

Civic powerhouses: How organizations drive volunteering

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Rebecca Nesbit and Laurie E. Paarlberg, focus on civic powerhouses, explaining how organizations, such as faith congregations, drive volunteering

Volunteering is a cornerstone of civic life, yet rates of secular volunteerism vary dramatically across U.S. counties. While most studies of volunteering focus on individual traits and motivations that support volunteerism, we focus on [how community context influences volunteering](#).

Our research develops a detailed typology of a community's "organizational infrastructure" – the mix of nonprofits, businesses, congregations, schools, and government agencies in a place – and tests how each dimension relates to individuals' likelihood of volunteering. Below, we highlight five high-level results from our work.

Key findings

1. Nonprofit and business density boost volunteering. Counties with a higher proportion of nonprofits see greater volunteer participation, confirming that these organizations actively generate opportunities and demand for volunteer labor. Similarly, a dense commercial sector – especially small, locally owned businesses – provides "third places" for social interaction and civic connection, further amplifying volunteerism.
2. Bridging nonprofits expand volunteering, while bonding nonprofits suppress it. Places with a higher proportion of bridging nonprofits (those that connect diverse groups) are positively associated with volunteering. Bridging nonprofits may act as inclusive hubs that connect people across social groups and raise awareness of community needs. In contrast, places with a high proportion of bonding nonprofits (those with more homogeneous membership) are negatively associated with volunteer rates. Bonding nonprofits may create insular networks that exclude individuals who are not part of those organizations, reducing the likelihood that they will volunteer in the community.
3. Professionalized service systems are linked to modestly lower volunteerism. Places with a higher proportion of welfare-oriented nonprofits showed a modest negative relationship with volunteer rates – likely because professional staff increasingly fulfill roles once held by volunteers. Public school enrollment also exhibited a small negative association, possibly also reflecting a professionalization effect that replaces volunteer roles.

4. Small, locally owned businesses act as civic hubs that amplify volunteer participation. Places where small businesses dominate the commercial sphere also exhibit higher volunteering rates. Small local businesses contribute to volunteerism by fostering trust, providing meeting spaces, and incentivizing civic pride among owners and employees. The commercial sector can also play an important civic role.
5. Faith communities lead to more secular volunteering – until overconcentration fragments engagement. Moderate congregation density supports volunteering by offering regular gathering points and developing social capital. However, once congregations become overly prevalent, they begin to crowd out secular volunteerism. A high density of congregations may reflect denominational insularity and community polarization.

Why the organizational infrastructure matters for volunteering

These patterns shed light on the organizational mechanisms that drive civic engagement. First, understanding that bonding nonprofits and small businesses both serve as “volunteer incubators” underscores the value of fostering a healthy, diverse organizational ecosystem. Organizations from all sectors can play civic roles. This insight helps explain why some communities maintain robust volunteer cultures even in times of economic strain. When multiple institutions offer different avenues for engagement, residents find it easier to connect their passions with concrete civic opportunities.

Second, the contrast between bridging and bonding organizations highlights how inclusivity shapes civic life. Communities dominated by insular networks risk perpetuating inequalities in who volunteers, as homogeneous groups may circulate opportunities among themselves. Homogeneous groups sharpen “us vs. them” boundaries, producing in-group favoritism (trust, access, reciprocity) and out-group bias (stereotyping, exclusion, lower willingness to cooperate). Civic leaders must focus on building more porous organizational boundaries, ensuring that volunteer roles reach beyond entrenched circles.

Third, the unexpected dampening effect of professionalized welfare agencies invites a rethinking of service delivery models. Rather than viewing professionalization solely as progress, it’s important to balance efficiency with avenues for meaningful public contribution. This balance has profound implications for social cohesion: when citizens see themselves as active partners in education and welfare, trust in institutions deepens and mutual responsibility flourishes. This invites thoughtful consideration of the role of volunteers within professional service delivery networks.

Finally, the nuanced role of faith congregations speaks to the delicate interplay between tradition and inclusivity. While congregations can anchor volunteering through shared rituals, networks of care, and socialization to helping behaviors, overconcentration can fragment efforts along denominational lines. It can also lead to smaller congregations that absorb more volunteer energy, leaving congregation members less time and inclination to serve in the community.

Together, these implications point to a core insight: civic infrastructure matters not just for service outputs, but for shaping the very spirit of volunteering. By mapping how different organizations reinforce – or undermine – public engagement, our research offers a roadmap for nurturing resilient communities where every resident can find their place in civic life.

From insight to action: Recommendations

For community leaders:

- Host collaborative service fairs where nonprofits, congregations, and schools jointly recruit volunteers. Invite small businesses to support these efforts at volunteer recruitment.
- Offer micro-grants to small businesses that develop employee volunteer programs or open their spaces for civic gatherings.
- Support interfaith and secular platforms that draw volunteers across faith traditions, broadening civic identity beyond any single institution.

For nonprofit managers:

- Recognize that volunteer recruitment needs to happen at the community level across many organizations rather than solely at the organizational level.
- Design volunteer roles and organizational activities that emphasize bridging connections – linking individuals from diverse backgrounds around shared projects and different organizations.
- Recognize that volunteers are not just for small organizations. Discuss how to appropriately and effectively engage citizens in professionalized service delivery, particularly in schools and welfare-oriented nonprofits.

For policymakers:

- Incorporate measures of organizational infrastructure into community well-being indices.
- Allocate funding to promote volunteerism and civic engagement within a community.

The bottom line

Our research illustrates that a thriving civic infrastructure emerges from strategic balance and collaboration across sectors. Communities do best at bringing in volunteers when they have a strong ecosystem of bonding nonprofits and small businesses that foster inclusivity and opportunities for connection. Communities aiming to boost volunteerism should heed these insights to craft policies and partnerships that deepen public engagement and strengthen the social fabric.

References

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