



# Independent Sector

## **NONPROFIT POLICY FORUM**

**14<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium  
on Public Policy for Nonprofits**

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## Key Takeaways for Nonprofit Researchers and Leaders

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The 14<sup>th</sup> annual Symposium on Public Policy for Nonprofits was held online on September 12, 2025, with a focus on the broad theme of assessing and communicating the impact of nonprofits and philanthropy. Symposium sessions addressed three important topics: communicating nonprofit impact through data and storytelling; advancing nonprofit impact through policy advocacy and civic engagement; and elevating nonprofit impact in restrictive political climates. Each session featured short paper presentations and discussions responding to questions from session moderators and the audience.

Dr. Akilah Watkins, President and CEO of Independent Sector, convened the Symposium and emphasized the event's purpose: to examine the nonprofit sector's real-world impacts and identify ways to effectively communicate those contributions in a uniquely challenging time. The sharing of ideas on this topic among researchers and practitioners has become increasingly important as the nonprofit sector seeks to increase society's understanding of its many social and economic impacts. Effectively demonstrating the sector's impacts can help break through the political partisanship and noise to build more support for, investment in, and resilience of nonprofits during hard times.

Chao Guo, President of ARNOVA, then spoke on the importance of building connections between nonprofit researchers and practitioners because practice is what researchers study, and because good research can inform good practice. A brief poll of symposium attendees was taken, and Dr. Guo noted the results showed that the full spectrum of the sector was represented in the symposium audience — including representatives from nonprofit, philanthropic, academic, consulting, government, and for-profit organizations.

Alan Abramson, Co-editor in Chief of *Nonprofit Policy Forum* (NPF) and the Symposium's emcee, noted that the ten papers presented focused on topics at the intersection of policies, communications, and impact, and will be published in an upcoming issue of NPF. Dr. Abramson also reported on the results of a second poll to discover what attendees hoped to take away from the discussions. Understanding current thinking on issues, hearing the latest research and insights, and learning practical strategies to implement within organizations were the top goals of the respondents.

Panelists in the first symposium session discussed the importance of communicating nonprofit impact through storytelling and data. In the first presentation, Amanda Olberg of Dalio Education and Julie DeGennaro of Domus Kids noted that time lag is a barrier to evaluating programmatic success, and introduced a new metric to provide more timely and better insight into the social value of nonprofit outcomes. Mark Hager from Arizona State

University (speaking also for Tania Hernandez from Civance Research) presented on the sector's need for a live, accessible data dashboard to demonstrate the extent of nonprofits' economic contributions and detailed the key variables that should be included in the dashboard. Chantelle Ramsundar and Harar Hall followed with a presentation from Volunteer Canada on the need for standardized, adaptable indicators to communicate the sector's value, and presented a framework to integrate data and storytelling to fill the existing gap. Lastly, Ann Searight Christiano of the Center for Public Interest Communications and Nicole Bronzan from the Council on Foundations highlighted the challenge of having too much unused data, emphasizing the need to use clear language to describe human-centered data to drive program narratives.

The second session explored the impact of policy advocacy and civic engagement, particularly in a time of misinformation and ambiguity. First, Marc Maxmeister from GivingTuesday identified the need for nonprofits to understand how belonging, trust, depolarizing attitudes, and preferred news sources intersect with giving, and presented a metric to track societal changes in prosocial behavior. Next, Caroline Mak and Kimberley Carroll-Cox of Nonprofit VOTE noted a growing lack of engagement of some eligible voters and presented a theory of change and measurement framework where nonprofits serve as trusted leaders of civic inclusion. Finally, Allison Grayson of AloDay Consulting explained how language used by nonprofits can sometimes be counterproductive and outlined how organizations can leverage values-based messages to connect with more audiences.

Panelists in the third session examined how nonprofits navigate in restrictive political climates, including in some democratic societies. Erwin De Leon of Columbia University shared that the LGBTQ+ nonprofit subsector is facing an existential threat, outlining multiple strategies for adaptation along with a glimpse into how the subsector may change in years to come. Second, Ceren Çevik of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies and Centre for Global Cooperation Research presented on the adaptations that nonprofits make when navigating repressive regimes to maintain legitimacy, and explained how the U.S. sector could take advantage of similar techniques. Finally, Thomas Showalter of Showalter Strategies presented an analysis of right-wing, infrastructure-building strategies that could serve as best practices for the pro-democracy movement and presented concrete actions that the sector could employ.

One main theme throughout the presentations was that **human-centered metrics paired with tailored storytelling can deepen understanding and build support**. For example, the presentations by Mak-Carroll-Cox and Olberg-DeGennaro both noted that there is a great deal of quantitative data showing inputs like “number of students served” or “number of doors knocked,” but comparatively little data demonstrating the quality of the inputs or

of the outcomes achieved — such as how many hours were spent with students or how many new voters actually went to the polls. Furthermore, Hernandez-Hager found that a great deal of extant data on the sector’s economic impact is fragmented and fails to give a full picture of the sector’s economic contributions, while Christiano-Bronzan pointed out that many data reports are never read or downloaded from organization. A lack of standardized, quality metrics complicates the task of crafting narratives that bring meaning to the data, as presentations by the researchers from Volunteer Canada and GivingTuesday both noted. Allison Grayson’s research found that quality data is essential for advocates to understand their intended audiences better, enabling them to employ the right mix of values- and facts-based messages to increase engagement and trust.

A second theme of the symposium was that **accessibility and inclusion are foundational to data, storytelling, and trust**. A strong case for increased data accessibility through a national data dashboard was made in the Hernandez-Hager presentation, with the goal of enabling even casual users to find currently siloed information. Researchers from Volunteer Canada asserted that culturally grounded storytelling enables lifting of voices that are often excluded from policy discussions. Such voices, they noted, are often both over-consulted and underserved. From a programmatic perspective, the researchers from Nonprofit VOTE found that when eligible voters feel excluded, they are less likely to feel a sense of agency or to vote. Their study also showed that building trust is a prerequisite to facilitating inclusion. Similarly, the researchers with GivingTuesday found that a feeling of belonging was central to people’s level of civic intent, and that fostering a feeling of togetherness could be part of the interventions offered by programs.

A third theme recurring throughout the symposium was that **adaptive, multi-pronged strategies are key to nonprofit resilience**. All the presentations touched on at least one aspect of adaptation, such as through improved data, tailored messaging, or increased inclusion. However, the final panel provided a more concentrated outlook on the existential threats confronting the nonprofit sector across the globe and provided concrete strategies for navigating varying degrees of repression. Regarding diminished federal funding and heightened rhetoric in the U.S., Erwin de Leon’s research suggested diversifying funding streams by tapping state and local funding and framing program activity in a way that will bring in more allies. Ceren Çevik noted that the nonprofit sector’s legitimacy must be continuously maintained through carefully calibrated messaging and network-building. Thomas Showalter echoed Çevik’s legitimacy point and reiterated that we have no choice but to all be advocates. He followed by setting forth five concrete strategies that organizations can adopt to increase resilience, many of which were taken from the right-wing movement’s playbook.

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## Session 1: Communicating Nonprofit Impact through Data and Storytelling

Moderator: Kara Young Ponder, National Council of Nonprofits

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### Session Outline:

Session 1 featured four presentations on the need for more insightful data combined with meaningful narratives to communicate the nonprofit sector's full economic and social impact to multiple audiences.

"A Better Metric for Measuring and Communicating Nonprofit Impact" by Amanda Olberg, Dalio Education, and Julie DeGennaro, Domus Kids

"Toward a Sector-Wide Dashboard: Measuring the Economic Contributions of Nonprofits in the U.S." by Tania Hernandez, PhD, Civance Research, and Mark Hager, PhD, Arizona State University

"Building Better Strategies: Towards a Multi-Disciplinary and Equity-Centered Framework for Research and Storytelling in the Nonprofit Sector" by Chantelle Ramsundar, Harar V.A. Hall, and Leigha McCarroll, Volunteer Canada

"Using Data and Storytelling to Reach Policymakers" by Ann Searight Christiano, Center for Public Interest Communications at University of Florida, and Nicole Bronzan, Council on Foundations

### Overview:

Moderator Kara Young Ponder with the National Council of Nonprofits opened the first session of the symposium with an incisive question: How do you communicate nonprofit impact through data and storytelling in ways that break through the noise? The four presentations in this session responded by identifying gaps in data paired with suggestions on leveraging data in ways that inform and persuade a variety of stakeholders. In the first presentation, Olberg-DeGennaro introduced a new metric that can provide early insight regarding program success that can lead to better monitoring and improvement. In the second presentation, Hernandez-Hager identified a critical lack of data regarding the nonprofit sector's true economic footprint and proposed a national dashboard to fill the gap. A team of researchers from Volunteer Canada then presented a multidimensional framework to standardize metrics to help shape compelling narratives for multiple

audiences. Lastly, Christiano-Bronzan highlighted the overwhelming amount of data that is underutilized and presented strategies for leveraging human-centered data paired with meaningful stories that supersede individual biases and build transparency.

## **A Better Metric for Measuring and Communicating Nonprofit Impact**

Amanda Olberg, Senior Portfolio Director of the Connecticut Opportunity Project (CTOP) at Dalio Education, introduced her organization's mission, which is focused on assisting disconnected or at-risk youth by strengthening nonprofits' capacity and performance management to achieve significant positive impacts for their clients. Social investment funds like CTOP analyze program evaluation statistics to help guide their strategic investments, but recognize that preparing such statistical analyses can take years and be a challenge for smaller programs. In working with their grantee partner, Domus Kids, a new type of measurement has been identified to fill the gap: the "active program slot metric," which assesses the extent to which participants in need are receiving services likely to drive intended outcomes.

The active program slot metric provides more insight than a standard practice metric such as "number of people served," which does not report on the appropriateness of the people being served and the services being delivered. This metric can also be generated and evaluated more quickly than the standard statistical analysis, which can lead to continuous programmatic monitoring and improvement.

Julie DeGennaro, Associate Executive Director of Domus Kids, explained that the organization's target population consists of ninth grade students who are disengaged and unlikely to graduate from high school. The services provided included at least 900 minutes annually of one-to-one engagement of program staff and students. As an active slot metric, this early information can serve as a real-time indicator of the likelihood of the program having successful outcomes.

Besides providing real-time data to external partners, the active slot metric can be used internally for continuous monitoring and improvement. In a Domus Kids case study, two program staff went on maternity leave, necessitating that their students be assigned to other staff. Of the two reassigned groups, one showed a larger drop in active program slots than the other. Researchers were able to determine that the reassigned group that had a stronger, pre-existing relationship with the new practitioner led to increased active slots. This significance was attributed to one staff's practice of sharing office space, which fostered informal connections with many participants, as opposed to the other group whose staff worked in discrete areas of the building.

By actively monitoring the active program slot metric, Domus Kids was able to shift quickly to foster relationships with multiple staff members for each youth and incorporate this knowledge into their best practices. As a result, 85 percent of the nonprofit's clients were in active slots, with 60 percent attaining long-term outcomes. The active slot metric helps improve impact.

Amanda Olberg concluded by reiterating the effectiveness of continuous monitoring of progress and feedback in real time. By specifying the target population to be served, the active slot metric provides clarity on the social value of investment in the program. Highlighting the quality of the inputs as opposed to the quantity also decreases organizational bias that might favor clients who are more likely to succeed.

## **Toward a Sector-Wide Dashboard: Measuring the Economic Contributions of Nonprofits in the U.S.**

Mark A. Hager of Arizona State University and Civanje Research began his presentation by acknowledging that storytelling is the way to advocate and move the needle for support of nonprofit activities. However, adding data increases the viability of the stories being told. In particular, more data from the nonprofit sector could increase the understanding of nonprofits' economic contribution to the community. While a fair amount of basic data exists — such as the number of nonprofits, the level of their resources, the number of volunteers, and the size of nonprofit budgets — in contrast figures on the number of jobs that nonprofits create are less available, as are estimates of the true economic impact of nonprofit employment in a specific region. For example, data on the spending induced by the presence of nonprofits (e.g., purchases by nonprofit organizations) and on nonprofits' property tax and sales tax contributions could inform calculations of the economic impact of the nonprofit sector. This information would be helpful for entrepreneurs, funders, and policymakers.

The Form 990 data dashboards presently available through sources like Urban Institute lack information regarding the economic and value-added contributions of the sector, such as through employment and tax contributions. More comprehensive data could provide critical visibility into how much economic activity the nonprofit sector generates in a geographic area, how many jobs are supported, the amount of tax contributed to state and local governments, and how the contribution of the nonprofit sector compares to those of the business and government sectors. This lack of visibility decreases nonprofits' ability to participate in important policy discussions and to connect with funders looking for strategic investments.



The limited data from several states were highlighted to demonstrate the significance of the nonprofit sector to communities. For example, nonprofits in the last few years were found to have accounted for 10% of all jobs in the state of Colorado, contributed \$139.8 billion of revenue in Pennsylvania, and have grown in number by 22% in Texas. Such information, the researchers noted, is siloed within each state and obsolete by the time the reports are published, further underscoring the need for a national portal, updated in real time.

A solution would be to develop a national nonprofit economic contributions dashboard that combines IRS Form 990 filings, data on nonprofit employment from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and other information on nonprofits with data models that can be continually updated with consistent metrics. The result would allow users to see how nonprofits are contributing to and driving economic activity. Furthermore, such a dashboard would make the information more accessible to all users, including legislators and potential donors, rather than the current situation where specialist researchers are the main consumers of information.

In addition to raising awareness of the sector's economic significance, a national dashboard could improve targeted funding by the philanthropic community and lead to stronger nonprofit advocacy with policymakers at all levels. Finally, a national, public dashboard that is accessible to all could help the sector meet the current challenges it faces relating to workforce and revenue shortages and policy uncertainties.

## **Building Better Strategies: Towards a Multi-Disciplinary and Equity-Centered Framework for Research and Storytelling in the Nonprofit Sector**

Harar V.A. Hall, Policy and Research Manager with Volunteer Canada, introduced the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS) framework now under development by Volunteer Canada to identify the reasons behind declining volunteerism, strengthen community resilience, foster inclusive participation, and remove barriers to volunteering. She indicated that the primary goal of the research is to understand how we can work together, inclusively. By integrating multiple stakeholder streams through a mixed-methods approach, the research team aims to build a comprehensive strategy with a focus on understanding the volunteering ecosystem, which can be scaled for use by a variety of organizations.

Volunteering-related variables that will be looked at include motivations, barriers, retention, best practices, policy change, and sustained investments. The key is to map societal collective wellbeing with democracy, emergency management, and other high-level issues using three kinds of methods. *Qualitative data* informs the questions as well as

the quantitative data that is collected. *Storytelling* anchors the data and infuses it with humanity. *Inclusive storytelling and data* are especially important, as research has shown that some people are simultaneously over consulted yet underserved.

Chantelle Ramsundar, Policy and Research Coordinator with Volunteer Canada, added that trust and equity are imbedded in the framework's guiding principles. The framework, which prioritizes equity as a throughline, examines how systemic forces shape collective experiences. The framework is experiential, structural, and societal and employs case studies, storytelling, and research. The next step is to consult with stakeholders and expand into rural areas to develop a volunteering strategy and framework for the broader sector.

Complete, compelling narratives that communicate the public value of volunteering is often missing from policymaking circles. By filling this knowledge gap, the NVAS can reduce the risk of undervaluing the sector or overloading organizations with responsibilities without the resources needed to discharge them. Finally, by describing volunteering in three dimensions (experiential, structural, and societal), the definition of its impact can be broadened and communicated across many audiences. In effect, this approach facilitates the difficult task of communicating complex data and messages with more ease.

## Using Data and Storytelling to Reach Policymakers

Ann Searight Chrstiano, Director of the Center for Public Interest Communications and Professor at the University of Florida, and Nicole Bronzan, Vice President of Communications and Content at the Council on Foundations, emphasized the importance of using data paired with storytelling to reach policy makers. They noted that, while there are many reports being generated, few are ever read and the sheer amount of data can be overwhelming. Data overload cannot drive needed systems change and presents a barrier to decisionmakers. The two-fold solution is to tell stories that bring meaning to the data and overcome biases to point to actionable solutions, and to apply human-centered design principles centered on decisions that are available to policy makers.

To emphasize this point, the presenters highlighted the article, “We Dare You to Figure Out What Our Nonprofit Does,” by James Klein, suggesting that obfuscation is too common in the sector — with actual, serious repercussions. For example, earlier versions of the Big Beautiful Bill championed by the Trump administration and later revised and enacted into law would have increased taxes on private foundations. This shows a fundamental undervaluation of philanthropic contributions and an underappreciation of how many people are helped by the sector. This chronic underestimation of the contribution and

impact of foundations and nonprofits comes at a time when the sector is being asked to take on more responsibility for service delivery.

This study asked what kind of stories and language can help build understanding and trust in foundations. Using a mixed methods approach, the authors found that policy makers rarely make inquiries about the sector and that few understand the role foundations play. Notably, they expressed that Congress is more interested in collaborating with foundations than regulating them. The philanthropic sector's lack of an established narrative has left foundation leaders unable to counter harmful narratives. More transparency was desired by all — the public, policymakers, and practitioners.

Three actions were identified that organizations can employ to ensure their data is most impactful in a narrative vacuum: Tell stories that bring meaning to the data and overcome personal biases; design data collection centered on actionable solutions; and use clear language free of jargon and metaphors. Researchers found that the stories that proved more effective were centered on transparency, such as where the money went and how programmatic decisions were made. People use data to affirm their beliefs absent a compelling story.

The presentation concluded with recommendations from the research about how the charitable sector can tell more impactful stories with clearer language:

- Resist the tendency to use simplistic narratives to describe complex situations, and lean into roles as trusted messengers.
- Storytelling should become sector-wide and should build the right kind of transparency, including “nitty-gritty” details about decision making.
- Organizations should recognize that impactful communication requires a substantial commitment of time and resources to be effective.

## Session 2: Advancing Nonprofit Impact through Policy Advocacy and Civic Engagement

Moderator: David Suárez, University of Washington

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### Session Outline:

Session 2 included three presentations highlighting the need for nonprofit organizations interested in influencing public policy to understand the motivations of multiple audiences and proactively employ messaging tailored across all types of stakeholders.

“Civic Intent as a Way to Understand How Belonging, Trust, Depolarizing Attitudes, and One’s Preferred News Sources Affect Nonprofit Trends in the U.S.,” by Marc Maxmeister, Annie Collins, Samir Khan, and Woodrow Rosenbaum, Giving Tuesday

“From Exclusion to Inclusion: Measuring Transformation in Nonprofit Civic Engagement,” by Caroline Mak and Kimberley Carroll-Cox, Nonprofit VOTE

“Shift from Defense to Offense: Targeted, Emotional Language Can Broaden Support for Nonprofits,” by Allison Grayson, PhD, AloDay Consulting

### Overview:

Moderator David Suárez, Associate Dean for Research at the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance at the University of Washington, opened the second session by remarking on the timeliness of the topics of advocacy and civic engagement — given the significant pressures facing the nonprofit sector, such as misinformation and voice. Moreover, there is new ambiguity, resulting from recent attempts to weaken the Johnson Amendment’s prohibition on religious and nonprofit electioneering activities. The three presentations that followed explored how standardized metrics grounded in a civic inclusion framework can build trust and advocacy, but also advised that the language communicating this information must be tailored to each intended audience and delivered proactively. The first presentation, by Marc Maxmeister of GivingTuesday, explained the development of the Civic Intent metric as a way to track what motivates prosocial behavior in communities and explain complex concepts with clarity. Mak and Carroll-Cox followed with an explanation of how a focus on trust-building and civic inclusion can lead to more persuasive storytelling. Lastly, Allison Grayson suggested that organizations need to be more proactive in understanding the motivations of stakeholders, and even detractors, and tailor facts and values-based language accordingly.

## **Civic Intent as a Way to Understand How Belonging, Trust, Depolarizing Attitudes, and One’s Preferred News Sources Affect Nonprofit Trends in the U.S.**

Marc Maxmeister, Senior Data Scientist with Giving Tuesday, introduced the concept of “Civic Intent” as a new variable to understand how belonging, trust, depolarizing attitudes, and preferred media sources intersect with giving. A measure of civic intent was developed using surveys and designed to be independent of gender, ethnicity, age, income, and employment. The results identified social behaviors that are correlated and uncorrelated with civic intent. Importantly, a deeper understanding of what drives civic intent can lead to better guidance for nonprofit organizations on how to grow generosity.

Thousands of study participants were surveyed across multiple countries using an online panel to test recall of recent prosocial deeds performed in relation to other prosocial features, such as current events awareness and feelings of community belonging. This approach is relatively novel, in that it tests prosocial deeds already performed rather than the propensity to act in the future.

The results of the study showed that depolarizing attitudes, which are best described on the survey as “I help others, even those whom I don’t agree with,” are a significant component of civic intent. Further, it was found that activism and feeling a sense of belonging were also highly correlated with civic intent. Significantly, both left and right-leaning orientations were more correlated with civic intent, while centrist orientations were less or not correlated with civic intent. Basic demographics such as age, wealth, and employment status showed no correlation with civic intent.

Nonprofits often struggle to define comparable outcomes across interventions. A standard metric could be a solution for defining the expected social improvements. In particular, the Civic Intent metric could present a cleaner way to track prosocial behavior and provide lessons on how to track political worldviews, as opposed to traditional data on voting or party affiliation, which only explains what happens on election day and not what happens in society the rest of the year.

## **From Exclusion to Inclusion: Measuring Transformation in Nonprofit Civic Engagement**

Caroline Mak, Senior Communications and Impact Strategist at Nonprofit VOTE, introduced the organization’s mission to provide nonpartisan resources to help nonprofits integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services. She explained that individuals’ feelings of inclusion or exclusion play a significant role in the likelihood of their

voting. Researchers gathered stories of transformation from eligible voters about why they do or do not vote through interviews. Like presenters in the first panel, they found that the primary metrics now used, such as “how many doors were knocked” or the quantity of text messages sent to eligible voters, too often only measure outputs rather than outcomes. Instead, appropriate measures should show how barriers to voting are removed and how capacity to vote is increased, which would clear the way for action. She noted that a sense of exclusion derives from feelings such as shame, fear, isolation, invisibility, and powerlessness, which the study found are especially prevalent in local elections. Drawing on surveys conducted before and after efforts to engage or reengage voters, the research found that nonprofit staff can help clients overcome their feelings of exclusion through relationships that staff form with the clients that allow the latter to feel comfortable asking for help in learning how to cast a ballot.

Kimberly Carroll-Cox, Director of Development at Nonprofit VOTE, noted that this research is important because it expands storytelling to identify impacts such as an increase in trust, belonging, and personal agency. Voter apathy was recontextualized and a new framework for metrics was developed, which reflects the impacts of exclusionary emotions. Since nonprofits are broadly viewed as trusted messengers, they are uniquely positioned to move voters to feel inclusion through trust building. For example, without judgment, practitioners can teach eligible voters how to use a QR code or navigate a sample ballot or help them register to vote.

Ultimately, the research is a call to consider a new lens and a case for investing to capture lived civic experience. For nonprofit practitioners, focusing on the impacts of shifting trust, feelings of inclusion, and confidence in voters can broaden the practitioners’ understanding of what advocacy involves — that is, it’s not just about lobbying policymakers. Furthermore, the demonstrated impact of increasing civic participation through emotional transformation can provide a stronger case for funders. Lastly, the study shows that more research is needed on how lived experience affects civic engagement and how shifts in feelings of inclusion and personal agency can lead to more engagement.

## **Shift from Defense to Offense: Targeted, Emotional Language Can Broaden Support for Nonprofits**

Allison Grayson of AloDay Consulting opened her presentation with a fitting sports metaphor for the nonprofit sector: Organizations should shift from defense to offense. The challenge, however, is that nonprofits often struggle to advocate proactively with advocacy that resonates and leads to public policy changes.

Grayson's study included an analysis of data from five surveys that gauge how much influence factual and emotional messages exerted on a variety of audiences. Overall, she found that the language nonprofits use to communicate their missions can be counterproductive at times. Shifting to effective messaging requires that advocates first understand the motivations not only of their missions' supporters, but also those held by neutral audiences and detractors.

Notably, the research revealed that emotions are powerful drivers of political decision-making. Advocates must therefore carefully match their messages to the morals and values of specific audiences to avoid turning off some audience segments. While policymakers tend to rely on facts when evaluating unfamiliar issues, factual messages alone often lack the emotional impact needed to spur action. In contrast, personal and values-based messages were found to be more effective at creating support. Although both types of messaging are important, values-based messages outperformed data- or fact-based ones.

For practitioners, the key point is to test messages across various audiences and balance fact-based communication with more human-centered advocacy. While values and emotions can win over some non-supporters, objective facts were found to be more persuasive for audiences without pre-formed opinions. Still, these messages must be aligned with the audience's core values to be effective.

Crucially, the study showed that equity-based messages were the least persuasive among almost all audiences regardless of their political leanings. Instead, messages based on shared values such as fairness, tribe, care, liberty, and proportion were found to be the most compelling. Given the low effectiveness of equity-centered messages, one solution is to reframe the language of equity in ways that resonate more deeply with the public, such as through an emphasis on fairness or care. In balancing values-based and factual messaging to specific audiences, nonprofits can strengthen their advocacy efforts while remaining true to their mission.

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## Session 3: Elevating Nonprofit Impact in Restrictive Political Climates

Moderator: Stefan Toepler, George Mason University

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### Session Outline:

Session 3 featured three presentations discussing the challenges facing nonprofit organizations in restrictive climates around the world, including in the U.S., with commentary on multiple nonprofit strategies for preservation, advocacy, and maintaining legitimacy.

“Resistance, Resilience & Reempowerment: LGBTQ+ Nonprofit Response to the Trump Administration,” by Erwin de Leon, PhD, Columbia University

“Legitimacy Under Watch: How Transnational Environmental NGOs Build Credibility in Authoritarian Settings,” by Ceren Çevik, PhD, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies and Centre for Global Cooperation Research

“How Nonprofits Can Power a Pro-Democracy Movement to Withstand – and Confront – Authoritarianism,” by Thomas Showalter, Showalter Strategies

### Overview:

Moderator Stefan Toepler, Professor and Program Faculty Director for Public Policy & Public Administration in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, opened the final panel with remarks on growing concerns over the shrinking of civic spaces in the last 20 years. Starting in the 2010s with Russia’s crackdown on human rights organizations, this repression is now spreading across the globe, including across Europe and the United States. The three presentations in this session explored a wide range of adaptive strategies to bolster nonprofit resilience. De Leon outlined the challenges facing the LGBTQ+ nonprofit subsector and discussed coping strategies of funding diversification, operational reorganization, and pacing policy advocacy to match public support. Çevik presented on insights gained from fieldwork studies in China and Turkey on how organizations can maintain legitimacy through reframing strategies and network building. Lastly, Showalter presented an analysis of right-wing infrastructure building as holding lessons for the pro-democracy movement.



## **Resistance, Resilience & Reempowerment: LGBTQ+ Nonprofit Response to the Trump Administration**

Erwin de Leon of Columbia University's School of Professional Studies noted that organizations operating in the LGBTQ+ space, particularly those that rely heavily on federal funding, are facing an existential threat from the current presidential administration. The challenges have been compounded by heightened hostile rhetoric in public spheres and a lack of consensus within the queer community on building a united movement that transcends identity politics.

Research consisted of conversations with 15 organization leaders representing 11 LGBTQ+ nonprofits focusing on how groups and their constituents have been affected by the challenges posed by the current administration and how the groups are responding. The study uncovered multiple instances of threats to organizational survival and identified several adaptive strategies to address financial, organizational, and advocacy constraints.

For example, the federal government eliminated specialized services through the national suicide prevention hotline for LGBTQ+ callers in July 2025, even though it was fielding 2,000 calls per day. Concurrently, almost 600 distinct anti-LGBTQ+ legislative initiatives have been identified across the state. The existential threat facing this sector is not limited geographically, as at least 120 grants to organizations across the globe in the LGBTQ+ space have been suspended or terminated, placing significant stress on transnational NGO support infrastructure.

Practitioners in LGBTQ+ organizations should reach out to state and local elected officials, among other alternative funding sources, for assistance in filling the federal funding gap. These nonprofits should consider returning to core missions of unity and communicating to a broader audience a call for active resistance. The philanthropic community is uniquely positioned to bring diverse nonprofits together to weather the storm and to survive for another day. Litigation, in particular, has been shown to be the most effective response for many nonprofits.

Ultimately, the LGBTQ+ nonprofit subsector will shrink by the end of the current administration. Nevertheless, it could also end up more consolidated and focused if a unifying message were to be employed that rallies the queer collective and its allies. For example, communicating in a more open and less strident way could allow more mutual aid models to emerge and can help organizations partner with a broader range of other social justice movements.

## **Legitimacy Under Watch: How Transnational Environmental NGOs Build Credibility in Authoritarian Settings**

Ceren Çevik, of the Max Planck Institute for Study of Societies and University of Duisburg-Essen, Centre for Global Cooperation Research, presented insights from fieldwork conducted in China and Turkey on how organizations operate under authoritarian regimes where civic space is constrained, transparency is limited, and advocacy may be viewed as a threat by the governing establishment. This research is important, as governments around the world are increasingly hostile to dissent and can erect barriers limiting civil society's ability to maintain their legitimacy and communicate their value to the public. Understanding how organizations can successfully navigate repressive tendencies in repressive societies is equally important for those operating in more democratic nations where civic spaces may also be confronting a growing backlash.

In observing how transnational environmental NGOs (tENGOS) operate in repressive nations, three key strategies were identified: framing nonprofit narratives to be in alignment with the dominant political agendas to the extent possible; embedding within credible networks; and adapting nonprofits' storytelling to communicate impact that is interpreted as a success that is noncompetitive with the government. Findings from the study suggest that an organization's legitimacy is not a fixed resource, but rather, a continually negotiated process shaped by political context and shifting policies.

Reframing nonprofit narratives to align with the dominant political agendas is key and can be accomplished without abandoning nonprofits' core mission, such as by communicating achievements as technical successes rather than a failure of government. For example, when air pollution was receiving widespread public attention in China in 2013, the tENGOS framed the issue as a matter of public health, rather than a failure of governance and established the sector as a partner in solving the problem by supporting the government with air pollution data. Further, being a part of a credible network, such as the local community, can allow for diverse network building. Storytelling, when properly framed, can reassure authorities that an organization is not a threat while simultaneously reassuring donors and communities that competence and integrity are intact.

## **How Nonprofits Can Power a Pro-Democracy Movement to Withstand – and Confront – Authoritarianism**

Thomas Showalter of Showalter Strategies began by noting the growing authoritarian infrastructure in the U.S. and emphasized that nonprofit actors have no choice but to all be advocates as a way of preserving legitimacy. He suggested looking to the conservative

movement for best practices and lessons learned from right-wing movements that could be useful for the pro-democracy movement.

For example, the Powell Memorandum of 1971 provided a strategic playbook for conservatives capturing the interlocking forces of politics, education, culture, and media through infiltration. This influential memo in turn inspired the Leo Model, which centered on cultivating career pipelines and high-income fundraising groups to exert leverage through groups such as the Federalist Society.

According to Showalter's analysis, the three main features of the Leo Model are patience and long-term vision, a willingness to keep trying until something works, and maintaining concern for taking care of the people in the movement. Turning Point USA is a good example of the Leo Model, in that it was a failure until it was a success and capitalized on its willingness to leave old ideas behind through regular reinvention and adaptive narratives.

Showalter asserted that nonprofit leaders could adapt their strategies to capitalize on the effective practices of the right-wing movement. The main objectives that nonprofits should be mindful of are:

- aim for explicit political outcomes;
- leverage the full suite of available advocacy strategies, including litigation and media/cultural-influencing podcasts;
- take advantage of the law, such as by partnering with 501(c)(4) groups and supporting lobbying entities;
- allocate more resources for pro-democracy missions; and
- emphasize art and community.

Notably, nonprofits could be much more politically active than they currently are without jeopardizing their 501(c)(3) status. For example, The Environmental Voter Project focuses on increasing turnout of less likely eligible voters with an environmental conscience without endorsing specific candidates. Other organizations with a 501(c)(4) status can link multiple groups to build an advocacy infrastructure. In addition, 501(c)(3) organizations may find that establishing a 501(c)(4) branch opens the door for more donors to contribute. To catalyze the momentum, charitable foundations should earmark more funds for general support and capacity-building for grantee partners. Specifically, awards aimed at promoting a pro-democracy agenda could find broad applicability and provide needed operational flexibility.

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## Themes from Presentations and Discussions

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### Overview

Each of the three sessions concluded with a discussion among panelists responding to questions from session moderators and the audience. These questions allowed presenters to elaborate on their presentations and highlight connections across their work. While not summarized in full, key insights from the presentations, Q&A discussions, and papers are incorporated into the themes discussed below.

### **Human-centered metrics paired with tailored storytelling can deepen understanding and build support for nonprofits and their missions.**

The symposium's presenters appeared to agree that while nonprofits produce or have access to a lot of data, it can be difficult for organizations to translate this data into compelling stories. A wide variety of solutions were explored, such as new metrics for program quality and volunteerism, a more inclusive framework for capturing different voices, and a national dashboard to illustrate the economic contributions of the sector. Quality data, dashboards and frameworks enable better storytelling to produce more compelling narratives for nonprofits.

Presentations by Olberg-DeGennaro and GivingTuesday provided examples of improved metrics: the “active program slot,” which nonprofits can use not just for internal monitoring but also to communicate their impact to the philanthropic communities; and the “Civic Intent” variable, which can help the sector understand what motivates community members and facilitate the communication of complex issues in broadly appealing, clear ways. These measures can be used to emphasize the stories of nonprofit clients more than the organizations themselves. Elevating client stories can enable others in the community to become advocates for both the clients and the nonprofits that serve them.

Harar Hall emphasized the need for standard measures across the sector and for sharing them for collective storytelling to support sustainability. Nevertheless, she cautioned against relying on any single motivation or method to broaden an audience. Indeed, good research naturally encounters contradictions, Ramsundar added. Nonprofits should consider embracing outlier ideas to access uncaptured stories or demographics. Mark Hager noted that policymakers are one audience for the narratives and emphasized their importance in constructing persuasive arguments around the data. Ann Seawright Christiano agreed and added that narratives are best transmitted in person through relationship building.

In the second session, Grayson's presentation contributed further insight into the importance of crafting mission narratives using language that resonates with the intended audience. This skill requires an understanding of what motivates, persuades, or even alienates different audiences. Being able to anticipate criticisms can allow organizations to develop messages that connect with new and different segments of the population. This means knowing when to employ facts- or values-based messaging.

### **Access and inclusion are foundational to data, storytelling, and trust.**

Presentations across all the panels shared differing perspectives on the importance of access and inclusion. The first session examined the importance of including new sources of data and making the information accessible to more users. The second session explored how feelings of inclusion or belonging can motivate volunteers as well as improve programmatic outcomes for participants. In the final session, inclusion was identified as a crucial aspect of coalition-building to strengthen social movements and maintain credibility. Ultimately, the discussions revealed that access and inclusion lead to relationship and trust-building.

In the study on civic engagement, Mak and Carroll-Cox found that feelings of exclusion and erosion of trust in government leave some eligible voters less likely to engage or vote. Furthermore, they noted that when nonprofit programs prioritize outcomes over relationships, participants' trust in organizations diminishes. Interventions that include connecting through conversations can help participants build individual capacity and identity shifts, which can increase civic engagement. Olberg-deGenarro experienced similar results in their study, namely a close relationship can change a participant's trajectory.

GivingTuesday's research also found that people's level of civil intent hinges on feeling a sense of belonging and togetherness. Yet feelings of inclusion can do more than serve as an indicator of prosocial behavior, they noted. Because of its high significance, being together as part of a group should also be considered an essential part of program services. As Maxmeister noted, advocacy is not a one-way process. People must first feel that they belong before they can truly believe. Mak echoed this point, emphasizing that their findings were made possible by practitioners who were willing to engage in the conversation and openly share their experiences and needs for better outcomes. Eventually, organizations can shift social norms through inclusion on the local level that can influence policymakers.

While inclusivity is crucial, Grayson's research suggested that messages framed around equity were the least persuasive for all audiences. On the other hand, while the specific

language used to communicate missions is important, she found that increasing personal connections can increase local engagement. Further, as the Volunteer Canada team explained in the first session, the inclusion of diverse communities in their research framework makes the resulting data more usable by those communities.

### **Adaptive, multi-pronged strategies are key to nonprofit resilience.**

In the final session, inclusion and relationship building were identified as critical components to a movement's survival. For example, de Leon explained how the LGBTQ+ subsector should stop policing language so much to avoid alienating some natural allies and embrace other social justice issues to build a broader coalition. Similarly, Çevik indicated that organizations working under repressive regimes can boost credibility and trust by embedding within their local community and building stronger relationships with international organizations.

A substantial cross-section of the panels shared insights on building organizational and sector resilience through narrative reframing, scenario planning, broadening support through using messaging that resonates, and diversifying funding streams.

The presentations by Showalter and De Leon both emphasized the importance of scenario planning as a tool for navigating uncertain political environments. Showalter explained that a key is to focus on concrete future scenarios and identify which steps will lead to the desired outcomes. He argued that nonprofits and philanthropic foundations should take full advantage of the available advocacy strategies, such as lobbying, institutional partnership, and litigation.

De Leon recommended that organizations explore more coalition-building and mutual aid compacts to counteract the steep plunge in federal funding and heightened political rhetoric. At the same time, he argued that neither philanthropy nor increasing individual donations can fill the gap. Corporate support presents other challenges. Citing Pride events as an example, he pointed out that some corporations are keen to avoid negative publicity. Çevik added that, while corporate philanthropy can offer resources and even political cover, many organizations have lists of companies that are off-limits for one reason or another, making corporate alliances a double-edged sword. One solution, she added, is to lean into international organizations and networks. These constraints, De Leon mused, raised a broader question: whose responsibility is it to provide for civil society — government, citizens, or corporations?

Çevik's study highlighted the unique challenges confronting organizations operating under repressive regimes. One key finding was that it helps when public narratives can be reframed to align with the dominant political agendas to communicate nonprofits' impacts

without generating suspicion or backlash. In practice, this can be achieved by framing programmatic achievements as technical successes, rather than criticism of governmental failures.

In line with Çevik's observations, Maxmeister identified Harvard University's global website revisions as an example of reframed messaging. In that case, the message was shifted to emphasize the university more as a community rather than a nonprofit organization. Mak echoed similar thinking and noted another good example of message alignment is the statement "no one deserves to go hungry," which is powerfully persuasive and broadly appealing.

In looking ahead, de Leon and Showalter agreed that significant damage has already been done to the nonprofit sector, particularly through the U.S.'s loss of international standing. De Leon framed the moment as part of an ongoing global tug of war between democratic ideals and populist movements. While nonprofits have a role to play, change ultimately lies with an informed and mobilized citizenry. Çevik closed on a hopeful note, drawing from her conversations with actors under oppressive regimes who remain committed to adaptation, resilience, and protecting their communities. She emphasized that even in these restrictive settings people believe they can shape their environments and outcomes. "Let's not lose hope," she urged.