

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Impact of Non-profit Regulatory Instruments on Civic Engagement Intention in China

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## Abstract

In China, both governments and civil institutions play important roles in non-profit regulation. However, with various regulatory instruments available, it remains unclear which has the strongest public support and most effectively promotes civic engagement. This study compared the impact of different non-profit regulatory instruments addressing information disclosure on two aspects of civic engagement intention: willingness to donate and willingness to volunteer. A survey experiment was conducted to analyse the perspectives of 939 Chinese participants on four types of regulation: no regulation, civil regulation, accommodative government regulation and deterrent government regulation. Results showed that regulation was preferred to no regulation and deterrent government regulation was preferred to accommodative government regulation, which was preferred to civil regulation. Additionally, public trust in non-profits significantly mediated the relationship between regulation and civic engagement intention. These findings suggest that government regulation, particularly the deterrent approach, garners strong public support and may be prioritized within the Chinese context.

## 摘要

在中国，政府和民间机构在非营利组织监管中发挥着重要作用。然而，尽管存在多种监管工具，目前尚不清楚哪种工具获得的公众支持最强，能够最有效地促进公民参与。本研究比较了不同非营利组织信息披露监管工具对两方面公民参与意愿的影响：慈善捐赠意愿和志愿服务意愿。通过对 939 名中国参与者进行的调查实验，文章分析了他们对以下四种监管类型持有的观点：无监管、民间监管、弹性政府监管和威慑性政府监管。结果显示，相较于无监管，监管更受欢迎；威慑性政府监管优于弹性政府监管，弹性政府监管优于民间监管。此外，公众对非营利组织的信任在监管与公民参与意愿之间发挥着显著的中介作用。这些发现表明，政府监管，特别是威慑性手段，获得了强烈的公众支持，并应在中国背景下优先考虑。

**Keywords:** non-profit regulation; civil regulation; government regulation; civic engagement intention; survey experiment

**关键词:** 非营利监管; 民间监管; 政府监管; 公民参与意愿; 调查实验

Non-profit organizations play a crucial role in promoting civic engagement and addressing social issues in China.<sup>1</sup> The development of non-profits cannot be separated from an appropriate form of regulation. However, non-profit regulation is a complex and contentious issue that involves civil institutions and governments.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese government have increasingly intervened in the regulation of non-profits to increase their political control over these organizations and ensure that they comply with laws and regulations. Meanwhile, civil institutions, such as professional associations and self-regulatory bodies, play a significant role in regulating non-profits by promoting self-governance and maintaining public trust. Owing to

1 Anheier 2014.

2 Breen, Dunn and Sidel 2016.

dissatisfaction with and resentment of strong government intervention or political control, non-profit researchers and practitioners have called for civil regulation as an alternative to government regulation.<sup>3</sup>

Although previous studies have explored the impact of regulation on non-profits, not enough attention has been paid to the general public's perspective on the issue. Thus, it remains unclear which type of regulation the general public prefers. Non-profit regulation not only affects the behaviour of non-profits but also the general public's attitude and behaviour towards non-profits. According to Suzanne Mettler and Joe Soss, public policy cannot be fully understood without examining its effects on the opinions and behaviour of the general public.<sup>4</sup> The present study aims to address the gaps in the literature regarding which regulatory instrument has the most public support and the optimal potential to advance civic engagement by conducting a survey experiment to compare the effects of four types of non-profit regulation: no regulation, civil regulation, accommodative government regulation and deterrent government regulation.

It is important to note three issues. First, this study compares the effects of four types of non-profit regulation because comparative studies allow us to differentiate public attitudes and preferences regarding different regulatory instruments. Civil regulation refers to voluntary non-profit regulation initiated by civil institutions, i.e. non-governmental third-party organizations, via accreditations and rankings; accommodative government regulation refers to flexible non-profit regulation initiated by governments via accreditations and rankings; and deterrent government regulation refers to the command-and-control approach used by governments.

Second, this study focuses on non-profit regulation relating to transparency and information disclosure in China. Although non-profit regulation is a multidimensional field that addresses non-profits' creation, operations, intersectoral relationships, financial resources and other matters, this survey experiment focuses on transparency and information disclosure as examples of non-profit regulation for two reasons. The first is the extreme importance of information disclosure for non-profits. While non-profits are expected to serve the public interest, without information disclosure, people do not know whether non-profits are behaving appropriately and achieving their expected missions.<sup>5</sup> Disclosing information and maintaining transparency are also important for building public trust, attracting charitable donations and fostering good relationships with stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> The second reason is the low level of non-profit transparency in China.<sup>7</sup> The China Foundation Centre (*Jijinhui zhongxin wang* 基金会中心网), an authoritative third-party institution, publishes the annual Foundation Transparency Index. In 2022, the average score of the foundations in China included in the index was 59.07 (out of 100), indicating a rather low level of transparency.

Third, this study compares the effects of non-profit regulatory instruments addressing information disclosure on civic engagement intention, with public trust in non-profits as potential mediators. The predictors of civic engagement such as charitable giving and volunteering can be divided into three perspectives<sup>8</sup> – micro-level (for example, socio-demographics),<sup>9</sup> meso-level (for example, non-profit accountability)<sup>10</sup> and macro-level (for example, government policies).<sup>11</sup> Non-profit regulation is a form of macro-level predictor. Existing studies have demonstrated that regulation has positive effects on public trust in non-profits,<sup>12</sup> which further fosters civic engagement such as

3 Ibid.; Levi-Faur 2011.

4 Mettler and Soss 2004.

5 Ortega-Rodríguez, Licerán-Gutiérrez and Moreno-Albarracín 2020.

6 Dethier, Delcourt and Willems 2023.

7 Nie, Liu and Cheng 2016; Xue and Niu 2019.

8 Barman 2017.

9 Bekkers and Wiepking 2011; Wiepking and Bekkers 2012.

10 Hoang and Lee 2022.

11 De Wit and Bekkers 2017.

12 Cordery and Deguchi 2018; Yang, Cherrie, and Northcott 2021.

charitable giving and volunteering.<sup>13</sup> In this vein, in survey experiments, individuals' civic engagement intention may vary according to the non-profit regulatory instrument.

Our findings reveal that, from the public's perspective, regulation is preferred to no regulation, and deterrent government regulation is preferred to accommodative government regulation, which is preferred to civil regulation. This suggests that Chinese people believe that a strong regulatory approach, especially one with a focus on deterrence, is most effective in enhancing civic engagement intention. We also explore the mediating role of public trust in non-profits on the relationship between regulation and civic engagement intention. Understanding how trust influences individuals' perceptions and behaviour towards non-profits in different regulatory contexts is essential for effective policymaking and for fostering a supportive environment for civic engagement.

## Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

### *Non-profit regulation in China*

Following David Levi-Faur, we define regulation as the “bureaucratic legalisation of prescriptive rules and the monitoring and enforcement of these rules by social, business and political actors on other social, business and political actors.”<sup>14</sup> In authoritarian China, non-profit regulation is often related to political control. Anthony Spires conducted a qualitative analysis of the 2016 Charity Law (*cishanfa* 慈善法), the most important and comprehensive regulatory law concerning non-profits in China.<sup>15</sup> He found that although the law “was well in line with what international legal advocates might suggest for a new system of non-profit governance, the logic of authoritarianism, as civil society practitioners pointed out in their reading of the law, has not disappeared”<sup>16</sup> and concluded that “regulation in such regimes should be seen more properly as a tool of political control.”<sup>17</sup> According to Mark Sidel, the Chinese government has exerted more constraints on non-profits and civil society in recent years, and these constraints are often accomplished using regulatory means.<sup>18</sup> A typical example is the long-term dual management system for the creation and operation of non-profits, which requires non-profits to obtain permission from a business-related supervisory agency and then to register with the civil affairs department.<sup>19</sup> Party-building as a regulatory instrument for non-profits is also seen as a form of political control in China.<sup>20</sup> In fact, since Xi Jinping 习近平 took office in 2012, the CCP and the Chinese government have attached greater importance to Party-building within the non-profit sector so that they can control non-profits more tightly.<sup>21</sup>

In China, non-profit regulation is used as a form of political control on the one hand, and a necessary and important managerial instrument to curb misbehaviour and help non-profits to achieve their missions on the other. Research from a political science perspective suggests that using stringent non-profit regulation as a form of political control can have a pernicious effect on the non-profit sector and damage individuals' civic engagement.<sup>22</sup> An administrative science perspective, however, indicates that stringent non-profit regulation, used as a managerial instrument, has positive effects on public trust in non-profits because of the expected high compliance of the non-profit organizations, which then enhances individuals' civic engagement. Here, we

13 Chapman, Hornsey and Gillespie 2021.

14 Levi-Faur 2011, 6.

15 Spires 2020.

16 Ibid., 583–84.

17 Ibid., 571.

18 Sidel 2020.

19 Yang, Yongjiao, Wilkinson and Zhang 2016; Zhang and Guo 2021.

20 Cai, Liu and Jiang 2023; Nie and Wu 2022; Thornton 2013; 2022.

21 Nie and Wu 2022.

22 Sidel 2020; Spires 2020.

adopt an administrative science perspective and explain in detail how diverse non-profit regulatory instruments impact civic engagement intention in the following section.

There are many different forms of misconduct and scandal within the non-profit sector, including false claims, controversial fundraising practices, fraud, sexual exploitation, inappropriate spending of donations and conflicts of interest. Non-profits play an important role in society and are expected to provide social services, engage in policy advocacy, cultivate social capital, promote innovative practices and serve the public interest.<sup>23</sup> Only when they are appropriately regulated can non-profits avoid wrongful behaviour and fully perform their expected functions. Strengthening regulation has been proposed in the literature as a way to address non-profit transgressions, ensure their healthy development and meet public expectations.<sup>24</sup>

In China, the non-profit regulatory system includes various regulatory instruments, including Party building, government policies, self-discipline and civil regulation. It covers many aspects of non-profit governance, such as internal structures, financial resources, personnel management and information disclosure.<sup>25</sup> Various stakeholders, including the CCP, the Chinese government, industry associations, third-party institutions and the general public, are involved in the regulation of the non-profit sector.<sup>26</sup>

Civil institutions and governments play important roles in the regulation of non-profits' information disclosure and transparency. Civil regulation has emerged as a pivotal force in the last decade, leveraging training programmes, ethical codes, accreditations and rankings to enhance transparency. A notable example is the Foundation Transparency Index (*Zhongji touming zhishu* 中基透明指数) and its accompanying rankings, which serve as benchmarks for non-profit accountability. Government regulation complements these efforts by integrating training initiatives, platforms, accreditations, rankings and a command-and-control strategy. Civil affairs departments, for instance, categorize non-profits into five tiers (A to AAAAA), with higher-tier organizations enjoying preferential treatment in government procurements. Additionally, China's legislative arm has played a significant role by enacting stringent legislation such as the Charity Law and the "Measures for information disclosure of charitable organizations" (*cishan zuzhi xinxi gongkai banfa* 慈善组织信息公开办法) to govern the disclosure practices of non-profits.

### *No regulation versus regulation*

Although previous studies on the consequences of regulation have yielded mixed results, they have shown that, when conducted appropriately, regulation has the potential to lead to higher compliance. For instance, Steffen Hurka and Christoph Knill found that regulatory policies on issues such as gun control significantly reduced homicides and suicides.<sup>27</sup> With regard to non-profit regulation, we argue that, compared to no regulation, any form of regulation can theoretically enhance aspects of civic engagement, such as charitable giving and volunteering, for two reasons. First, the general public expects regulation to serve the public interest. Following the logic of public interest theory, non-profit regulation is designed, in part, to combat misconduct within the sector, maintain the health of the non-profit sector and to help non-profits achieve their missions and vision.<sup>28</sup> Thus, non-profit regulation is likely to increase individuals' trust and confidence in non-profits and encourage them to engage with non-profit organizations.

Second, any regulatory instrument, if implemented appropriately, can motivate non-profits to behave as expected, leading to greater trust in non-profits and increased civic engagement intention.

<sup>23</sup> Anheier 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Bottiglieri, Kroleski and Conway 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Guan and Li 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Zhou 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Hurka and Knill 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Brito and Dudley 2012.

Regulation shapes non-profits' behaviour by permitting, prescribing or prohibiting specific categories of actions in three ways: setting standards, monitoring activities and establishing sanctions or rewards.<sup>29</sup> Setting standards enables non-profits to understand what behaviour is encouraged, allowed or prohibited, and encourages them to modify their actions accordingly. Through a series of voluntary or compulsory monitoring instruments, regulators can easily observe non-profits' behaviour, alert them to potential wrongdoing and help them to avoid violations. A control strategy that establishes sanctions and rewards allows for the praise of good practices and the punishment of misconduct. Furthermore, good practices will spread to other non-profits, encouraging them to either avoid or curb their own misconduct. These three methods increase non-profits' regulatory compliance and encourage them to behave as expected. As a result, individuals are more likely to trust and have confidence in the non-profit sector, which, in turn, increases their willingness to engage in civic activities, such as charitable giving and volunteering. Based on the above conditions, we present the following hypotheses:

*H1a: Compared to no regulation, regulation increases civic engagement intention.*

*H1b: Compared to no regulation, regulation increases public trust in non-profits.*

*H1c: Public trust in non-profits plays a mediating role in the relationship between regulation and civic engagement intention. That is, compared to no regulation, regulation increases public trust in non-profits and increases civic engagement intention.*

#### *Civil regulation versus government regulation*

Civil regulation is more flexible, less antagonistic and less costly than government regulation, and it can be adopted quickly.<sup>30</sup> It also has greater credibility because third parties are external to non-profits and should not have any vested interest in them.<sup>31</sup> Because of these inherent advantages, the non-profits that join civil regulation programmes tend to have higher ratings and receive accreditation, distinguishing them from those that do not participate in such programmes and which therefore have lower ratings and no accreditation.<sup>32</sup> In other words, civil regulation allows non-profits to benefit from the value and exclusive advantages it offers; non-profits that do not meet the standards of the civil regulation programme may be expelled from the programme, receive lower ratings or no accreditation, all of which can severely damage their reputation.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the weaknesses of civil regulation are salient, the most severe of which is the lack of strong enforcement mechanisms.<sup>34</sup> Civil regulation programmes are voluntary, but only non-profits with sufficient motivation are likely to participate, creating tension between stringency and participation.<sup>35</sup> Non-profits may withdraw from a civil regulation programme if they are dissatisfied, and some influential non-profits may establish their own standards.<sup>36</sup> Although civil regulation may appear strong on paper, its monitoring activities and sanctions are too weak to ensure compliance with its standards.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, civil regulation cannot substantially improve non-profits' compliance. Moreover, as Annette Töller succinctly writes, civil regulation has "no binding rules, no role for courts, no forcible implementation by the state and sometimes no public agency at all," making it unsurprising that non-profits sometimes do not comply with civil regulation, which

29 Amirkhanyan, Meier and O'Toole, Jr 2017.

30 Gunningham and Rees 1997; Töller 2011.

31 Waarden 2011.

32 Potoski and Prakash 2011.

33 Ibid.

34 Töller 2011.

35 Potoski and Prakash 2009.

36 Boström 2006.

37 Potoski and Prakash 2011.

can result in lower public trust in and civic engagement with non-profits.<sup>38</sup> For example, using rating data from Charity Navigator, an important civil regulation organization in the United States, Rebecca Szper and Aseem Prakash found that changes in non-profits' ratings did not lead to significant changes in charitable giving to those organizations.<sup>39</sup>

Government regulation has the potential to address the weaknesses of civil regulation. Owing to its higher authority, greater reliability and stronger sanctions compared to civil regulation, government regulation can lead to higher levels of compliance, especially in China. Civil regulation is less visible and less widely recognized, and Chinese people have low levels of trust in civil institutions.<sup>40</sup> Given China's long-standing "strong government and weak society" dynamic, Chinese people are more accustomed to and more familiar with government regulation.<sup>41</sup> They may believe that government regulation ensures that non-profits comply with regulatory policies and behave as expected, leading to greater trust in non-profits and increased civic engagement intention. Furthermore, although Chinese people may be dissatisfied with the government to some degree, they still report high levels of trust in the government and may believe that government regulation of non-profits serves the public interest.<sup>42</sup> In this context, when compared to civil regulation, government regulation is perceived as more likely to ensure that non-profits behave as expected and thus it increases people's trust in non-profits and civic engagement intention. The above arguments lead us to the following hypotheses:

*H2a: Compared to civil regulation, government regulation increases civic engagement intention.*

*H2b: Compared to civil regulation, government regulation increases public trust in non-profits.*

*H2c: Public trust in non-profits plays a mediating role in the relationship between regulation and civic engagement intention. That is, compared to civil regulation, government regulation increases public trust in non-profits and increases civic engagement intention.*

### *Accommodative government regulation versus deterrent government regulation*

Government regulation does not have a single form; instead, it can be seen as a continuum that ranges from an accommodative approach to a deterrent approach.<sup>43</sup> Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Government regulation that employs a deterrent approach, also known as command-and-control regulation, is often criticized for the following shortcomings: it can be high cost, inefficient, inflexible, a constraint on regulatory discretion, resented by those it regulates, obstructive to innovation and of a low standard.<sup>44</sup> In China in particular, stringent government regulation has been found to be detrimental to the non-profit sector and may have a pernicious effect on individuals' civic engagement.<sup>45</sup>

The accommodative approach also has shortcomings, such as limited surveillance and enforcement and uncertain resources for implementation.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, the deterrent approach may promote non-profit compliance owing to its stringent sanctions.<sup>47</sup> Credible threats of enforcement lend support to the compliance outcomes of the deterrent approach, whereas the lack of powerful sanctions may lead to non-compliance under the accommodative approach. In the Chinese context, the deterrent approach may be perceived as more effective in promoting non-profit compliance

38 Töller 2011, 499.

39 Szper and Prakash 2011.

40 Yan 2009.

41 Breen, Dunn and Sidel 2016.

42 Huang, Intawan and Nicholson 2022.

43 Levi-Faur 2011.

44 Vrieliink, Montfort and Bokhorst 2011.

45 Kang 2018; Sidel 2020; Spies 2020.

46 Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen 2011.

47 Vrieliink, Montfort and Bokhorst 2011.



because, unlike Western developed countries, China has an incomplete rule of law, and there have been various instances of non-profit misconduct and scandal.<sup>48</sup> If the accommodative approach, which is flexible and soft, is used in China, the misbehaviour of non-profits may increase. In contrast, the stringent nature of the deterrent approach has the potential to reduce non-profits' misconduct and ensure their acceptable behaviour. Moreover, the general public tends to associate the Chinese government, which is often perceived as powerful and strong, with command-and-control, hard deterrent approaches. Therefore, Chinese people may believe that deterrent government regulation encourages non-profits' compliance, and this will increase their trust in non-profits and willingness to engage in charitable giving and volunteering. Based on these conditions, we propose the following hypotheses:

*H3a: Compared to accommodative government regulation, deterrent government regulation increases civic engagement intention.*

*H3b: Compared to accommodative government regulation, deterrent government regulation increases public trust in non-profits.*

*H3c: Public trust in non-profits plays a mediating role in the relationship between regulation and civic engagement intention. That is, compared to accommodative government regulation, deterrent government regulation increases public trust in non-profits and increases civic engagement intention.*

## Methodology

### Experimental design

To test the above hypotheses, we conducted a survey experiment.<sup>49</sup> A survey experiment has the advantages of survey studies in terms of external validity and generalizability and the advantages of experimental research in terms of causal inference.<sup>50</sup> It can also be used in hypothetical conditions. For example, it is impossible to simultaneously observe the “with non-profit regulation condition” and the “without non-profit regulation condition”; however, by setting specific conditions in a survey experiment, we can differentiate the effect of regulation on civic engagement intention from the effect of no regulation. This unique advantage has made the survey experiment an increasingly popular research method in a range of disciplines, such as public administration,<sup>51</sup> political science,<sup>52</sup> sociology<sup>53</sup> and non-profit studies.<sup>54</sup>

For the survey experiment in the present study, the participants were divided into four groups. Group 1 is the no-regulation group, in which participations were informed that information disclosure was voluntary for non-profits in City T and non-profits may or may not disclose information on their governance structure, revenues and expenditures, programmes and activities, and so on. Group 2 is the civil-regulation group, in which participants were informed that an authoritative third-party civil institution annually published the transparency index and corresponding transparency rating for non-profits in City T, so as to encourage non-profits' information disclosure. This scenario is based on the Foundation Transparency Index by the China Foundation Centre. Group 3 is the accommodative government-regulation group, in which participants were informed that the

48 Collins and Gottwald 2011; Shen and Wang 2009.

49 This experiment is registered on the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/b6qzy>.

50 Sniderman 2011.

51 Keiser and Miller 2020.

52 Adida 2015.

53 Jackson and Cox 2013.

54 Peng, Kim and Deat 2019.

government annually published the transparency index and corresponding transparency rating for non-profits in City T, so as to encourage non-profits' information disclosure. This is based on non-profits' evaluation by civil affairs departments. Finally, Group 4 is the deterrence government-regulation group, in which participants were informed that the government enforced regulatory policies and statutes that required non-profits to disclose information on their governance structure, revenues and expenditures, programmes and activities, and any other necessary information, otherwise they would be sanctioned and penalized. This scenario is inspired by non-profit regulation laws and statutes in China. Please see the Appendix for the detailed vignettes shown to participants.

After reading their assigned vignette, the participants were asked a manipulation check question to ensure that they understood what the vignette referred to. Then, they were asked to what extent they trusted, would donate to and would volunteer at the non-profits in City T. They also answered sociodemographic questions and questions on their philanthropic attitudes and behaviour, which are two types of factors that may be associated with trust in and engagement with non-profits.

The survey experiment was conducted in May 2023 using Credamo (<https://www.credamo.world/#/>), an online platform for collecting survey data and conducting experiments. Since this platform allows random assignment, has a wide range of potential participants and offers a variety of quality control methods, we considered it appropriate for the present study. We deployed G\*Power 3.1 to determine the minimum sample size. Using an effect size of 0.25, error probability of 0.05, power of 0.95 and four groups, we determined that at least 280 participants were needed.

### Measures

#### *Dependent variable: civic engagement intention*

This study focuses on two forms of civic engagement intention: willingness to engage in charitable giving and willingness to volunteer for non-profits. The former was measured using the following question: "Suppose Organization B is a poverty-alleviation non-profit in City T, in the context of the non-profit regulation presented to you, to what extent are you willing to donate to this non-profit?"<sup>55</sup> For the latter, the participants were asked about the extent to which they were willing to volunteer for the non-profit in the context of the non-profit regulation presented in their vignette. The responses for both items ranged from 1 to 10, with higher values indicating a greater willingness to donate or volunteer. A non-profit focusing on poverty alleviation was selected because Chinese people tend to perceive non-profits as organizations that focus on poverty alleviation and poverty alleviation is one of the three fields that receive the most donations in China (the other two being education and health).

#### *Independent variable: non-profit regulation*

Non-profit regulation was measured by comparing (a) no regulation and any form of regulation (Group 1 versus Groups 2, 3 and 4); (b) civil regulation and government regulation (Group 2 versus Groups 3 and 4); and (c) accommodative and deterrent government regulation (Group 3 versus Group 4).

<sup>55</sup> We considered our experimental design to be acceptable for several reasons. Besides mentioning poverty alleviation as its mission, we did not provide detailed information on Organization B, e.g. performance or ranking information. Some people may question the effectiveness of the experimental design because it is difficult for participants to make decisions without knowing whether Organization B is good or bad. However, Organization B is described the same way in each vignette, i.e. as a typical non-profit in City T. The only difference between the vignettes was the regulatory environment. Moreover, any potential organizational differences and confounding effects could be removed by the random assignment embedded in the experimental design.



*Mediating variable: public trust in non-profits*<sup>56</sup>

To measure the mediating variable, the participants were asked to what extent they trusted Organization B, a poverty-alleviation non-profit in City T, in the context of the non-profit regulation presented in their vignette. The responses ranged from 1 to 10, with higher values indicating greater trust in the non-profit.

*Control variables: sociodemographic information and philanthropic attitudes and behaviour*

Sociodemographic information included participants' gender, age, education, income, employment, marital status, CCP membership, household registration (*hukou* 户口), religiosity, health, happiness, generalized trust and social networks. Philanthropic attitudes and behaviour were measured according to participants' internet use regarding philanthropy, previous charitable giving, previous volunteering, perceived importance of philanthropy, knowledge of charities, trust in charities and knowledge of non-profit regulation. These variables were included as controls because they have been shown to affect civic engagement activity such as charitable giving and volunteering.<sup>57</sup> See Table 1 for the measurements of the control variables.

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

A total of 982 individuals completed the survey; however, 24 did not pass the manipulation check, 18 spent either too much or not enough time completing the survey (less than 1 per cent or longer than 99 per cent of the time spent by all participants) and 1 mistakenly reported her age as 3. These 43 respondents were removed, resulting in a study population of 939 participants.

As shown in Table 2, there were several differences between the participants and the Chinese population. For example, 34.2 per cent of the participants were male, which is lower than the nationwide estimate of 51.1 per cent in 2022. The average age of the participants was 29 years, which is younger than that of the Chinese population. The participants had an average of 16 years of education, which is higher than the estimate from nationally representative data. Party members accounted for 16.6 per cent of the study population, which is higher than a national estimate of 6.9 per cent.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, 64.0 per cent and 36.0 per cent of the participants lived in urban and rural areas, respectively, figures which are quite similar to the estimates for the Chinese population (65.2 per cent and 34.08 per cent, respectively). In summary, compared to the Chinese population, the study population had fewer men, more Party members and, on average, the participants were younger and had more education.

### *Balance check*

Before analysing the effect of regulation on civic engagement intention, it was important to conduct a balance check to ensure that the participants in the four groups were not significantly different. The majority of the *p*-values from the Kruskal-Wallis tests were greater than 0.05, indicating that most of the control variables did not significantly differ across the groups. Although education and religiosity were found to be marginally significant, the groups were balanced overall. Please

56 Public trust in non-profits can be measured using a single-item scale or a multi-item scale. Since this study focused primarily on non-profit regulation and civic engagement, and public trust was not the key variable of interest, we utilized the single-item scale to measure individuals' overall trust in non-profits.

57 See, e.g., Bekkers and Wiepking 2011; Wiepking and Bekkers 2012.

58 The authors estimated the percentage of CCP members based on the total number of CCP members and the total population in China.

**Table 1.** Measurement of Control Variables

Name	Description	Measurement
Gender	Participant's gender	0 = female, 1 = male
Age	Participant's age in years	Age in years
Education	Participant's education in years	Education in years
Income (yuan)	Participant's total income in the past year	1=50,000 and below, 2=50,000–100,000 3=100,000–200,000 4=200,000–400,000 5=400,000–700,000 6=700,000–1,000,000 7=1,000,000+
Employment	Participant has a job	0=no, 1=yes
Marital status	Participant is married	0=no, 1=yes
Party membership	Participant is a CCP member	0=no, 1=yes
Household registration	Rural or urban household registration	0=rural, 1=urban
Religiosity	Participant has a religious belief	0=no, 1=yes
Health	Participant's self-rated health status	1 (very unhealthy)–10 (very healthy)
Happiness	Participant's self-rated life happiness	1 (very unhappy)–10 (very happy)
Generalized trust	Participant agrees that most people can be trusted	1 (strongly disagree)–10 (strongly agree)
Social networks	Frequency of interaction with neighbours, relatives and friends	1 (very unusual)–10 (very usual)
Internet use	Frequency of reading information on non-profits or philanthropy on the internet	1 (very unusual)–10 (very usual)
Previous giving (yuan)	The amount of charitable giving in the past 12 months	Log transformation of the amount
Previous volunteering (hr)	The duration of volunteering in non-profits in the past 12 months	Log transformation of the time period
Importance of philanthropy	Whether participant agrees that philanthropy is important	1 (very unimportant)–10 (very important)
Knowledge of charities	Participant has knowledge of charities in China	1 (least)–10 (most)
Trust in charities	Participant trusts charities in China	1 (strongly distrust)–10 (strongly trust)
Knowledge of charity regulation	Participant has knowledge of charity regulation in China	1 (least)–10 (most)

note that we utilized the Kruskal-Wallis test rather than analysis of variance because the assumptions of the latter were strongly violated.<sup>59</sup> Following the same logic, the Kruskal-Wallis test was also used for the univariate analysis, which is described below.

59 In addition to the Kruskal-Wallis test, we conducted balance checks using the equivalence test. Owing to space limitations, we have not reported the detailed results. Since the results rejected the null hypothesis regarding the differences in the covariates between the groups, the groups were considered balanced overall.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics (N=939)

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
Trust in the non-profit sector	7.000	2.098	1	10
Charitable giving	7.037	2.300	1	10
Volunteering time	6.986	2.104	1	10
Gender	0.342	0.475	0	1
Age	29.226	7.165	18	60
Education	16.106	1.356	6	22
Income	2.347	1.034	1	7
Employment	0.822	0.383	0	1
Marital status	0.517	0.500	0	1
Party membership	0.166	0.372	0	1
Household registration	0.640	0.480	0	1
Religiosity	0.112	0.315	0	1
Health	7.741	1.277	2	10
Happiness	7.618	1.39	1	10
Generalized trust	6.987	1.569	1	10
Social networks	6.353	1.863	1	10
Internet use	6.342	1.881	1	10
Previous giving (yuan)	879.135	3662.296	0	100000
Previous volunteering (hr)	33.244	95.781	0	2000
Importance of philanthropy	8.154	1.259	3	10
Knowledge of charities	6.407	1.838	1	10
Trust in charities	7.106	1.704	1	10
Knowledge of charity regulation	5.727	2.218	1	10

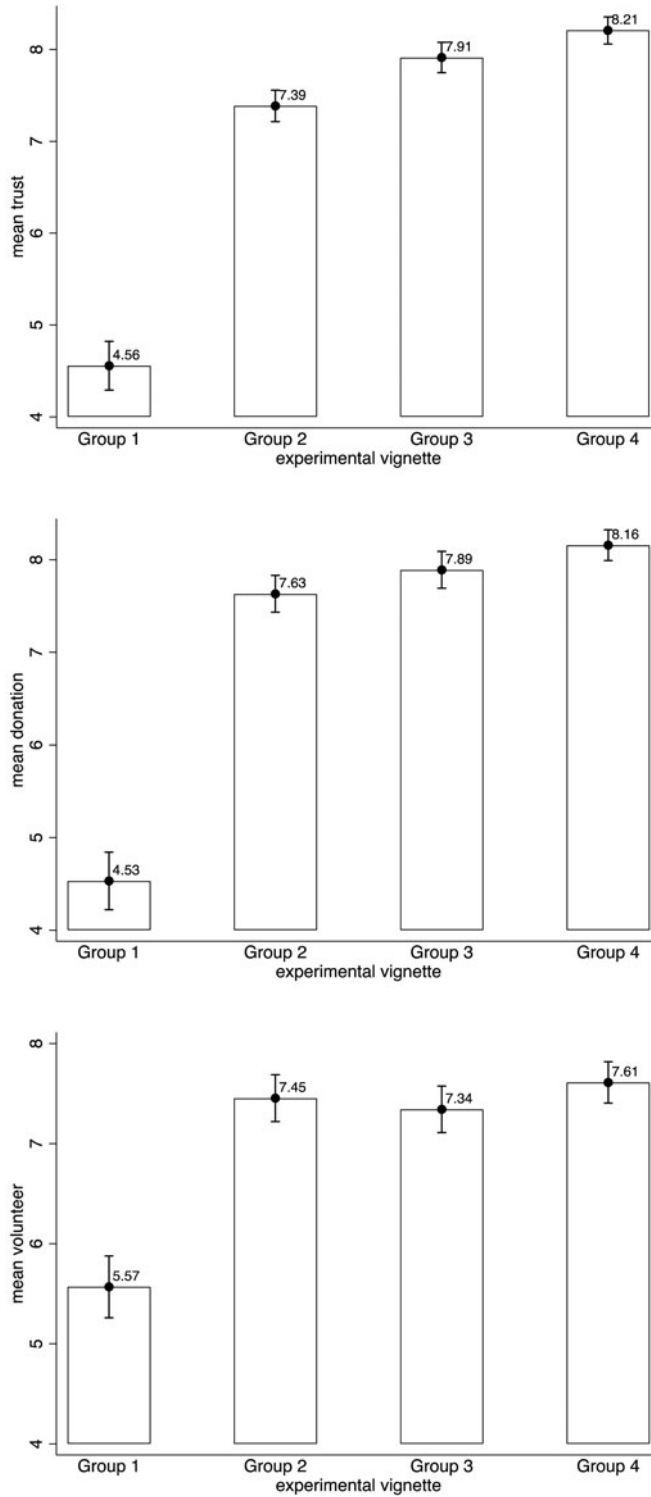
### Univariate analysis

Figure 1 shows the average level of trust in the non-profit sector as well as the charitable giving willingness and volunteering willingness of the four groups. We also tested whether the differences between the groups were statistically significant. The results indicate that the differences between the three regulation groups and the no regulation group are significant. Specifically, trust, charitable giving willingness and volunteer willingness are significantly higher in the three regulation groups than in the no regulation group.

In addition, the differences between the effects of civil regulation and both types of government regulation are statistically significant for trust and charitable giving willingness but not for volunteer willingness. Likewise, the differences between the effects for accommodative and deterrent government regulation are statistically significant for trust and charitable giving willingness but not for volunteering willingness.

### Multivariable analysis

As shown in the balance check, although the majority of the controls were balanced between the groups, significant differences were found for two controls. To reduce the confounding effects of



**Figure 1.** Average Trust, Charitable Giving and Volunteering among the Four Groups.

*Notes:* Group 1 refers to the no-regulation group, Group 2 is the civil-regulation group, Group 3 is the accommodative government-regulation group, and Group 4 the deterrent government-regulation group.

**Table 3.** Ordinal Logistic Regression Results of the Effect of Regulation on Civic Engagement

	Charitable Giving	Volunteering Time	Trust in Non-profits
<i>Hypothesis 1</i>			
Group 1 vs Group 2	20.220*** (4.398)	5.023*** (0.939)	22.197*** (4.706)
Group 1 vs Group 3	4.855*** (0.520)	2.159*** (0.201)	6.816*** (0.816)
Group 1 vs Group 4	3.232*** (0.247)	1.794*** (0.113)	4.152*** (0.363)
<i>Hypothesis 2</i>			
Group 2 vs Group 3	1.399+ (0.245)	0.886 (0.159)	2.431*** (0.434)
Group 2 vs Group 4	1.455*** (0.124)	1.061 (0.096)	2.146*** (0.201)
<i>Hypothesis 3</i>			
Group 3 vs Group 4	1.570* (0.283)	1.331 (0.237)	1.941*** (0.353)

Notes: + $p < 0.1$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Odds ratio reported in the table. Robust standard errors reported in the parentheses. All the control variables are included in the above models.

the control variables, we ran multivariate regression models that included all control variables. Since trust, charitable giving willingness and volunteering willingness are ordinal variables, we deployed a series of ordinal logistic regressions to examine the impacts of different regulatory instruments on trust and civic engagement intention.<sup>60</sup> The results are reported in Table 3.

Relative to no regulation, the participants in the three regulation groups were more willing to trust, donate to and volunteer for non-profits. Relative to civil regulation, the participants in the two government regulation groups were more willing to trust and donate to non-profits but might not have been significantly more willing to volunteer at non-profits. Likewise, the participants in the deterrent government regulation group were more willing to trust and donate to non-profits, while the effect on their willingness to volunteer was not significant. Thus, the results of the multivariate and univariate analyses are similar.

Overall, these results demonstrate that, in terms of stimulating trust, charitable giving and volunteering, regulation is better than no regulation and government regulation is better than civil regulation. In addition, deterrent government regulation is better than accommodative government regulation in stimulating trust and charitable giving.

This study also explored the mediating role of trust in the relationship between regulation and civic engagement intention. The generalized structural equation model results are presented in Table 4. Compared to no regulation, civil regulation leads to greater trust in non-profits (odds ratio = 22.197,  $p < 0.001$ ), and trust in non-profits increases charitable giving willingness (odds ratio = 5.099,  $p < 0.001$ ). The odds ratio for the effect of civil regulation on charitable giving willingness decreases from 20.220 when excluding trust to 2.106 when including trust; however, the effect when including trust remains significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). These results indicate that trust in non-profits partially mediates the relationship between civil regulation (compared to no regulation) and charitable giving willingness. The partial or full mediating role of trust in non-profits can also be

60 We also used the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to test the effects of regulation on trust and civic engagement intention. The results did not significantly differ from the ordinal logistic regression results.

**Table 4.** Mediating Role of Trust in Non-profits

	Charitable Giving	Volunteering Time	Trust in Non-profits
<i>Hypothesis 1</i>			
Civil regulation (ref: no regulation)	2.016** (0.485)	0.908 (0.222)	22.197*** (4.706)
Trust in non-profits	5.099*** (0.538)	2.110*** (0.168)	--
Accommodative government regulation (ref: no regulation)	1.164 (0.143)	0.713* (0.099)	6.816*** (0.816)
Trust in non-profits	4.921*** (0.510)	2.174*** (0.168)	--
Deterrent government regulation (ref: no regulation)	1.138 (0.109)	0.777** (0.071)	4.152*** (0.363)
Trust in non-profits	4.666*** (0.428)	2.303*** (0.178)	--
<i>Hypothesis 2</i>			
Accommodative government regulation (ref: civil regulation)	1.399+ (0.245)	0.886 (0.159)	2.431*** (0.434)
Trust in non-profits	3.996*** (0.526)	0.679* (0.126)	--
Deterrent government regulation (ref: civil regulation)	1.010 (0.095)	0.930 (0.078)	2.146*** (0.201)
Trust in non-profits	3.658*** (0.446)	1.900*** (0.200)	--
<i>Hypothesis 3</i>			
Deterrent government regulation (ref: accommodative government regulation)	1.138 (0.216)	1.123 (0.204)	1.941*** (0.353)
Trust in non-profits	3.536*** (0.405)	1.901*** (0.204)	--

Notes: +p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001. Odds ratio reported in the table. Robust standard errors reported in the parentheses.

found in other forms of regulation and civic engagement intention. These results suggest that various regulatory instruments might affect individuals' trust in non-profits, which, in turn, affects aspects of civic engagement, such as charitable giving and volunteering.

## Discussion and Conclusion

There are a variety of non-profit regulatory instruments addressing information disclosure and transparency in China, including government regulation and civil regulation. However, previous studies have not shed light on which one has the most public support or is the most effective at enhancing aspects of civic engagement such as charitable giving and volunteering. To address this gap, the present study conducted a survey experiment to compare how four types of regulation impact civic engagement intention in China.

The findings show that, compared to no regulation addressing information disclosure and transparency, regulatory instruments significantly increase participants' trust in and willingness to donate to and volunteer at non-profit organizations in China. Well-functioning non-profit regulation is expected to serve the public interest and has the potential to reduce non-profits' misconduct



by setting standards, monitoring activities and sanctioning wrongdoing.<sup>61</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that our experimental results show that non-profit regulation, as opposed to no regulation, has positive effects on trust, charitable giving willingness and volunteering willingness. These findings highlight the importance of building regulatory systems for non-profit organizations. Although the non-profit sector is characterized as being structurally separate from the instrumentalities of governments<sup>62</sup> and should not be subjected to extensive government intervention, our findings suggest that civil or government regulation can serve as a potential policy tool to enhance public trust in non-profit organizations and civic engagement intention. Regulation addressing information disclosure and transparency is necessary and urgently required in China, given the frequent non-profit scandals, the low level of public trust in non-profits, the low level of charitable giving and the small number of non-profit volunteers.

The findings also show that government regulation targeting information disclosure and transparency is more effective than civil regulation at promoting trust and charitable giving willingness. However, no significant differences were found between the effects of government and civil regulation on volunteering willingness. Regarding government regulation, the deterrent approach to addressing information disclosure and transparency was found to be more effective than the accommodative approach in stimulating trust in non-profits and charitable giving willingness. However, these approaches did not show significant differences in their effects on volunteering willingness. Although our findings indicate that regulation is more effective than no regulation at stimulating volunteering willingness, we found no significant differences between civil regulation, accommodative government regulation and deterrent government regulation in their effects on volunteering willingness. A possible reason for these results may be the inherent differences between charitable giving and volunteering. Donating to non-profit organizations is relatively quick and easy, especially with the development of online charitable giving mechanisms. Therefore, a regulatory instrument that enhances non-profit compliance and public trust in non-profits can easily lead to charitable giving. In contrast, volunteering requires more time and effort, so factors such as lack of time might impede volunteering willingness, even if a regulatory instrument enhances non-profit compliance and public trust in non-profits.

Meanwhile, public trust in non-profits significantly mediates the relationship between regulation addressing information disclosure and transparency and civic engagement intention. Public trust in non-profits is an important antecedent of aspects of civic engagement like charitable giving and volunteering.<sup>63</sup> The findings show that regulation produces greater trust in non-profits than no regulation, government regulation, more than civil regulation, increases trust in non-profits, and a deterrent approach generates more trust in non-profits than an accommodative approach. These findings indicate that regulation that addresses information disclosure and transparency has a direct effect on public trust in non-profits, which, in turn, affects civic engagement intention.

Overall, our findings lend support to the following preferences of the public regarding regulation on the information disclosure and transparency of non-profit organizations in China: regulation is preferred to no regulation, and deterrent government regulation is preferred to accommodative government regulation, which is preferred to civil regulation. Non-profit regulation is a multidimensional field. While this experimental study focuses primarily on non-profit regulation on information disclosure, our findings can also be extrapolated to other aspects of non-profit regulation, such as fundraising practices, conflicts of interest and governance structures. For instance, the public's preference for government regulation likely extends to ensuring that non-profit organizations behave ethically in their fundraising efforts, clearly disclose where donations go and avoid deceptive or misleading practices. Similarly, government regulations aimed at preventing conflicts of interest

61 Brito and Dudley 2012.

62 Anheier 2014.

63 Chapman, Hornsey and Gillespie 2021; Wang and Graddy 2008.

and ensuring board diversity and accountability would likely resonate with the public's desire for a well-governed and ethical non-profit sector.

However, government regulation, particularly the deterrent approach, has been strongly criticized for its weaknesses, such as high costs.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, non-profit-oriented regulatory instruments, such as self-regulation and third-party regulation, are more popular and prioritized in both the literature and non-profit practices.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, long-term involvement of government regulation may crowd out self-regulation and civil regulation and thereby hinder the healthy development of the non-profit sector and civil society as a whole in China.<sup>66</sup> In this context, regulation is viewed as a managerial instrument and often used as a form of political control. Government regulation that is too stringent can be detrimental to the development and survival of the non-profit sector and hinder individuals' civic engagement in China.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, Party building, a required political task for all non-profits in China, has become a crucial aspect of Chinese non-profit control measures in recent years.<sup>68</sup> The combination of stringent government regulation and Party building is damaging to the non-profit sector and hinders civic engagement in China. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that Chinese people have more trust in non-profit organizations and more civic engagement intention in a context where there is government regulation, particularly a deterrent approach to regulation.

This study has several important practical implications. First, since the findings indicate that regulation is preferred to no regulation, and that non-profit regulation addressing transparency and disclosure plays an important role in stimulating public trust and civic engagement intention in non-profits, it is important that the Chinese government and civil institutions develop non-profit regulation. Second, even though government regulation has always been criticized in China, the findings show that government regulation addressing transparency and disclosure produces more trust and civic engagement intention than civil regulation. Therefore, although both the government and civil institutions can play regulatory roles, government regulation should be prioritized in the Chinese context. Third, government regulation addressing transparency and disclosure in China may take accommodative or deterrent forms, but the deterrent approach should take priority as our findings suggest that it produces more trust and civic engagement intention than the accommodative approach. Although non-profit researchers and practitioners often complain about excessive intervention and political control by the CCP and the Chinese government, the study participants preferred deterrent government regulation, indicating that the general public believes that government regulation of non-profits' information disclosure, especially through the deterrent approach, is necessary.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The first concerns data and measurement. Since the characteristics of the study participants are not representative of the Chinese population, caution is recommended when interpreting and generalizing the findings. Because of the weaknesses of the survey experiment approach, the key variables of interest – charitable giving and volunteering willingness – were measured based on the participants' self-reported results rather than actual behaviour. The existence of intention-behaviour gaps might bias the findings. That said, the theory of planned behaviour, as proposed by Icek Ajzen, argues that considerable variance in actual behaviour can be explained by intentions, so civic engagement intentions can still shed light on civic engagement behaviour.<sup>69</sup> Second, there were shortcomings in our experimental design. Although we informed respondents that poverty alleviation was Organization B's mission, we did not provide detailed information about the organization, such as its performance or ranking.

64 Feldman 2011.

65 Breen, Dunn and Sidel 2016; Gugerty and Prakash 2010.

66 Breen, Dunn and Sidel 2016.

67 Kang 2018; Sidel 2020; Spies 2020.

68 Cai, Liu and Jiang 2023; Nie and Wu 2022; Thornton 2013; 2022.

69 Ajzen 1991.

While we consider this design to be acceptable because Organization B represented a typical non-profit in City T and the random assignment embedded in the experimental design could remove the confounding effects of the organizational information, we must acknowledge that it is a design limitation and recommend caution when interpreting the results. Regarding the third limitation, we empirically tested four regulatory instruments but did not consider others, such as self-regulation and hybrid regulation.<sup>70</sup> The inclusion of additional instruments in future research could yield more comprehensive insights into the public's preferences regarding non-profit regulation. Moreover, since regulatory instruments such as civil regulation are not uniform, future research could obtain more nuanced evidence through in-depth explorations of each type of regulation. For example, researchers could use Aseem Prakash and Mary Kay Gugerty's division of civil regulation into four types based on lenient/stringent standards and weak/strong monitoring and enforcement.<sup>71</sup>

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70 Breen, Dunn and Sidel 2016.

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## Appendix

### Experimental vignettes

Disclosing information on governance structure, revenues and expenditures, programmes and activities, and other relevant information contributes to public trust in non-profits and non-profits' mission achievement.

#### Group 1: No regulation

Information disclosure is completely voluntary in City T. Non-profits can choose to disclose or not to disclose governance structure, revenues and expenditures, programmes and activities, and other relevant information.

#### Group 2: Civil regulation

An authoritative third-party institution annually publishes the transparency index and corresponding transparency ranking of non-profits in City T, so as to encourage non-profits to disclose information on governance structure, revenues and expenditures, programmes and activities, and other relevant information. Non-profits with a lower transparency ranking may not have a good reputation.

#### Group 3: Accommodative government regulation

The government annually publishes the transparency index and corresponding transparency ranking of non-profits in City T, so as to encourage non-profits to disclose information on governance structure, revenues and expenditures, programmes and activities, and other relevant information. Non-profits with lower transparency ranking may not have a good reputation.

#### Group 4: Deterrent government regulation

The government enforces regulatory policies and statutes that require non-profits to disclose information on governance structure, revenues and expenditures, programmes and activities, and other relevant information. Non-profits violating information disclosure requirements will be severely sanctioned and penalized.

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