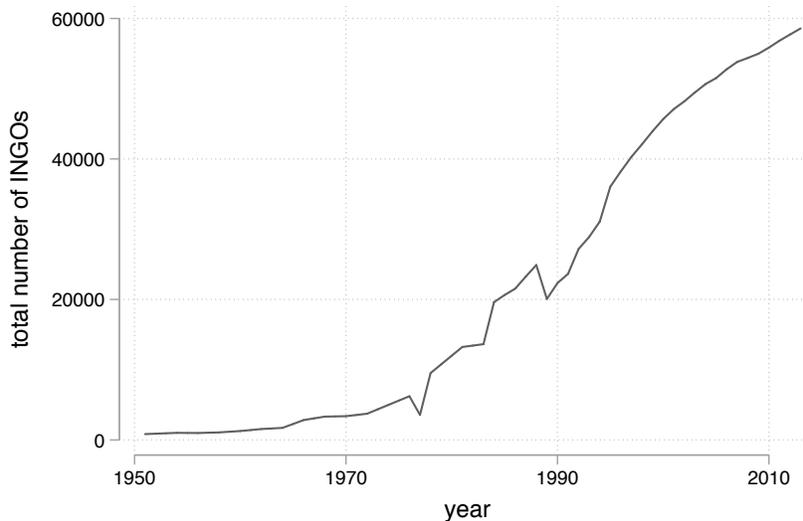


Figure 1: **The total number of INGOs in the world, 1950-2012.**

But Figure 1 also shows, although the total number of INGOs in the world continues to expand, the rapid growth of the 1980s and 1990s has slowed. Since roughly 2000, INGO

growth rates have declined dramatically. The global INGO growth rate peaked at 16% per year in 1995 and dropped to 1.5% by 2012. Whereas the average growth rate in the 1990s was 8.2%, it dropped to 2.3% in the 2000s.



Figure 2: **The number of INGO foundings per year, United States.**

Figure 2 visualizes the annual number of new INGO foundings in the United States based on the same data. The data reveal American INGO foundings peaked in 1994 and sharply declined thereafter. In fact, more comprehensive data on American INGOs from the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), which compiles information on American nonprofits based on tax filings, reveal the annual growth rate for American nonprofits working on international affairs dropped to *negative* 4% by 2012. These trends are notable because American INGOs constitute 32% of global INGOs in 2017 according to the YBIO. Descriptive evidence from the next six largest INGO populations – in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Belgium, Australia, and Canada – reveal a similar decline in recent years (see appendix). In our view, the stagnation in INGO foundings in the United States and elsewhere is an important trend with potentially-significant domestic and international implications. Although INGO populations may still be growing in some countries, the evidence suggests

INGOs – both globally and in the United States – have not continued their rapid growth since the 1990s.

As growth rates have declined, INGOs have also aged. In 2012 – the most recent year for which we have comprehensive IRS data – the average American INGO was founded in 1998, making it eight years older than Twitter (founded in 2006) and six years older than Facebook (founded in 2004). Most INGOs created in the 1980s have already celebrated their thirtieth birthdays. If foundings introduce innovation, stagnation in population growth may decrease the adaptive capacity of INGO sectors. Our case studies provide suggestive evidence of bureaucratization among INGOs, a point to which we return in the conclusion.

2 Explaining INGO Foundings

To our knowledge, political scientists have neither recognized nor theorized about the patterns we observe in the growth rate of INGOs, including their recent stagnation. To address this topic, we combine insights from two theoretical approaches. First, we build on work in political economy that shows how resource competition and population density shape the strategic decision-making of INGOs. Although political economy’s focus on density may help to explain the stagnating growth rates we observe, this approach is less useful for explaining rapid growth in earlier periods. To explain both the rise and decline of INGO foundings, we draw on the tradition of organizational ecology, which emphasizes how the effect of population density varies systematically over a population’s life cycle.

2.1 The Political Economy Approach

Arguably, the dominant IR paradigm for studying INGOs is now that of political economy. Studies in this tradition explore how INGOs respond strategically to their resource environments, often drawing analogies between INGOs and firms (Sell and Prakash 2004; Prakash

and Gugerty 2010). A major focus has been on the rise of INGO competition. As Cooley and Ron (2002, 6) write, “the growing number of IOs and INGOs in a sector increases uncertainty, competition, and insecurity for all organizations in that sector.” Terming this phenomenon the “NGO Scramble,” they argue competition leads to undesirable outcomes such as ineffective aid. Bob (2005) also emphasizes the importance of market competition for social movements and INGOs, suggesting it leads certain causes to get more traction even though they are not the worthiest ones.

States and IGOs credit the idea that INGOs respond to their resource environments. A core element of foreign aid since the end of the Cold War has been support for civil society. Such initiatives are premised on the idea that providing funding can encourage the creation and growth of NGOs. In many cases, the NGOs supported through these aid initiatives are – or have become – international. Partially confirming donors’ logics, scholars have found foreign funding transforms NGOs’ activities and structures, though not necessarily in ways that make them more effective (Henderson 2002; Gugerty and Kremer 2008).

Although research in the political economy of INGOs tradition has not – to the best of our knowledge – previously examined the causes of INGO founding, it nevertheless generates predictions about how competition might affect the entry of organizations. Specifically, it implies increased competition might explain why INGO foundings have slowed.

First, the political economy model implies INGO foundings result from economic opportunity; as financial resources increase, INGO foundings will increase, all else equal. Multiple funding sources are relevant for INGOs, including individuals, foundations, corporations, and governments. IR scholars have paid particular attention to government funding (e.g., Cooley and Ron 2002; Stroup 2012; Dupuy, Ron and Prakash 2015). Their research suggests that as more funding becomes available, entrepreneurs will found more INGOs.

Second, the political economy model implies that not only do total resources matter, but also that the density of the sector affects the opportunities for new entrants. As density

in a sector increases, INGO foundings will decrease due to expanded competition, all else equal. Density can be understood in two ways. The traditional definition is the number of organizations in the population (Cooley and Ron 2002, 10). However, it is also possible that new INGOs could generate new resources, perhaps by expanding the donor pool for their sector. As such, an alternative definition of density is the ratio of the number of INGOs over the total resources available to INGOs. In either case, the political economy model suggests that when density increases, entrepreneurs will found fewer INGOs.

Hypothesis 1: As financial resources increase, INGO foundings will increase.

Hypothesis 2: As density increases, INGO foundings will decrease.

2.2 Introducing Organizational Ecology

The traditional political economy model implies that every new INGO introduces some competition into the overall sector. In other words, it assumes the effects of increased competition on foundings will be *linear*. That assumption may well hold true for INGOs in particular times and places, such as those analyzed by Cooley and Ron. We suggest, however, that the effect of density varies over the life cycle of an INGO population. A life-cycle approach highlights that in the early stages of population growth INGOs often work together to build the legitimacy of their sector and promote new entrants. In this model, the competitive pressures introduced by new foundings come only in a later phase, once populations have reached saturation. In other words, in the life cycle approach, increases in density do not always lead to decreases in INGO foundings.

This perspective integrates insights from organizational ecology into the political economy model of INGOs. To understand changes in populations of organizations, scholars working in this tradition draw on ecological models concerning populations of species.³ Organiza-

³Foundational contributions include Hannan and Freeman (1987) and Hannan and Carroll (1992).

tional, or population, ecology has only recently been applied to study IR (Abbott, Green and Keohane, 2016), yet it offers potentially significant insights. Looking at population data regarding organizational foundings in domains ranging from newspapers to breweries, organizational ecologists have shown that founding rates are affected by two opposite pressures: the degree of mutual support and the extent of competition among members of a population.

The extent of mutual support within a population tends to increase monotonically with density, but at a *decreasing* rate. When there are only a few organizations, the creation of a new organization increases benefits to the field as a whole, making organizations likely to support and collaborate with one another. An initial wave of successful foundings can convince audiences that a new organizational form, such as an INGO, is a legitimate and effective way to achieve some common goal (Hannan and Carroll, 1992; Abbott, Green and Keohane, 2016), via a logic of appropriateness. Foundings thus bring benefits to all organizations of that type. For example, Minkoff (1995) examines the history of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s and finds that early organizations in this movement helped expand opportunities for other groups to be created. The presence of these early groups expanded the familiarity, and hence the perceived legitimacy, of the organizational form. At the same time, cooperative social networks facilitated the creation of new groups, enhancing the capacity of the movement as a whole. In contrast to this supportive early period, organizational ecology also predicts that when many organizations already exist in a population, the creation of a new organization tends to contribute only a little to the overall field's legitimacy and benefits, making organizations less likely to support one another and more likely to compete for resources.

Meanwhile, the extent of competition tends to increase monotonically with density, but at an *increasing* rate. When few organizations in a population exist, the founding of a new organization does create some additional competitive pressure, but not as much as when the field is already saturated with organizations that perform similar functions and seek similar

resources. Combining these two general tendencies together suggests foundings will initially increase with organizational density, and *then* decrease with density.

This model implies that an INGO entrepreneur faces predictably different conditions depending on the density of the field she is considering entering. At lower levels of density, the beneficial effects of mutual support will prevail and favor foundings. For example, an INGO entrepreneur may receive helpful advice and guidance from others in the field; such actions may be understood as a form of cooperation, defined as when INGOs make mutual adjustments in their activities to accommodate each other (Abbott, Green and Keohane, 2016, 263). She will also likely face less funding competition. But at higher levels of density, the benefits of mutual support are weaker and funding competition is fiercer. The entrepreneur may be perceived as a threat, be discouraged from entering the field, and have a harder time acquiring the initial support and guidance needed from peers to sustain a new INGO.

Thus, our argument falls within the political economy tradition in its recognition of the importance of competition. Whereas it departs is that we expect the effects of density – and therefore the incentives to found a new organization – to vary predictably over time. Where political economy approaches are mostly silent about periods of market creation, an organizational ecology approach highlights that in the early stages of population growth INGOs often work together to build the legitimacy of their sector and promote new entrants. In other words, increases in organizational density do not always lead to decreases in INGO foundings. This insight offers a way to reconcile research in the political economy tradition with the first generation of scholarship on INGOs, which observed cooperation between INGOs: the INGOs being studied by each group of scholars may have been operating in populations with different densities. *Hypothesis 3* summarizes our empirical expectation.

Hypothesis 3: INGO foundings will initially increase with density, then decrease with density, following an inverted u-shaped curve.

2.3 Alternative Explanations

Both the traditional political economy model and the revised model that integrates insights from organizational ecology focus on how competition shapes the “supply” of INGOs. However, alternative models of INGO action emphasize how these organizations respond to changes in the “demand” for their activities and services. The demand for INGOs stems from the vast amount of social need that is unmet by governments and markets.

Scholars have examined demands for INGOs in three ways. First, media attention may indicate or stimulate demand for INGO foundings. Research has established that media attention is influenced by multiple factors, including objective need (Ron, Ramos and Rodgers 2005). Greater attention and “problem pressure” may stimulate both external support and entrepreneurial interest. Periods of media attention can create more public awareness, and in turn, a larger pool of potential INGO founders with an interest in a cause. Would-be founders may also believe that it will be easier to secure funding, members, and policy influence under such conditions (Bob 2005).

Second, and relatedly, policy attention may indicate or stimulate demand for INGO foundings. Government policy influences INGO behavior in myriad ways (Lecy and Slyke, 2013; Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire, 2017). In the United States, aid agencies have increasingly channeled aid via INGOs – as opposed to giving directly to governments – due to perceptions that INGOs have unique competencies (Dietrich 2016, 66). This increased demand for INGOs’ services may stimulate the creation of organizations.

Third, international norms may encourage INGO foundings by promoting the legitimacy of the INGO form and by supporting the spread of particular norms on which entrepreneurs focus (Barnett, 2005). Reimann (2006, 59) observed the emergence of a pro-NGO norm within powerful Western states and IGOs during the 1980s and 1990s. This changing normative environment created new ideas about the appropriateness of INGOs as well as new opportunities for policy influence. In tandem, scholars working in the world society tradition

have argued international models of behavior guide domestic action, promoting growth in the INGO population (Boli and Thomas 1999). In sum, both perspectives suggest when international norms are more supportive, entrepreneurs will decide to found more INGOs.

3 A Quantitative Test of the Hypotheses

3.1 INGO Population Data

Organizational ecologists define populations to include groups that share common structures, patterns of activity, and normative orders within a geographic region or regulatory system (Hannan and Freeman 1977, 935). IR studies have generally neglected INGO populations as units of analysis.⁴ Part of the reluctance to study populations may be the difficulty of acquiring population-level data.

We use a rich dataset with information on all legally-constituted American INGOs. We use the NCCS Core Files, which contain financial information on all American nonprofit organizations that file IRS Form 990. Though generally unfamiliar to political scientists, the NCCS Core Files are widely used in public administration since American nonprofits are required to file Form 990 if they have revenues of at least \$25,000 and are not religious organizations.⁵ The NCCS Core files were produced annually between 1989 and 2013 but are most comprehensive between 1992 and 2012. For each organization, the NCCS provides information on when the IRS recognized it as tax exempt, its total revenues, and its issue area, which is primarily identified from program descriptions.

Analyzing American INGOs supports our research design in numerous ways. First, there

⁴But see Carpenter (2014) for an implicitly ecological focus.

⁵Many organizations with smaller revenues voluntarily register and file the form anyway (Schnable, 2015, 314). The exclusion of smaller and religious entities means our study cannot offer a complete accounting of all INGO activity in the United States. Schnable (2015) includes more of these actors in her study. At the same time, IRS registration provides the most comprehensive data on this topic, is part of the founding process for many organizations, and ensures we are studying coherent populations.

is no comprehensive roster of global INGOs with comparable depth. In this regard, the YBIO has important limitations. It relies on existing INGOs, the media, and foundations' and IGOs' lists for information about INGO creation, and then on voluntary self-reporting for information on INGO activities and funding (Murdie and Davis 2012, 180). As such, we estimate it is missing entries for 94% of INGOs in the populations we examine.⁶ Moreover, because INGOs are not required to file with the YBIO annually, these data likely offer an inaccurate measure of population density in any given year.

Second, focusing on American INGOs enables us to hold constant variables related to country of origin, such as level of democracy and integration into the international system. There are stark national differences in INGO practices that are related to differences in regulations, resources, and political opportunities (Stroup, 2012).

Third, American INGOs constitute a distinct market. They are the main recipients of U.S. foreign assistance, with a procurement policy of “buying American” for overseas goods and services only loosening in 2012.⁷ USAID (2017) reported that 89% of its funding that was channeled through private voluntary organizations in 2016 was granted to U.S. groups. Analysis of the budgets of INGOs registered with USAID shows only 12% of their total support and revenue in 2016 came from other governments and IGOs (USAID, 2017). This pattern implies that although American INGOs may well compete with foreign peers for international grants and foreign funding, there is a distinct domestic market.

Analysis of private funding sources also supports the idea of a distinct national market. At the corporate level, a 2013 survey revealed that 93% of Fortune 100 companies reported donating to U.S.-based NGOs for foreign giving, whereas 63% reported giving to foreign NGOs directly. Survey respondents explained their preference for U.S. NGOs by citing

⁶See appendix.

⁷See 22 CFR §228 2012. Even still, the twenty largest recipients of USAID funding in 2015 were all American. See Ezekiel Carlo Orlina, “Top USAID contractors for 2015,” *Devex*, May 27, 2016, available at <https://www.devex.com/news/top-usaid-contractors-for-2015-88181> (accessed December 15, 2017).

their efficiency and results-oriented programming (Global Impact 2013, 3). Analysis by the Foundation Center (2010) likewise shows that U.S. foundations have historically provided most of their international giving to U.S.-based NGOs, with American recipients constituting 76% of international grant dollars in 2008. Although individual donations are difficult to track, according to U.S. law, contributions to foreign nonprofits are not tax deductible, which encourages individual support for domestic nonprofits. In sum, this evidence strongly supports our claim that American INGOs can be treated as their own market, although we later control for foreign competition.

Finally, American INGOs are important actors in world politics, making them worthy of study in their own right. As noted above, more INGOs are headquartered in the United States than in any other country. American INGOs are also much wealthier even than INGOs headquartered in other Western countries, with collective revenues of \$32 billion in 2013 according to our data. As such, the literature on INGOs has focused on American organizations (e.g., Hermann et al. 2010; Büthe, Major and de Mello e Souza 2012; Bush 2016; Mitchell and Stroup 2017). Thus, on balance, we believe that studying American INGOs helps us test the hypotheses effectively while providing significant and potentially-generalizable insights. In the appendix, we present data from the YBIO on INGO foundings that – although incomplete in some of the ways described above – suggests broadly similar founding patterns in the other countries that are the main headquarters of INGOs, adding plausibility to our claims to generalizability.

3.2 Dependent Variable: INGO Foundings

We begin by exploring descriptive trends in INGO foundings. We focus on trends in four populations: conservation, democracy assistance, health, and relief.⁸ To study population

⁸We used the NCCS classification system to identify sectors. For information on the NCCS sectors and associated robustness checks, see the appendix.

dynamics, it is important for relatively few INGOs be founded prior to when our analysis begins (1992) to avoid concerns about left censoring. Thus, we examine the major NCCS sectors from within the total U.S. INGO population for which no more than 20% of the total INGOs were founded prior to 1992. Other sectors of interest – such as human rights and international development – are less suitable because their populations were already very large when our data begin.

The resulting set of INGO populations is diverse. Two of the issue areas involve common problems (conservation, health) and two do not (democracy assistance, relief). Moreover, two involve work in primarily developing countries (health, relief) and two do not (conservation, democracy assistance). Finally, the populations vary in peak sizes (e.g., about 60 INGOs in conservation vs. 2,500 INGOs in relief). By examining diverse INGO populations, we can identify the effect of density across sectors with different fixed issue-area characteristics.

Figure 3 presents foundings by year and sector, with foundings occurring when the IRS recognizes an INGO as tax exempt. Across all sectors, more INGOs were founded each year until a certain point, after which fewer INGOs were founded. These patterns support our expectation that foundings are density dependent. Interestingly, each sector’s peak occurs in a different year, which suggests that a common shock that discouraged foundings did not occur. Moreover, the curvilinear trends in foundings do not correlate with revenues reported to the IRS. Figure 4 reveals there is little correspondence between foundings and revenues, with the potential exception of the relief sector, which experienced a leveling off of both around 2010. These trends provide some prima facie evidence that existing frameworks may be inadequate for explaining INGO foundings.

3.3 Explanatory Variables

To test *Hypothesis 1*, we measured *financial resources* using several strategies. Since foreign aid is a major funding source for many organizations, our first indicator is U.S. foreign

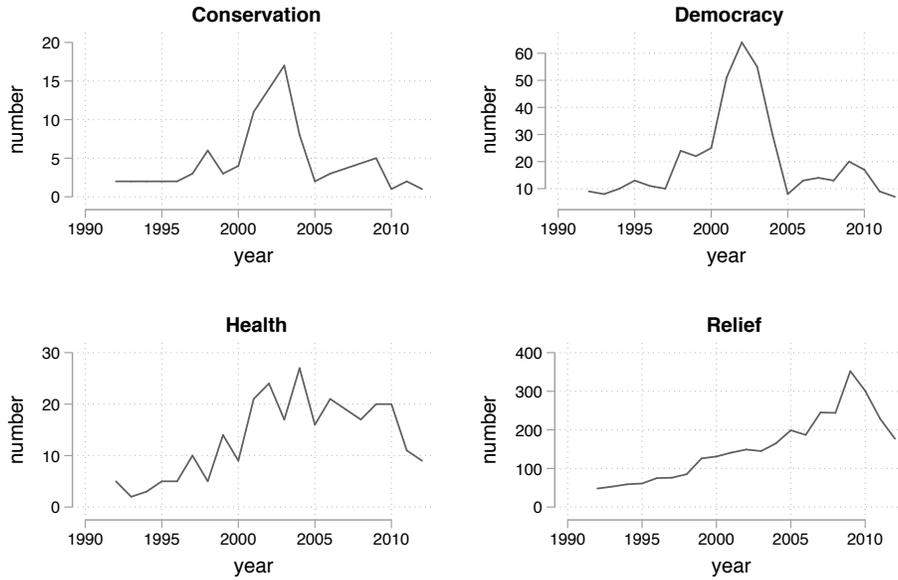


Figure 3: **American INGO Foundings by sector, 1992-2012.**

assistance. We used the AidData coding scheme to identify the amount of aid in the previous year in each sector (Tierney et al. 2011).⁹ We also use data on total U.S. private giving to international charities, which is positively correlated with public funding (Giving USA Foundation 2016). Both measures were recorded in constant U.S. dollars.

To test *Hypotheses 2* and *3*, we require a measure of sector *density*. We follow Carroll and Hannan (1989) and other studies on nonprofits (Lecy and Slyke, 2013) in defining density as the number of organizations in a given population. We calculated the number of INGOs that were “alive” in the sector in the previous year.¹⁰ The minimum value for density is 9 (the number of conservation INGOs in 1992), whereas the maximum is 2,366 (the number of relief INGOs in 2012). Abbott, Green and Keohane (2016, 258) define population density differently: as the ratio of “the extent and complexity of governance activities within a population of organizations” over the “resources available for that population.” Therefore, we created

⁹For more information, see the appendix.

¹⁰INGO death occurs when an INGO fails to file tax returns for at least three consecutive years.

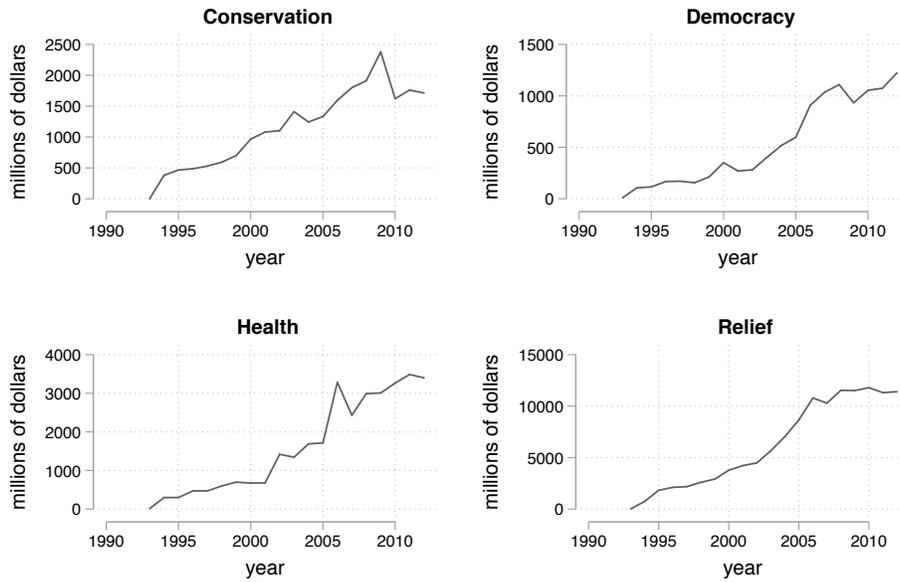


Figure 4: **American INGO Revenues by sector, 1992-2012.**

an alternative measure by dividing the number of alive INGOs by the total available financial resources, again measured in terms of foreign aid. Although we acknowledge our measure of existing resources does not capture the *potential* resources available to the population – a concept for which there is no ready measure – it is reasonable to assume potential and actual resources are correlated. Finally, to model the theorized curvilinear effect of density, we include a measure of the field’s density as well as its square (*density squared*). We expect the sign for *density* to be positive and the sign for *density squared* to be negative, consistent with the idea that density has a curvilinear relationship with foundings.

We also gathered data to address the alternative explanations. First, we gathered data on sector *issue attention* in the previous year. We used a sample of newspapers contained in LexisNexis Academic Universe and counted the number of times that keywords associated with each sector were referenced. This database included English-language newspapers from throughout the world as well as foreign-language articles translated into English. We took the natural log of the number of references to address the problem of skewness.

Next, we gathered data on *policy attention*. Our measure is the natural log of the number of times that sector keywords were mentioned in the U.S. Congress. The Congressional Record, Daily Edition (housed by ProQuest Congressional) was our source. The appendix contains a list of the keywords used for the issue and policy attention variables.

Finally, we gathered data on the normative environment by measuring sector *IGO attention* in the previous year. Since IGOs spread and institutionalize norms, there could be more demand for INGOs when IGOs are more active. We coded the number of IGOs active in each issue area. As a robustness check, we used the index from Tallberg et al. (2013) to calculate the annual mean score of INGO access to IGOs. When more IGOs grant INGOs access, the pro-NGO norm may be stronger and encourage foundings.

3.4 Results

Although the number of INGO foundings is, by definition, bounded by zero, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions since there can be as many as 350 foundings per sector–year. The appendix shows that our results are similar when using negative binomial models and duration models that estimate the length of time between foundings. In all analyses, robust standard errors are clustered by sector.

We begin by examining the effects of the variables identified by the traditional political economy model: resources and density. As *Model 1* in Table 1 shows, both variables are statistically significantly related to foundings, but in the *opposite* direction as predicted. More *U.S. foreign assistance* is associated with fewer foundings, while greater *density* is associated with more foundings. These relationships are surprising in light of the conventional wisdom as we understand it within the political economy tradition of INGOs.

However, when we add *density squared* in *Model 2*, as suggested by organizational ecology, *density* has the expected curvilinear effect. The estimated coefficients are positive and significant for *density* and negative and significant for *density squared*, consistent with our

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Foreign Assistance (log)	-11.16*	-10.66	-6.27**	-7.68
	(4.465)	(4.974)	(1.434)	(6.652)
Density	0.14***	0.23***	0.23***	0.24***
	(0.003)	(0.039)	(0.023)	(0.040)
Density squared		-0.01*	-0.01**	-0.01*
		(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Issue Attention (log)			-9.91**	-10.01
			(2.297)	(10.129)
Policy Attention (log)			13.67**	8.29
			(2.372)	(7.906)
IGO Attention			-0.08*	1.26
			(0.026)	(0.921)
Population Age				-2.35
				(2.477)
Democracy				-181.96
				(244.768)
Conservation				-577.93
				(641.482)
Health				-504.82
				(484.971)
Constant	266.60*	244.72	168.26***	5,569.53
	(110.194)	(111.062)	(17.572)	(5,542.765)
Observations	84	84	84	84
R-squared	0.85	0.90	0.92	0.92

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
density squared coefficient multiplied by 100 for display purposes

Table 1: **Explaining variation in the founding of American INGOs, 1992-2012.**

argument about the changing dynamics of competition over time. Although density is at first associated with more foundings, that gain decreases as density increases and even becomes negative eventually. This pattern holds when we introduce variables associated with the “demand-side” alternative explanations in *Model 3*.¹¹ As it shows, *policy attention* is strongly and positively related to foundings, as expected. In contrast, *media* and *IGO at-*

¹¹The SI contains a figure showing the curvilinear effect of density on the number of predicted foundings.

tention to the issue area are negatively correlated with foundings.

One concern is that what we interpret as density dependence may be simply *time* dependence. In other words, the curvilinear relationship may be a natural consequence of population aging. To address this possibility, *Model 4* controls for *population age*, or the months since the founding of the sector’s first INGO. Since *density* and *density squared* retain the same signs and statistical significance and *population age* does not have a clear relationship with foundings, *Model 4* suggests the patterns in our data reflect density dependence, not time dependence. This saturated model further establishes the significance of density by introducing sector indicator variables. Relief is the omitted sector. As expected, foundings in the other sectors – which are smaller – are less frequent.

Another concern is that the analysis does not directly show the effects of competition. Providing evidence of this mechanism is a goal of our case studies, but we also explore it quantitatively. We introduce a lagged indicator of annual sector concentration to the models in Table 1; the results are in the appendix. The indicator is the proportion of overall revenues in the sector held by INGOs in the 99th percentile. Following studies in industrial organization, we expect that as a sector’s concentration decreases, it will be more competitive. This indicator is not perfect since a concentrated market may deter certain types of foundings (e.g., generalists) more than others (e.g., specialists). Nevertheless, and as expected, concentration is negatively related to foundings. At the same time, the significant, curvilinear effect of density remains, suggesting there are aspects of competition that our fairly-crude concentration measure does not capture.

Our results are robust to other tests, as well, which we report in the appendix and summarize here. We begin with alternative measures of key concepts. First, we use the alternative indicator of financial resources: private charitable giving. Second, we use the alternative indicator of density: the ratio of alive INGOs to available resources. Third, we use the alternative indicator of the normative environment: INGO access to IGOs. Across

all models, *density* and *density squared* are important predictors of foundings. The alternative measures of *financial resources* and *norms* generally have the same signs as the main measures, though they are less consistently statistically significant.

Next, we introduce additional controls, and the curvilinear effect of *density* remains clear. First, we introduce a lagged measure of the average level of democracy in the world. This variable accounts for the possibility a backlash against democracy or the rise in restrictions on INGOs may have discouraged foundings. Second, we introduce a variable that takes the value of 1 if the House of Representatives is controlled by the Republican Party and 0 otherwise. Similarly, we introduce a variable that takes the value of 1 if the president is Republican and 0 otherwise. These variables address the possibility that liberal politicians are more inclined to channel aid through NGOs (Dietrich, 2013; Allen and Flynn, 2018). Third, we introduce a dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 after September 11, 2001, and 0 otherwise. Fourth, we introduce a count of the total number of INGOs in the world to address the possibility that growth in INGOs elsewhere explains stagnation among American INGOs. Fifth, we include a variable capturing average INGO size to address the possibility that the existence of larger INGOs in a population – which may have unique access or other advantages – discourages new entries. Finally, we introduce year fixed effects.

Overall, our analysis suggests American INGO foundings are density dependent. Further, we find several intriguing relationships between foundings and the control variables. Once we control for density, funding is associated with fewer foundings. Though this pattern is surprising within the context of a simple political economy model of INGOs, it is consistent with research in the field of public administration. Although the relationships between government funding, private philanthropy, and nonprofit foundings are far from settled, cross-national studies have shown that more public and private money does not automatically translate to more nonprofits (e.g., Salamon and Anheier, 1998). The expansion of funding, as shown in Figure 4, does not reduce competition and encourage foundings if resources mainly

support a few organizations. Moreover, and whereas policy attention is positively correlated with foundings, the same is not true for media and IGO attention. This pattern tentatively suggests an attention cycle whereby policy attention draws in new entrepreneurs, who then spur attention to their issue in the media and at IGOs.

Though robust to many specifications, these results should be interpreted with some caution. We acknowledge that there are inferential challenges associated with relying on observational data in which many variables trend over time. Thus, we now proceed to case studies of INGOs in two sectors. The cases are designed to speak more directly to the posited causal mechanism: INGO populations grow quickly at low levels of density due to mutual support, but slow at higher levels of density due to competition.

4 Case Studies

We focus on conservation and democracy assistance. Both sectors are “on-the-line” statistically in the sense that they exhibit clear inverted-u curves in foundings (recall Figure 3). The sectors also maximize variation in terms of several potential explanatory variables. First, they involve different kinds of issues. Conservation is a commons problem, whereas democracy assistance primarily benefits people in areas where programs take place. As such, we might hypothesize that conservation INGOs would be less competitive.

Second, conservation and democracy assistance have different population characteristics. Whereas democracy assistance had over 250 active INGOs in 2012, conservation had less than 60 active INGOs that year. Since cooperation tends to be easier in smaller populations (Olson, 1965), we might expect mutual support to prevail among conservation INGOs.

Finally, conservation and democracy assistance have different resource profiles, with democracy assistance INGOs relying more on the U.S. government. Since democracy assistance INGOs contend for the same federal funding, we might expect them to be more

competitive. Given these differences, if we nevertheless find evidence of density dependence in both cases, it will strengthen our causal claims. Additionally, we employ these case studies to highlight the implications of stagnating growth rates for sector outcomes, including processes of organizational ageing and bureaucratization that affect how INGOs perform.

Our case studies rely on published primary and secondary sources and 13 original interviews with practitioners.¹² The published sources include academic research, books written by practitioners, published interviews, INGO publications (e.g., annual reports, websites), and news sources. For interviews, we selected representatives from INGOs founded in periods of low density (prior to 2000) and high density (since the early 2000s) and asked questions about INGO creation and evolution. In many cases we spoke directly with founders.

Our theory implies density discourages foundings, but we are not able to identify representatives of INGOs that were never created. The high-level INGO staff we interviewed were, however, either former founders or plausible founders of new INGOs. We also interviewed representatives of INGOs that still existed in 2012. As a result, we might expect our sample to include particularly successful INGOs that were unlikely to report density-driven competition. On the contrary, the qualitative data corroborate the general trends we observe in the quantitative data and provide evidence of our hypothesized causal mechanism.

4.1 Democracy Assistance

Democracy assistance supports democratization abroad, whether through democratic transition or consolidation. INGOs engaged in democracy assistance design and implement a variety of programs aimed at fostering democratization. Some examples include directly supporting domestic NGOs, sponsoring election observers, advising public officials on reform measures, and providing legal aid. Such programs take place in more than 100 countries each

¹²In addition, the case study on democracy assistance draws on pertinent materials from interviews conducted for a previous project (Bush, 2015).

year, and many (though not all) of them are implemented by INGOs (Bush 2015, 8).

Democracy promotion has a long, if troubled, tradition in U.S. foreign policy. However, unlike some other tools of democracy promotion, democracy assistance is relatively new. A landmark year was 1983, when President Ronald Reagan founded the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a quasi-private foundation that received money from Congress with the aim of promoting democracy via grants to INGOs and NGOs. Concurrent with the creation of the NED was the founding of four American INGOs – the Center for International Private Enterprise, Free Trade Union Institute, International Republican Institute (IRI), and National Democratic Institute (NDI) – that were designed to represent the interests of business, unions, and the Republican and Democratic parties in aiding democracy abroad.¹³ These INGOs have continued to be important players in the sector.¹⁴ Although they focused initially on a particular issue (e.g., aiding political parties for NDI), they have expanded to cover a more general set of activities.

In-depth analysis reveals a steady increase in the resources available to democracy assistance INGOs during the 1990s and 2000s. This increase in funding was accompanied by an increase in policy attention. The field first expanded with the end of the Cold War, when many democratizing states sought out foreign assistance to help with their transitions. In response, USAID announced a new “democracy initiative.” Between 1993 and 1999, USAID administrator J. Brian Atwood – previously the founding president of NDI – worked to mainstream democracy promotion (Bush 2015, 126-127). Under his guidance, funding expanded and became institutionalized. Funding and policy attention continued to expand in the 2000s, especially with the “freedom agenda” of President George W. Bush. Whereas democracy assistance represented around 8% of the USAID budget in 1990, it was around 16% in 2009 (Bush 2015, 7). Although the largest funder for American democracy assistance

¹³Although these INGOs depend heavily on government funding, they are all legally independent from it.

¹⁴Other key INGOs founded in the 1980s included the Carter Center (founded 1982) and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES; founded 1987).

INGOs was and is the U.S. government, other governments, IGOs, and private foundations also provided resources to these organizations.

Yet stagnation in INGO foundings occurred at the same time democracy promotion was at the heart of U.S. foreign policy. Activity within IGOs also increased at this time, such as with the formation of the UN Democracy Caucus in 2004 and UN Democracy Fund in 2005. Meanwhile, democracy assistance INGOs enjoyed a fairly widespread perception of success during this period thanks to their roles in the Colored Revolutions (Carothers, 2006, 55-56). But the year of peak INGO foundings in democracy assistance was 2002, when 64 new INGOs were created. By 2005, the number of new INGOs had plummeted to eight. Thanks to organizational ecology, we can understand why this era of significant funding and media, policy, and IGO attention was accompanied by relatively low INGO growth.

The early years of democracy assistance often involved cooperation among INGOs, both in the sense that organizations were providing each other with mutual support and in the sense that they were collaborating. Mutual support could take many forms. Sometimes, larger organizations helped new organizations by covering overhead. For example, Wendy Luers created Charter 77 New York in 1990 to support Charter 77, a civic initiative in Czechoslovakia. Charter 77 New York benefited from support from the Open Society Foundation, which provided it with office space and support for an administrative assistant.¹⁵ The Willkie Memorial Building – a New York building owned by Freedom House, an American INGO engaged in democracy assistance – likewise provided offices and meeting spaces for many other organizations attempting to advance the cause of political rights and civil liberties. When a U.S. chapter of Amnesty International was created in 1966, the first public meeting was held at Freedom House (Snyder, 2012, 784). During the 1980s, the U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee (an INGO founded in 1979 to monitor compliance with the Helsinki Ac-

¹⁵Interview, Wendy Luers, Founder, Foundation for Culture and Society, by telephone, September 23, 2016.

cords) supported the establishment of the Americas Watch (1982), Asia Watch (1985), and Africa Watch (1988) organizations.

American INGOs also collaborated during this period to build the field's profile. In 1994, the International Forum for Democratic Studies was established. Among other things, this center supported analysis and research on topics relevant for democracy assistance, further advancing the field's professionalism and legitimacy through the Network of Democracy Research Institutes. In 1999, a group of INGOs led by the NED created the World Movement for Democracy, a periodic international conference for democracy activists from around the world, and in 1998, another group including IFES forged the ACE Network, a resource hub on electoral assistance. Although many INGOs were pursuing similar "turf" in terms of U.S. government funding, collaboration was possible since a rising tide was viewed as lifting all boats. In 1995, IFES, IRI, and NDI united to create the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS). The CEPPS mechanism was intended to foster the norm that the U.S. government would support democracy abroad by funding INGOs via grants – not by supporting firms that were more willing to accept government contracts.¹⁶ This action helped legitimize INGOs as actors in democracy assistance.

Although large INGOs dominated the scene during these early years, entrepreneurs still saw opportunities. New INGOs often occupied niches left open by older INGOs, such as those involved with CEPPS. For example, Barbara Ferris decided to found the International Women's Democracy Center in 1995 after visiting various transitioning democracies with the Peace Corps and hearing from women that they wanted to learn how to run for office. Her approach was to work with other organizations, saying, "There's only a limited number of dollars in the field, guys, so we need to work with others to get things done."¹⁷ Former NDI executive Thomas O. Melia concurred, reflecting in 2005 that the field had developed

¹⁶Interview, former NDI executive, in person, April 30, 2010.

¹⁷Interview, Barbara Ferris, Founder, International Women's Democracy Center, by telephone, October 4, 2016.

over the previous twenty years such that it comprised “a rather decentralized, cooperating community of several thousand men and women” (Melia, 2005, 9).

Yet as time passed, competition among INGOs increased – despite increased funding.¹⁸ Whereas the top 1% of democracy assistance INGOs in our data controlled 54% of the field’s revenues in 1992, they controlled only 12% by 2010. Given mechanisms such as CEPPS, the nature of competition was not that of an open market. Nevertheless, competition eventually became rife in the sense of INGOs fighting to win resources.

Entrepreneurs who founded INGOs during this period of greater competition acknowledged how density shaped their decisions. For example, James Apple founded the International Judicial Academy (IJA) in 1999 to train judges overseas. A combination of tuition fees, private and public grants, and individual contributions supported IJA. Yet according to Apple, “as more and more organizations got involved in this work, it became increasingly difficult for the Academy to obtain funds for its programs.” When asked what advice he would give to someone thinking of starting an INGO, Apple replied: “Based on my experiences, funding is very difficult. Unless you’re in a position to attract large grants from the U.S. government, it’s very difficult. . . So that’s my advice: you have to go into it with your eyes open.”¹⁹ Another founder from the 2000s, Brian Concannon of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (founded 2004), concurred about the challenges of securing support within this environment: “Initially, we didn’t have funding – it was a struggle.”²⁰ Although

¹⁸A few for-profit development firms began to seek out democracy assistance in the 1990s, creating further competition (Bush, 2015, 43). These organizations were (with founding dates in parentheses): Tetra Tech (formerly ARD, 1966), Checchi (1973), Chemonics (1975), DAI (1970), and Democracy International (2003). These firms’ revenues are not publicly available. Given their founding dates and entries into the field of democracy assistance, however, we do not believe slowing founding rates reflect democracy assistance simply moving from the non-profit to for-profit sector.

¹⁹Interview, James Apple, Founder, IJA, by telephone, October 19, 2016. To be clear, he was referring to challenges given the emergence of other American INGOs, such as the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative, not the emergence of homegrown democracy assistance INGOs from countries that were once the targets of democracy assistance.

²⁰Interview, Brian Concannon, Founder, Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, by telephone, October 26, 2016.

several INGOs tried in 2015 to challenge CEPPS through the Advancing Democratic Elections and Political Transitions (ADEPT) consortium to their mutual benefit, the initiative stalled. As one person knowledgeable about the process explained, “it’s not necessarily a cozy relationship because these organizations all compete with each other.”²¹

These experiences of competition were not isolated ones. The founder of Charter 77 New York noticed changes in the field: “Once the Washington Beltway bandits found out that there was real money in this... [These organizations] look at the register and apply for every opportunity regardless of whether they know the area or not. We were being given kudos and prizes by USAID for being the best and the most innovative, and other people were getting the contracts for other countries in Eastern Europe.”²² Another interviewee who has worked in the field since the 1990s argued that Freedom House went so far around 2000 as to “open an [overseas field] office at its own cost to make itself more competitive for future USAID grants.”²³ Someone who entered the field in twenty-first century could not observe these changes over time, but noted that by 2010: “The funding climate is competitive... [My former organization’s] operations in the Balkans are just scraping by and can’t seem to get any money.”²⁴ A former NED grant-maker reflected, “There’s no doubt that the competition for funding is now really intense. It’s a small world with a lot of sharp elbows.”²⁵

Although evidence from these interviews captures the perspectives of a non-representative sample of practitioners, other forms of evidence suggest they represent a more general trend. Several studies on democracy assistance have emphasized the expansion of competition over time (e.g., Henderson 2002; Brown 2009). Bush (2015, 116-117) attempted to document this trend by showing that large INGOs’ share of NED grants decreased from 90% in 1985 to

²¹Interview, former NDI executive, by telephone, September 28, 2016.

²²Interview, Wendy Luers, Founder, Foundation for Culture and Society, by telephone, September 23, 2016.

²³Interview, former Freedom House staff member, by telephone, October 18, 2012.

²⁴Interview, former American INGO field officer, by telephone, October 24, 2013.

²⁵Interview, former NED staff member, by telephone, April 19, 2013.

50% in 2009, at the same time as the average grant size shrank by more than two-thirds. In light of these changes, INGOs have used many strategies to survive: asking friends in the U.S. government to pressure USAID to fund their INGO; winning contracts to evaluate other INGOs' programs, and then being highly critical; fighting to win the allegiance of the best local partners; and applying for many available grants and contracts, even for work in countries or on issues for which the INGO lacks expertise. According to one analysis, INGOs tended to "pursue short-term gains rather than collective long-term development," a tendency characterized as "pathologi[cal]" from the perspective of advancing democracy (Henderson 2002, 143).

As growth stagnated, older INGOs turned on what has been described as "strategic autopilot" (Carothers 2015, 64). By the 2000s, INGOs founded in the 1980s were larger and more bureaucratic. Reflecting on NDI in 2010, one long-time former staff member commented, "By the mid-1990s, things had started to change – [NDI] started to become bureaucratized."²⁶ Another colleague concurred, saying, "What's happened is that NDI has become institutionalized. It became a permanent player at Washington at very high levels, and it wasn't obvious that it would become that when it started... Now people enjoy the work, but you see yourself as a permanent fixture in a country's hopefully long-term liberalization. Both NDI and IRI have leaders that have been there for a while."²⁷ Of course, the shift was not unique to NDI or IRI. An interviewee who worked at a different organization noted a similar dynamic: "there is that sort of bureaucratization where people have a stake in a particular approach without taking into account the political context."²⁸

In sum, evidence from democracy assistance supports the hypothesized causal mechanism. In the early era of the population – until roughly 2000 – INGOs demonstrated a willingness to support each other and establish institutions that would contribute to the field's legitimacy.

²⁶Interview, former NDI executive, by telephone, June 4, 2010.

²⁷Interview, former NDI executive, in person, May 26, 2010.

²⁸Interview, former democracy assistance donor, in person, May 4, 2010.

Later, the field became denser and more competitive. Funding rates in democracy assistance are difficult to obtain but were reported as less than 20% in 2013, suggesting the extent of resource competition among INGOs is significant.²⁹ As such, we conclude that evidence from democracy assistance supports our density dependence argument.

4.2 Conservation

International environmental conservation concerns the protection of endangered species and habitats in the developed and developing world. INGOs provide a range of services, including protecting areas and parks, treating and rehabilitating particular species, researching habitat threats and diseases, monitoring threats to biodiversity, educating citizens, supporting community development, and enforcing laws related to nature preserves.

Systematic conservation efforts first began as domestic activities in the late 19th century (Brulle 2000). The creation of organizations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK (1889) and the Sierra Club in the United States (1892) launched an initial wave of NGOs focused on domestic conservation and wildlife management (Carmichael, Jenkins and Brulle 2012, 431). Nature conservation became more internationally-oriented after World War II with the creation of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). IUCN was founded in 1948 at the urging of UNESCO to facilitate cooperation between national governments and disseminate research about conservation. One of its most important products was the “Red List of Endangered Species,” which helped set priorities for conservation work globally (Boardman 1981).

The increased ecological consciousness of the 1960s led to the founding of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) with a mission of capitalizing on public interest to raise funds for IUCN projects. The WWF quickly opened chapters in different countries, including WWF-

²⁹Rebekah Usatin, “Evaluation of Democracy Assistance Grantmaking,” Presentation at the University of Pennsylvania, May 1, 2013.

US, to channel money to the international office. Its initial impulse was cooperative, as founder Max Nicholson described in 1961: “what is needed is not a new organization to duplicate and compete with the work of existing bodies but a new co-operative international project to make their efforts effective by providing them with adequate resources” (Schwarzenbach 2011, 19).

Although the U.S. conservation landscape had many important players by 1961, WWF-US was one of the first groups with an explicitly international focus. Most INGO action was organized through the WWF or species-protection programs based in U.S. zoos. WWF-US believed it was operating in “an expanding market” in the 1970s and thus was keen to take on projects with other groups, reflecting its cooperative ethos (Schwarzenbach 2011, 73). In its first ten years, WWF International supported 550 conservation projects in 59 countries, including an anti-poaching unit in Kenya and an education campaign in India.

The end of the Cold War corresponded with an expansion of environmental INGOs (Frank et al. 1986; Smith and Wiest 2012). The 1992 Rio Earth Summit launched the Convention on Biodiversity, legitimating INGOs’ role in this sphere (Frank et al. 1986, 94).³⁰ Funding from aid agencies also expanded as USAID began to view conservation as a pillar of development. New and old INGOs worked together to raise the status of international conservation issues, as reflected in the formation of numerous transnational networks, including the Climate Action Network and various regional coalitions, as well as the development and professionalization of the field of conservation biology (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Princen and Finger 1994, 4; Hadden 2015).

There was a steady increase in resources for conservation until 2008, paralleled by increased issue attention. Yet, the rate of new foundings slowed much earlier, with the peak of INGO foundings occurring in 2003, when 16 new organizations were founded. After 2005, there have consistently been less than five foundings per year. If our argument is correct, we

³⁰See also Hironaka (2014).

would expect foundings in the 1980s and 1990s to be mutually supportive. Later foundings should have the opposite effect, driving perceptions of competition.

The conservation sector fits this pattern. Although WWF-US held a virtual monopoly on international conservation for many years, in the 1980s, several other organizations entered the market. The intra-population dynamics initially were cooperative and mutually supportive. The Nature Conservancy – the largest and richest conservation NGO in the United States – launched its international program in 1980 with support from a grant of \$500,000 from WWF-US. Conservation International was founded as a spin-off of the Nature Conservancy in 1987 and quickly became a major player by promoting the concept of “biodiversity hotspots” and specializing in the tools of “Rapid Assessment Programs” (Seligmann 2011). Other INGOs welcomed these developments, and cooperation among these three organizations yielded major success in the 1980s and early 1990s. For example, the joint efforts of WWF, the Nature Conservancy, and Conservation International from the mid-1980s to late-1990s led to the protection of Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica (Boza 1993).

In the 1980s, WWF-US served as a grantmaker, stimulating the creation of other groups that would support its programming in specific locations or on certain topics. Other INGOs followed the WWF-US model of mutual support. For example, the Charles Darwin Foundation was formed in 1992 as a vehicle to fund conservation projects in the Galapagos, including both its own programs and those of other INGOs. As the founder described it, “when we started this organization in 1992, honestly it was pretty lonely. We were able to grow the field more generally by growing our own budget and showing up as funders throughout the 1990s.” Reflecting the idea that population growth at low levels of density is mutually beneficial, her judgment was that supporting other organizations “hasn’t shrunk the pie” and ultimately led to more support for its work.³¹ Overall, the experience of WWF-US and the Charles Darwin Foundation suggests that many INGOs viewed their peers as

³¹Interview, Johanna Barry, Founder, Galapagos Conservancy, by telephone, September 28, 2016.

supporters during the 1980s and 1990s.

Competition among INGOs grew in the 2000s. Our quantitative data reflect this trend; the top 1% of INGOs in the conservation sector controlled 72% of the resources in 1992, and only 52% of the resources by 2010.³² Indicative of this trend, WWF-US began to gradually move away from grantmaking. As former WWF-US President Russell Train recalled in his memoir, the competitive dynamic was driven home when a foundation suggested the WWF's support for other groups and lack of its own distinct programming made it hard to justify supporting it (Train 2003, 244). There was also a prominent intra-INGO conflict in 2004, when the leader of a smaller INGO accused Conservation International, WWF, and the Nature Conservancy of neglecting the rights of indigenous peoples (Chapin 2004).³³ This growing criticism was compounded by a well-publicized investigation into the financial and management practices of the Nature Conservancy (Jepson 2005). In short, the era of mutual support had clearly ended by the mid-2000s.³⁴

Although aggregate resources in the conservation sector increased until 2008, the biggest INGOs largely controlled them. In the 1980s and 1990s, the sector's concentration meant larger INGOs supported the relatively few foundings of smaller groups, which they viewed as potential partners. But as density increased, the number of smaller groups fighting for the bigger INGOs' attention grew almost exponentially, contributing to perceptions of competition and depressing foundings. As the founder of Pandal International explained it, other INGOs with an interest in panda preservation discouraged her from founding her own group in 2000. As she recalls, "before [founding] we talked to [another Panda conservation organization]. And they were very, 'Oh, you know, you wouldn't want to do that. It's too hard. Don't do it.' I think they saw us as competition, essentially. And we went ahead,

³²Concentration in the conservation sector has consistently been higher than in the democracy assistance sector, but has been declining.

³³See also Dowie (2009).

³⁴See Balboa (2016, 111) for a similar assessment.

because that's sort of my personality... but the first few years were very difficult.”³⁵

Other founders after 2000 attempted to respond to the sector's concentration by locating a distinct niche. As one explained with regards to the process of founding in 2009, “we developed a business plan, and a big part of it was to target a sector of resources and support that we thought was relatively untapped. But it didn't stay that way for long, because as soon as we got off the ground other organizations figured out where the money was coming from and began to move in as well.”³⁶ Similarly, an interviewee explained about his organization's history since founding in 2000, “it's a constant war... very few are successful and 90% are not. The big NGOs have the money, but it's hard for us to get their attention. And the issues we face [with primate preservation] are just getting more costly over time. It's no wonder that people simply burn out.”³⁷ When asked for advice for potential founders, another respondent who founded in the 2000s replied, “you better make sure you have your own source of funding, or that you're doing things better than everyone else. Because every nonprofit is competing with every other nonprofit, essentially.”³⁸

In addition to the increase in competition, there is also evidence that older conservation INGOs have become more bureaucratic. In contrast to their “shoestring” early days, large conservation INGOs today control budgets in the hundred millions and have thousands of staff members. Expansion comes with important fiscal responsibilities and constraints. For example, a commonly-heard complaint is that conservation INGOs that receive substantial corporate or government funding must implement burdensome accountability procedures that make it difficult to engage in the responsive, participatory, and context-sensitive programs that some believe would be optimal.³⁹ If these bureaucratic transformations are

³⁵Interview, Suzanne Braden, Founder, Pandas International, by telephone, October 5, 2016.

³⁶Interview, Don Church, Co-Founder, Global Wildlife Conservation, by telephone, October 24, 2016.

³⁷Interview, Norm Rosen, Founder, Pan-African Sanctuary Alliance, by telephone, October 24, 2016.

³⁸Interview, Suzanne Braden, Founder, Pandas International, by telephone, October 5, 2016.

³⁹Balboa (2014); Jeremy Hance, “Has Big Conservation Gone Astray?” *Mongabay.com*, April 26, 2016, available at <https://news.mongabay.com/2016/04/big-conservation-gone-astray/> (accessed April 25, 2017).

widespread within the sector, as we suspect they may be, they may have important implications for service delivery in global conservation.

Thus, although conservation differs from democracy assistance in key ways, we observed similar causal processes within it. Foundings in the 1980s and 1990s were largely mutually supportive, and new INGOs were often financially assisted by older ones. By the early 2000s, potential founders faced a more competitive and discouraging environment, frequently describing difficulties obtaining needed resources given the density of the field.

5 Conclusion

This paper explored the founding of INGOs globally and in the United States, explaining both the rapid population growth of the 1990s and the recent stagnation in founding rates by integrating insights from political economy and organizational ecology traditions. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, we demonstrate American INGO foundings are density dependent. Our life cycle approach thus helps reconcile previously-conflicting findings in the literature on INGOs, in which early studies suggested intra-population dynamics were marked by cooperation but later ones emphasized competition. Although our study primarily concerns the population of INGOs based in the United States, we suggest the theoretical perspective adopted here may illuminate dynamics of the global INGO population and those based in other countries.

The research agenda on the organizational ecology of INGOs could be pushed forward in several ways. First, an important extension would involve studying the relationship between density and INGO mortality. Second, our case studies hint at the importance of density as an explanation for other strategic choices of INGOs, including whether to pursue a generalist or specialist issue orientation or tactical profile. Third, the research agenda on INGOs could benefit from deeper quantitative examinations of the relationship between resources,

issue attention, and organizational outcomes, as well as larger-scale qualitative and survey experimental studies that might test the mechanisms explored in this study.

Although we think organizational ecology has significant potential, we also draw attention to three challenges. First, organizational ecology is not a predictive theory. Although it identifies the expected form of the relationship of interest, it does not predict the inflection point at which sectors become “too dense” and foundings decline. Second, organizational ecology requires complete longitudinal data on all actors, both big and small. Many IR datasets lack such coverage. However, our study illustrates these data are possible to obtain, and registries may exist of INGOs in other countries and for other kinds of actors. Third, organizational ecology is sometimes criticized for presenting an overly-structural perspective. We do not expect agents to be fully constrained by population dynamics; our case studies clearly illustrate they are not. But we do expect density to have predictable effects on entrepreneurs.

Beyond suggesting a broader research agenda drawing on organizational ecology, this paper also contributes to our understanding of global governance. A recent article by Abbott, Green and Keohane (2016) argued stagnation in one organizational population can provide the opportunity for another population to emerge. Thus, private transnational regulatory organizations expanded their role in global governance because they are more flexible than INGOs, which enables them to occupy favorable niches. Given the recent stagnation in INGO foundings, along with the bureaucratization we observe in our cases, it is reasonable to wonder if we may see new organizational forms emerging to challenge the dominance of INGOs as the main non-state service providers and advocates in world politics. For example, the growth in internet-enabled campaign groups like Change.org, MoveOn, or Avaaz may mark the emergence of a new organizational model in which activists move easily across the virtual and physical, national and international, and sectoral boundaries that often demarcated the identities of traditional INGOs. Direct-giving campaigns – often internet-

enabled through platforms such as Give Directly, GoFundMe, or Kiva – are also gaining popularity as an alternative to organization-led programming. Whereas an entrepreneur in an earlier time period may have turned to creating an INGO to pursue social change, the density and competitiveness of the INGO population may make new forms more appealing. These new entrants may enhance innovation within global governance, but also bring with them the potential for substantial disruption as the modes of service delivery and advocacy evolve in new directions. Government agencies may also be able to spur new forms of non-state action in the same way they have done in the past (e.g., Dietrich, 2013).

Finally, the rise in density and competition within the INGO population has implications for social welfare in the areas in which INGOs are active. At the organizational level, the competitive pressures that accompany an increase in population density may well drive efficiency, with the potential to improve performance. But at the population level, growing density makes coordination and cooperation among INGOs more difficult, introducing the potential for redundancies or even conflicts (Hadden, 2015). Although reforms to contracting environments may help minimize the problems associated with INGO competition in some areas (Cooley and Ron, 2002), our cross-sector analysis leads us to suspect the problems of INGO competition apply across a variety of contracting environments due to high density. Thus, from a policy perspective, we recommend INGO funders and practitioners focus on developing policies and performance metrics that encourage coordination of efforts and productive innovations within highly-dense and mature INGO populations.

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