

Nonprofits as Civic Intermediaries

The Role of Community-Based Organizations in Promoting Political Participation

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Nonprofit organizations have a long-standing tradition of advocacy on behalf of their clients, particularly those that comprise underrepresented groups. However, much less is known about the roles these institutions play in empowering citizens to become active participants in the political process. This research note examines the efforts of nonprofit organizations to facilitate voting and contacting of public officials by their clientele. Results from this analysis suggest that social-service nonprofits located in urban areas are significantly more likely to encourage both voting and contacting. Findings also suggest that government funding has a positive and consistent effect on nonprofits' efforts to promote both of these forms of participation.

Keywords: *nonprofits; political participation; civic engagement; minority incorporation*

Nonprofit organizations are widely recognized as institutions essential to civil society (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 1997). Nonprofits assume a vast variety of forms, including voluntary associations, interest groups, and social-service agencies, all of which serve as important vehicles for civic engagement. As lobbying organizations, nonprofits have long been recognized as integral parts of the federal policy-making process. In the contemporary era of devolution, however, community-based nonprofit organizations are playing increasingly important and complex roles in American cities and local communities. Nonprofits located in urban areas are especially recognized as having adopted a diverse array of social, economic, and political functions that traditionally have been reserved for other sectors and other types of institutions (Hula and Jackson-Elmoore 2000).

Much of the attention that has been directed toward the political activity of nonprofits has focused on the advocacy roles carried out by these organizations. Social-service organizations in particular are thought to serve as a public voice for their clientele, many of whom lack access to political institutions or do not have the requisite knowledge or skills to participate in politics on their own (Berry and Arons 2003). A number of empirical studies related to nonprofit advocacy suggest that charitable organizations do indeed engage in a wide range of activities designed to influence public policy on behalf of their clients, including testifying before legislative bodies, lobbying on behalf of or against proposed social-welfare legislation, and informally talking and meeting with policy makers about their organizations and the needs of their service population (Berry and Arons 2003; Ezell 1991; Pawlak and Flynn 1990).

Previous studies of nonprofits' political activities have emphasized the activities these organizations undertake on behalf of underrepresented groups, overshadowing attention to the ways in which nonprofits facilitate active engagement in political processes among their clients. Hula and Jackson-Elmoore (2001) initiated a move beyond the advocacy conception of nonprofits' political activities by demonstrating that certain types of nonprofits can serve as effective mediums for incorporating African-American citizens into the local policy-making process, thereby contributing to a local governing regime that reflects a greater balance of interests. These "governing nonprofits" are described as "formal organizations that provide a platform for restructuring local political processes and/or agendas" (Hula and Jackson-Elmoore 2001, 35). Through case studies of two organizations in the city of Detroit, these authors demonstrate that nonprofits can serve as effective alternatives to traditional political institutions.

In a similar fashion, Clarke (2000) argued that institutions shape the political identities of individuals and groups. Drawing on the work of March and Olsen (1995) and Jones (1994), Clarke poses the question of whether nonprofits create communities of interest and otherwise promote political identities that encourage individuals to act as democratic citizens (Clarke 2000). Nonprofits promote civic awareness and stimulate activity on the part of their clients by functioning as intermediaries between their clients and the larger political structure, and thus, they may be particularly well suited to promoting participation by underrepresented groups.

It is clear that participation in American politics is greater among those with adequate resources of time, money, and education (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Given the limits of traditional political institutions in overcoming the participation disparities among the wealthy and the poor, critical

questions arise about the efforts of nonprofits to counter this imbalance: Do community-based nonprofits attempt to develop the political identities of their clients by promoting voting and facilitating their contact with public officials?¹ Are nonprofits situated in urban areas more inclined toward these activities? What types of organizational characteristics contribute to such efforts?

This research note addresses these questions, building directly on findings from the existing case-based research of Hula and Jackson-Elmoore (2001) and Hula, Jackson-Elmoore, and Orr (1997). This study overcomes some of the limitations of the previous work by offering a larger-scale empirical test of the political activities performed by nonprofits. Moreover, it examines two forms of activity that have been overlooked in previous studies: organizational efforts to facilitate voting and the frequency with which nonprofits link clients to public officials. Lastly, this study is not limited by a conceptual definition of nonprofits as advocacy organizations or “governing nonprofits,” but rather, it encompasses a range of community-based nonprofits to include social-service providers, arts and cultural institutions, local civic clubs, and community groups organized around a variety of neighborhood interests. All of these nonprofits are alike in that they exist for a primary purpose other than political activity, but as public-interest organizations, they maintain a commitment to advancing their particular social cause as a secondary goal.

Although limited to a single state, this analysis represents an initial step toward addressing these significant gaps in the literature related to nonprofits’ political activities. Michigan provides an excellent context in which to examine nonprofits as civic intermediaries as it is home to several urban areas that are heavily populated with nonprofits, including the city of Detroit, which has one of the highest rates of poverty among central cities in the country (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

Institutional Alternatives: Local Nonprofits as Civic Intermediaries

Nonprofits represent alternative institutional forms to those born of the market and the state. As such, they are characterized by a distinct set of properties that suggest they are uniquely equipped to function as civic intermediaries. Use of voluntary labor, dedicated adherence to mission, flexibility and innovation in addressing social problems, and the capacity to satisfy minority preferences are some of the features that define the nonprofit sector and lend to nonprofits’ potential as civic intermediaries.

Theories of nonprofit existence provide important frameworks for understanding how nonprofits might function in a mediating capacity, linking citizens to the political system. Salamon's "partnership" theory (1995) contends that the relationship between government and nonprofits is a complementary one that is both necessary and desirable. Government funding provides the resources for nonprofits to expand their capacity, while government is able to capitalize on the resources of nonprofits, including voluntary labor, flexibility, and creative programs, that are often difficult to implement in rule-bound public bureaucracies.

On the other hand, government funding may complicate nonprofits' political-empowerment activities. Organizational leaders may be reluctant to mobilize clients and members, fearing unfavorable consequences related to political support and funding levels. Clarke (2000), for example, reports findings of a negative relationship between government funding and nonprofits' political-empowerment activities. Leaders who perceive their organizations as having greater autonomy may be more likely to promote political activity. Hula and Jackson-Elmoore (2001) found that when nonprofit leaders become too closely aligned with local political leaders and structures, co-optation and goal displacement can occur.

Another factor suggesting that nonprofits may be especially well suited for engaging underrepresented groups in the political process is their tendency to form around specialized populations and interests. Reid (1999) suggests that "identity-based" nonprofits, those formed on the basis of a particular group identity such as race or ethnicity, commonly engender political activism that advances the groups' shared interest. Similarly, many nonprofits are formed according to religious values and missions. By mobilizing clients of a particular identity, such as those of a particular religious persuasion, organizations may hope to influence political decision makers to produce policy outcomes that are consistent with the group's interests.

African-American leadership has been studied among a range of political institutions, including local elected office, municipal employment (Eisinger 1982), and advisory boards and commissions (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984) and has been found to be less than wholly effective in incorporating minority interests. Thus, it is important to examine minority leadership in alternative institutions such as nonprofits. The political interests of minorities and other underrepresented groups might be better served when organizational leadership mirrors the demographics of the community served (Krislov 1974). The findings from Hula and Jackson-Elmoore's (2001) Detroit case studies suggest that African-American-led governing nonprofits operate from an activist approach, and

it is possible that such a political-action orientation extends to other types of nonprofits.

Whether they provide services, lobby, or deliver some other social good, all nonprofits share a common feature in that they exist to fulfill a mission. Nonprofits serve to provide an organizing structure for groups of citizens who have a shared interest, whether it be the elderly, persons with AIDS, or defenders of women's rights. For some persons, these organizations may serve as their primary link to society. Social-service-providing agencies that typically count many poor among their clientele represent the only link for some. During the reform era, early pioneers of social-welfare provision sought to mobilize the poor politically, believing that engaging these persons in the process of democratic citizenship was the key to mitigating their circumstances. Among all nonprofit types, social-service organizations are the ones most likely to promote political participation, because they are the most likely to be poor-serving (Salamon 1995), and they are also the most likely to have sustained relationships with their clientele during the period of time it may take to engage people in political processes.

The fact that nonprofits register their clients to vote and encourage them to vote in elections does not necessarily translate into greater turnout at the polls. However, one study indicates that nearly 70% of those who became registered to vote by volunteers in welfare and food-stamp offices voted in the presidential election (National Coalition for the Homeless 2004). Similarly, assisting service recipients in the process of contacting their elected officials does not necessarily translate into policy outputs that will benefit the persons or groups in question. While data are not available to examine these questions here, this study provides a starting point from which to assess the viability of nonprofits as civic intermediaries by examining the priority given by these institutions to increasing participation among their clients.

Method

The data used in this analysis were collected during the early summer of 2004 through a series of mail surveys to the executive directors of nonprofit organizations in Michigan. The surveys were timed to reach the organizations about five months before the 2004 elections, when voluntary organizations might begin to gear up for get-out-the-vote activities. The sample of organizations was drawn randomly from a database compiled by the Michigan Office of Attorney General, the state agency that maintains a listing of all licensed charities in the state of Michigan.²

From the Michigan Attorney General's database, 231 community-based nonprofits³ were randomly selected, 197 of which were ultimately included in the sample.⁴ The method for administering the survey followed from the Tailored Design Method (Dillman 2000). During the course of three mailings, responses were received from 119 of the 197 organizations, constituting a total response rate of 60%. Because the surveys were addressed to executive directors, the nonprofit equivalent of a chief executive officer, it is assumed that these persons or a delegate in close proximity to this position completed the questionnaire. The responses, thus, are presumed to come from top leadership speaking to the practices and activities of the organization as a whole.

Measurement and Hypotheses

Two aspects of nonprofits' political activities are examined as dependent variables to explore the efforts of these organizations to increase political participation among their constituencies. The first variable measures nonprofit efforts to encourage voting. Organizational activity related to voting may occur on an ongoing basis, but it is more likely that attention and activity related to this matter increase around election times. Therefore, survey questions related to voter promotion were worded to determine the relative effort devoted to these activities by the organization rather than the frequency with which the activities occur. The voting variable is a combination of three measures ($\alpha = .803$) consisting of responses to the following questions: "To what extent does your organization prioritize getting clients/members to become registered voters?", "To what extent does your organization make it a priority to remind clients to vote in elections?", and "To what extent does your organization make it a priority to provide transportation to polling locations during elections?" All responses to these questions are measured on a scale from 0 to 4, with 0 being *none* and 4 being *high priority*.

Contacting of elected officials is another way that citizens can participate in the political system. While encouraging clients to make contact with public officials may be an effective mobilization strategy, clients that are at a disadvantage for participation by lack of education and resources may require assistance with these activities from nonprofit personnel and volunteers. The second dependent variable examined here combines three measures of nonprofit efforts to link their clients with public officials ($\alpha = .815$). These three measures are responses to the following questions: "How often

does your organization link clients/members to legislative offices or elected officials?”, “How often does your organization encourage clients to attend public hearings or meetings?”, and finally, “How often does your organization provide transportation for clients to government meetings?” All responses are measured on a scale from 0 to 4, with 0 representing *never* and 4 representing *high frequency*.

Seven factors are examined as predictors of the nonprofits’ political-empowerment efforts, two of which are related to organizational leadership. These seven variables include percent of the population that is African-American in the city in which the organization is located, minority leadership on the board of directors, leadership perception of decision-making autonomy, government funding, ratio of paid professional staff to volunteers, whether or not the organization has a social-service mission, and whether or not the organization is religiously affiliated.

The percentage Black of the population of the city in which the organization is located is included to examine variation among nonprofits located in urban areas versus nonurban areas.⁵ If nonprofits encourage voting and contacting among their clientele to increase participation by the underrepresented, then nonprofits located in urban areas should be those most likely to engage in the activities examined here. Urban nonprofits may be especially inclined to focus efforts on promoting political participation by their clients, because voter turnout rates are likely to be lower than average in these areas.⁶ Directly related to the urban hypothesis, the extent to which an organization is led by minorities is included as another predictor. Minority leadership is measured by the percentage of the board of directors composed by African-Americans.

When leaders believe their organizations to be highly autonomous, they are more likely to be politically active. Perception of autonomy is measured through an index created from six questions asking respondents to indicate, on a scale of 0 to 4, how much internal control they felt organizational leadership (management and board) had over the following matters: setting and carrying out organizational mission, client or member eligibility, where the organization’s funding comes from, general operating procedures, qualifications and training required of staff and volunteers, and starting up new programs or services ($\alpha = .823$).

Government funding is measured as a percentage of the organization’s total budget and is tested as a nondirectional hypothesis. Since the political activities examined are indirect or secondary goals rather than the primary focus of the organization, organizations with greater supplies of voluntary labor are thought better equipped to carry out these activities. Thus, it is

Table 1
Factors Explaining Nonprofits' Commitment to
Ensuring That Clients or Members Vote

Variable	Hypothesized Direction	<i>B</i>	Standard Error	<i>T</i> -score
Percent population Black	+	.003**	.001	2.269
Black leadership (board)	+	.001	.001	.694
Decision-making autonomy	+	.114	.153	.744
Government funding	±	.002***	.001	3.126
Ratio paid/voluntary labor	-	-.001	.000	-1.243
Social-service organization	+	.083**	.042	1.987
Religious affiliation	+	.033	.052	.634
Constant		-.054	.113	-.474

Note: *R*-squared = .384; adjusted *R*-squared = .330; probability < .0001; *n* = 119.

p* < .10; *p* < .05; ****p* < .01.

expected that as the proportion of paid to unpaid staff increases, organizational efforts to promote political participation decrease. Dummy variables were included in each of the analyses for mission and religious affiliation, coded 1 if the organization is a social-service provider and 0 if not and coded similarly if the organization has a religious affiliation or not. Organizations that meet these criteria are expected to place a greater premium on promoting participation.

Findings

Ordinary least squares regression was used to examine the significance of the factors thought to contribute to the two types of political activity by nonprofits. The first part examines factors thought to lend to nonprofit efforts to facilitate voting. Table 1 displays the findings from this analysis.

Significance of the Black population variable indicates that nonprofits located in Michigan's urban areas were indeed more likely to make it a priority to encourage their clients to vote. The findings, however, do not provide support for the hypothesis that minority agency leadership plays any role in these activities. While African-American leadership is positively correlated with the voting variable ($r = .39$), this relationship loses significance after controlling for total Black population of the city in which the organization is located.

Table 2
Factors Explaining How Frequently Nonprofits Link
Their Clients or Members to Public Officials

Variable	Hypothesized Direction	<i>B</i>	Standard Error	<i>T</i> -score
Percent population Black	+	.002**	.001	1.961
Black leadership (board)	+	-.002	.001	-1.277
Decision-making autonomy	+	-.281*	.159	-1.769
Government funding	±	.002**	.001	2.625
Ratio paid/voluntary labor	-	.000	.001	-.342
Social-service organization	+	.102**	.044	2.301
Religious affiliation	+	-.105*	.057	-1.842
Constant		.265**	.117	2.268

Note: *R*-squared = .281; adjusted *R*-squared = .213; probability < .0001; *n* = 119.

p* < .10; *p* < .05; ****p* < .01.

The results also demonstrate the existence of a positive relationship between government funding and nonprofit voter activity. As the proportion of nonprofits' budget that comes from government increases, so does the likelihood that the organization will make concerted efforts to promote voting among its clients. Perception of autonomy is positive but does not appear to have an impact on nonprofits' decisions to engage in activities related to voting. Results also reveal support for the hypothesis that social-service organizations are more likely to promote voting, but these efforts are not necessarily the responsibility of volunteers.

The second form of political activity examined in this analysis is the frequency with which nonprofits facilitate client contact with legislative offices and participation in public forums by linking clients to these structures. Findings from this analysis are presented in Table 2.

All of the same factors that lend to nonprofits' voter activities are also effective predictors of nonprofits' tendencies to promote contacting. When a nonprofit is a social-service organization located in a city with a larger Black population and receives higher proportions of its funding from government, the organization is significantly more likely to make efforts to link clients to public officials and forums.

Perception of organizational autonomy is also significant, but counter to prediction, it is negatively related to nonprofits' efforts to facilitate contacting. While data are not available here to explain this counterintuitive finding, one possibility may be that organizations are required in some way to facilitate

theses linkages as a mandate of their contract with the issuing public agency. Some organizations accepting government funds are required to educate users of their service about due-process rights and mechanisms for grievances and appeals. Thus, while nonprofits may facilitate clients' linkages to government officials and public forums with the outcome of incorporating their clients into the political process, this finding suggests that their motivation for doing so is less clear.

Lastly, some unexpected findings about religious affiliation materialize in this analysis. Religion is significant but negative rather than positive, suggesting that secular organizations are more likely to link clients to public officials than are those that operate from a faith base. One plausible explanation for the disinclination of faith-based organizations to encourage contacting is that they are reluctant to attract negative attention to their organization by political leaders who have the power to influence funding. Leaders of religious nonprofits that receive public money may be reacting to criticisms that government funding of faith-based programs poses a threat to separation of church and state.

Discussion and Implications

This analysis was designed to provide a preliminary assessment of nonprofits' potential to function as civic intermediaries, linking the interests of citizen-clients to the state through organizational efforts to promote active political participation. The results from this analysis tentatively suggest that nonprofits do exhibit potential as civic intermediaries in some ways. Specifically, not-for-profit organizations may represent promising avenues for enhancing the prospects of both voting and contacting among social-service recipients in urban areas. The racial composition of the community clearly plays a role in determining the propensity of nonprofits' political activity and points to an important line for future research on the political impact of urban nonprofits.

If achieving elected office and engaging in protest politics represent opposite ends of the spectrum for incorporating the underrepresented into politics, nonprofits may serve to bridge the divide between the mainstream and the radical. Rather than discourage nonprofits' roles as civic intermediaries, government funding appears to be a clear and consistent enabler of these functions. When an organization relies heavily on government funding to carry out its mission, political mobilization activities seem to become an institutionalized practice of nonprofits. While government funding has a demonstrable effect on nonprofit efforts to promote political participation, the motivations of these organizations for mobilizing their clients are much

less clear. Nonprofits' diminished sense of autonomy when it comes to linking clients to public officials suggests that organizations may do this as a requirement of their government funding. Also, the finding that faith-based organizations are less inclined to encourage contacting may be a sign that government funding mediates particularistic values (Salamon 1995).

Politically empowered citizens engage in many activities including educating and informing oneself about political candidates and issues, volunteering for campaigns and civic organizations, serving on boards and committees, and so on. Some of these activities are undertaken in concert with voting and contacting. Nonprofits may use additional strategies to equip clients and members for civic participation. They may offer discussion forums, educate clients by providing politically relevant information, inform clients of proposed legislation that affects them, or impart information on matters of legal entitlement. Future studies will need to examine these and other politically oriented activities undertaken by nonprofit agencies before their capacity as civic intermediaries can be fully understood.

Notes

1. The 1993 Voter Registration Act provides the enabling legislation for nonprofits to engage in voter registration efforts. Section 7B of this law, also known as the "motor voter" act, encourages all nongovernmental entities to register their clients to vote (Independent Sector 2004). While there is no comparable statutory provision for get-out-the-vote activities, encouraging clients to vote in elections is a common practice among many nonprofit organizations and is clearly permissible so long as the message is designed to encourage political participation rather than promote a candidate or specific political message. The Internal Revenue Service regulations governing the political activities of nonprofits explicitly prohibit charitable organizations from participation in political campaigns, endorsing or opposing a candidate for political office, and any other form of partisan political activities. Nonprofits are permitted to target underrepresented groups in their voter promotion activities, so long as these efforts are conducted using a nonpartisan approach.

2. The attorney general's office is responsible for issuing solicitation licenses and regulating charitable solicitations within the state. However, several nonprofits are exempt from the licensing requirement, including churches, hospitals, educational institutions, day-care facilities, veterans organizations, and charities chartered by the United States Congress, such as the Red Cross. Thus, the attorney general's database does not include an exhaustive list of all nonprofits in the state but captures the ones that are licensed to solicit the public for donations and also those most likely to meet federal criteria for filing financial statements. Nonprofits are not required to file financial statements with the state, because their financial and tax-exempt status is regulated by the federal government. Moreover, only those with gross annual receipts greater than \$25,000 are required to file with the IRS. Berry and Arons (2003) have estimated that approximately 70% of all 501(c)(3) organizations operate on budgets less than \$25,000, meaning that the vast majority of nonprofits in the United States do not file with the IRS. In 2004, approximately 37% of all Michigan charities filed with the IRS, slightly above the average for all states combined (National Center for Charitable Statistics 2005).

3. The initial sample contained 231 organizations. This number included 19 charitable foundations that were removed from the mailing list. Foundations do not engage in the types of political activity with which this study is concerned, and thus, they were not appropriate targets for data collection. Since the attorney general's database contains all nonprofits licensed to solicit in Michigan, the initial sample also included a small number of out-of-state organizations, generally national advocacy organizations headquartered in the nation's capital. The seven organizations that met this description were also excluded from the sample, along with four undeliverable mailings. Responses were received from three organizations that have a 501(c)(4) tax-exempt designation and one that had both a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) status. Since the purpose of 501(c)(4) organizations is lobbying and advocacy, these organizations would be expected to engage in very high levels of political activity, so these four responses were excluded from this analysis. Thus, the organizations ultimately included in the sample are all locally based, 501(c)(3) organizations consisting of service-providing agencies, arts organizations, and local community groups.

4. Social-service agencies (health and human service) compose the majority of nonprofit organizations included in the sample (68.1%). Arts and cultural institutions compose the next largest category (14.3%), followed by neighborhood associations (8.4%), civic and fraternal organizations (5%), and a small number of other types of not-for-profits such as sports clubs and organizations providing technical assistance to nonprofits (4.2%). Organizations included in this study are randomly distributed across a wide range of community sizes, from those with populations just more than 1,000 persons to the city of Detroit, with a population just less than 1 million. Of the organizations in this sample, 17 (approximately 15%) fulfill the latter description.

5. Of the sample organizations, 17 are located in the city of Detroit. According to the 2000 census, Detroit's population is 951,270, 81.6% of which is Black. The city has a poverty rate of 26.1% (the national average poverty rate is 12.4%). Of the organizations in the sample, 13 are located in the second-largest city of Grand Rapids, which has a total population of 197,800, is 20.4% Black, and has a poverty rate of 15.7%. Three organizations are located in the third-largest city of Flint, with a total population of 124,943, of which 53.3% is Black and 26.4% lives in poverty. Lansing is the location of 15 of the sample organizations and is the fourth-largest city; it has a population of 119,128, of which 21.9% is Black, and a poverty rate of 16.9% (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

6. This is true for three of the four urban areas represented in this study. The overall voter-turnout rate for the 2004 elections in the state of Michigan was 64.7%, while in Wayne County (Detroit), it was 58.9%; in Kent County (Grand Rapids), it reached 71%; in Genesee County (Flint), turnout was 61.4%; and in Ingham County (Lansing), it was 62.8% (State of Michigan Secretary of State 2005). Consistent with the national trend in the 2004 election, voter turnout was higher than in the prior presidential election in the state of Michigan and increased in each of the counties in which the four urban areas represented in this study are located. Voter turnout increased in each of these areas anywhere from 6 to 10 percentage points from 2000 to 2004.

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