ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

The Political Embeddedness of Voluntary Action: The Case of Local Philanthropic COVID-19 Relief Funds

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This article examines the relationship between political institutions and the activation of local voluntary action in the context of COVID-19 funds managed by community philanthropic organizations.

Research question: What is the relationship between political institutions and voluntary action?

The article finds that political engagement, policy signaling, and political competition all support the emergence of a COVID-19 fund. The findings advance our understanding of the significant role that political institutions play in activating voluntary action. The findings suggest a more nuanced relationship between government and the nonprofit sector that emphasizes the importance of political institutions in activating voluntary responses.

#voluntaryaction #philanthropy #governmentinstitutions #COVID-19 #politicaltheory

Background & Context

- **Political factors** that the article theorizes will shape the activation of local voluntary action:
  - Government Size
  - Political Engagement
  - Policy Signalling
  - Political Ideology
  - Political Competition

- The **reciprocal nature of the relationship between voluntary collective action and political institutions complicates empirical analysis**: voluntary action supports democratic institutions, and political institutions enable voluntary action.

- This paper argues that **voluntary action is not merely a substitute or response to government (in)action.** Rather, **voluntary action is embedded in local political institutions.** The hypotheses are tested using data on the emergence of COVID-19 philanthropic funds hosted by local community philanthropic organizations (CPOs) during the first quarter of the pandemic.

Three key findings emerge from the study:
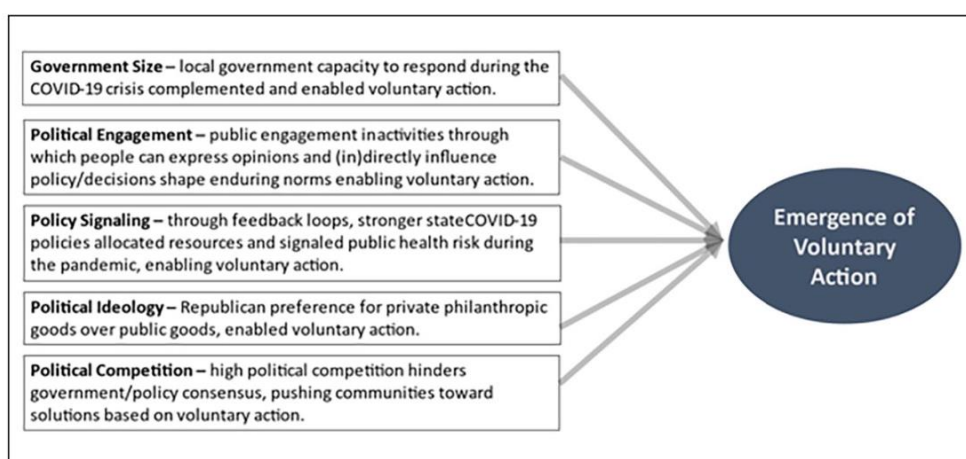
1. The study found **no support that government size directly affected the launch of a fund during COVID-19**. However, the negative relationship between the size of county government and the initial capacity to launch a fund (having paid staff) does support the **concept of government failure**.

2. **CPOs in communities with high levels of political engagement**, as evidenced by Census return rates, **were more likely to launch funds**. Existing norms of political engagement shape the roles that CPOs, and other nonpartisan organizations, play in mobilizing collective action in disaster/emergency situations.

3. **CPOs were responsive to state-level policies**. The findings emphasize that policy signals matter for CPO responsiveness to politicized community emergencies.

▪ The findings have implications for policy and practice. **Voluntary action is closely entwined with political institutions**, raising important questions about the resilience of local communities, especially in situations where political engagement is weak, disaster is politicized, and/or government response is limited.

▪ Reliance on voluntary action in the face of disaster may reproduce disparities as those communities that foster vibrant political institutions may reap strong voluntary action that supports resilience. **Reliance upon voluntary action in response to a politically charged disaster may exacerbate inequities** that exist in disaster response more generally.

Figure 1. Local political factors shaping the activation of voluntary action.