



Indiana University

Observing Civic Engagement and Assessing Civic Infrastructure

What is the background for this study?

This longitudinal study examines the internal dynamics of 60 civil society organizations (CSOs) in one community and assesses their impact on promoting civic engagement. Previous research has identified the dynamics occurring within CSOs, including how staff interact, the types of responsibilities they have, and how decisions are made. However, there is little information about how often those dynamics occur and how they influence CSOs' impact on civic infrastructure, social cohesion, and civic engagement. Thus, this research study aims to (1) uncover what goes on inside CSOs, specifically with respect to participation, interaction, networking, leadership, deliberation, and decision-making, and (2) show how these internal dynamics influence CSOs' effectiveness in strengthening civic infrastructure, promoting social cohesion, and increasing civic engagement.

What are the research questions?

The objective of the study is to collect data on CSOs' internal dynamics to examine the following inter-related research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of particular types of dynamics occurring within CSO convenings (e.g., participation, interaction, networking, leadership, deliberation, and decision-making)?
2. How much do the internal dynamics of CSO convenings vary within and across organizations?
3. How do internal dynamics related to participation, interaction, networking, leadership, deliberation, and decision-making influence CSOs' effectiveness in strengthening civic infrastructure, promoting social cohesion, and increasing civic engagement?

What data and methods are used in this study?

The researchers employ a systematic social observation (SSO) protocol, an innovative data collection method that bridges the gap between large-scale survey research and in-depth ethnographic studies to collect data on the internal dynamics of CSOs in one city, Bloomington, IN. The SSO method involves multiple trained observers following carefully constructed protocols, allowing for the large-scale collection of detailed, quantitative data on the internal dynamics of organizations.

In Year 1, the researchers apply the SSO technique to gather approximately 200 observations of the meetings of 20 randomly selected CSOs in Bloomington, IN. Using this data, the researchers perform descriptive analyses of

Study At-A-Glance

Study Title
Observing Civic Engagement and Assessing Civic Infrastructure

Researchers
Brad Fulton, PhD
Matthew Baggetta, PhD

Grant Cohort 2022

Timeline 2022-2025

Study Location Bloomington, IN

Study Topic Area(s)
Community Development
Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service

the CSOs' internal dynamics. They also conduct structured interviews with CSO leaders to connect the observational data with organizational outputs. The study uses multivariate analyses to explore how the internal dynamics of CSOs affect their effectiveness in strengthening civic infrastructure, promoting civic engagement, and increasing social cohesion.

In subsequent study years, the researchers will collect data from the original sample to create a panel study of CSOs, including adding 20 randomly selected CSOs each year to ensure the sample remains representative. Data collection continues in 4-month waves to generate a total of nine waves of data and approximately 1,000 observations. Using this longitudinal data, the researchers conduct multilevel analyses using hierarchical linear regression modelling to address the study's three primary research questions.

What are potential opportunities to apply study findings and/or build on this research?

This study on CSOs provides scholars, practitioners, and policymakers with critical insights into the distribution of internal dynamics among CSOs, how the dynamics predict outcomes, and how CSOs can conduct their activities in ways that effectively promote civic engagement. The research findings will help CSOs learn how to strengthen civic infrastructure, promote social cohesion, and increase civic engagement. Findings will also help CSO leaders understand how to engage members better and develop future leaders to pursue their objectives. The research findings can help city and county governments provide better support to CSOs in building their internal civic capacity and strengthening local civic infrastructure. In addition, the findings may help AmeriCorps understand how to use their programs, staff, and volunteers to bring those insights to the communities they serve and support.

For more information on the study:

Study Website	Observing Civic Engagement: Indiana University			
Study Contacts	Brad Fulton	Associate Professor	Indiana University	fulton@iu.edu
	Matthew Baggetta	Associate Professor	Indiana University	baggettm@iu.edu

About AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation Research Grants

AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation holds grant competitions to foster scholarly research on civic health, address knowledge gaps in civic engagement and volunteerism, and identify new ideas and methodological approaches to service.

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- See a [Snapshot of Research Grantee Activities and Insights](#).
- Explore the [AmeriCorps Open Data Research Grantee Dataset](#).

About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America. For more information on this study and other studies funded by AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation, please contact evaluation@americorps.gov.

About AmeriCorps

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