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Are We All in This Together? Examining Nonprofits' Perceptions of Governmental Actors in the Management of the U.S. Refugee Crisis

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Abstract: U.S. federal policy has created, at best, a gap and, at worst, a hostile environment for nonprofits serving refugees. We rely on frameworks of nonprofit-government relationships (institutional voids, structural holes, instrumental/expressive support) to explore government-nonprofit interactions in the refugee domain, and their impact on 34 refugee-serving nonprofits in the U.S. Findings indicate limited expressive and instrumental support for nonprofits and suggest nonprofits must navigate complex, multilevel, environments. Contributions include the suggestion of “intentional” rather than institutional voids, and a new typology of forms (zero, unclaimed, symbolic, or comprehensive) of government support for nonprofits in a problem domain based on whether government’s instrumental and expressive support for nonprofits is high or low.

Keywords: nonprofits; refugees; structural holes; institutional voids; instrumental and expressive support

The plight of refugees demands cooperation from government and nonprofit agencies. However, inadequate U.S. federal policy in that domain has created, at best, a gap (Fehsenfeld and Levinson 2019; Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann 2017) and, at worst, a hostile environment for serving refugees (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Steimel 2016; Wathen, Decker, and Weishar 2021).

Refugee resettlement is a complex process influenced by federal policy as well as resources and support negotiated at federal, state, and community levels. Although the U.S. relies on nonprofits in order to serve these populations both during and after resettlement, this system has been characterized by instability and uncertainty

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(Darrow and Scholl 2020). In the absence of policy – and perhaps due to partisan squabbling over migration issues – nonprofits play a significant role in providing resources and advocating for refugees. But we have limited knowledge of how refugee-serving nonprofits perceive this environment and their relationships with different levels of government (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Wathen, Decker, and Weishar 2021). Given the interdependence between nonprofits and governmental actors in refugee/migration issues, a polarized socio-political environment, and the variation in state and municipal policies within the U.S., it is important to examine how refugee-serving nonprofits perceive and interact with governmental actors in pursuit of their goals. Although numerous theoretical frameworks examining government-nonprofit relationships depict how nonprofits might fill structural holes or institutional voids brought on by government inaction, nonprofit perceptions of specific policy or problem domains are necessary to (re)examine why these voids exist, and identify what forms of government support, if any, nonprofits receive.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how refugee-serving nonprofits¹ perceive and interact with governmental actors at various levels as they pursue their goal of serving refugees. First, we examine nonprofit roles in serving refugees within the U.S. Second, we explore the institutional environment, drawing on various theories regarding nonprofit-government relationships (e.g. structural holes, institutional voids, and instrumental/expressive support), and the influence of recent U.S. policy and political rhetoric on this work. Third, we introduce our qualitative methodology, which draws on interviews with 34 U.S. nonprofit leaders.

Ultimately, this research contributes to our understanding of structural holes and institutional voids, in that holes may not just be an absence, but were intentionally created by government(s) or occur as a result of destructive governmental acts (e.g. *intentional* voids). Additionally, findings offer a nuanced view of the relationship between nonprofits and differing levels of government, illustrating how nonprofits navigate federal, state, and local policies. We introduce a typology depicted in a 2×2 matrix that highlights government support of nonprofit work in a problem or policy domain as defined by variations in instrumental (high or low) and expressive (high or low) support (see Figure 1). We suggest that findings have implications for nonprofits generally as they pursue a social mission while navigating explicit government policies, as well as for refugee-serving nonprofits specifically, which are

¹ In recognition that nonprofits might serve refugees under a variety of National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) classifications or work outside of refugee resettlement, we use the term “refugee-serving nonprofits” to refer to organizations that provide services (social services, legal aid, educational, or general resettlement support) to refugee or migrant communities, or those who advocate primarily for these communities.

Instrumental Support (e.g., funding, infrastructure, legislation)		
Expressive support (e.g., tweets, public declarations, and other public communicative acts)	Low	High
	Low <i>Zero.</i> Governmental actors offer limited or no support of any kind to nonprofits in a given domain. This may reflect indifference/neglect or outright hostility.	<i>Unclaimed.</i> Governmental actors provide tangible support to nonprofits to help them achieve their goals, but do not acknowledge it publicly or may even distance themselves from these nonprofits. Nonprofits' work may be perceived as morally legitimate, but politically or economically undesirable.
	High <i>Symbolic.</i> Governmental actors claim to support nonprofits and their work through various expressive acts but offer little else. Nonprofits' work may be perceived as publicly popular but difficult to serve in a political or legislative sense.	<i>Comprehensive.</i> Governments provide public declarations of support as well as tangible resources. Governmental actors view nonprofits' work as legitimate, useful, necessary, desirable, and/or beneficial

Figure 1: Framework of government support for nonprofits in a problem or policy domain.

perhaps uniquely dependent on government as government dictates refugee policy as well as funding for refugees and organizations that support them.

1 Literature Review

The U.S. has a long history of admitting refugees, a history only possible because of nonprofit-government interorganizational coordination. Refugee resettlement involves enabling or empowering refugees to start a new life and become productive members in their new communities (Steimel 2017). Refugee-serving nonprofits play a particularly important role in resettlement as well as providing additional services or access to services in health and housing, job training and employment, and in ongoing advocacy (Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann 2017).

Refugee screening and admission are handled by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security while basic assistance, social services, and early employment is handled by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). After refugees' arrival in the U.S., PRM oversees their placement within the country and contracts with nine national nonprofit resettlement organizations (Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Relief).

These agencies, in turn, sub-contract with local nonprofits in various states to provide reception and placement services.

Upon arrival, ORR further assists refugees through its Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) that provides short-term medical and cash assistance to refugees not eligible for federal benefits, while also funding matching grant programs (e.g. job training, housing, case management, language training) that are generally implemented by local refugee-serving nonprofits (Steimel 2017). Beyond the resettlement process, nonprofits play a critical and ongoing role in serving refugees. Nonprofits act as crucial advocates for refugees (Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann 2017), not just in lobbying government but also in mobilizing public support. Local communities are critical in resourcing and serving refugees (Dykstra-DeVette and Canary 2019), and nonprofits play a critical role in mobilizing the public to provide support as expressed through volunteer time and material resources (Authors, under second review).

Although nonprofits play a critical role in serving refugees through resettlement and beyond, nonprofits working in this area are extremely vulnerable to changes in government policy and funding. The funds that both PRM and ORR provide to their nonprofit resettlement partners are formula-driven and fluctuate based on the number of refugee admissions to the states in which they are distributed (Darrow and Scholl 2020). Although refugee-serving nonprofits can obtain funding from private sources, many have traditionally depended on the federal government for the majority of their funding (Darrow and Scholl 2020). This approach all but guarantees a heavily asymmetrical distribution of power in the relationship between refugee-serving nonprofits and the federal government, as well as a significant vulnerability of these nonprofits to changes in the federal government with respect to orientation towards refugees. The relationship is further complicated by a lack of policy, as the U.S. government has not accomplished meaningful immigration reform for many years. In the next section, we explore different theoretical explanations for how government inaction impacts nonprofits and the forms that government support for nonprofits may take.

1.1 Government Inaction Manifested as Structural Holes

Structural holes theory was originally developed to explain why certain actors have relative advantages in a social network (Burt 1992). As a framework for the examination of the interactions between nonprofits and governmental actors, structural holes has been adapted to explain the emergence and proliferation of nonprofits as complementary actors to government. For example, Stohl and Stohl (2005) suggest the existence of structural holes was associated with a dramatic growth of the

nonprofit community in that domain. Filling those holes was not only advantageous to nonprofits in the regime, but also to other actors (nation-states and intergovernmental organizations), as well as to the global regime itself. In this argument, the failures of nation-states in the global human rights regime created structural holes, needs, and/or opportunities that led to the proliferation and the increased prominence of nonprofits and other actors in that regime/network.

In a refugee context, Stohl and Stohl's (2005) approach to structural holes essentially suggests that governmental deficiencies create gaps that allow nonprofits to strengthen their organizational positions as well as the entire refugee management system itself. The prominence of nonprofits in the refugee space, as explained by structural holes, suggests that nonprofits attend to various needs and provide critical services generally provided by the governmental agencies (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Fehsenfeld and Levinsen 2019; Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann 2017; Steimel 2017).

1.2 Government Inaction Manifested as Institutional Voids

Another perspective that has been used to examine nonprofit-government interactions and that also emphasizes the idea of gaps is the institutional void perspective (Anheier and Toepler 2019). In this perspective, the need for nonprofits generally increases in resource-scarce environments where social problems abound. The combination of resource scarcity (e.g. funding cuts), increased social problems (e.g. increased refugee numbers and needs), and under-institutionalization (e.g. deficient, inexistant, or inadequate policies) has increasingly characterized U.S. refugee resettlement (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Steimel 2016). Essentially, government deficiencies create or exacerbate refugee needs and create increased demand for refugee-serving nonprofits to address those needs.

The institutional voids perspective posits that government inactivity in the provision and delivery of social services motivates and enables nonprofits to fill those gaps or 'voids' (Nissan, Castaño, and Carrasco 2012; Salamon and Anheier 1998). "Void" terminology has also been explicitly used in relation to refugee/migration issues. For instance, Anheier and Toepler (2019) refer to the erosion and stagnation of policy development and suggest that refugee and migrant rescues represent regulatory voids in which nonprofits play a significant role because other institutions cannot.

1.3 Government Action as Instrumental or Expressive Support

This framework suggests that nonprofits' activities are shaped in part by governmental actors. Instrumental actions are described as those in which actors try to influence the social and political environment; and expressive actions are those in

which actors verbalize their support for an organization or cause (Klandermans 2015). The instrumental-expressive distinction was originally introduced in nonprofit scholarship by Gordon and Babchuck (1959), and was more recently adopted by Frumkin (2002) as a dimension in his typology of rationale for nonprofit action. However, in the context of this study, we use the instrumental-expressive distinction to characterize the type of support that is provided to nonprofits in problem or policy domains, rather than to describe nonprofit actions. As such, *instrumental support* refers to the tangible assistance (e.g. funding, infrastructure provision, resource allocation, etc.) that is provided to nonprofits to help them achieve their goals or outcomes. *Expressive support*, on the other hand, is more symbolic – though not unimportant or without value – and involves the articulation of beliefs, values, views, or attitudes toward a cause or organization. In other words, support is “expressive” when its goal is not to bring about some tangible assistance to an organization, but to reflect or communicate a particular belief or attitude about that organization. Examples of expressive forms of support include yard signs, bumper stickers, tweets, public declarations, photo ops, and other public communicative acts that serve as a ‘show of support’ for an organization or cause.

Support for refugee-serving nonprofits may be significantly impacted by the policies and the rhetoric of political leaders at federal, state, and local levels. The Trump administration (2016–2020) has had a particularly negative impact on the American refugee resettlement system (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Pierce 2019; Steimel 2016; Wathen, Decker, and Weishar 2021). Although that system has generally been underfunded since its inception and has experienced many fluctuations and challenges over the decades, refugee-supporting organizations had typically received widespread support from the American public and broad bipartisan political support in Congress prior to Trump’s election (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Wathen, Decker, and Weishar 2021). The Trump administration issued several executive orders which made the admission and resettlement of refugees more difficult (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Pierce 2019; Wathen, Decker, and Weishar 2021). Moreover, the Trump administration also implemented severe funding cuts which significantly reduced the size of the refugee admission program and fueled criticism of immigrants and refugees.

At the state and local levels of governance across the US, instrumental and expressive support for refugees varied by political ideologies/affiliations (Krogstad 2019; Oliphant and Cerda 2022). This is reflective of trends suggesting that Americans are divided across party lines regarding refugees. For instance, although a slim majority (51 %) of Americans believed that the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees, 74 % of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents believe that U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees while only 26 % of Republicans/Republican-leaning who stated the same (Krogstad 2019). More recently, Oliphant and Cerda (2022) confirmed significant political differences in that 85 % of Democrats believed

that accepting refugees from countries where people are escaping violence/war is an important goal while only 58 % of Republicans believed the same.

Efforts to assist refugees are typically informed by both country-level political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts (Yang, Liu, and Wang 2020) as well as local differences within the community (Dykstra-DeVette and Canary 2019). With the U.S., states may be led by Republican or Democratic governors who disagree or agree with federal positioning depending on which party occupies the White House, and even within conservative states, cities may be more likely to be run by Democratic mayors or more divided city councils. Local policies may also be informed by the designation of “sanctuary cities” that claim to be more welcoming to refugees. However, to our knowledge, the question of how nonprofits navigate these political differences has not been examined in qualitative detail. As such, we consider how nonprofits in the refugee domain perceive governmental actors’ roles or actions in the domain more generally, and how they are supported (or not) by government at varying levels.

RQ1: How do refugee-serving organizations perceive federal government response to refugees in the U.S.?

RQ2: What instrumental or expressive support do U.S. refugee-serving organizations receive from federal and local government?

RQ3: How do nonprofits experience federal and local government support?

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and Procedure

This paper drew on data collected for a broader study to explore how nonprofits worked with other agencies in support of refugees. Thus, the research team sought research participants that shared similarities and differences (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to get a better sense of the variation in nonprofit approaches. Because we were interested in exploring variation in terms of metropolitan area, refugee populations served, and socio-political contexts (e.g. red and blue states), we used local directories and snowball sampling to contact the executive directors or equivalents of nonprofit organizations serving refugees in or near four metropolitan areas: San Diego (CA), El Paso (TX), Chicago (IL) and Louisville (KY). Because one of the questions in our research protocol asked if there were other refugee-serving organizations we should contact, we eventually spoke with agencies referred to us in other states. Table 1 offers an overview of the states in which data was collected, along with state-level numbers of refugees and political designations at the time of data collection.

Our 34 participants represented a 24.5 % response rate and eight different states (Illinois (13), California (8), Texas (5), Kentucky (4), and Arizona, Pennsylvania, New

Table 1: Background information on refugees in various sites/states of data collection.

Sites of data collection	Number of nonprofit participants	Ideological classification of state at federal/state levels*	Refugee arrivals in past 10 years**	Refugee arrivals per 100,000 state population**	Refugee arrivals per 100,000 immigrants in state**
Illinois	13	Democrat/ Democrat	16,219	128	899
California	8	Democrat/ Democrat	39,509	101	378
Texas	5	Republican/ Republican	43,527	147	855
Kentucky	4	Republican/ Democrat	14,671	325	8,061
Arizona	1	Democrat/ Republican	19,950	274	2,178
Pennsylvania	1	Democrat/ Democrat	17,723	137	1,888
New York	1	Democrat/ Democrat	26,586	134	600
Washington DC	1	Democrat/ Democrat	66	10	74

*Federal classification was determined by whether the state went Republican or Democrat in the November 2020 presidential election. State level was determined by the political party of the governor in power during the time of data collection in 2021–2022. For states that held gubernatorial elections in 2022; there was no shift in power (for instance, Gov. Josh Shapiro, (D-PA) was elected to statewide office in 2022 during data collection but does not represent a shift in power as his predecessor was also a Democrat). Washington, DC, has no governor but was represented by a Democratic mayor during the time of data collection. **From 2013 until 2022 (Immigration Research Initiative 2023).

York, and Washington, DC (1 each)). Participants were racially diverse (23 identified as white/non-Hispanic, six identified as Chicano, Latino/a or Hispanic, 3 as Asian, 1 as Black, and 1 as Middle Eastern; several participants noted that they were biracial); two in our sample self-identified as refugees or immigrants. The sample included 19 women and 15 men with various backgrounds. All participants reported a bachelor's degree; 25 indicated that they had an additional graduate degree in a range of fields (e.g. arts, law, ministry, social work). They had been at their organizations ranging between 1 and 32 years, for an average of 7.86 years. Twenty-one reported that they were executive directors or equivalents and the others held director-level leadership positions. 14 participants indicated they had founded or co-founded the organization.

Participants worked in nonprofits that provided social services (e.g. housing, employment, community support), legal aid, social enterprise or vocational training for refugees, and media and advocacy initiatives. Within the sample, 18 organizations provided services within their city or local community, while the remaining

organizations coordinated national or international initiatives.² In conjunction with our IRB protocol, all interviewees were assigned a pseudonym that included its location (e.g. CA, TX) in order to capture some of the regional distinctions and similarities in the analysis.

The first author and a team of research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom in 2021–2022. Interviews ranged between roughly 30 and 90 min and generated 526 pages of transcripts. Participants received their verbatim transcripts with the opportunity to correct or clarify their remarks and received \$40 for their participation.

2.2 Analysis

As previously mentioned, this data was part of a broader project for which we began with a concept (nonprofit coordination in response to refugees) as opposed to an existing theoretical framework (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967) and developed a semi-structured interview protocol comprised of questions about organizational partnerships. However, in the initial open coding conducted by the first author, the author noticed that many research participants talked extensively about frustrations with the federal government. The period of data collection overlapped with national and international events that research participants referenced within their interviews (e.g. President Biden's inauguration, the removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine) as well as other events in which federal policies impacted their work (e.g. COVID-19).

With this in mind, the research team developed new research questions and pivoted to examining how nonprofits perceived and interacted with government as they served refugees. We then relied on provisional coding (Saldaña 2013) comprised of codes developed from prior research/theory (e.g. *structural holes*) as well as research questions (e.g. *federal, state, or local government policy*). The first author acted as the main coder, creating memos and sharing samples of coding with the rest of the research team to serve a “reality check” as recommended in provisional coding (Saldaña 2013, p. 146). Following Saldaña's (2013) suggestions, we further defined and modified these provisional codes (e.g. *instrumental action*) to create memos and observations from what we saw in the data (e.g. *instrumental support*).

RQs 1 and 2 were primarily analyzed through multiple rounds of provisional coding in which the coder looked for instances that represented or illustrated

² Because of the variation in the type of services provided by our sample that encompassed local resettlement efforts as well as national advocacy efforts), we opted to focus on state-level data rather than city-level data in Table 1. More comprehensive reviews of city-level services and policies exist (e.g., Graauw and Gleason 2021).

theoretical frameworks that explain government-nonprofit relationships. But, because researchers should “exercise caution with provisional codes” so as not to fit qualitative data to existing codes (Saldaña 2013, p. 146), the researchers engaged in extended memo-writing and further discussion about how nonprofits experienced or accessed government support, especially as they navigated different federal, state, or municipal policies. As we discussed these memos, we began to engage second-order pattern coding (Saldaña 2013). This ultimately led us to the suggestion of a more nuanced framework for how nonprofits experience government support (RQ3).

Data collection was interrupted on several occasions because of the previously mentioned events (e.g. the fall of Afghanistan, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine) during which many nonprofit agencies were unable to participate in an interview. Because our window for data collection was extended, we revisited the entire set of manuscripts after coding. As part of this review, the first author read each transcript in its entirety and placed those interviews in sequence to determine whether particular events dramatically altered interview participants’ responses. However, no notable differences were found. Although interviewees did acknowledge specific national or international events as they were occurring, interviewees at the beginning, middle, and end of data collection had similar perceptions regarding government support.

2.3 Findings

In response to RQ1, participants overwhelmingly described the necessity of federal involvement in serving refugees but suggested that federal government (regardless of political party) failed to take action. Nonprofit organizations received limited support from federal and local agencies, and suggested that although refugee issues sometimes received expressive support (e.g. public declarations of support) from governmental actors, there was very little instrumental support (e.g. funding and infrastructures) provided by these agencies (RQ2). Additionally, accessing the support provided by governmental actors was complicated by the variation in local policies and regional factors (RQ3) and led to the development of a new typology depicting *zero*, *unclaimed*, *symbolic*, or *comprehensive* support (Figure 1).

3 RQ1: Nonprofit Perception of Federal (In)action

Participants highlighted a lack of government action consistent with an institutional void. Interview participants widely acknowledged that the government was responsible for creating and enacting refugee policy. As suggested by TX2: “[The refugee crisis] is something that was created by the federal government and

therefore should be resolved by the federal government.” Interviewees pointed to numerous reasons for a lack of adequate federal involvement, including antagonism, turnover, and a lack of political motivation. Participants suggested that federal government had not only abdicated, but also taken a more antagonistic stance. In noting antagonism towards refugees, CA8 acknowledged struggling against “certain government agencies” that “present a border that’s out of control when in fact that’s not the issue.” Although federal border narratives under Obama (prior to Trump) and Biden (presently) were also criticized by participants, the Trump administration was described as particularly damaging. CA2 stated that “Trump’s reign of terror” led to “so many laws ... that were new barriers for us.” IL3 referred to the Trump administration’s “systematic taking apart of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program,” expressed more bluntly by TX3: “The problem we have right now is that the Trump administration destroyed ... refugee systems in the United States.” KY4 depicted the Trump administration not just as a blow to services, but in changing the dialogue:

“In previous administrations, Republican, Democrat, didn’t matter, refugee resettlement was seen as a value piece of diplomacy and just a moral obligation of a country like the United States to be willing and able to accept refugees. That was completely called into ques ... Well, that was completely obliterated by the Trump administration.”

Every interviewee we spoke with suggested that the Trump administration had been harmful to refugees, but several suggested that policy has not yet changed dramatically under the Biden administration. CA8 further suggested that their organization’s work was “impacted by President Biden’s administration continuing some of President Trump’s policies that continue to create extremely harsh conditions for migrants. So where we believe that some of those policies would have changed, they actually have not, and they’ve continued to exacerbate harm for people seeking asylum.”

The transition from Trump to Biden administration was one example of what IL3 and TX4 referred to as the “ups and downs” that come from turnover at the federal level and ultimately proved disruptive to organizations serving refugees. DC1 acknowledged that “the policies at the border had been so hard to predict,” so nonprofits were continually on their toes.

Besides describing federal government as antagonistic, or in flux, interviewees also suggested that government actors were not motivated to take a more active role in crafting refugee or migrant policy. IL1 acknowledged that “it is not necessarily politically advantageous to speak for human rights,” so these issues took a backseat in public forums. This had not necessarily always been the case, but IL4 suggested that “over the past decade or so [refugees] has become increasingly a hot button issue.” IL12 suggested that “politicians don’t want to talk about” refugees or migrants because it represented a “third rail.”

Though participating organizations represented a range of services, the interviewees representing them in this study did not report differences in their view of federal government according to their mission. Organizations that were extensively involved in resettlement or legal support were often very vocal about their frustrations with the federal government, but even organizations involved in more peripheral refugee support post-resettlement that received no federal funding talked about the ways they were impacted by federal policy. For instance, in their mission of providing opportunities for refugee women to form friendships and gain employment skills, IL5 distinguished between “welcoming” and “not welcoming” federal administrations and noted that they were better positioned during the Biden’s administration.

Ultimately, participants were very critical of the federal government, suggesting that the executive and legislative branches had largely vacated their responsibilities (e.g. IL8, IL1, IL4, IL12) or were openly hostile to the plight of refugees (e.g. CA2, IL3, TX3, KY4, CA8). In the absence of federal policy and political goodwill, nonprofit organizations did much of the work of serving refugees with limited support.

4 RQ2: Limited Instrumental and Expressive Support for Refugee-Serving Organizations

Interviewees described themselves as filling voids, but without sufficient resources (i.e. instrumental support). IL10 emphasized that “We’re doing the work. We’re the experts,” but also noted that “it is ridiculous that [we] just get crumbs” in terms of funding. Funding was not only limited, it was inefficient and difficult to access, as suggested by KY4:

[the money] is earned through each individual arrival. So if you have a year when there are no refugees are admitted, because the government doesn’t want to admit them, then you don’t have any money to pay your staff or to staff them. Vice versa, if a whole lot of people come, you have a lot of money, but you didn’t know what was coming so you didn’t hire people. So you have to hire people after people have already arrived ... that’s stupid.

Multiple interviewees echoed KY4 in suggesting systemic concerns with funding. IL5 expressed a need for federal and state funding for staff positions so that fundraising could instead support programming; others criticized the limited availability of grants (TX1) or a competitive system that pitted refugee-serving organizations against each other (IL3; IL9). For example, IL3 suggested that “the current way that state and federal funding is allocated creates a competitive system rather than a collaborative system, and that recognition that small agencies such as mine that

provide very specific culturally responsive services to a very specific population are not in competition with the larger general service, but they're in fact there to be supportive."

Additionally, interviewees suggested that opportunities to discuss refugee or migration issues – when brokered by the government – brought them together with agencies that were hostile to refugees or migrants. IL8 suggested that:

"there are a lot of complicated relationships with ICE and the federal government ... The same state that is supporting the [refugee-serving nonprofits] is also collaborating with [ICE]. And how do you hold both of those things at the same time?"

CA3 noted a similar environment in California, suggesting that government leaders often hosted "stakeholder meetings" that included pro-immigration and pro-refugee nonprofits alongside government officials charged with policing the border, and that such meetings "created a huge amount of tension and conflict" for nonprofits who sought to provide humanitarian aid. AZ1 suggested that although they declined federal funding in part to avoid circumstances such as this because the presence of federal funding undermined collaborative efforts. If task force partners received federal assistance, they were afraid to add their names to a bill: "We couldn't send a unified message [from] all the task force because a few of the partners that we had at these task force [s], they received federal money ... they were concerned that it could mean the reduction of these funds" (AZ1).

Interviewees often noted a discrepancy between instrumental and expressive support that appeared to depend in part on where the organizations were located. Some organizations noted that although the state claimed to be supportive of refugee concerns (e.g. expressive support), their available funding did not necessarily provide instrumental support. CA4 noted that "as far as funding, the city, the county and the state really have never given us anything. And so we are basically left to fend for ourselves." IL1 acknowledged that "we're supported in i.e. but I have not really seen any robust support from the State of Illinois."

While organizations in blue states were trying to secure instrumental support (e.g. funding) that backed up the expressive support for refugees proclaimed by government officials, some organizations in red states suggested that local government was disinterested at best and dangerous at worst. KY2 suggested that the state's lawmakers were antagonistic to refugee rights: "In Kentucky, a lot of Republicans are not like the Mitt Romney-Republicans. They're like Ted Cruz-type Republicans If we could have a supportive legislature, it would make things so much easier." The public sentiment could be dangerous. KY1 suggested that they chose not to have a physical office for fear of their workers and beneficiaries:

The state is not very friendly to refugees. That is one of the reasons that we try to fly under the radar and not bring too much attention to ourselves ... I think if it wasn't for the climate in Kentucky, we would probably have [a physical] office ... it feels safer not to."

Interviewees expressed similar concerns in Texas, with TX3 referring to Texas as "the new epicenter of the anti-immigrant policies." TX3 suggested that local lawmakers had retaliated against their organization by suggesting that the organization had violated its nonprofit operating rules, triggering an IRS audit.

5 RQ3: Different Experiences of Instrumental and Expressive Support

Although themes of nuanced expressive and limited instrumental support from government were dominant across interviews, interviewees also suggested that these dynamics were complicated by local factors. For instance, some participants (CA1, CA2) located in California noted that although the state was generally supportive of refugees and migrants, there were conservative pockets – sometimes characterized by the presence of a military base and its residents – that were less welcoming. Like California, Illinois was a large state with some communities that were less welcoming to refugees concentrated in the Chicago suburbs and southern part of the state (IL2). In Kentucky, one participant noted that they had privately received affirmation from some city-level Democrat officials who were more in favor of refugee support than residents from across the state (KY2), but such support was unacknowledged publicly – which raises the question of whether it can be considered expressive support. Expressive government support also impacted the availability of support from other communities. Although participants from across our sample spoke of receiving support from churches and other places of worship, it was only in Kentucky that research participants noted the difficulty of navigating the political climate among religious believers, stressing that although congregations were often willing to help, organizations emphasized the legality of refugees' plight so that congregants were assured that those receiving their assistance were not in violation of the law.

Findings suggest that the presence of low or high expressive support, alongside low or high instrumental support, offers a framework for how nonprofits experienced government support (see Figure 1). For instance, the presence of high instrumental and high expressive support suggests a *comprehensive* support approach in which nonprofits are partners with federal and/or local government agencies that view their work as critical and valuable. This was not articulated within our sample. The presence of high instrumental/low expressive support represents *unclaimed* support,

in which nonprofits may receive financial support or other tangible resources without public support from the government – or the government actually distances publicly from the nonprofit's efforts despite channeling physical resources to them. Interestingly, we saw some variation in this category according to federal and local government – KY2 suggested that some city-level officials were actually helpful in some tangible ways, but privately so (KY2 also noted that their state-level officials were not as supportive). Low instrumental/high expressive support represents *symbolic* support, or lip service in which government actors praise the nonprofit or the social issue but offer no or limited resources in support. Within our sample, this was most common in blue states where local communities received and resettled many refugees. Organizations such as CA4 and IL1 mentioned this tension of receiving lots of public support or ideological agreement regarding the importance of serving refugees, but with limited resources to actually do the work. Finally, low instrumental/low expressive support represents *zero* support. This could be manifest as either an absence of support or even outright hostility. This was suggested by TX3, the organization that experienced a retaliatory audit, though it is worth noting that Texas-based organizations within our sample were especially vocal about the lack of government support.

When considering the complexity of this government landscape – inflammatory political rhetoric, polarized political parties, the differences between federal, state, and municipal administrations and the system for how funding is distributed – it is perhaps unsurprising that many participants ultimately chose not to pursue federal funding (e.g. AZ1) or advocated for other options to champion local organizations (PA1). IL9 criticized the present system while also suggesting an opportunity for advocacy:

I'm behind a huge movement right now where we are talking about how do we redefine and reconceptualize resettlement in this country. I like the idea of identifying new pathways, new ... Decentralizing the resettlement system so that we aren't dependent on the federal government and that we're more dependent on local communities. So that's where I would like to put my energy in terms of policies" (IL 9).

6 Discussion

Findings demonstrate that nonprofits in various locations continue to provide refugee support, but with limited support. Overall, participants across the country indicated they were frustrated by federal limitations in policy and funding, as well as inflammatory political rhetoric. At state and local levels, participants received mixed messages in support of their work serving refugees. Nonprofit leaders in blue states reported expressive support from local and state level officials that championed the

cause of refugees, but rarely received instrumental support in terms of funding. Research participants repeatedly acknowledged challenges of operating, for instance, as a blue city in a red state (in the case of our Kentucky-based participants), or in a red community within a blue state (some California and Illinois communities) as they navigated different support at state and local levels. These findings indicate theoretical, practical, and policy implications.

First, these findings contribute to theories, such as structural holes (Stohl and Stohl 2005) and institutional voids (Anheier and Toepler 2019), that depict how nonprofits engage social issues. The common thread across these theories is that something is missing, but they do not necessarily suggest that this gap is intentional or willful on the part of government actors. Participants in this study acknowledged an absence of federal policy or agreement that impacted how they served refugees, but suggested that the gap in federal policy was not necessarily an oversight. In fact, several participants even went so far as to characterize the hole, gap, or void as hostility.

In other words, what may have been described as a structural hole or institutional void may also be described as an “intentional” void if there is a lack of goodwill or outright hostility. Limited federal policy, funding, and the presence of inflammatory political rhetoric (e.g. the “third rail” described by IL12) create conditions for voids. The “intentional void” appears to be the result of intentional destruction (expressed widely by research participants with regard to the Trump administration) or purposeful neglect (as described by research participants CA8, IL3, TX4, DC1 regarding the Biden administration’s unwillingness to reverse many of the Trump-era rules). All 34 interviewees we spoke with indicated that the Trump administration had an adverse impact on their work, a sentiment that has also been documented in prior research (Darrow and Scholl 2020; Pierce 2019; Steimel 2016; Wathen, Decker, and Weishar 2021). Although prior research suggests that nonprofit-government relationships may be adversarial (Young 2000), this research demonstrates how a particular policy issue can prompt a negligent or negative government response. The resulting gap is not necessarily an opportunity for nonprofits to demonstrate their value (e.g. Stohl and Stohl 2005) but instead represents a “trap”- i.e. a herculean task of mobilizing political goodwill and federal resources when there is little support to be found. Although a trap can be circumvented or even repurposed, it is important to note that, unlike a “gap,” and its neutral connotation, “traps” are not for the benefit of refugees or the nonprofits that serve them. A “trap” constitutes a threat, and previous research (e.g. Darrow and Scholl 2020) demonstrates that many refugee serving-nonprofits have fallen victim to the trap and closed as a result.

Second, this research suggests a more nuanced view of the nonprofit relationship to different levels of government in varying contexts. The lack of federal action as well as the impact of administrations hostile to refugee concerns have been

previously documented. But nonprofit efforts to assist refugees are typically informed by both influences at the country (Yang, Liu, and Wang 2020), community (Dykstra-DeVette and Canary 2019), and partisan level (Oliphant and Cerda 2022). Findings from this study suggested that nonprofits navigate federal and state policies, experience varying support, and, depending on location, may navigate complex environments in which federal, state, or municipal leaders disagree on significant policy issues.

These findings have theoretical implications, in that this research depicts nuanced forms of instrumental and expressive support derived from the conceptualization of instrumental and expressive action (Klandermans 2015). Participants in California and Illinois spoke of expressive support that varied by neighborhood, by religious, political, or occupational affiliation within their cities, or of expressive support that was tempered by public versus private sentiment from local elected officials (e.g. KY-2's assertion that local officials were privately far more accommodating in their assurances of refugee support to the organization than they were to the general public). Offers of instrumental support (e.g. funding) were complicated by the fact that securing that support meant cooperating with agencies viewed as hostile to refugee needs, as reported by participants in Arizona, California, and Illinois. Findings prompted a new typology of government-nonprofit relationships with regard to a problem or policy domain (see Figure 1) and ultimately suggest that nonprofits may experience *comprehensive*, *symbolic*, *unclaimed*, or *zero* support according to the variability of expressive and instrumental support in a given environment.

This typology may be applicable to government-nonprofit relationships about other controversial social problems or in unorganized domains where there is limited public consensus. In particular, the typology may be applied to social problems on which government actors want to avoid taking action (for instance, government actors typically offer expressive support after a mass shooting but no instrumental support that might lead to action on gun control) or public scrutiny (e.g. many government actors struggle to declare a coherent position on reproductive rights).

Findings also suggest practical and policy implications for refugee-serving organizations in particular. Specifically, the variation in support that nonprofits experienced points to a lack of public agreement, which in turn implies that nonprofits have a critical role in educating the public as well as policymakers. Only two organizations within our sample identified as explicitly advocacy organizations, yet many of them talked about advocacy and education as critical to their work. In an "intentional void," every nonprofit must be an advocate, and some interviewees quoted previously in this manuscript indicated that they engaged in political advocacy work to decentralize federal government and develop new pathways to

champion the work of local organizations in resettling refugees (e.g. IL9). Although nonprofits face an uphill battle in advocating for critical populations where policy is limited, nonprofits may develop advocacy activities through a lens of converting instrumental support into expressive support, or vice versa. A move to boost from “unclaimed” to “comprehensive” support, for instance, could include campaigns to raise awareness of the economic value of migrant labor, whereas efforts to convert expressive to instrumental support (thus moving from “symbolic” to “comprehensive”) might entail campaigns to pressure public officials in support of migration to provide funding or develop adequate legislation.

7 Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations regarding the sample and methodology, though these limitations also offer opportunities for further research. First, although the sample comes from a number of states, this is not fully representative of the entire U.S. landscape. Future research may include data from different geographic areas to have a better understanding of the institutional landscape within each community, capturing more nuance in instrumental and expressive support across, for instance, red and blue states, or municipal or state jurisdictions. Locations outside the U.S. would provide further rich contexts to study government-nonprofit dynamics. Second, although we have been mindful of some state and municipal variation with respect to political affiliation and sentiment, additional sampling strategies – and the inclusion of publicly available quantitative datasets – may better inform our understanding on the complexities of how nonprofits navigate government relationships at different levels (e.g. federal, state, county, city). Third, this study relies on one-time data collection during a tumultuous time for nonprofits, and future research might benefit from taking a micro-view of how nonprofits responded to any one of these events as well as a macro or longitudinal focus on how these national and international events impact refugee services. Fourth, we are mindful that our research reflects a survivorship bias. Interviewees reminded us that many organizations did not survive the Trump administration’s cuts, and those who oversaw those organizations may have different takes on the issues represented within this research.

8 Conclusions

This research demonstrates the critical role that nonprofits play in the absence of government leadership. We suggest that absence of comprehensive federal policy

and funding within the U.S. creates “intentional voids.” Though similar to structural holes and institutional voids, these intentional voids are characterized by purposeful omission or absence of critical resources and contentious or hostile public debate. Within these voids, nonprofits seek instrumental and expressive support from government and may find comprehensive, unclaimed, symbolic, or zero support as a result.

The 34 nonprofits represented within this study indicate that such voids provide opportunities for nonprofit leadership and advocacy as well as obstacles in the forms of limited instrumental and expressive support as well as complex socio-political dynamics at state and local levels. The findings here offer theoretical implications for nonprofit-government relationships as well as practical and policy implications for refugee-serving nonprofits. Future research may build on this work to further examine the nonprofit sector’s critical role in serving vulnerable populations, in particular by examining nonprofit-government partnerships involving varying levels of government or nonprofit responses to other “intentional” voids.

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