INDEPENDENT SECTOR

The Retreat of Influence

EXPLORING THE DECLINE OF NONPROFIT ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

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Title:

The Retreat of Influence: Exploring the Decline of Nonprofit Advocacy and Public Engagement

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Dear Nonprofit Sector Leaders, Advocates, and Researchers:

Thank you for delving into "The Retreat of Influence: Exploring the Decline of Nonprofit Advocacy and Public Engagement." Advocacy and public engagement are the heart of the work of nonprofits. Unfortunately, the report shows fewer nonprofits today leverage their influence to drive systemic change, educate community leaders, and give voice to their missions and those they serve compared to 20 years ago.

As we know, each of us—as individuals, families and communities, and nonprofits—has a unique origin story. Oftentimes these stories show how something seemingly impossible was made *possible* by using our voices to drive change, often though public policy. In my case, that story goes back to the voices that were raised in 1967 to create the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation in Brooklyn, New York. The program made it possible for African American families, including my parents, to own a home—that they still live in today—and advance community development and racial equity. That community-based advocacy work changed many lives, including mine. The examples of how nonprofits have used their voices to drive change are all around us, from securing the right to vote to passing the Americans with Disabilities Act. In the last few years, nonpartisan advocacy by nonprofit organizations helped save over four million jobs in our sector through the Paycheck Protection Program in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Advocating for change through the public policy process defines what it means to be a nonprofit. The changes we seek for those we serve rarely come without it. It is a core knowledge—and practice—that is essential for our missions and our survival.

For individual nonprofits, stepping into your role as an advocate can:

- Generate public support for your cause;
- Increase your organization's visibility;
- Empower your stakeholders and the community you serve; and
- Allow you to be part of the solution to systemic problems that challenge all of us.

This report compels us to act—whether that is by digging deeper into some of the questions the study raises, turning to advocacy practices we know work and deploying them pervasively, or partnering across the sector to innovate new, long-term solutions. I believe our success will be measured when we see more nonprofit leaders stepping into deeper civic engagement and public policy advocacy, and more funders giving nonprofit leaders the financial assistance to make a difference. Independent Sector looks forward to working with you as we break down the findings of this report and think critically and creatively about what we must do to lift and support nonprofit voices to create a healthy and equitable nation where all people thrive.

Akilah Watkins

Dr. Akilah Watkins
President and CEO
Independent Sector

Executive Summary of Key Findings

A significantly lower proportion of nonprofits report advocating or lobbying compared to 20 years ago.

Only 31% of nonprofits report engaging in advocacy or lobbying over the last 5 years and only 25% report *ever* lobbying, which is around a third of the percentage of nonprofits that reported ever having lobbied in 2000 (74%).

Mission plays the largest role in determining nonprofit advocacy and lobbying.

Approximately 70% of policy-engaged nonprofits report their mission encourages their policy engagement. For nonprofits that do not engage in policy, 56% report policy engagement is not applicable to their mission and 18% believe that their mission discourages advocacy.

Today, significantly fewer nonprofits know advocacy activities they are legally allowed to do compared to 20 years ago.

In 2000, over half of 501(c)(3) public charities (54%) knew they could support or oppose federal legislation in the year 2000, compared to fewer than one-third (32%) of nonprofits that are aware of that fact today.

Although a majority of nonprofits have a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statement, only 36% of them engage in policy activities to create more equitable systems.

However, policy-engaged nonprofits' investment of time and resources in DEI activities is much higher than for non-policy-engaged nonprofits.

Nonprofits that belong to collaborative groups advocate at higher rates than those that are not members.

Of nonprofits that belong to local, state, or national coalitions, 57% advocate or lobby, compared to only 12% of nonprofits that do not belong to such coalitions.

Only 13% of nonprofits conduct nonpartisan activities to help people vote.

Among nonprofits that advocate, 1 in 5 provide people with nonpartisan voter information.

Nonprofits play an essential role in promoting social change and addressing societal issues. One way that nonprofits can achieve this is through policy advocacy. However, the 2022 Public Engagement Nonprofit Survey (PENS) project found that nonprofit engagement in policy advocacy and lobbying activities has significantly decreased over the last 20 years.

- Only 31% of nonprofits report engagement in advocacy and/or lobbying over the last five years. Mission plays the most important role in determining nonprofit engagement in advocacy and lobbying.

- Approximately 70% of nonprofits that engaged in advocacy and/or lobbying report that their mission encourages such engagement, while non-engaged nonprofits often report that policy engagement is not applicable to their mission or that their mission discourages advocacy.

- In fact, about 56% of non-engaged nonprofits report advocacy is not applicable to their mission and 18% believe that their mission discourages advocacy.

- Additionally, nonprofits today are less aware of the advocacy and lobbying activities they are legally allowed to do compared to 20 years ago.

- In 2000, over half of 501(c)(3) public charities (54%) knew they could support or oppose federal legislation, compared to less than one-third (32%) of nonprofits that are aware of that fact today.

The 2022 PENS project also examined how nonprofit engagement in advocacy and lobbying interacts with their engagement in other forms of public affairs.

- Only 13.8% of nonprofits conduct some type of voter engagement with 5% of nonprofits conducting nonpartisan voter registration and 8% of nonprofits doing voter education work. Among nonprofits that engage in policy advocacy, one in five provide people with nonpartisan voter information.

- Nonprofits that belong to collaborative groups advocate at higher rates than those that are not members. Of nonprofits that belong to local, state, or national coalitions, 57% advocate or lobby, compared to only 12% of nonprofits that do not belong to such coalitions.

- Nonprofits engaged in advocacy and/or lobbying invest more time and resources in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) activities compared to non-engaged nonprofits.

- While a majority of nonprofits have a DEI statement, only 36% of them engage in advocacy or lobbying to create more equitable systems.

The main findings in the 2022 PENS project suggest several challenges and opportunities for nonprofits when it comes to policy advocacy.

- First, nonprofits need to be aware of the advocacy activities they are legally allowed to do. Nonprofits should prioritize educating themselves on their legal rights and responsibilities when it comes to policy advocacy to ensure they are engaging in activities that are legally permissible.

- Second, mission plays a significant role in determining nonprofit policy engagement. When nonprofits do not engage in advocacy or lobbying, it is often because they believe doing so is not applicable to their mission or that their mission discourages advocacy. Nonprofits should consider how engagement in advocacy can contribute to and align with their mission and values, even if this engagement may not come in the form of direct service delivery.

- Third, joining collaborative groups can be an effective way to increase policy advocacy rates among nonprofits. Collaborative groups can provide nonprofits with additional resources and support to engage in policy advocacy effectively.

- Fourth, nonprofits that invest in DEI activities should consider strategically engaging in advocacy and lobbying as one pathway to creating more equitable systems.

In conclusion, nonprofits can and should consider policy advocacy as one strategic approach to advancing their mission and values. As a first step, nonprofits and those who work with them should be more aware of their legal rights to engage in policy issues and nonpartisan voter engagement. We also encourage nonprofits to join collaborative groups and associations of nonprofits with similar interests, invest in DEI activities, and promote nonpartisan voter engagement. By doing so, nonprofits can increase their mission impact, promote equity, increase civic participation, contribute to democracy, and drive changes in their communities that align with their values.

Introduction

Nonprofits have long played a significant role in public life in the U.S. by mediating interests and informing political leaders about community issues (Boris & Maronick, 2012; Jenkins, 2006). While trust in public institutions has declined, nonprofits have remained relatively trusted and occupy a unique position to represent the interests of their communities (Martin, 2021). A recent poll with registered voters shows that the vast majority of respondents (87%) were in favor of local nonprofits informing political representatives about community issues, and over 70% supported nonprofits engaging in civic participation activities such as voter registration drives (Rogers & Kershaw, 2021). In other words, Americans are generally in favor of nonprofits engaging in policy discussions. But what do we know about the role nonprofits actually play in these discussions?

Policy advocacy and lobbying are two common terms used to describe nonprofit public engagement. Policy advocacy can be thought of as a broad category encompassing many forms of public policy engagement, with lobbying as a formal subset of advocacy (Calderon et al., 2021; Fyall & Allard, 2017). Schmid, Bar, and Nirel (2008) define advocacy as "activities aimed at influencing the social and civic agenda and at gaining access to the arena where decisions that affect the social and civil life are made" (p. 582), and Pekkanen and Smith (2014) define it simply as "the attempt to influence public policy, either directly or indirectly" (p. 3). Other scholars define advocacy as the promotion of social justice or change, and the representation of constituent interests (Andrews & Edwards, 2004; Ezell, 2001; Mickelson, 1995). Lobbying is a specific, formal type of policy advocacy that involves contacting individuals in the executive, legislative or judicial branches of government to influence public policy, including legislation, rulemaking, and implementation (Grasse et al., 2021; Chand, 2017; Suárez & Hwang, 2008).

DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

POLICY ADVOCACY
Involves attempting to influence government policy at the local, state, or federal level. This may include lobbying, but it also involves many educational and information-sharing activities including sponsoring events to raise public awareness of an issue, conducting research, educating the public about policies that affect your organization, or participating in coalitions.

LOBBYING
Involves taking a position on specific legislation (local, state, or federal level) and communicating this position to legislators or their staff, either directly or indirectly.

The 2000 Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project (SNAP), led by Jeffrey Berry and Gary Bass, assessed the factors that encouraged or discouraged nonprofit organizations from engaging in public policy matters. The survey found that many nonprofits viewed public policy participation as an important strategy in carrying out their missions. However, most nonprofits at the time engaged in advocacy and lobbying infrequently and did not view themselves as major players in influencing public policy. The SNAP findings provided valuable insights for practitioners and inspired subsequent studies on nonprofit public engagement, but the sector has lacked comprehensive, nationally representative data on the extent of public policy engagement since the SNAP survey was conducted in 2000.

The Public Engagement Nonprofit Survey (PENS) project, commissioned by Independent Sector, was fielded in 2022 to fill this 20-year gap in data through a nationally representative survey of charitable nonprofits. The PENS results provide insights into how nonprofit organizations' activities have changed over the last two decades and how activities vary by organization size, geography, communities served, and leadership demographics. This information can directly inform strategies, resources, and capacity-building efforts necessary to support nonprofits and their broader societal impacts. The research team invited randomly selected nonprofits to participate in this original survey to ensure a nationally representative sample of small, medium, and large 501(c)(3) organizations that provide all types of services through various funding sources in rural, suburban, and urban areas in every state.

This report describes the 2022 PENS findings and assesses the current state of nonprofit public engagement. First, the report describes the overall landscape of nonprofit engagement in policy advocacy and lobbying. Second, the report compares the 2022 PENS results with key findings from the 2000 SNAP survey to understand what has changed over the last 20 years. Third, the report examines ways that nonprofits engage with public and civic affairs beyond traditional advocacy and lobbying mechanisms. Fourth, the report discusses the extent to which nonprofits engage in policy discussions across various subgroups, such as organizations led by people of color (POC leaders) or those serving in low-income communities. Finally, the report analyzes the factors that encourage or discourage nonprofits to engage, or not engage, in policy discussions.

Before discussing the 2022 PENS findings, the following section provides a brief review of what we already know about nonprofit public engagement from existing literature. This includes the major barriers to and incentives for nonprofit advocacy identified by previous studies, as well as a brief description of the PENS methodology. A detailed description of the methodology can be found in the appendix.

Literature Review

Research on nonprofit advocacy suggests a range of reasons why nonprofits might—or might not—engage in public policy matters. This section outlines previous research findings related to the factors that motivate or discourage nonprofit public engagement and how they impact nonprofit advocacy and lobbying efforts.

Types of Organizations That Engage in Policy (and Those That Don't)

A variety of **organizational factors** contribute to the level and form of nonprofit advocacy including size, mission, professionalization, and reliance on certain funding streams (Devita et al., 2014; MacIndoe & Whalen, 2013). For instance, **an organization's size is a major factor for a nonprofit's capacity to engage in advocacy** (Fyall & Allard, 2017; Mosley, 2010; Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Donaldson & Shields, 2009; Child & Grønbjerg, 2007). Larger nonprofits have more financial and human resources available, which translates to greater capacity to train their staff and volunteers to exert more political influence (Schmid et al., 2008). An organization's mission also plays a major role. Nonprofits that explicitly mention advocacy in their mission statements (Beaton et al., 2021; Clear et al., 2018; Donaldson, 2007; Suárez, 2012; Suárez & Hwang, 2008) are much more likely to advocate (Yanagi et al., 2021; Pekkanen & Smith, 2014; Mosley, 2013).

A nonprofit's decision to engage in advocacy as well as its level of engagement **are dependent on its service area or subfields** (Fyall & Allard, 2017; Guo & Acar, 2005; Li et al., 2017; Zhang & Guo, 2012). Mission specialization may decrease nonprofit advocacy (MacIndoe, 2014); subfields in the human services subsector, such as child welfare and youth organizations, can be less likely to advocate, as exemplified by Mosley and Ros (2011) and Moulton and Eckerd (2012). Further, service-oriented nonprofits are overall less likely to participate in advocacy (Smith et al., 2017) and certain types of nonprofits are more likely to be active in online advocacy (Suárez, 2009).

Professionalization and leadership also play a role in determining nonprofit advocacy. Nonprofits led by those with specialized degrees, particularly in executive management, or those who have past advocacy experience are more likely to engage in advocacy activities (Kim & Mason, 2018; Lu & Park, 2018; Mosley, 2010, 2014; Suárez & Hwang, 2008). In contrast, increased staff professionalization is associated with decreased advocacy (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009), meaning that nonprofits staffed by professionals may focus on providing services rather than advocating for the causes related to their programs. Nonprofit leaders who share racial identity with their clients are more likely to act to advance political interests (LeRoux, 2009), as are nonprofits that offer services in languages other than English (Calderon et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2017).

Other factors that influence nonprofit advocacy include an organization's age or staff tenure (Guo & Acar, 2005; M. Mellinger & Kolomer, 2013; M. S. Mellinger, 2014), political ideology (Mason, 2015), location (LeRoux, 2007), charitable status or religious designation (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007; Fyall & Allard, 2017), and legal knowledge (Calderon et al., 2021).

Influence of Resources, Government Funding, and Constituent Involvement

Nonprofits with **larger budgets** have more capacity for advocacy (Guo & Acar, 2005; Pekkanen & Smith, 2014), while smaller budgets represent a challenge to advocacy activities (Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2014). Revenue sources also influence nonprofit advocacy, with nonprofits examining a variety of venues and tactics to determine which will have the biggest effect (Buffardi et al., 2015).

The impact of **government funding** is a subject of much debate in nonprofit advocacy literature. Numerous studies have found a consistent and positive effect of government funding on advocacy and political activities (Fyall & Allard, 2017; LeRoux, 2007; Lu, 2017a; Mosley, 2010, 2012, 2014; Moulton & Eckerd, 2012; Pekkanen & Smith, 2014; Salamon, 2002; Verschuere & De Corte, 2015; Yanagi et al., 2021). Chavesc et al. (2004) and Leech (2006) found that nonprofits with federal grants or public funding were no more or less likely to participate in political or lobbying activities than those without. Onyx et al. (2008) observed that while nonprofit leaders are concerned about government funding restricting advocacy activities, government involvement has a positive association with advocacy and political involvement. Guo and Acar (2005) found that government funding had no impact as long as the nonprofit was not dependent on government funding for their operations.

While most studies find a positive association or no net effect between government investment in nonprofits and advocacy, others have found a negative impact from government funding on nonprofit policy engagement. Some scholars posit that the government, as one type of donor, can punish nonprofits by reducing funding if their political activity becomes too radical or antagonistic to the government's policy agenda (Berry, 2005; Berry & Arons, 2003; Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; McAdam, 1982). Alexander et al. (1999) argued that dependency on government funding or close relationships with government funders can diminish legitimacy in the eyes of the public and negatively impact civic missions. Several studies suggest that advocacy appears to diminish as government investment in nonprofits increases (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Guo & Saxton, 2010; Neumayr et al., 2015). Government funding and involvement appear to limit the nature and intensity of nonprofit advocacy (Guo & Zhang, 2014); those with government ties are less likely to participate in direct advocacy (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009). Local government involvement decreases advocacy in some contexts (Schmid et al., 2008) and increases advocacy behaviors in others (Calderon et al., 2021; Donaldson, 2007). Overall however, the impact of government funding remains inconclusive and is highly context-dependent.

Another resource-related factor that has been shown to influence nonprofit advocacy is the level of **constituent involvement**. Increased buy-in from the community increases the scope and intensity of advocacy (Guo & Saxton, 2010; Guo & Zhang, 2014). The more diverse a nonprofit service population, or the greater the proportion of the community that identifies as a minority, the higher the level of advocacy (Kim & Mason, 2018; Lu, 2017b). Additional resource-based factors that impact nonprofit advocacy include resource competition (Lu, 2017b; MacIndoe, 2014) and restricted funds from donors or grants (Mellinger & Kolomer, 2013).

Policy Environment Matters Too

Guo and Zhang (2014) found that, more than organizational or internal characteristics, the broader legal and regulatory environment has the largest impact on advocacy scope and intensity. Zhang and Guo (2021) argued that when nonprofits are actively engaged in advocacy, it is not just about having enough resources or autonomy, but rather it is a combination of many different factors, including the environment they are in and other characteristics of the organization, that contribute to a nonprofit's policy engagement. Similarly, Liu (2018) argued that cultural factors, as opposed to organizational or resource dependency, played more of a role in nonprofit advocacy in Taiwan, and LeRoux (2011) found that the principal challenges in enacting voter mobilization are state laws that restrict such activity in the U.S. Larger environmental conditions, like the COVID-19 pandemic and political ideology, also restrict nonprofit advocacy (Riegel & Mumford, 2022; Strolovitch, 2014).

Though not always the case, advocacy implies potential conflict between nonprofits and the government (Najam, 2000). Salamon (2002) posited a "paradigm of conflict" between nonprofits and the state. The state, as a resource provider and regulator, can deter nonprofits' advocacy activities by altering the policy environment through regulation and funding (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017). Nonprofits may be reluctant to "bite the hand that feeds them" (Bass et al., 2007; Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Onyx et al., 2008). Nicholson-Crotty (2009) found that nonprofits that perceive a hostile policy environment are less likely to engage in direct advocacy activities. Therefore, despite the great potential for nonprofits' involvement in public affairs given the size of the nonprofit sector, sometimes nonprofits are regulated in a way that discourages civic engagement and policy advocacy, especially among those that work on behalf of poor and marginalized constituencies (Berry, 2005).

Drawing from a national survey and interviews with nonprofit executives, Berry and Arons (2003) found that nonprofits are "discouraged by federal laws from participating in legislative lobbying efforts." Similarly, Boris, Maronick, and Nikolova (2014) found that nonprofits that considered government reporting to be a barrier to advocacy would be significantly less likely to engage in direct advocacy activities. However, some studies show that nonprofits are more politically active when public policies restrict their capability to provide core services, though such advocacy is less effective without political allies (Nicholson-Crotty, 2007). On the other hand, nonprofits with missions or objectives that are closely aligned with the policy environment enjoy more political support and thus have greater engagement in advocacy activities. For example, Holyoke et al. (2007) found that nonprofits that see the government as an ally and source of support are more likely to proactively engage in advocacy regardless of the receptivity of policymakers. Political elites who see the advocacy work of nonprofits benefiting their own career are more likely to support and encourage such advocacy (p. 212).

Overall, the evidence for how the policy environment affects nonprofits' engagement in advocacy is mixed. Whether governmental regulations, policy agendas, and financial support have a positive or negative effect on nonprofit advocacy is still unclear. Such effects also vary by nonprofit service sector (Berry, 2005; LeRoux, 2007), location (Devita et al., 2014; Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014), leaders' political ideology (Mason, 2015), professionalism (Fyall & McGuire, 2015; Kim & Mason, 2018; LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009; Lu & Park, 2018; Onyx et al., 2010), and sometimes even the organization's time of establishment (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007; MacIndoe & Whalen, 2013). The lack of consistency in the literature calls for comprehensive and updated national data.

Determining nonprofit advocacy motivations and challenges may be further complicated by nonprofit participation in coalitions or collaboration. The role of nonprofit coalitions and partnerships in the sector's advocacy behavior is explored in the next section.

Nonprofit Advocacy Coalitions

Research suggests that one of the best ways to overcome barriers to advocacy is for nonprofits to join or form advocacy coalitions (Buffardi et al., 2015; LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009; Mosley, 2011; Zhang & Guo, 2021). Advocacy coalitions are groups of organizations that share the same goals and act in concert to influence legislation, rules, or implementation (Fyall & McGuire, 2015; Mosley, 2010, 2012; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021). A nonprofit coalition might collaborate on specific advocacy projects, share knowledge about policy issues that affect nonprofits and their advocacy tactics, or even hold advocacy trainings (Chin, 2018; Fyall & McGuire, 2015). Some nonprofits might join associations of nonprofits to represent their interests, or collaborate on non-advocacy activities; for instance, some government grants require collaboration (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010; Mosley, 2010, 2011). Some research suggests that collaboration on non-advocacy issues may increase the likelihood that nonprofits engage in advocacy, through skill and knowledge sharing (Mosley, 2010, 2011).

Coalitions can help nonprofits overcome a lack of financial capacity for advocacy since they allow for pooling of resources (such as staff) among many groups, limiting the cost and risk for individual organizations (Boris et al., 2014; Li et al., 2017; Mosley, 2014; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021). Similarly, advocacy coalitions can help nonprofits build trust with each other and other actors in the policy area, helping them learn more about the policy process and increase their political power in the policy area (Fyall & McGuire, 2015; Guo & Acar, 2005; Mosley, 2014; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021).

Coalitions can also support individual organizations' advocacy efforts; collaborating with other organizations that have more advocacy experience may increase their legitimacy in the policy area (Guo & Acar, 2005; Lu, 2015; Mosley, 2014). Similarly, the more member organizations that a coalition has, the more attention, resources, and, thus, legitimacy it will be able to gain (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010). Coalition-based advocacy can also allow nonprofits to shield themselves from any possible negative ramifications of policy advocacy, as it allows for a "low profile" (Boris et al., 2014). However, there are also challenges. Coalition activity can result in the loss of an organization's autonomy, and funding from many sources may complicate how a nonprofit takes a position on an issue (Fyall & McGuire, 2015; Guo & Acar, 2005).

Research Methodology and Characteristics of the U.S. Nonprofit Sector

Research Methodology

The PENS project was developed based on the 2000 Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project (SNAP) survey, with input from experts in the field and focus groups of nonprofit executive directors. The final survey was tested with executive directors working in organizations similar to the survey sample and revised based on feedback from those individuals. The survey was fielded to a random sample of U.S.-based nonprofits. All participants met certain criteria, including good standing with the IRS and inclusion in the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) Core 990 Public Charity File. From the resulting pool of about 290,000 active charitable nonprofits, the research team drew a 10.5% random sample, stratified to ensure representative inclusion of organizations by size, subsector, and state. Independent Sector then contracted with SSRS, a survey research firm, to contact the 21,267 organizations through email and postal outreach. This report is based on analysis of 2,282 completed surveys, or 7.7% of the full sample. Final survey data were weighted to be fully representative of the U.S. nonprofit sector other than hospitals and higher education. For a more detailed description of survey methodology, see Appendix A.

- **Nationally representative study of nonprofits designed to identify disparities within the sector in order to guide interventions to promote greater equity.**

- **Only the second study of its kind, the last of which was conducted over 20 years ago.**

- **Designed to serve as baseline for new research on advocacy and equity to benchmark the nonprofit sector against for the next 20 years.**

Characteristics of the U.S. Nonprofit Sector in 2023

As shown in Table 1, the resulting sample in this study is representative of the U.S. nonprofit sector based on known characteristics of U.S. nonprofits and the communities they serve. Just over one-third (36%) of nonprofits are human services organizations, around 12% are arts organizations, 17% education, 6% environmental, 10% health, 2% international, 11% public benefit, and 7% religious. Reflective of the U.S. nonprofit sector, close to two-thirds (64%) of organizations have annual budgets under $500,000. The study sample is slightly over-representative of organizations located in the Midwest (26% compared to 22% of the sector overall) and slightly under-representative of organizations in the South (29% compared to 33% of the sector). The final sample is also slightly over-representative of organizations in lower-income and rural areas. However, the differences between the survey sample and overall U.S. nonprofit sector are marginal and are further adjusted by sample weights to reflect nonprofits across the country. This report uses measures from the final weighted sample, which are representative of the U.S. nonprofit sector.

TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF NONPROFITS IN THE PENS STUDY

	U.S. Nonprofit Sector	Weighted Sample
Subsector		
Arts	10.6%	11.8%
Education	15.7%	16.8%
Environment	5.2%	6.1%
Health	10.1%	9.7%
Human Services	36.4%	35.8%
International	2.4%	2.4%
Public Benefit	11.7%	10.8%
Religion	7.2%	6.7%
Organization Size (Total Expenses)		
<$100,000	26.2%	25.5%
$100,000–$499,999	39.5%	38.2%
$500,000–$999,999	11.2%	11.8%
$1 Million–$9,999,999	18.8%	20.2%
$10 Million and Above	4.4%	4.4%
Region		
Northeast	21.8%	21.2%
Midwest	21.9%	26.2%
South	32.5%	28.7%
West	23.8%	23.9%
Community Income Level		
Low Income	8.5%	9.2%
Medium–Low Income	39.0%	44.2%
Medium–High Income	29.6%	27.1%
High Income	22.9%	19.6%
Community Urban/Suburban/Rural		
Rural	17.4%	22.1%
Suburban and Small Cities	48.4%	48.5%
Urban Core of Metropolitan Areas	34.2%	29.4%
State Politics (Cook PVI 2020)		
Blue	46.2%	45.6%
Purple	35.9%	33.5%
Red	18.0%	20.8%
Community Demographics (ZIP Code, Census Five-Year Estimates 2018)		
Avg. Population	27,146	25,973
Percent Non-White	26.3%	25.1%
Percent Black	11.8%	10.9%
Percent Poor	30.2%	31.0%
Percent Low Education	10.4%	10.5%

Notes:

[1] Community income levels are based on ratios of a ZIP code's median household income relative to the state median household income. We use the 2018 American Community Survey five-year estimates on the ZIP code level from Social Explorer (**https://www.socialexplorer.com/**) and Berkowitz et al. (2015) to define ZIP code income categories. Low income = less than 60% of state median household income, medium–low income = 60-99.999% of state median household income, medium–high income = 100-139.999% of state median household income, and high income = greater than or equal to 140% of state median household income.

[2] See the Cook Partisan Voting Index, **https://www.cookpolitical.com/cook-pvi**.

[3] Percent poor is based on the U.S. Census rating for percent of households that are below the poverty threshold for their family size.

[4] Percent low education is based on the U.S. Census rating for percent of individuals 25-64 years of age who have less than a high school diploma (or equivalent).

In the survey, we also asked for more detailed information about organizations' revenue than what is reported on the IRS Form 990. Importantly, this provides a better understanding of U.S. nonprofit revenue sources than what we know from tax forms alone.

FIGURE 1: REVENUE SOURCES (PERCENT OF BUDGET)

- ● Individual Donations
- ● Foundation and Corporate Grants
- ● Government Funding
- ● Program Revenue
- ● Dues
- ● Investment Income
- ● Other Income
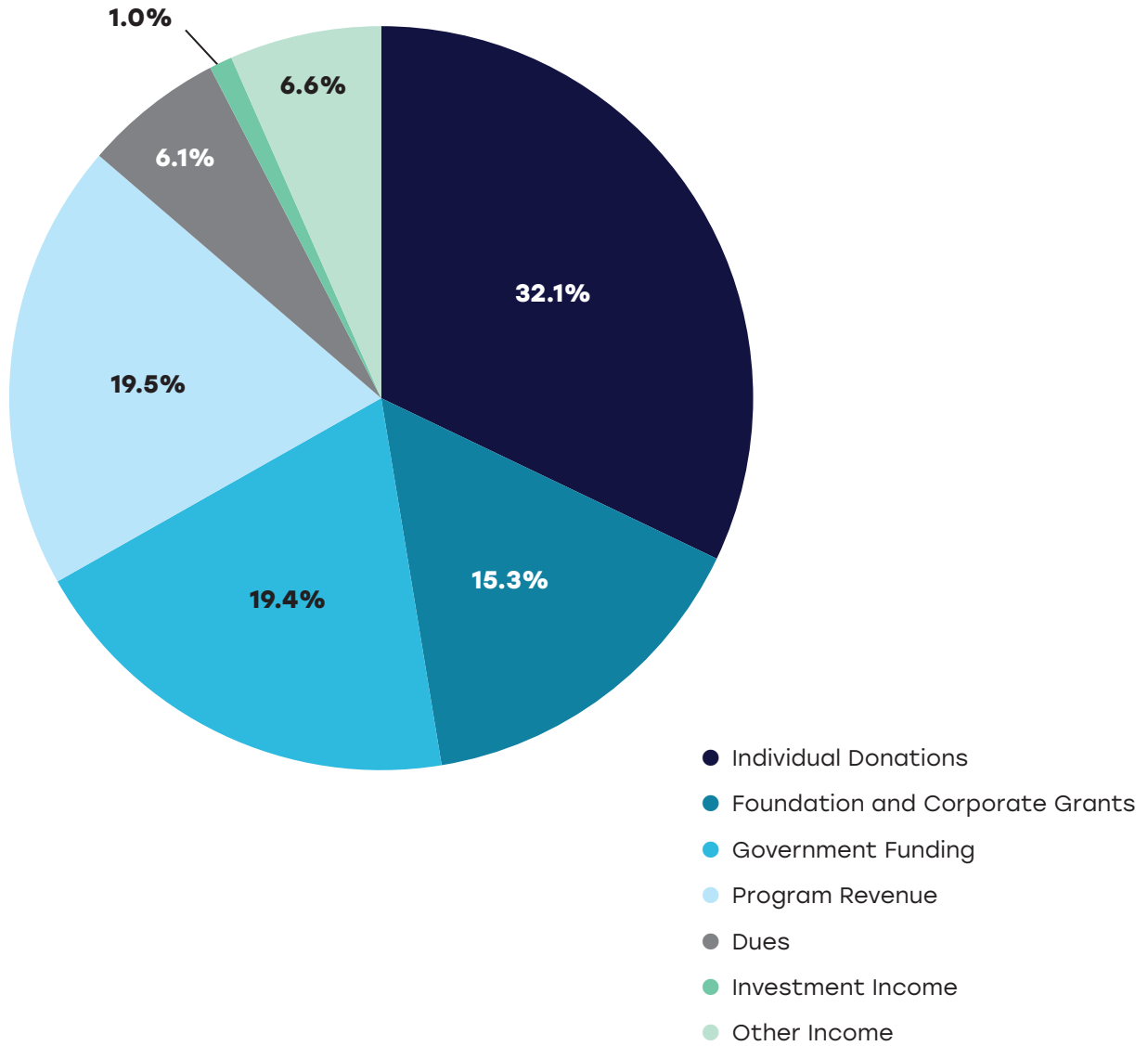
Analytic Findings: Changes in the Nonprofit Landscape Over the Last 30 Years

To provide a broad picture of how the nonprofit sector has changed over the last 30 years, we have combined publicly available data from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) from 1993 to 2023. These data allow us to describe trends in the growth of the sector overall, as well as trends in the number of organizations that formally report lobbying expenses and lobbying engagement on their IRS Form 990. As shown in Table 2, the size of the nonprofit sector has tripled in the last three decades, with the number of 501(c)(3) organizations growing from just over half a million in 1993 to nearly 1.5 million in 2023. Most of this growth in the sector occurred among public charities.

As shown in Table 2, the size of the nonprofit sector has tripled in the last three decades, with the number of 501(c)(3) organizations growing from just over half a million in 1993 to nearly 1.5 million in 2023.

Growth in Nonprofit Lobbying Expenses

Over the last three decades, the number of public charities reporting lobbying activities (which we refer to as lobbying public charities) grew at a faster rate than the growth in nonprofits overall even though they still make up a small percentage of the nonprofit sector. In 1993, lobbying public charities represented less than half of a percent of all 501(c)(3) organizations and around 1.5% of Form 990-filing public charities. 501(h) electors, nonprofits that voluntarily opt in to a clear set of expenditure guidelines for advocacy expenses, made up half of a percent of filing public charities. From 1993 to 2003, the number of filing public charities grew 1.4 times, but the number of public charities reporting lobbying activities grew fourfold. In 2003, lobbying public charities represented just over 1% of all 501(c)(3) organizations, and just over 4% of all 990-filing public charities, with (h) electors growing at a similar pace to 1.3% of 990-filing public charities. However, between 2003 and 2023, the pace slowed. The number of filing public charities grew 163%, but the number of lobbying public charities only grew 138%. Therefore, even though the overall number of lobbying public charities has continued to grow over time, in 2023 they still represent less than 1% of all 501(c)(3) organizations and 3.5% of filing public charities. The number of (h) electors has grown more quickly than lobbying public charities overall, close to doubling in raw number since 2003 and representing around 1.5% of all filing public charities in 2023.

TABLE 2: COMPARING (H) ELECTORS AND LOBBYING EXPENSES, 1993 TO 2023

	1993[a]	2003[c]	2023[e]
Total 501(c)(3) Organizations	**526,874**	**889,544**	**1,457,986**
Total 501(c)(3) Assets	$1,091,860,496,384[b]	$2,034,623,315,968	$6,854,302,236,672
Inflation-adjusted to 2023 dollars	*$2,303,825,647,370*	*$3,377,474,704,507*	*$6,854,302,236,672*
Total Public Charities	**515,772[b]**	**783,958**	**1,368,851**
990-Filing Public Charities[g]	**176,278**	**246,507**	**400,614**
Organizations with Lobbying Expenses	**2,534**	**8,571[d]**	**10,233[f]**
Lobbying Expenses (Total for all organizations)	$46,100,000 ($1,519 median)	$201,199,472 ($2,952 median)[d]	$470,341,056 ($6,875 median)[f]
Inflation-adjusted to 2023 dollars	*$97,271,000 ($3,205 median)*	*$333,991,124 ($4,900 median)*	*$564,409,267 ($8,250 median)*
501(h) Elector Organizations	**848**	**2,993[d]**	**5,200[f]**
Lobbying Expenses (Total for all 501(h))	$22,688,552 ($5,196 median)	$128,847,432 ($11,457 median)[d]	$226,684,496 ($10,394 median)[f]
Inflation-adjusted to 2023 dollars	*$47,872,845 ($10,964 median)*	*$213,886,737 ($19,019 median)*	*$272,021,395 ($12,473 median)*
Non-501(h) Organizations with Lobbying Expenses	**1,686**	**5,578[d]**	**5,033[f]**
Lobbying Expenses (Total, non-501(h))	$23,448,180 ($600 median)	$72,352,048 ($806 median)[d]	$243,656,560 ($4,688 median)
Inflation-adjusted to 2023 dollars	*$49,475,660 ($1,266 median)*	*$120,104,400 ($1,338 median)*	*$292,387,872 ($5,625 median)*
Total 501(c)(4) Organizations	**128,226[b]**	**120,129**	**73,377**
Total 501(c)(4) Assets	$42,505,682,944[b]	$73,105,072,128	$205,397,098,496
Inflation-adjusted to 2023 dollars	*$89,686,991,012*	*$121,354,419,733*	*$205,397,098,496*

[a] Source: GAO/GGD-93-52R, Lobbying Expenses, GAO memo from 1993 based on most recent forms filed in 1991 or 1992.

[b] Source: Authors' calculations using data from NCCS IRS Business Master File (BMF) Aug 1995.

[c] Source: Authors' calculations using data from NCCS Nov 2003 IRS BMF.

[d] Source: Authors' calculations using data from the NCCS 1998–2003 digitized 990 files, Schedule A, based on each organization's annual average lobbying expenses reported for any forms filed 1998–2003, for all organizations within the study sample frame restrictions (i.e., excludes hospitals, higher education), excluding eight outlier observations with 990 errors.

[e] Source: Authors' calculations using the NCCS Aug 2022 IRS BMF.

[f] Source: Authors' calculations using the 2019 IRS Form 990 e-file data and Form 990 Schedule C e-file data based on each organization's annual average lobbying expenses reported for any forms filed between 2016–2019, for all organizations within the study sample frame restrictions (i.e., excludes hospitals, higher education). Note: Approximately 85% of organizations e-filed their Form 990 in 2019, so the totals may underestimate the full amounts in this column.

[g] Total number of public charities that filed a Form 990 within the previous two years, excluding organizations that filed and reported $0 assets and $0 income (zero filers).

Stable Percentage of Overall Charitable Nonprofits Lobbying, Sizeable Increase in Lobbying Nonprofits

If we compare organizations that were present in nonprofits' 990 tax records in 2003 and 2023, we also find interesting trends. For that analysis, we excluded organizations that were not in our survey sample frame—that is, we excluded hospitals and higher education organizations and limited the analysis to organizations in the 50 U.S. states plus the District of Columbia and organizations with gross receipts (the total amount a nonprofit receives from all revenue sources) over the 990-filing threshold ($25,000 in 2003 and $50,000 in 2023). Using that smaller universe of organizations, we found that there were 8,571 lobbying public charities in 2003 and 10,233 lobbying public charities in 2023. Of those organizations, 13,007 filed a Form 990 in both 2003 and 2023. Meanwhile, 2,993 lobbying organizations in 2003 stopped filing Form 990s (i.e., exited) by 2023, and 2,446 public charities with lobbying expenses began filing the Form 990 between 2003 and 2023. Of those that were present in both time periods, 2,867 (or 22%) reported lobbying activities in the 2003 and 2023 time periods. Another 18% (2,353 organizations) that reported lobbying activities in the 2003 period did not report lobbying activities in the 2023 period. Importantly, a full 38% (4,920 organizations) began reporting lobbying activities between 2003 and 2023 when they had not before. Therefore, combined with the 2,446 new public charities entering the sector that filed lobbying expenses, 7,366 (or 72% of current public charities that report lobbying) began lobbying activities within the last 20 years. In other words, even though the overall percentage of lobbying public charities within the nonprofit sector has remained relatively stable, there are significantly more organizations representing the sector and causes they serve through lobbying than ever observed before.

Other major shifts in how in the nonprofit sector represents public interests are an important backdrop to this study. This can be seen specifically with the trends in 501(c)(4) organizations in contrast to 501(c)(3) organizations over the last three decades. In 1993, there were 128,226 501(c)(4) organizations. That number steadily shrank to 73,377 in 2023. However, the total assets controlled by those organizations more than doubled, after adjusting for inflation. Additional research beyond this study is needed to understand how those specific trends in 501(c)(4) organizations relate to lobbying and policy representation by nonprofits overall. In this study, we are able to describe some 501(c)(3)–501(c)(4) relationships, but we encourage additional research on this general topic to understand these trends in a more nuanced way.

> **Even though the overall percentage of lobbying public charities within the nonprofit sector has remained relatively stable, there are significantly more organizations representing the sector and causes they serve through lobbying than ever observed before.**

Where Public Charities That Lobby Are Located

When looking at the geographic distribution of public charities, we find some significant differences in the prevalence of nonprofits (excluding hospitals and higher education organizations) that report lobbying activities. More nonprofits are located in the urban core ZIP codes of major metropolitan areas than in smaller metropolitan areas and suburban ZIP codes. While 6.2% of urban core public charities reported lobbying activities on their most recent Form 990s in 2023, only 1.7% of rural organizations and 3.4% of suburban organizations reported such expenses.

We see a similar pattern with respect to lower-income communities having relatively greater proportions of nonprofits that engage in lobbying. In ZIP codes where the median household income is in the lowest quartile relative to state income levels, 6.3% of public charities reported lobbying activities, compared to around 4% of nonprofits in ZIP codes with relatively greater income. These differences extend to new lobbying nonprofits represented in each of those communities. Four percent of public charities in the lowest quartile income ZIP codes began lobbying since 2003, compared to only 2.7% of public charities overall. Similarly, 3.8% of urban core public charities started lobbying since 2003, compared to only 1.2% of rural public charities and 2.2% of suburban public charities. This evidence suggests that there is slightly greater lobbying and policy representation by public charities in low-income and urban core communities. These differences do not extend to variation along communities' racial demographics. While majority non-white ZIP codes have a slightly greater percentage (5.3%) of public charities that lobby than majority white ZIP codes (4%), public charities in majority Black ZIP codes are neither more nor less likely to lobby than nonprofits in other communities.

These findings provide an important basis for further investigation with our survey data on the advocacy, civic, and public engagement behaviors reported by public charities beyond the specific reporting of lobbying activities in Form 990.

This evidence suggests that there is slightly greater lobbying and policy representation by public charities in low-income and urban core communities.

Analytic Findings:
Public Engagement Nonprofit Survey Results

Changes Over the Last Two Decades (Comparison Between 2000 SNAP Survey Findings and 2022 PENS Findings)

In our 2022 survey, we replicated several questions that were asked in the 2000 SNAP survey in order to compare nonprofit public engagement activities today to those 20 years ago. It is important to note that the sampling strategies were slightly different between the 2000 SNAP survey and the 2022 PENS project, which likely explains some of the differences between the resulting estimates. First, even though we used the same sample frame characteristics to make inferences for the same population of organizations (i.e., drawing our sample from Form 990-filing public charities, excluding hospitals and higher education), the 2000 SNAP survey intentionally oversampled 501(h) electors and organizations that reported lobbying expenses on their Form 990. This was done by the 2000 SNAP survey team to include enough (h) electors and lobbying organizations among respondents to compare those organizational categories to non-(h) electors and non-lobbying organizations. However, that sampling strategy highly skewed the resulting sample toward representation of lobbying or (h)-electing organizations (respondent N=1,155, sample frame N=5,148) instead of being more representative of the vast majority of the population of organizations that did not report lobbying expenses or (h) elect (respondent N=583, sample frame N=200,174). This resulted in a greater proportion of the SNAP respondents overall being likely to be knowledgeable of or engaged in advocacy or lobbying.

In contrast, the 2022 PENS project team intentionally sampled organizations to be fully representative of the sample frame population of 990-filing public charities. The resulting sample of respondents includes (h) electors and lobbying organizations, but those organizations are distributed in the same proportions as in the population of organizations we sampled from (see descriptions of (h) electors and lobbying organizations in section 6). Therefore, we should expect the overall estimates of lobbying activities to be greater in the 2000 SNAP survey than in the 2022 PENS. Nonetheless, we can still compare our current findings to knowledge from the 2000 SNAP survey as both samples cover the vast majority of the nonprofit sector. Also, in our analysis we provide focused comparisons to the subsamples in the 2000 SNAP study that most resemble the 2022 PENS sample, and that are most representative of the full nonprofit sector. Most importantly, the 2022 PENS findings provide a new, nationally representative benchmark for a better understanding of generalizable knowledge on public engagement activities by nonprofits in the U.S.

Table 3 below compares the frequency of different types of policy participation between the 2000 SNAP survey and 2022 PENS project. Following the SNAP survey questions, respondents were asked to rate their organizations' engagement in each of the categories of policy participation along a five-point scale (1= "Never," 2= "Relatively

The 2022 PENS findings provide a new, nationally representative benchmark for a better understanding of generalizable knowledge on public engagement activities by nonprofits in the U.S.

Infrequently," 3="Sometimes," 4="Frequently," and 5="Ongoing Interaction"). Following Bass et al., (p. 164), we coded responses of 1 as "Never," responses of 2 or 3 as "Low," and responses of 4 or 5 as "High." Types of participation are listed in the order following the 2000 SNAP survey from least to most participation. As shown, organizations represented in the 2022 PENS findings are more likely to indicate never engaging in each type of participation and less likely to indicate high engagement across all categories. Bass et al. (2007, p. 29) found that 86% of nonprofits engaged in lobbying, testifying, or encouraging members to contact policymakers (what they referred to as "policy participators"). In contrast, only 48% of nonprofits today report ever having engaged in any of those activities, including only 25% that have ever lobbied (compared to 74% in 2000).

Interestingly, there are some areas of overlap in the "Low" levels of participation—including organizations that reported infrequently or sometimes engaging in each activity. These areas of similarity between 2000 and 2022 are specifically prevalent in (1) "discussing obtaining grants or contracts with government officials" and (2) "meeting with government officials about the work we are doing." There are also similar percentages of organizations indicating they infrequently or sometimes (3) work in an advisory group or (4) respond to requests for information from those in government. While much more likely to never engage in more direct forms of policy advocacy, lobbying, and testifying than the sample from the 2000 survey, 20–40% of organizations in 2022 are at least infrequently or sometimes engaging in those policy participation activities.

TABLE 3: COMPARING FREQUENCY OF TYPES OF POLICY PARTICIPATION (2000 VS. 2022)

	Never		Low		High	
	2000	**2022**	**2000**	**2022**	**2000**	**2022**
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Releasing research reports to the media, public, or policymakers	31.0	74.3	47.1	21.7	21.8	3.9
Discussing obtaining grants or contracts with government officials	29.2	45.3	42.6	42.0	28.2	12.7
Testifying at legislative or administrative hearings	29.0	75.0	47.9	21.4	23.1	3.6
Lobbying on behalf of or against a proposed bill or other policy pronouncement/proposal	26.3	74.8	42.8	21.2	31.0	4.0
Encouraging members to write, call, fax, or email policymakers	22.3	60.2	40.8	32.6	36.8	7.2
Interacting socially with government officials	19.3	--	55.5	--	25.2	--
Working in a planning or advisory group that includes government officials	18.4	54.8	39.2	34.3	45.1	10.9
Meeting with government officials about the work we are doing	15.0	37.4	40.2	48.4	44.8	14.2
Responding to requests for information from those in government	12.9	43.0	26.0	44.9	41.0	12.0

Sources: Bass, et al (2007), p. 30, and PENS 2022

We also find that public charities in 2022 have relatively lower levels of understanding of the types of policy participation that is legally allowed under current law. Organizations today generally understand to a greater extent what they are prohibited from doing (i.e., using government funds to lobby Congress or endorsing a candidate for elected office). However, compared to nonprofits in 2000, nonprofits in 2022 have a much lower understanding of what advocacy/lobbying activity is permissible under the law. For the ten SNAP questions about permissibility of certain lobbying actions that were replicated in the PENS survey, on average respondents answered 73% correctly in 2000 and 54% correctly in 2022. As discussed above, these differences could be due at least in part, but not entirely, to the differences in samples.

Compared to nonprofits in 2000, nonprofits in 2022 have a much lower understanding of what advocacy/ lobbying activity is permissible under the law.

FIGURE 2: COMPARISON OF NONPROFIT LEGAL UNDERSTANDING (2022 VS. 2000)

Can your organization...?

Question	% Correct PENS (2022)	% Correct SNAP (2000)
Use government funds to lobby Congress (no)	98	94
Talk to elected officials about public policy matters (yes)	69	91
Endorse a candidate for elected office (no)	91	87
Take a policy position without reference to a specific bill (yes)	45	82
Support or oppose federal regulations (yes)	44	79
Support or oppose federal legistlation (yes)	32	73
Sponsor a forum or candidate debate for elected office (yes)	31	57
Lobby if part of your budget comes from federal funds (yes)	18	50
*Work closely with a 501(c)(4) for advocacy purposes (yes)	45	
*Participate in nonpartisan voter engagement (yes)	57	

● % Correct PENS (2022)   ● % Correct SNAP (2000)

However, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, even when comparing the subset of responses to the 2000 SNAP survey that were not 501(h) electors (referred to as "conventional nonprofits"), nonprofits in 2022 are significantly less knowledgeable of what they are allowed to do in the form of policy engagement and non-partisan elections activities than in 2000. The final two questions were added in the 2022 PENS to provide a baseline understanding of how knowledgeable nonprofits are when it comes to two other activities they are allowed to do under current federal and IRS regulations: (1) work closely with a 501(c)(4) for advocacy purposes, and (2) participate in nonpartisan voter engagement. As shown in Figure 2, 45% of nonprofits today accurately understand that they can work closely with a 501(c)(4). A greater percentage (57%) know they can engage in nonpartisan voter engagement, which would include get-out-the-vote activities. Because these questions were not asked in 2000, we do not know how nonprofits' knowledge of these two allowed activities has changed.

Nonprofits in 2022 are significantly less knowledgeable of what they are allowed to do in the form of policy engagement and non-partisan elections activities than in 2000.

FIGURE 3: COMPARISON OF NONPROFIT KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT THEIR ORGANIZATION CAN DO (2022 VS. 2000) | COVENTIONAL 501(C)(3) NONPROFITS

Activity	% Correct PENS (2022)	% Correct SNAP (2000)
Use government funds to lobby Congress (no)	98	93
Talk to elected officials about public policy matters (yes)	69	80
Endorse a candidate for elected office (no)	91	84
Take a policy position without reference to a specific bill (yes)	44	61
Support or oppose federal regulations (yes)	43	62
Support or oppose federal legistlation (yes)	32	54
Sponsor a forum or candidate debate for elected office (yes)	31	45
Lobby if part of your budget comes from federal funds (yes)	18	32
*Work closely with a 501(c)(4) for advocacy purposes (yes)	45	
*Participate in nonpartisan voter engagement (yes)	56	

● % Correct PENS (2022)   ● % Correct SNAP (2000)

FIGURE 4: COMPARISON OF NONPROFIT KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT THEIR ORGANIZATION CAN DO (2022 VS. 2000) | (H) ELECTOR 501(C)(3) NONPROFITS

Use government funds to lobby Congress (no): 100, 92
Talk to elected officials about public policy matters (yes): 92, 98
Endorse a candidate for elected office (no): 100, 90
Take a policy position without reference to a specific bill (yes): 83, 96
Support or oppose federal regulations (yes): 77, 95
Support or oppose federal legistlation (yes): 68, 92
Sponsor a forum or candidate debate for elected office (yes): 52, 70
Lobby if part of your budget comes from federal funds (yes): 36, 74
*Work closely with a 501(c)(4) for advocacy purposes (yes): 79
*Participate in nonpartisan voter engagement (yes): 81

● % Correct PENS (2022)　　● % Correct SNAP (2000)

Status of Nonprofit Public Policy Engagement in 2022

After asking about nonprofit participation in public engagement activities and other issues related to their engagement, the PENS asked respondents directly whether they have engaged in lobbying efforts or any policy advocacy other than lobbying on behalf of their constituents or organization in the last five years.

> **DEFINITIONS PROVIDED IN THIS SURVEY**
>
> **Lobbying** involves taking a position on specific legislation (local, state, or federal level) and communicating this position to legislators or their staff, either directly or indirectly.
>
> **Policy advocacy** involves attempting to influence government policy at the local, state, or federal level. This may include lobbying, but it also involves educational and information-sharing activities such as sponsoring events to raise public awareness of an issue, conducting research, educating the public about policies that affect your organization, or participating in coalitions.

FIGURE 5

- Engaged in Both Advocacy and Lobbying
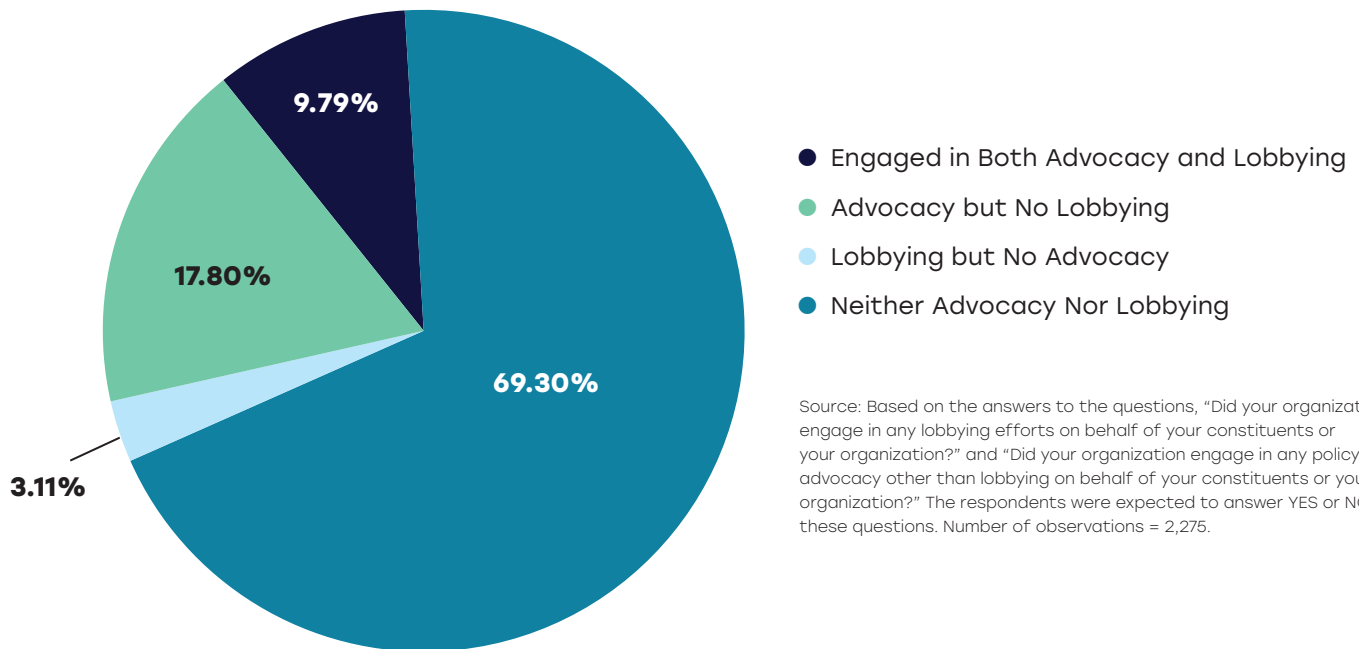- Advocacy but No Lobbying
- Lobbying but No Advocacy
- Neither Advocacy Nor Lobbying

Source: Based on the answers to the questions, "Did your organization engage in any lobbying efforts on behalf of your constituents or your organization?" and "Did your organization engage in any policy advocacy other than lobbying on behalf of your constituents or your organization?" The respondents were expected to answer YES or NO to these questions. Number of observations = 2,275.

Overall, about 31% of nonprofits are engaged in advocacy or lobbying activities, or both. Of these, about 58% are engaged in advocacy but no lobbying activities (17.8% of the nonprofits surveyed), about 32% are engaged in both advocacy and lobbying activities, and the remaining 10% answered that they are engaged in lobbying activities, but they do not engage in policy advocacy other than lobbying. Throughout this report, we focus on the group of organizations that engaged in advocacy or lobbying activities, which we call "advocacy/lobbying engagement." The report focuses on comparing those organizations engaged in advocacy/lobbying and those not.

Participation in Public and Civic Engagement Activities in 2022

Table 4 shows different types of engagement activities of nonprofits that self-reported advocacy/lobbying engagement in the last five years. The average values between the first two columns (nonprofits engaged in policy versus those not engaged) clearly show that policy-engaged nonprofits participate in other types of public engagement activities listed below more frequently than the non-engaged nonprofits. Nonetheless, even among the organizations that reported having been engaged in public policy, the mean value hovers between 1 and 2, where 1 represents "relatively infrequently" and 2 indicates "sometimes."

TABLE 4: COMPARISON OF ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING BEHAVIORS

	69.30%	30.7%	9.79%	17.80%	3.11%
	Advocacy = N Lobby = N	Either Advocacy or Lobbying (doing at least one or two or both)	Advocacy = Y Lobby = Y	Advocacy = Y Lobby = N	Advocacy = N Lobby = Y
Resource to Public Officials					
a. Testifying at legislative or administrative hearings	0.15	1.00	1.45	0.80	0.75
b. Meeting with government officials about the work you are doing	0.83	2.02	2.24	1.95	1.69
c. Working in a planning or advisory group that includes government officials	0.53	1.67	1.90	1.63	1.20
d. Responding to requests for information from those in government	0.71	1.78	2.01	1.70	1.52
e. Discussing obtaining grants or contracts with government officials	0.77	1.71	1.71	1.73	1.56
f. Meeting with elected officials to discuss legislation and/or local ordinances	0.42	1.55	1.97	1.36	1.34
g. Inviting elected official(s) and/or government official(s) to participate in or speak at a program or event	0.69	1.61	1.76	1.58	1.37
h. Assisting in developing government regulations	0.17	0.85	1.11	0.74	0.65
i. Assisting in drafting legislation and/or local ordinances	0.14	0.79	1.19	0.62	0.50
Organizing Constituencies					
a. Encouraging members to engage with legislators via social media (e.g., share a policy/related message via social media)	0.29	1.30	1.75	1.12	0.86
b. Encouraging members to write, call, fax or email policymakers	0.35	1.50	2.01	1.27	1.23
c. Mobilizing the public to support or oppose specific legislation	0.19	1.00	1.47	0.79	0.65
d. Lobbying on behalf of, or against, a proposed bill or other policy proposal	0.19	1.00	1.75	0.61	0.89
e. Filing lawsuits on behalf of constituents/environment/community	0.06	0.16	0.33	0.08	0.05
f. Organizing members of the community to influence public policy	0.25	1.14	1.66	0.95	0.61
Public Education					
a. Releasing research reports on policy issues to the media, public, or policymakers	0.22	0.94	1.29	0.85	0.38
b. Sending newsletters, blogs, or reports with information on policy issues to constituents	0.38	1.46	1.94	1.31	0.76
c. Working to pass or defeat ballot measures/referendums	0.13	0.68	1.09	0.49	0.44
d. Using technology (email, social networking) to educate about policy	0.50	1.75	2.23	1.60	1.04

Note: These are mean values where 0 = never, 1 = relatively infrequently, 2 = sometimes, 3 = frequently, and 4 = ongoing interaction; weighted results.

Consistent with the trends in general levels of engagement shown on p. 21, the overall means for nonprofits on these measures of policy engagement have declined significantly since 2000. In the 2022 PENS project, we repeated many questions in the same way they were worded in the 2000 SNAP survey. As shown in Table 5, for conventional nonprofits (organizations that do not formally report lobbying expenses on the IRS Form 990 or file with the IRS as an (h) elector), the average nonprofit today engages in much lower levels of engagement with government. This is especially true for the first four behaviors reported on Table 5, which Berry (2007, p. 101) describes as "more legislative" behaviors (testifying, lobbying, encouraging members to lobby, and releasing research reports), for which organizations today report mean levels of engagement that are only around half of the mean levels reported in 2000. Nonprofits today also engage at lower levels in behaviors that Berry (2007, p. 101) refers to as "more administrative" forms of engagement; the mean levels of behavior reported today are more similar to those reported 20 years ago than the "legislative" behaviors.

TABLE 5: COMPARISON OF "CONVENTIONAL NONPROFIT" GOVERNMENT AND POLICY ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIORS, 2000 TO 2022

	"Conventional Nonprofits" (Nonprofits that do not report lobbying expenses or file with the IRS as a 501(h) elector)	
	2000	**2022**
Engagement Behavior	**Mean (0-4)**	**Mean (0-4)**
Legislative		
Testifying at hearings	0.7	0.4
Lobbying on a bill or policy	0.9	0.4
Encouraging members to write, call	1.2	0.7
Releasing research reports	0.8	0.4
Administrative		
Meeting with government officials	1.4	1.2
Working in a planning or advisory group with government	1.4	0.8
Responding to government requests for information	1.5	1.0
Discussing grants with government officials	1.3	1.0

Sources: SNAP Survey, Berry (2007), p. 101 , and 2022 PENS.

While the general levels of nonprofit engagement in public policy and government interactions is lower today than it was in 2000, there is significant variation across organizations today. Even though many organizations report not engaging in these behaviors at all, some nonprofits engage heavily. In the next section, we discuss how policy engagement differs across types of organizations and across organizations with different characteristics.

Which Nonprofit Sector Subgroups Are More or Less Engaged in Policy and Government Interactions in 2022?

In this section, we examine whether the average self-reported public engagement rates vary across different subgroups of nonprofit organizations and explore how they are different. In other words, we look at which groups are more or less engaged in public engagement activities. The percentages shown in the figures in this section represent the average percentage of each group that reported having been engaged in advocacy and/or lobbying efforts as described previously.

FIGURE 6: ADVOCACY/LOBBYING ENGAGEMENT ACROSS SUBSECTORS
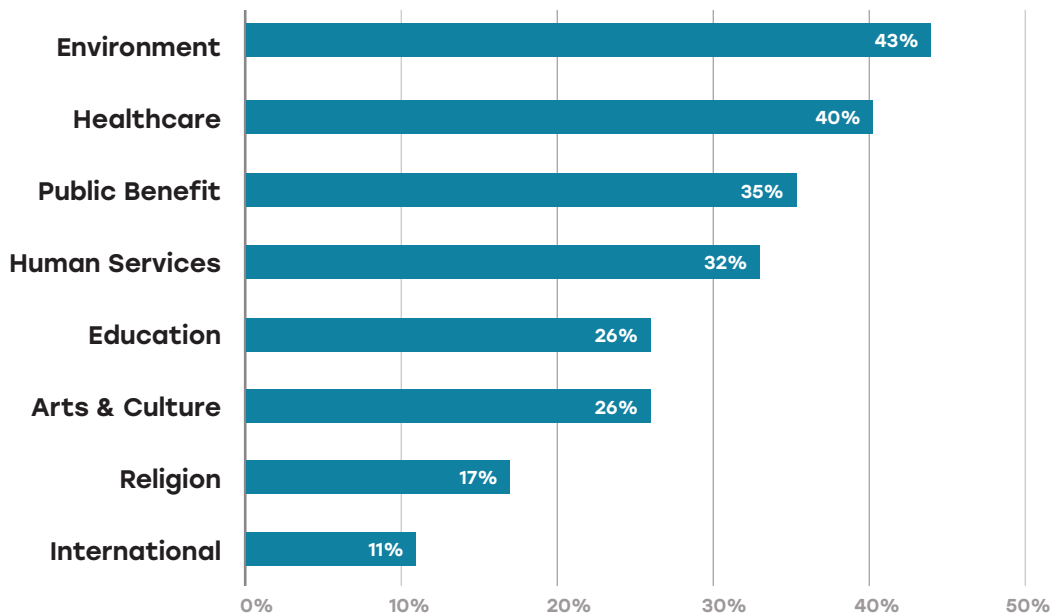
Using the subsector codes from the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities on the IRS 990 tax returns, Figure 6 shows that environmental organizations are generally more engaged in policy discussions than other subsectors. Arts and culture organizations, religious organizations, and international organizations are still engaged but at a much lower rate (26%, 17%, and 11% respectively). This is similar to the ranking of policy-engaged subsectors in the 2000 SNAP survey, with health and environmental organizations being ranked as most engaged, followed by human services organizations, which were around the mean level of activity, and with arts, education, and religious organizations ranked as least engaged. The 2000 SNAP survey did not identify international organizations separately from other organizations.

The 2022 PENS project also asked organizations whether they approached their work from a religious or faith-based perspective, regardless of mission area. We found that around one out of five nonprofits in 2022 approach their work from a faith-based perspective. Interestingly, around 72% of these faith-based organizations belong to subsectors other than religious organizations. About 22% of faith-based organizations engage in policy discussions (i.e., advocacy and lobbying activities) as compared to the 32% participation rates by non-faith-based organizations, and this difference is statistically significant at the 1% level.

Larger Organizations Are More Likely to Engage in Policy Discussions

The findings in Figure 7 highlight the potential imbalance in the nonprofit sector when it comes to policy advocacy and lobbying. As shown, beyond mission, an organization's size in terms of annual budget is one of the most important predictors of policy engagement, with larger organizations being significantly more likely to engage in public policy. As shown in Figure 7, a full two-thirds of nonprofits with budgets of $10 million and above (67%) engage in public policy, compared to 48% of organizations with budgets between $1 million and $9,999,999, 36% of organizations with budgets between $500,000 and $999,999, and 25% of organizations with budgets between $100,000 and $499,999. The smallest organizations, those with budgets below $100,000 per year, engage in public policy the least (17%). Similar to our findings on subsector engagement, an organization's budget size was also one of the key factors related to policy engagement in 2000, with larger organizations being more likely than smaller organizations to engage. However, it should be noted that policy engagement today is lower at all size categories than it was 20 years ago.

FIGURE 7: PERCENTAGE OF NONPROFITS ENGAGED IN POLICY DISCUSSION BY BUDGET SIZE, 2022
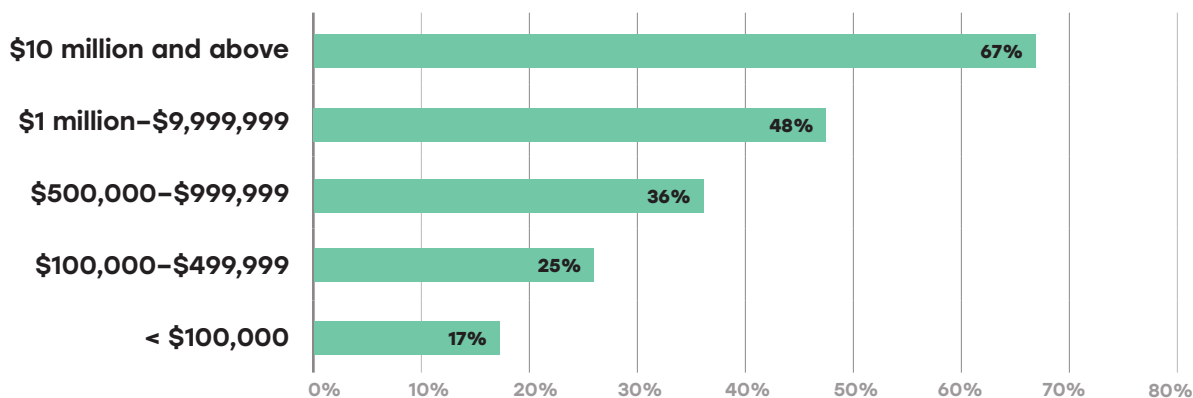
*Notes: Size categories are based on expenses drawn from the 2018 990 files.

It should also be noted that policy engagement is likely related to organizations' knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of being able to engage. As discussed earlier in this report, smaller organizations are least likely to know that they are legally allowed to take public policy positions (33%) or formally lobby for or against legislation (24%). In contrast, the largest organizations are most knowledgeable, with 70% of organizations with budgets of $10 million and above accurately knowing they can take policy positions and 50% knowing they can formally lobby for or against legislation.

The fact that larger organizations are more likely to both understand the rules and actually engage in these activities may mean they have more influence on shaping public policy, while smaller organizations are more likely to be left out of policy discussions and decisions. It is worth noting that one-fourth of all nonprofits belong to the smallest size category and over half of nonprofits have budgets below $500,000. This translates to over half of the nonprofit sector being excluded from the policy process, either through their

This translates to over half of the nonprofit sector being excluded from the policy process, either through their lack of knowledge or from other factors related to being smaller in size.

lack of knowledge or from other factors related to being smaller in size. Because smaller organizations are the most prevalent across American communities, this disparity could have significant implications for the sector's voice as a whole and for the communities that these organizations serve and represent.

Overall, this finding highlights the need for more equitable and inclusive approaches to advocacy in the nonprofit sector that take into account the perspectives and needs of organizations of all sizes and that engage smaller organizations more fully to make their voices heard. This could result from organizations working together to amplify those perspectives to influence policy discussions, or it could also be encouraged by policymakers, who can take steps to ensure that all stakeholders have a seat at the table.

Organizations Working at the State Level Are More Likely to Engage in Policy Discussions

Nonprofits working at the state level or regionally in a state are more likely to engage in policy advocacy or lobbying (41%) than organizations working nationally or across multiple states (34%), organizations working locally or in multiple local areas (25%), or organizations whose work includes international programs (21%). Even though organizations that work at the local or multi-local level represent the largest segment of the sector (46% of organizations), they demonstrate the lowest level of policy engagement, apart from international organizations (which represent 11% of the sector). Meanwhile, state and national organizations represent 33% and 9% of the nonprofit sector respectively, but are the most engaged in policy advocacy and lobbying.
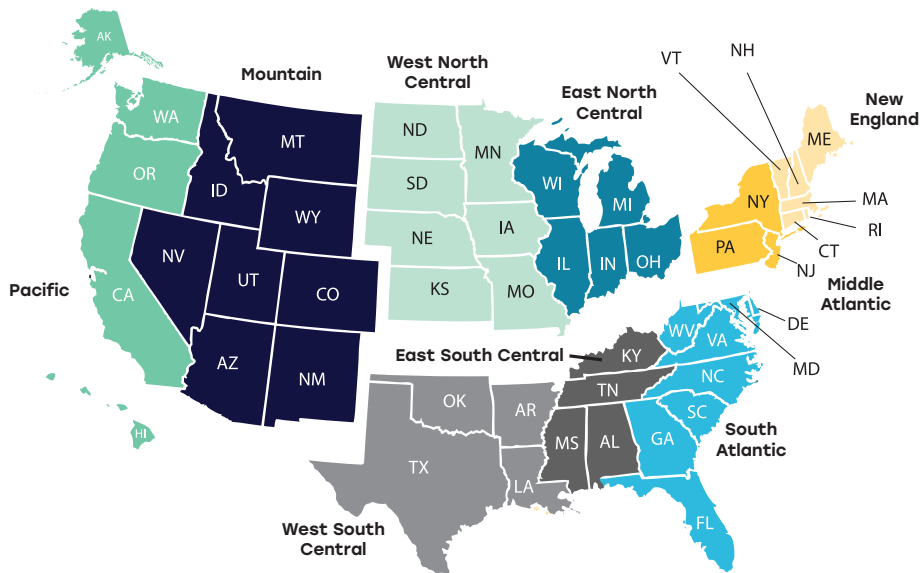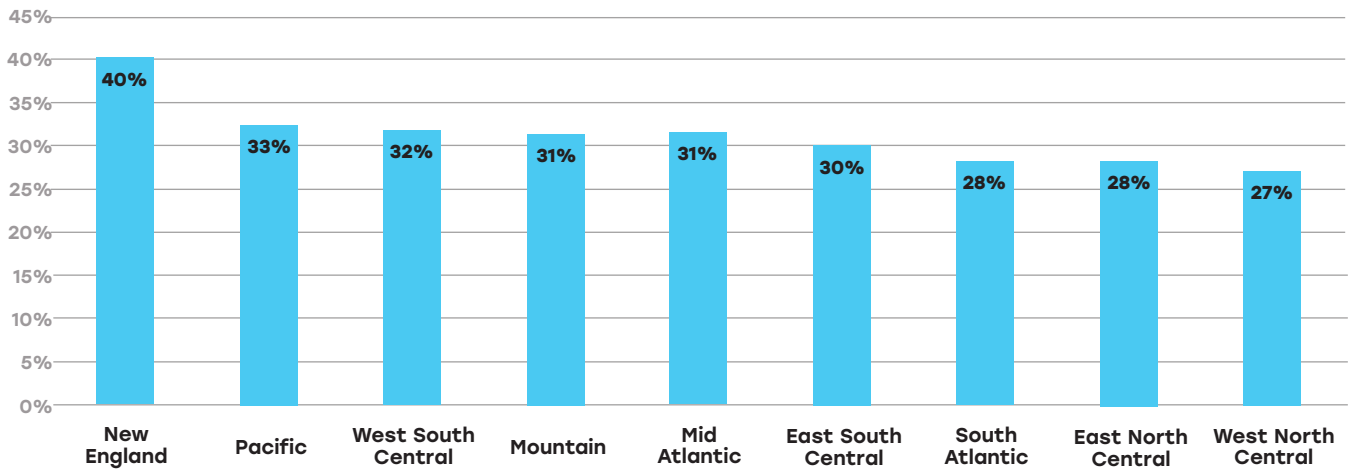
FIGURE 8: POLICY ENGAGEMENT BY GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF PROGRAMS

- % of Sector
- % Engaged in Lobbying or Advocacy
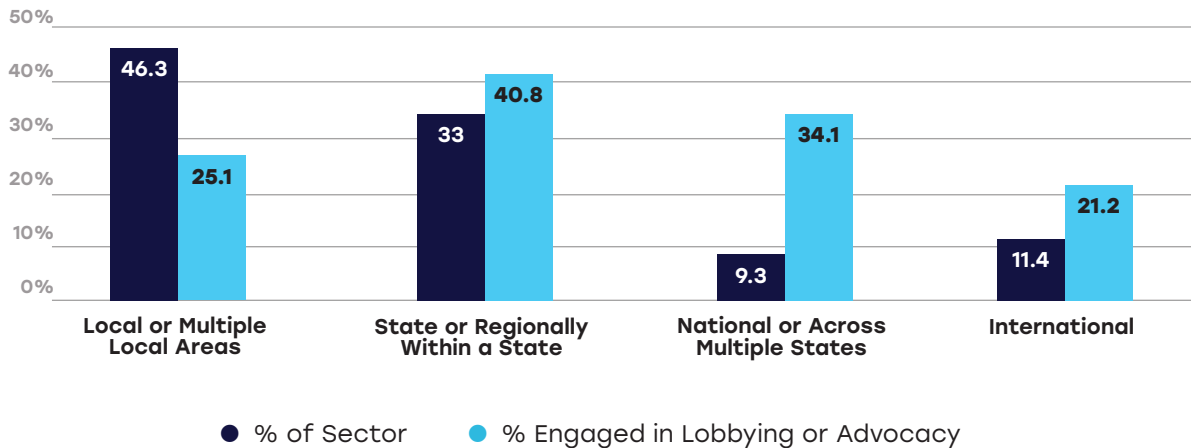
FIGURE 9: ADVOCACY/LOBBYING ENGAGEMENT ACROSS GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS

The average advocacy/lobbying engagement rates in most regions are close to the national average of 30%, except for New England, which has the highest percentage of policy-participating nonprofits at 40%, followed by the Pacific region at 33%. The West South Central, Mountain, Middle Atlantic, East South Central, South Atlantic, East North Central, and West North Central regions all fall within a narrow range of 27–32% participation rates.

One possible explanation for the higher participation rate in New England is that the area has a higher concentration of larger, more established nonprofits that have the resources and capacity to engage in policy discussions. According to Hall (2017), the nonprofit sector in New England has a long and rich history, dating back to the colonial era. New England was one of the first regions in the U.S. to establish institutions for social welfare, such as orphanages, hospitals, and schools, which were often run by religious groups. The region also had a strong tradition of voluntary associations, such as mutual aid societies and benevolent organizations, which played an important role in supporting communities and providing social services. New England's long history of a strong nonprofit sector could be why the region has a relatively higher participation rate in advocacy/lobbying. The regional differences raise the question of whether a state's overall politics either encourage or discourage nonprofits from being more vocal about policy issues, which we discuss next.

FIGURE 10: ADVOCACY/LOBBYING ENGAGEMENT ACROSS STATES' POLITICAL ATMOSPHERES
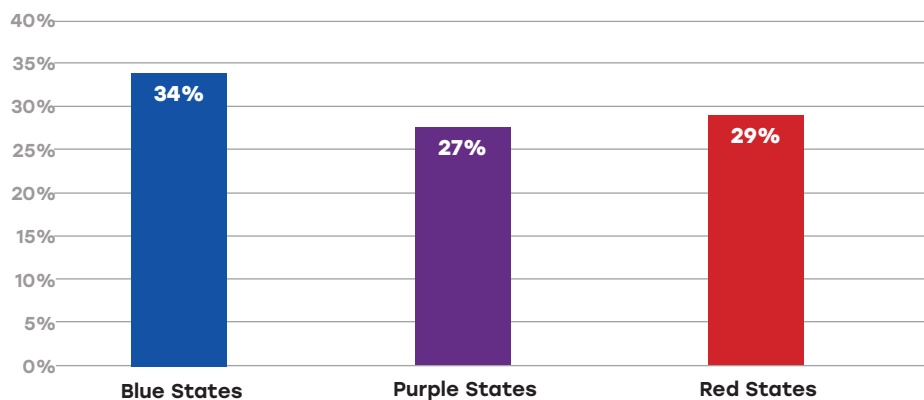
We divided the states into three types using the Cook Political Report in 2020.[1] Solid Democrat states such as California and likely Democrat states such as Virginia are coded as blue states, solid Republican states such as Tennessee and likely Republican states such as Missouri are coded as red states, and battlefield states such as Pennsylvania are coded as purple states. About 34% of nonprofits in blue states are engaged in policy discussions through lobbying and/or advocacy, whereas 27% of nonprofits in battleground states participate in lobbying or advocacy activities. It is likely because nonprofits in politically divided states may try to be extra careful about their public policy engagement to avoid alienating either of the political parties.

Nonprofits with Dedicated Policy Staff Are More Likely to Engage in Advocacy

In the 2022 PENS, organizations were asked if their organization had one or more people who have responsibility for government relations and/or public policy. If organizations answered yes, they were asked to identify those people's roles, including CEO/executive director, staff member, constituent, volunteer, board member, director of public policy, lobbyist, or someone else (multiple selections were permitted). It is important to note that nonprofits engaged in public policy activities are more likely to have one or more dedicated persons for those activities. On average, about 46% of organizations with dedicated policy personnel are engaged in public policy activities as compared to 12% of those

> **On average, about 46% of organizations with dedicated policy personnel are engaged in public policy activities as compared to 12% of those without a dedicated person.**

without a dedicated person. And 23% of those nonprofits with a dedicated policy workforce are engaged in lobbying activities as compared to 4% of those without a dedicated person. Among those organizations with a dedicated policy staff, nearly 80% identified their CEO/executive director as responsible for the role. To be more specific, 45% of all nonprofits have at least one staff member (or someone officially affiliated with the organization including their executive directors) who is responsible for government relations and/or public policy. Conversely, 55% have no one mainly dedicated to policy or government relations. Further, 36% of all nonprofits have their CEO/executive director (and sometimes other staff members as well) responsible for government relations and/or public policy, and 9.5% of all nonprofits have at least one non-CEO staff member responsible for government relations and/or public policy.

[1] https://www.cookpolitical.com/sites/default/files/2020-10/EC%20Ratings.102820.pdf

We can also put it in the following way: About 75% of nonprofits engaged in public policy activities have at least one or more dedicated persons for government relations and/or public policy, whereas about 32% of those not engaged have such persons in their organizations. More than half of nonprofits with CEO responsibility for government relations and/or public policy (53%) engage in advocacy and/or lobbying activities. In other words, organizations led by CEOs who are responsible for government relations and/or public policy are more likely to engage in advocacy and lobbying activities. When a nonprofit is not led by a CEO who is responsible for government relations and/or public policy, the chance that the organization engages in advocacy and/or lobbying activities is only 18%.

Funding Sources Affect Advocacy

The 2022 PENS study also reveals significant differences in revenue sources between organizations that participate in policy discussions and those that do not. Specifically, nonprofits that engage in advocacy and lobbying activities draw a larger proportion of their revenues from government funding (nearly twice as much) as non-participants.

FIGURE 11: REVENUE SOURCES AND ADVOCACY/LOBBYING ENGAGEMENT

Percent of Total Revenue
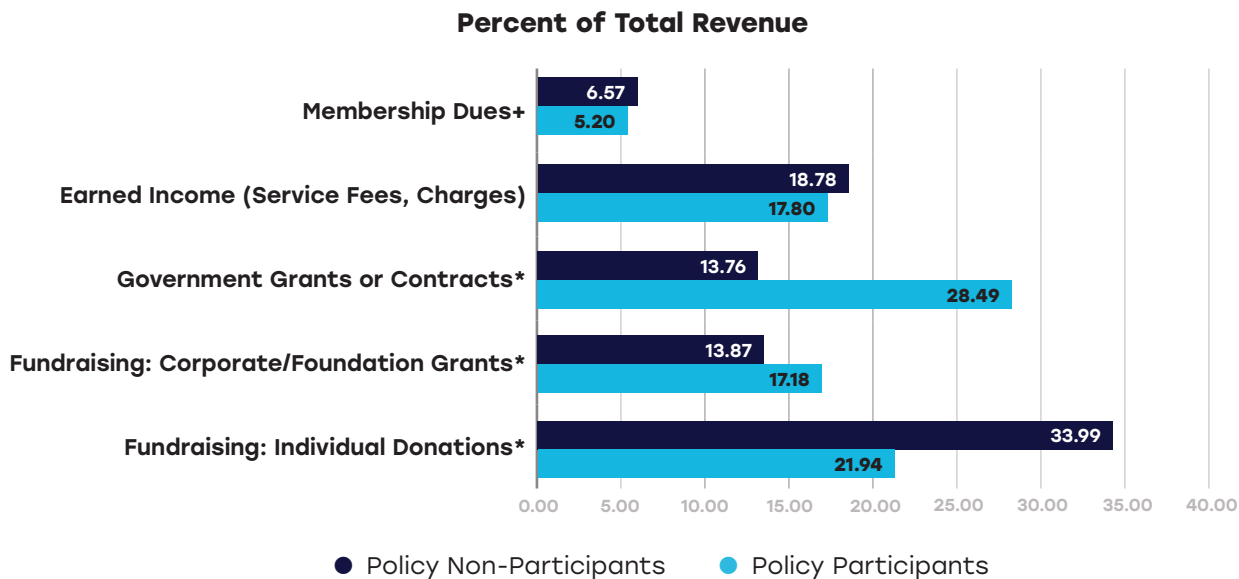
Notes: * indicates statistically significant differences between two groups at the $p<0.05$ level, while + indicates a marginal statistical difference at the $p<0.1$ level.

Importantly, the negative relationship between reliance on donations and policy engagement and the positive relationship between receiving government and foundation grants and policy engagement are consistent with the 2000 SNAP survey findings. For instance, organizations in 2000 that relied more heavily on individual donations were less likely to be "policy participators" (i.e., testify, lobby, or encourage members to lobby) than those that relied less on individual donations (Bass et al., 2007, pp. 204–217). Organizations that engaged in policy in 2000 were also more likely to receive government funding and foundation funding– both for smaller organizations below $1 million in annual budget and for those above $1 million. The 2000 SNAP survey also found that organizations reported government and foundation funding as barriers.

For instance, Bass et al. (2007, pp. 218–230) suggested that government and foundation funders could reduce barriers for organizations to engage in advocacy by making the rules clearer and (for foundations in particular) by removing restrictions on advocacy as conditions in their grant agreements.

The finding that policy participants draw a larger proportion of their revenue from government funding compared to non-participants is also consistent with other prior studies that have explored the relationship between government funding and nonprofit engagement in advocacy and lobbying. Lu's (2017a) review of 38 existing studies on this topic found that nonprofit organizations that received government grants were more likely to engage in advocacy activities, such as lobbying and public education campaigns, than organizations that did not receive government grants. The study suggests that government funding provides a valuable resource for nonprofits to engage in policy-related work and influence public policy decisions.

However, the relationship between government funding and nonprofit engagement in advocacy is complex and can be influenced by a variety of factors. For example, a study by Gordon and Haider-Markel (2011) suggested that government funding may actually constrain nonprofit advocacy and lobbying activities, as nonprofits may be hesitant to advocate for policy changes that could jeopardize their funding streams.

Nonprofits relying on government funding are more likely to be affected by policy decisions, and therefore may be more motivated to engage in policy-related work. A study by Ospina and Dodd (2010) found that nonprofits that receive government funding are more likely to engage in policy advocacy and are more effective at influencing policy decisions. Indeed, policy-engaged nonprofits in the 2022 PENS study have indicated that they sought to influence and safeguard existing government funding and develop new sources of government funding more than the other groups.

The 2022 PENS study asked respondents if someone in their organization sought to influence the government for the purpose of 1) safeguarding existing government funding and 2) developing new sources of government funding at the local, state, and federal levels. We measured the number of government levels organizations have tried to influence (i.e., a value of 3 indicates an organization sought to influence all three levels of government, and a value of 1 indicates an organization only sought to influence one level of government). Policy participants had an average of 1.14 with regard to safeguarding existing government funding, compared to 0.27 for non-participants. Policy participants also had an average of 0.88 with regard to developing new sources of government funding, while the average for non-participants was 0.23. While those organizations also indicated other reasons for government engagement, funding was an important consideration for those that were more policy-engaged.

As noted previously, nonprofits that are more engaged in advocacy/lobbying tend to rely less on individual donations as a source of revenue, while nonprofits that do not engage in these activities tend to rely more heavily on individual donations. This finding is supported by several previous studies. For example, Barman, Hwang, and Smith (2016) found that nonprofits engaged in advocacy and lobbying activities tend to rely more on foundation grants and government contracts, and less on individual donations, than nonprofits that do not engage in these activities. Kim and Meijs (2018) similarly found that policy-engaged nonprofits are more likely to have diversified revenue streams, including government funding and corporate sponsorships, than nonprofits that do not engage in advocacy activities. This study also found that advocacy nonprofits tend to have greater access to resources than non-advocacy nonprofits.

The idea that nonprofits that do not engage in advocacy or lobbying rely more heavily on individual donations is consistent with the notion that these organizations may place a greater emphasis on community engagement and fundraising activities. This is supported by a study that found that fundraising activities and community outreach were among the most important strategies used by nonprofits to build and maintain relationships with donors (Sargeant et al., 2012). **Overall, the evidence suggests that nonprofit organizations engaged in advocacy or lobbying activities tend to rely less on individual donations and more on other sources of revenue, such as foundation grants and government contracts. Nonprofits that do not engage in advocacy or lobbying activities, on the other hand, tend to place a greater emphasis on fundraising and community engagement to support their programs and operations.**

Taken together, these findings suggest that the sources of revenue for nonprofit organizations may play an important role in determining their capacity and willingness to engage in advocacy. We must note that the relationship between funding sources and nonprofit engagement in advocacy or lobbying is a multifaceted issue that is likely to vary depending on the specific circumstances of individual organizations. Still, policymakers and funders may want to consider how they can support organizations that are not currently engaged in policy discussions, perhaps by providing more opportunities for government funding or other types of support—or by providing additional pathways for more organizations receiving government funding to engage in policy discussions. At the same time, they may also want to ensure that organizations that are already engaged in advocacy and lobbying activities have access to the resources they need to continue their important work.

TAKE ACTION

- Consider how to support organizations that are not currently engaged in policy discussions, perhaps by providing more opportunities for government funding or other types of support.

- Ensure that organizations that are already engaged in advocacy and lobbying activities have access to the resources they need to continue their work.

FIGURE 12: ADVOCACY/LOBBYING ENGAGEMENT ACROSS COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS
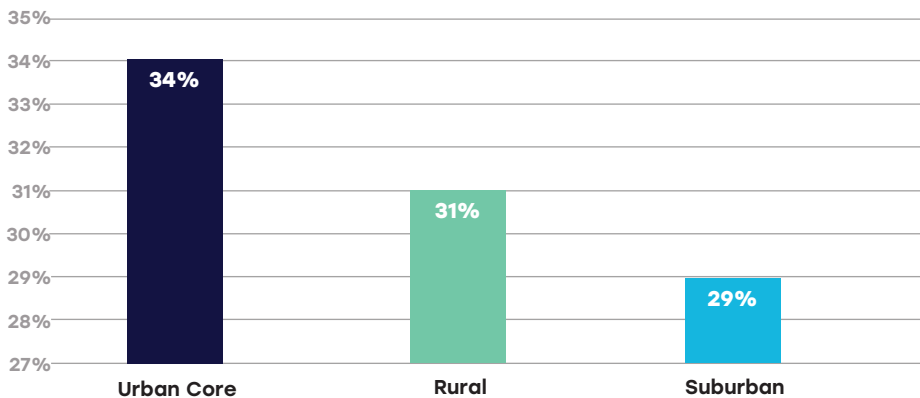
Geography and Demography Affect Advocacy

The 2022 PENS project findings show that nonprofits across the U.S. are located in geographically diverse areas, with 22% located in rural areas, 49% in suburban areas, and 29% in urban core areas. As shown in Figure 12, organizations located in urban core areas are more likely to engage in policy advocacy and lobbying than those in other areas, particularly suburban areas. (The advocacy and/or lobbying rate for urban core area nonprofits is 34%, compared to 31% for rural area nonprofits and 29% for suburban area nonprofits.) It is worth noting that nearly half of nonprofits are located in suburban areas and that area has the lowest advocacy/lobbying engagement.

FIGURE 13: ADVOCACY/LOBBYING ENGAGEMENT ACROSS COMMUNITY CONDITIONS
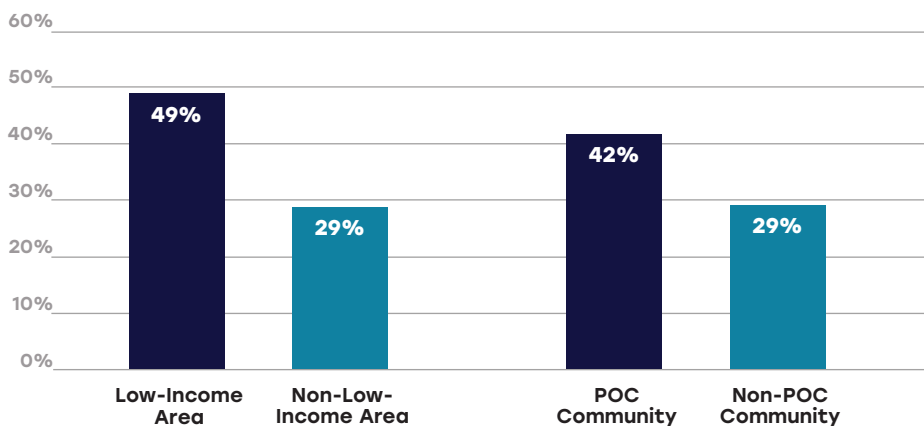
Secondly, we find that nonprofit organizations located in low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to engage in public policy discussions than other organizations. Specifically, organizations located in low-income communities have an advocacy and/or lobbying rate of 49%, while those in communities of color have a rate of 42%, which are both significantly higher than the overall average of 31%.

Regardless of where they are located, 38% of nonprofits with programs that focus on people of color report being policy-engaged, compared to 26% of organizations that do not report having those programs. Similarly, organizations across the country with programs focused on serving low-income individuals report higher rates of policy engagement (38%) compared to organizations that do not have those programs.

Overall, these findings suggest that nonprofit organizations serving different geographic and demographic groups may face different challenges and opportunities when it comes to engaging in advocacy or lobbying activities. Nonprofits working in low-income and POC-dominant communities with fewer resources may face greater pressure to advocate for their constituents, while those located in suburban areas may face more difficulty accessing policymakers.

Representation, Equity, and Nonprofit Advocacy Engagement

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Commitment

Nonprofits in the 2022 PENS project were asked if they have a written DEI statement. Such a written statement could demonstrate an organization's dedication to bolstering equity within the community. Among the fully completed respondents, 63% indicated they had a DEI statement, but we found a statistically significant difference between nonprofits engaged in advocacy/lobbying and non-engaged nonprofits. About 74% of engaged nonprofits have a DEI statement, whereas about 58% of non-engaged nonprofits have one. It is important to note that having a written statement is different from having organizational resources dedicated to DEI initiatives, even though the official statement could signify an organization's intention.

Table 6 compares policy (advocacy/lobbying) engagement, the presence of written DEI statements, and having dedicated organizational resources for DEI initiatives. As shown, there is a positive relationship between an organization's internal actions regarding DEI and its external policy engagement. In other words, if a nonprofit with an official DEI statement is engaged in policy activities, the organization is also more likely to dedicate more of its resources to DEI. This may be logical, as DEI by definition has an embedded policy stance that diversity is important for organizational success and should be fostered. However, it should also be noted that 40% of nonprofits report having a DEI statement but no policy engagement. This suggests that some organizations may be more comfortable expressing those policy interests within their own organization rather than externally—or alternatively that there may be opportunities to engage more organizations in related policy issues beyond their organizations' formal boundaries. Not surprisingly, smaller percentages of nonprofits without official DEI statements dedicate organizational resources to DEI initiatives. Still, among nonprofits without a written DEI statement, about 8% dedicate some of their budget to DEI initiatives, 12% dedicate their staff time, and 11% have board/volunteer committees for DEI initiatives, even though they do not have an official statement.

These findings suggest that some organizations recognize the importance of investing in DEI efforts, even if they have not yet formalized their commitment to these issues in an official written statement. However, without a clear and formalized commitment to DEI, there may be a risk that these nonprofits are not fully aligned with best practices in this area or may be perceived as insincere in their efforts, not to mention that their resources can be easily repurposed for other initiatives.

TABLE 6: POLICY ENGAGEMENT AND DEI

	Nonprofits "with" DEI Statement (63%)		Nonprofits "without" DEI Statement (37%)	
	Advocacy/Lobbying Engagement	NO Engagement	Advocacy/Lobbying Engagement	NO Engagement
Advocacy/Lobbying	36%	64%	22%	78%
Dedicated to DEI				
Budget/funding	45%	32%	14%	7%
Staff time	59%	42%	22%	9%
Board/volunteer committee	49%	41%	14%	11%
DEI Investment Level Index (0–3)	1.53	1.16	0.50	0.27

More generally, Table 6 shows that nonprofits dedicated to DEI initiatives are more likely to also engage in advocacy and lobbying activities. Among those nonprofits with a DEI statement (63% of the sector), about 36% are engaged in advocacy and lobbying activities. Among those nonprofits without a DEI statement (37% of the sector), about 22% are engaged in advocacy and lobbying activities. In other words, nonprofits with DEI statements are more engaged in advocacy and/or lobbying than those without.

DEI investment level is also generally much higher for policy-engaged nonprofits as compared to non-engaged nonprofits. We measured the level of DEI investments with an index that goes from 0 to 3. The index measures the number of areas in an organization that dedicate resources to DEI initiatives: budget/funding, staff time, and board/volunteer committee. The average index score is 1.27 for policy-engaged nonprofits and 0.79 for non-engaged nonprofits.

Policy engagement can provide an avenue for organizations to advocate for changes to laws, regulations, and policies that impact their stakeholders, including those related to DEI issues. Policy engagement can also help reinforce an organization's commitment to DEI by providing opportunities for learning, networking, and collaboration with other organizations and stakeholders that share similar goals. In this way, policy (advocacy/lobbying) engagement can help create a virtuous cycle of commitment and action toward advancing equity. It is also possible that an organization's commitment to DEI is one of the factors that drives their policy engagement or that such engagement influences organizational practices. **In fact, it is likely that the relationship between DEI commitment and policy engagement is bidirectional and mutually reinforcing.**

The relationship between engaging in formal DEI initiatives and greater engagement in advocacy/lobbying could also be related to more general responses by nonprofits to social, economic, and political trends. As noted in other sections of this report, organizations in lower-income, majority-POC, and majority-Black communities are more likely than other organizations to both be engaged in public policy and have increased their policy advocacy engagement over the last five years. Organizations in those communities are also more likely to engage in DEI initiatives. Specifically, organizations in low-income communities (74%), majority-POC communities (70%), and majority-Black communities (80%) are more likely than organizations overall (63%) to have written DEI statements. Organizations in low-income, majority-POC, and majority-Black communities are also significantly more likely to dedicate budget, staff, or volunteer resources to DEI initiatives (60%, 54%, and 59% respectively), compared with 44% of organizations overall. Similarly, organizations with dedicated programs that serve people of color, people who identify as Black or African American, and people in poverty are significantly more likely than other organizations to have written DEI statements (75%, 78%, and 74%, respectively) and dedicate resources to DEI initiatives (58%, 60%, and 55%, respectively).

Our findings concerning DEI and policy engagement also underscore the importance of having a written DEI statement as a signal of an organization's intention to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. While having a statement is not a guarantee for action, it does signify a willingness to prioritize DEI issues and can serve as a foundation for future efforts.

TAKE ACTION

Our findings concerning DEI and policy engagement also underscore the importance of having a written DEI statement as a signal of an organization's intention to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

While having a statement is not a guarantee for action, it does signify a willingness to prioritize DEI issues and can serve as a foundation for future efforts.

Leadership Traits (Minority and Female Leadership)

Consistent with nationally representative statistics on the nonprofit sector in 2021 (Faulk et al., 2021), the 2022 PENS project shows that roughly one in five nonprofits is led by an executive director who is a person of color (POC)—defined as someone who is not white, non-Hispanic. Similarly, around 22% of nonprofits have a person of color serving as their board chair, and approximately 12% of nonprofits have both a POC executive director and a POC board chair.

To investigate whether POC-led nonprofits are more involved in lobbying and advocacy than their non-POC-led counterparts, we compared the advocacy and/or lobbying participation rates of these two groups. We did not observe a statistically significant difference between the two: Nonprofits led by POC executives had a participation rate of 29%, while those led by non-POC executives had a rate of 31%. However, we did find a noteworthy difference between nonprofits with white board chairs and those with POC board chairs. Specifically, about 32% of nonprofits with white board chairs participated in public policy activities, compared to only about 26% of nonprofits with POC board chairs. This difference was statistically significant at the 5% level.

These comparisons need to be considered in context. According to a prior study (Kim & Mason, 2018), arts and culture nonprofits led by POC tend to be more engaged in policy advocacy when controlling for other factors. However, the PENS findings suggest that POC-led nonprofits may not necessarily be more active in advocacy/lobbying. It is possible that these organizations face greater organizational constraints that hinder their ability to engage in advocacy. For instance, recent research has shown that nonprofits serving mainly people of color, or those led by people of color, encounter greater financial challenges than others (Kim & Li, 2022). It is worth noting that about 38% of nonprofits located in majority-POC communities are led by POC board chairs, whereas about 20% of nonprofits located in majority-white communities are led by POC board chairs. Of all nonprofits, only about 5% are led by POC executive directors and located in majority-POC communities, and nearly three out of four organizations (72%) are led by white executive directors and operate in majority-white communities. We did not find that the small proportion of nonprofits (5%) that have POC leadership and serve POC communities engage in advocacy/lobbying activities at a significantly different rate than others.

We also examined the influence of female board leadership on nonprofit engagement in advocacy/lobbying. About 54% of nonprofits have female-dominated boards, meaning that more than half of board members are female. When we compared organizations with a board composed of mostly women to those with fewer women, we did not find the participation rate to be statistically different (32% vs. 30%). We also looked at nonprofits led by female board chairs (44% of the sample) versus others, but found no difference. We do, however, observe a slight significant difference in policy engagement rates between nonprofits with female executive directors (55% of the sample) and the others (32% vs. 29%, respectively).

The finding that female board leadership has no significant impact on policy engagement rates among nonprofits suggests that other factors may play a more critical role in driving these activities. Nonetheless, the marginally significant difference in policy engagement rates between nonprofits with female and male executive directors is noteworthy, as it may indicate that having a female executive director could positively influence an organization's advocacy and lobbying efforts. Further research is needed to understand the underlying reasons for this difference.

Motivating and Discouraging Factors for Nonprofit Policy Engagement in 2022

One of the main purposes of this report is to identify motivating and discouraging factors for nonprofits to engage in public policy discussions through advocacy or lobbying activities. While the subgroup analyses above suggest that some external factors matter, we examined a variety of factors that nonprofits perceive to "mostly encourage or mostly discourage [their] organization when trying to influence public policy." The survey question randomly rotated the wording order of "encourage" and "discourage," and respondents could also choose "not applicable" for each of the items.

The results in Figure 14 show the average choice by each group (self-reported advocacy and/or lobby group versus others) where –1 means "mostly discouraging," 0 means "not applicable," and 1 means "mostly encouraging." Positive values that are close to 1 represent mostly encouraging factors, whereas the negative values represent mostly discouraging factors.

FIGURE 14: SELF-REPORTED BARRIERS AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS FOR POLICY PARTICIPATION
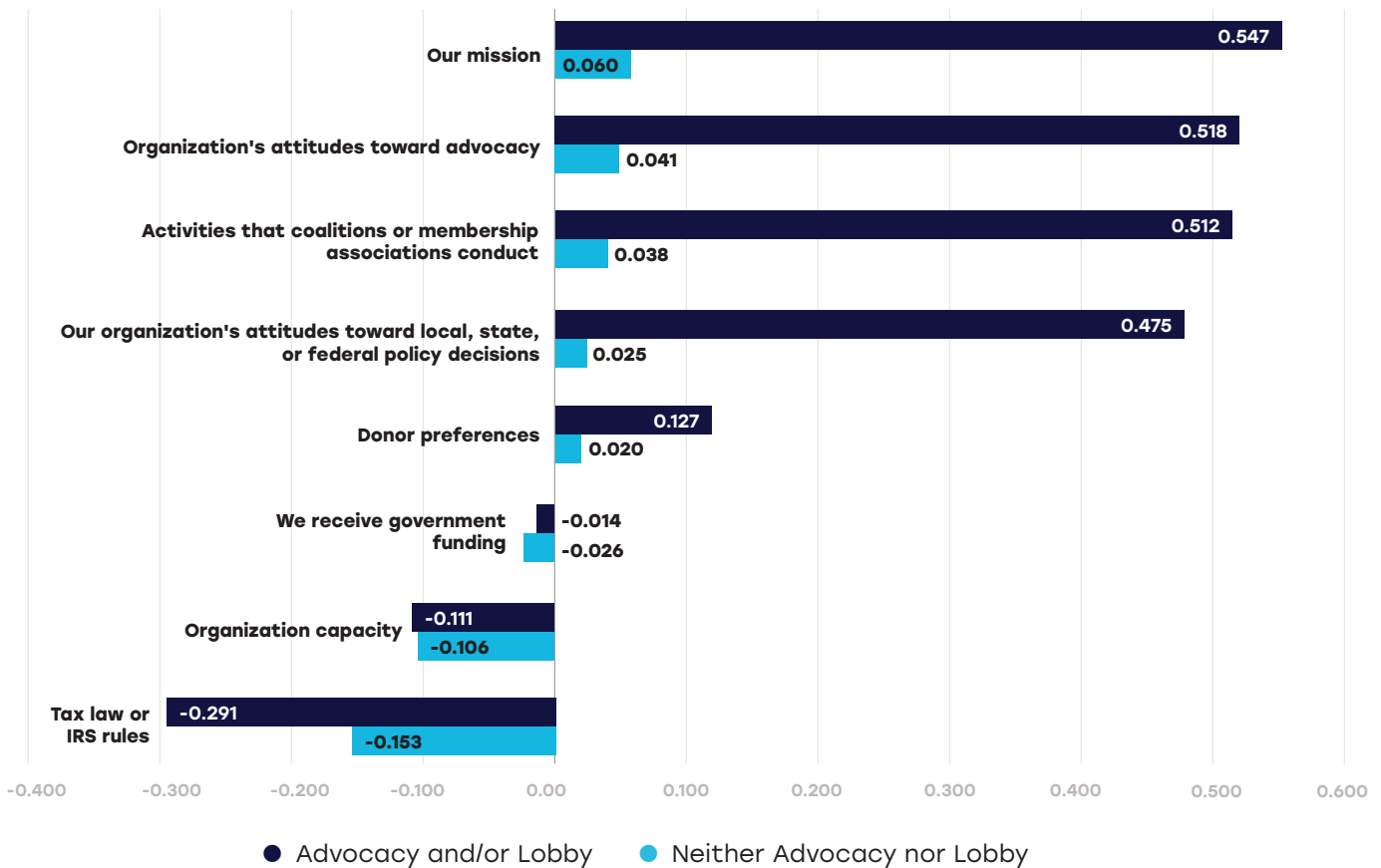
Regardless of their current engagement in advocacy or lobbying efforts, nonprofits find their mission, organization's attitudes toward advocacy, activities that coalitions or membership associations conduct, organization's attitudes toward local, state, or federal policy decisions, and donor preferences to be mostly encouraging factors, whereas the receipt of government funding, organization capacity, and tax laws or IRS rules mostly discourage their participation in policy discussions.
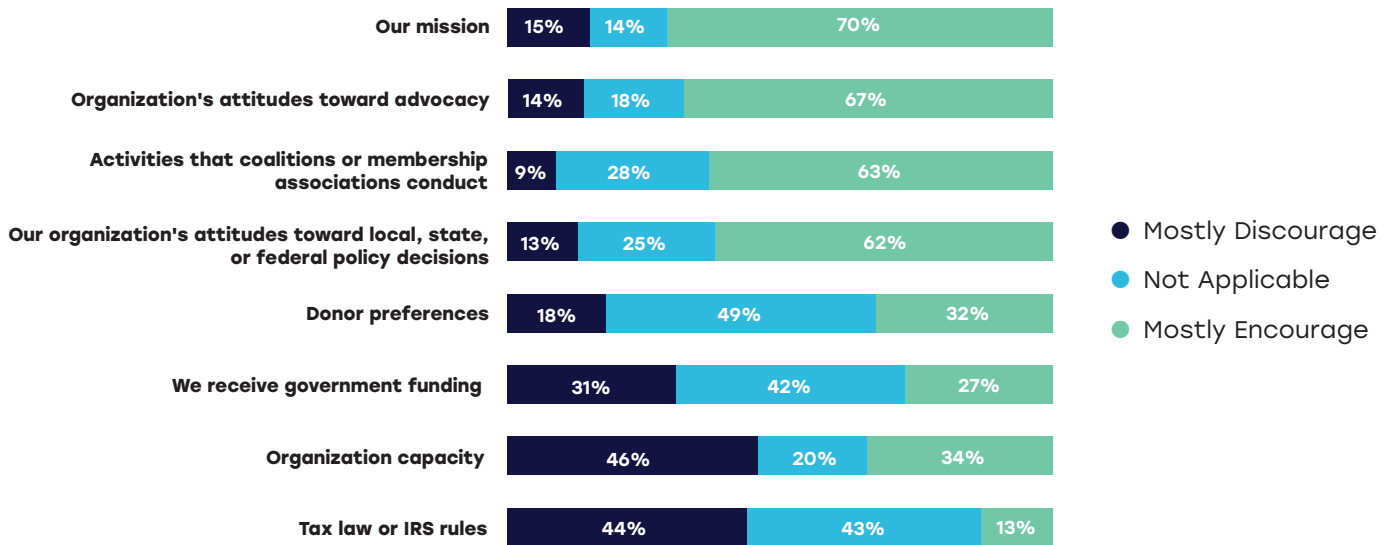
However, organizations not engaged in policy discussions chose "not applicable" for most factors, as the average values hover around -0.1 and 0.1. Figures 15 and 16 provide further details. It is notable that many organizations not engaged in advocacy/lobbying say that most factors are not relevant. **So, the biggest barrier for non-participants appears to be their perspective that advocacy and/or lobbying is not relevant to their mission.**

This finding also suggests that nonprofits, having already made a strategic decision to engage (or not) in policy discussions, may be fixed with their views about policy engagement so that other factors like IRS rules, receipt of government funding, or coalition activity do not change their behavior. Still, when it comes to mission, more non-engaged nonprofits chose either "mostly encouraging" or "mostly discouraging" (as compared to the other categories) rather than saying "not applicable," which again suggests their strategic decision about policy engagement based on organizational identity.

Most policy-engaged nonprofits (70%) said that organizational mission is a mostly encouraging factor. In other words, organizations engage in policy discussions because they perceive policy engagement to be related to their mission. Policy-engaged nonprofits also see organizational attitudes, help from coalitions, and their organization's attitudes toward policy decisions as encouraging when trying to influence public policy. However, these organizations found organizational capacity and current tax laws (or IRS rules) to be discouraging for their engagement in policy discussions.

> **Organizations engage in policy discussions because they perceive policy engagement to be related to their mission.**

FIGURE 15: FACTORS THAT MOSTLY ENCOURAGE OR DISCOURAGE ADVOCACY AND/OR LOBBYING FOR ORGANIZATIONS THAT ENGAGE IN ADVOCACY AND/OR LOBBYING

Factor	Mostly Discourage	Not Applicable	Mostly Encourage
Our mission	15%	14%	70%
Organization's attitudes toward advocacy	14%	18%	67%
Activities that coalitions or membership associations conduct	9%	28%	63%
Our organization's attitudes toward local, state, or federal policy decisions	13%	25%	62%
Donor preferences	18%	49%	32%
We receive government funding	31%	42%	27%
Organization capacity	46%	20%	34%
Tax law or IRS rules	44%	43%	13%

FIGURE 16: FACTORS THAT MOSTLY ENCOURAGE OR MOSTLY DISCOURAGE ADVOCACY AND/OR LOBBYING FOR ORGANIZATIONS THAT ENGAGE IN NEITHER ADVOCACY NOR LOBBYING

Factor	Mostly Discourage	Not Applicable	Mostly Encourage
Our mission	18%	56%	26%
Activities that coalitions or membership associations conduct	9%	76%	14%
Organization's attitudes toward advocacy	13%	68%	19%
Our organization's attitudes toward local, state, or federal policy decisions	12%	73%	15%
We receive government funding	12%	74%	15%
Donor preferences	15%	73%	12%
Organization capacity	24%	63%	13%
Tax law or IRS rules	21%	72%	6%

- ● Mostly Discourage
- ● Not Applicable
- ● Mostly Encourage

**Figures 15 and 16 are based on weighted data with complete responses. N = 2,275

Motivating and Discouraging Factors Across Subgroups

FIGURE 17: MOTIVATING AND DISCOURAGING FACTORS ACROSS ORGANIZATION SIZE

- ● <$100,000
- ● $100,000–$499,000
- ● $500,000–$999,999
- ● $1 Million–$9,999,999
- ● $10 Million and Above
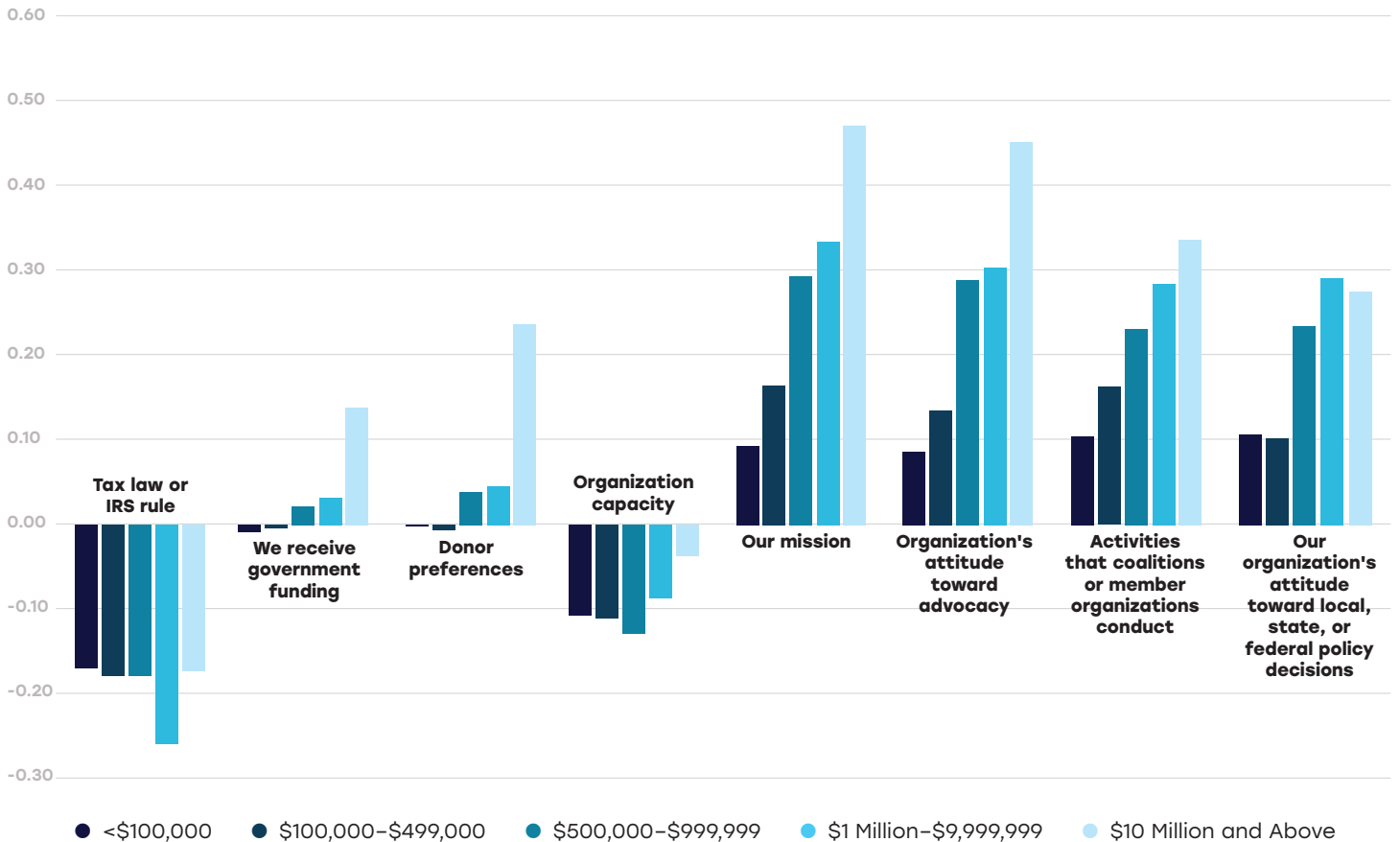
Figure 17 shows the relationship between the five different expense (size) categories and the factors that either discourage or encourage nonprofit organizations to engage in public policy activities. An average value between 0 and 1 means that the group generally views the factor as mostly encouraging for their engagement, and an average value between 0 and –1 means that the group generally views the factor as mostly discouraging. An average value close to 0 suggests the group generally views the factors as mostly not applicable.

- For the factor of tax law or IRS rules, the relationship between expense categories and discouragement is fairly consistent, with all expense categories having a negative value, which means they find tax laws or IRS rules to be mostly discouraging.

- When it comes to government funding, smaller organizations with less than $100,000 in expenses have a slightly more negative value compared to other categories, but overall, the relationship is close to zero, indicating that government funding does not strongly encourage or discourage policy involvement for any budget category.

- Nonprofits in all expense categories find that donor preferences mostly encourage advocacy/lobbying. However, the effect is stronger for larger organizations with $10 million and above in spending.

- For organizational capacity, smaller organizations with less than $100,000 in spending have a more negative value compared to other categories, indicating they find this factor more discouraging. However, overall, the relationship is close to zero.

- For the factor of mission, there is a clear positive relationship between income categories and encouragement, with larger organizations having a much stronger positive relationship compared to smaller organizations.

- For organizational attitudes toward advocacy, there is a similar positive relationship between expense categories and encouragement, with larger organizations having a much stronger positive relationship compared to smaller organizations.

- For the activities that coalitions or membership associations conduct, the relationship between expense categories and encouragement is generally positive, with larger organizations having a slightly stronger positive relationship.

- Finally, for the organization's attitudes toward local, state, or federal policy decisions, there is a positive relationship for all expense categories, with larger organizations having a slightly stronger positive relationship compared to smaller organizations.

In summary, these findings provide insights into various factors influencing nonprofit organizations' policy involvement as perceived by nonprofit organizations. Tax laws and IRS rules are seen as discouraging, government funding has a neutral effect, donor preferences encourage advocacy/lobbying, organizational capacity has a minimal impact, mission and organizational attitudes toward advocacy are positively influenced by size and resources, activities related to coalitions or membership associations are encouraging, and attitudes toward policy decisions are generally positive across all expense categories, with larger organizations exhibiting a slightly stronger positive relationship.

FIGURE 18: MOTIVATING AND DISCOURAGING FACTORS BY MISSION AREA
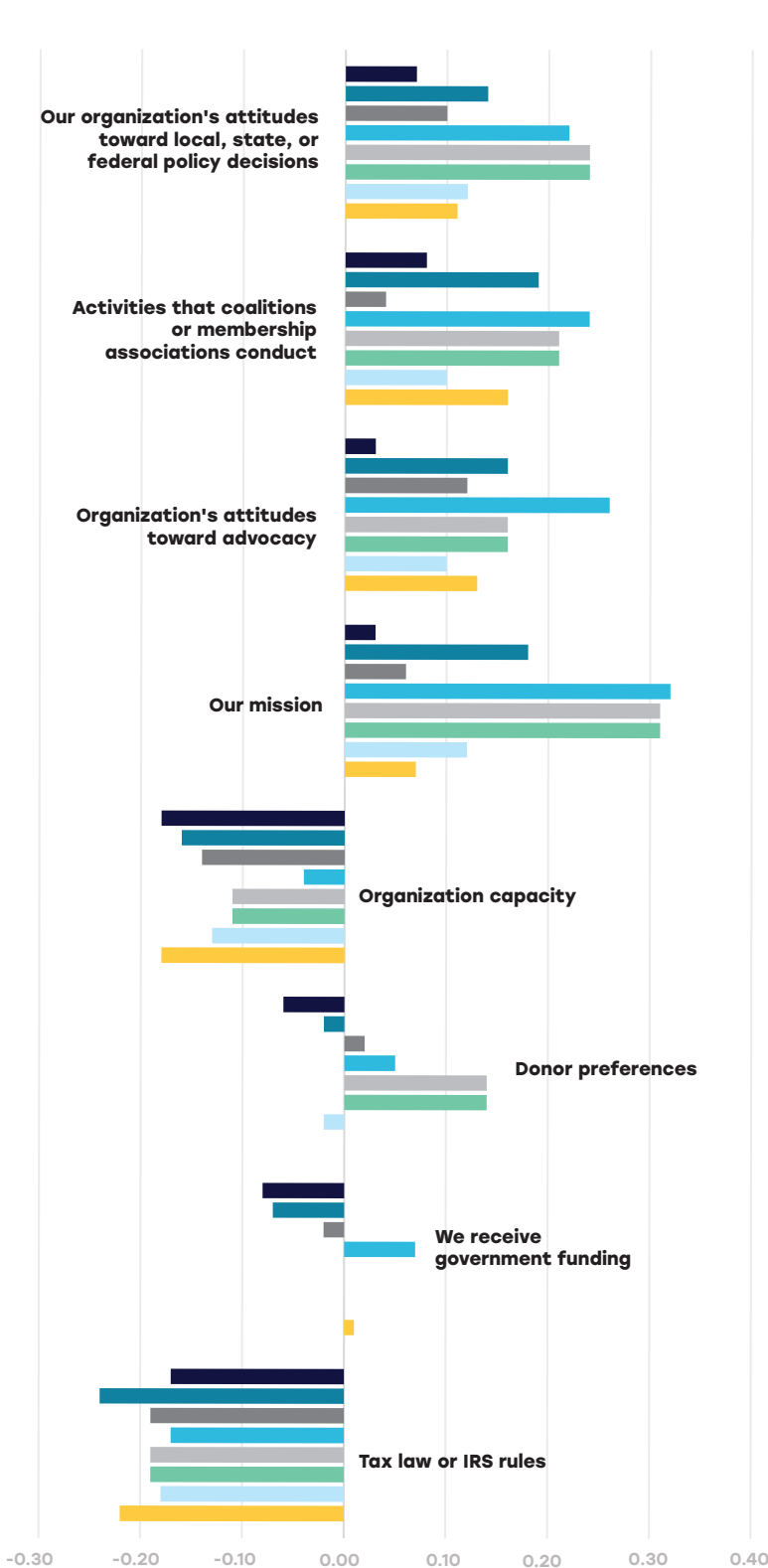
Legend:
- Religious
- Public Benefits
- International
- Human Services
- Healthcare
- Environment
- Education
- Art and Culture

This chart shows the relationship between different subsectors and the factors that either discourage or encourage nonprofit organizations in engaging in public policy activities.

- Tax law or IRS rules are not well received by any subsector, with negative scores ranging from –0.17 to –0.24 across the board.

- Government funding seems to have a neutral effect on most subsectors, with scores hovering around 0, but the human services subsector finds it slightly encouraging, with a positive score of 0.07.

- Donor preferences vary by subsector. They are seen as slightly encouraging by some subsectors with positive scores ranging from 0.02 to 0.14, but slightly discouraging for the religious subsector with a negative score of -0.06.

- Most subsectors find organization capacity to be discouraging, with negative scores ranging from –0.04 to –0.18.

- Mission is universally seen as a positive factor, with encouraging scores ranging from 0.03 to 0.32 across all subsectors.

- Attitudes toward advocacy and policy decisions are generally seen as positive, with encouraging scores ranging from 0.03 to 0.26 across most subsectors.

Below, we note a few encouraging or discouraging factors that are different statistically across various subgroups based on the same measurement. Recall that an average value between 0 and 1 means that the group generally views the factor as mostly encouraging for their engagement, and an average value between 0 and –1 means that the group generally views the factor as mostly discouraging. An average value close to 0 suggests the group generally views the factors as mostly not applicable.

- Nonprofits led by POC executive directors view organization capacity in a more favorable view (on average, –0.002, meaning close to "not applicable") than nonprofits led by non-POC executives, which regard organization capacity as a discouraging factor (–0.13).

- Nonprofits led by female executive directors see organization capacity as a more discouraging factor (–0.15) than other nonprofits (–0.05). Both nonprofits with female-dominated boards and female executives find their organization's attitudes toward advocacy generally more favorable (0.24) than the other nonprofits (0.12).

- Nonprofits in POC communities and nonprofits in low-income communities are more likely to be encouraged to engage in policy by both the activities of coalitions (0.22 and 0.33, respectively, compared to 0.14 overall) and their organization's attitudes toward local, state, or federal policy decisions (0.22 and 0.24, respectively, compared to around 0.13 for other nonprofits). In other words, they find these two factors to be encouraging for their policy engagement.

Nonprofit Public Engagement Beyond Advocacy and Lobbying

While the bulk of this report has addressed the current state of nonprofit advocacy and lobbying in the U.S., nonprofit public engagement reaches beyond the policy realm. This public, non-political aspect of nonprofit organizations is noted in an oft-quoted passage from Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America." A Frenchman traveling to America in 1831, de Tocqueville wrote about the uniquely American tendency to form associations in civic life "which have an object that is in no way political":

> **"The political associations that exist in the United States are only a single feature in the midst of the immense assemblage of associations in that country. Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations."**
>
> de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America," Book 2, Chapter 5

The associational role of nonprofits persists today in the thousands of charitable organizations across the country that are publicly engaged. These nonprofits provide a vast array of services and engage in their communities in myriad ways. Public engagement encompasses advocacy and lobbying as well as a wide variety of other activities oriented toward public needs.

The PENS project investigated forms of public engagement through the following multiple-choice question: "Please indicate whether your organization engaged in or facilitated its employees, volunteers, board members or constituents to conduct or participate in any of the following activities in the last 12 months on behalf of your organization." The response options referred to three groups of activities discussed here:

- Civic engagement, referring to a wide range of activities that promote public participation, awareness, and action around issues of social importance;

- Social movement activities, including collective efforts to mobilize and organize individuals and communities around social and political issues; or

- Elections engagement, referring to nonpartisan activities aimed at promoting voter education, registration, and turnout.

Civic Engagement

Nonprofit organizations play a vital role in civic engagement by mobilizing their resources, expertise, and networks to support community development and social justice. While this can take the form of advocacy (including lobbying), nonprofits also play many other important roles in civic life. Studies have shown that nonprofit density, the number of nonprofits located in a geographic area, is associated with higher rates of civic action (Sampson et al., 2005). Examples of nonprofit civic engagement include organizing community events, providing spaces for community dialogue, raising funds for community causes, and conducting vaccine or blood drives.

FIGURE 19: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Participate in community gathering — 59.78% (Lobbying/Advocacy YES), 31.92% (Lobbying/Advocacy NO)
Provide spaces for community dialogue — 47.66% (Lobbying/Advocacy YES), 18.47% (Lobbying/Advocacy NO)
Raise funds for community causes — 37.87% (Lobbying/Advocacy YES), 27.38% (Lobbying/Advocacy NO)
Conduct a vaccine drive — 20.13% (Lobbying/Advocacy YES), 0.70% (Lobbying/Advocacy NO)
Host a blood drive — 6.95% (Lobbying/Advocacy YES), 0.54% (Lobbying/Advocacy NO)

● Lobbying/Advocacy YES   ● Lobbying/Advocacy NO

Figure 19 shows a variety of ways, beyond advocacy, that nonprofits are engaged in their communities, based on the PENS findings. While these activities may be combined with advocacy, they are not necessarily oriented toward the policy process. The table compares policy-engaged nonprofits and non-engaged nonprofits. **All nonprofits are engaging in a variety of civic activities beyond advocacy.** However, nonprofits that engage in advocacy or lobbying report civic engagement activities at a higher rate than

other nonprofits. Non-engaged nonprofits still do some of the civic activities. The most frequently engaged activities are participating in community gatherings, providing spaces for community dialogue, and raising funds for community causes. The pattern of higher civic engagement by policy-engaged nonprofits holds for community gatherings (59.8% vs. 32%), providing spaces for community dialogue (47.7% vs. 18.5%), and fundraising for community causes (37.9% vs. 27.4%). Nonprofits are also doing other forms of civic engagement such as public service announcements. Interestingly, about 12% of nonprofits (and 20% of those that engage in advocacy or lobbying) held a vaccine drive during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All forms of civic engagement (except holding blood drives) are positively and significantly correlated with nonprofits doing lobbying and/or advocacy. We constructed an additive scale with the civic enga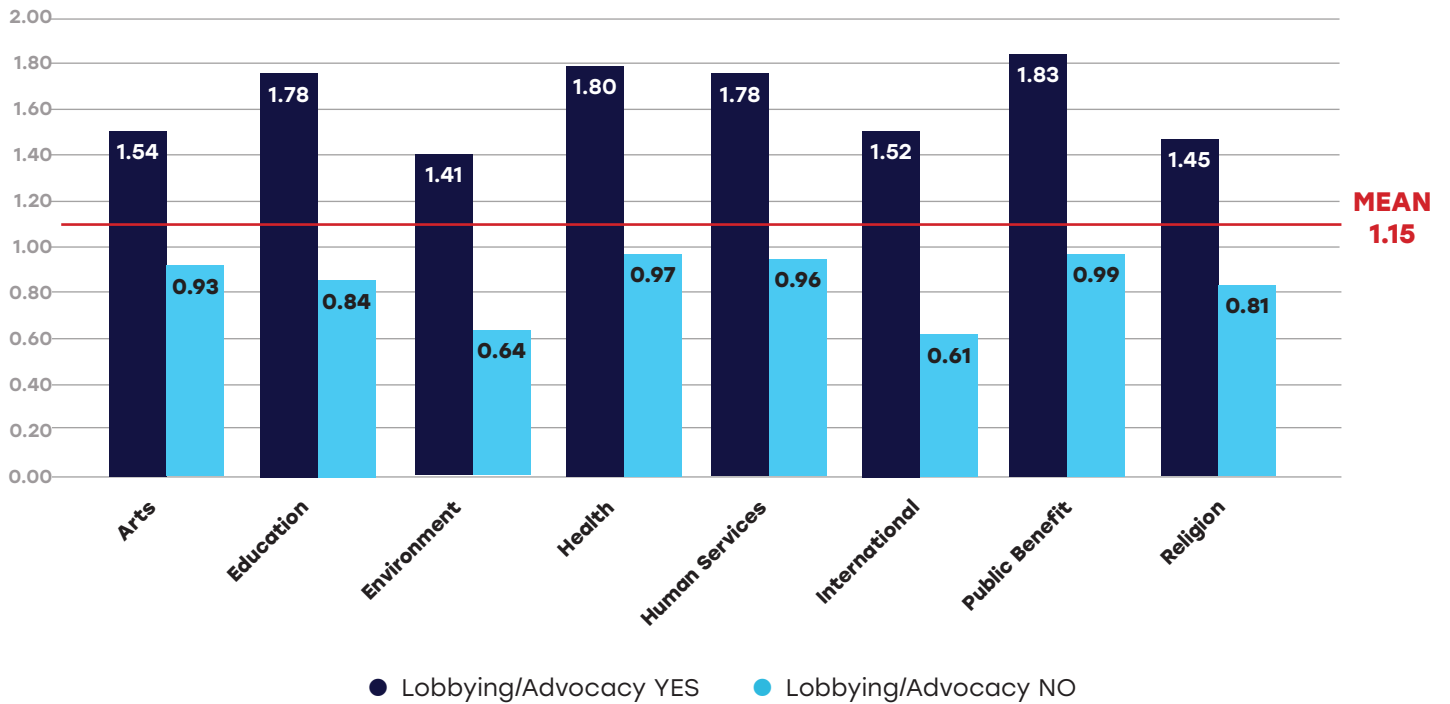gement items to look at general levels of civic engagement across different subsectors and sizes of organizations. Figures 20 and 21 below show the mean values of the Civic Engagement Scale (CES) constructed using the five civic engagement activities in Figure 19. This additive scale combines the civic engagement measure for nonprofits whether they do or do not engage in these civic activities. The scale ranges from 0 to 5 with a mean of 1.15. The dark blue bars show the mean CES value of nonprofits engaged in advocacy/lobbying by nonprofit subsectors. The light blue bars show the CES value for non-engaged nonprofits. As shown in Figure 20, across all subsectors, nonprofits engaged in advocacy/lobbying register above the mean, or average, on the CES. International, public benefit, and human services nonprofits engaged in advocacy/lobbying have the highest CES values. While non-engaged nonprofits evidence lower levels of reported civic engagement, they are nonetheless participating in these activities on some level.

Figure 21 shows the mean values of the CES by organization size (expenditures in 2018). Across all organizational sizes, policy-engaged nonprofits also score higher on the CES. Of non-engaged nonprofits, only the largest organizations, those with expenses of $10 million or more, register values of CES above the mean of the entire sector, on average. The increasing level of civic engagement with greater organizational size suggests that, like advocacy and lobbying, nonprofit involvement in civic engagement might require resources such as staff time or funds.

FIGURE 20: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SCALE BY SUBSECTOR

Bar chart — Lobbying/Advocacy YES (dark navy) and Lobbying/Advocacy NO (light blue):

Subsector	Lobbying/Advocacy YES	Lobbying/Advocacy NO
Arts	1.54	0.93
Education	1.78	0.84
Environment	1.41	0.64
Health	1.80	0.97
Human Services	1.78	0.96
International	1.52	0.61
Public Benefit	1.83	0.99
Religion	1.45	0.81

MEAN 1.15

FIGURE 21: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SCALE BY SIZE

Size	Lobbying/Advocacy YES	Lobbying/Advocacy NO
<$100K	1.41	0.78
$100K–$499K	1.56	0.80
$500K–$999K	1.76	1.07
$1M–$9.9M	1.73	1.15
$10M+	2.62	1.76

MEAN 1.15
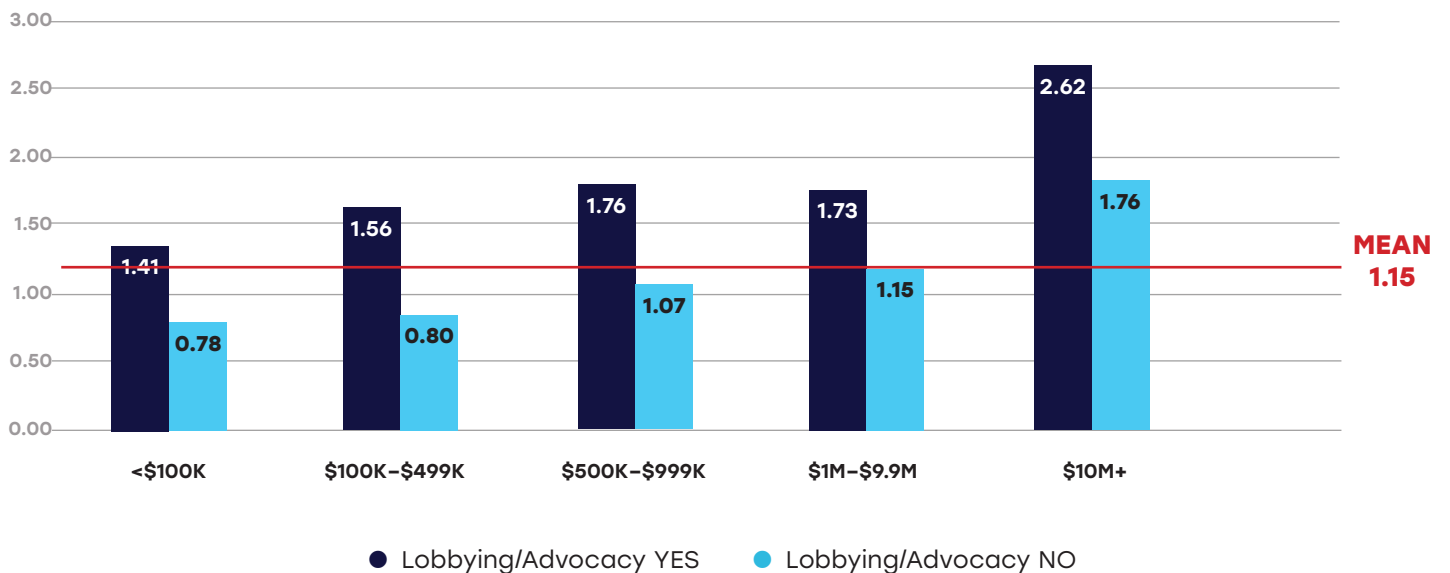
Exploratory factor analysis of these five civic engagement activities returned one factor suggesting a single theoretical construct underlies the scale, which has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.573. The mean of the civic engagement scale for policy participators (1.72) is significantly different than for nonprofits that do not engage (0.90) (t value 13.58, *p<0.000).

Social Movement Engagement

In addition to advocacy and traditional forms of civic engagement, nonprofits also take part in more disruptive forms of public action, sometimes referred to as social movement activity (Della Porta & Diani, 1999). Nonprofit social movement activities refer to the efforts of nonprofit organizations to mobilize and organize individuals and communities around specific social and political issues, with the goal of promoting social change and creating a more just and equitable society. Examples of nonprofit social movement activities include organizing rallies, marches, and protests (Buechler, 2011). Such activities are typically viewed as "outsider" actions, as they do not involve direct "insider" contact with elected officials. These actions may also take place outside of the electoral and policy processes.

Figure 22 shows nonprofit participation in social movement activities reported in the PENS findings. As with civic engagement, nonprofits that report engaging in lobbying or advocacy report participation in social movement actions at higher rates that nonprofits that do not engage in advocacy or lobbying. Of nonprofits engaged in advocacy or lobbying, more encouraged their employees, volunteers, board members, or constituents to sign petitions (17.8%), participate in marches (11.4%), or circulate petitions (11%) than non-engaged nonprofits.

FIGURE 22: SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

● Lobbying/Advocacy YES   ● Lobbying/Advocacy NO
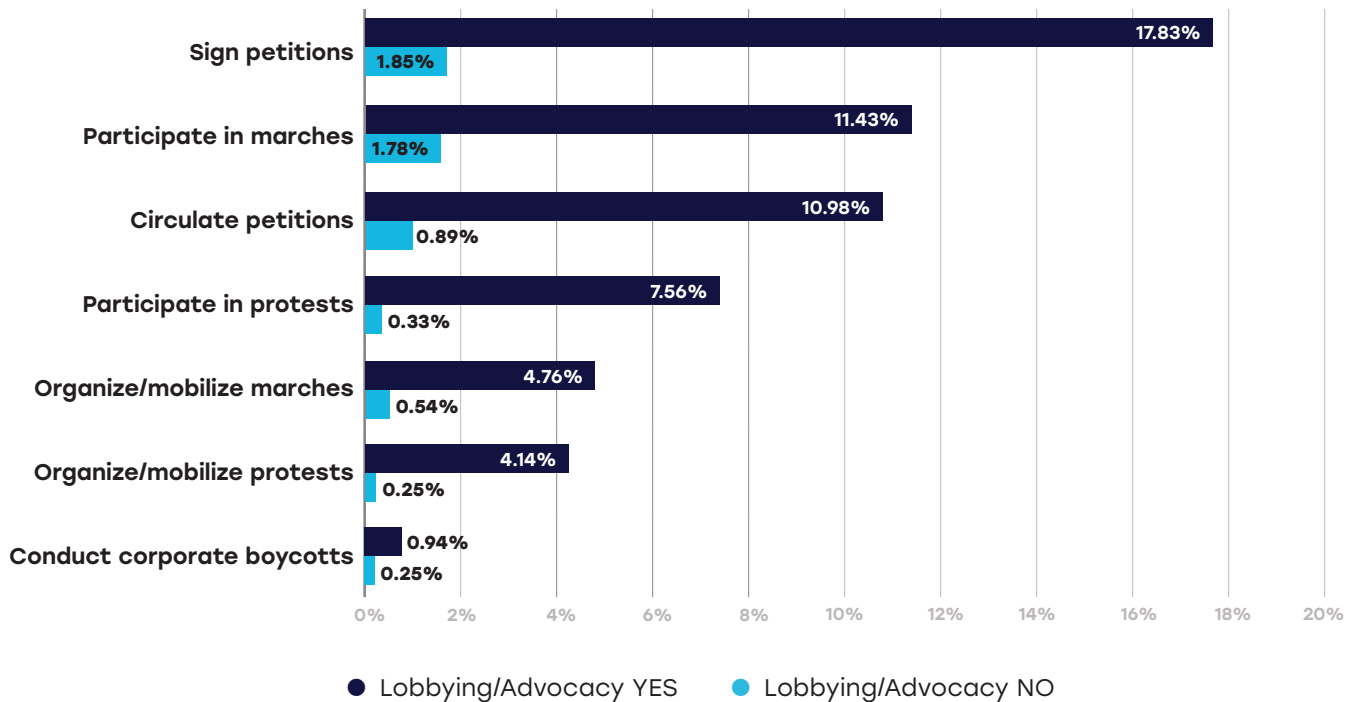
All forms of social movement activity are positively and significantly correlated with advocacy or lobbying (except corporate boycotts, which are positively but not significantly correlated with lobbying). Figure 23 shows the mean values of the Social Movement Activity (SMA) scale constructed using the seven social movement activities in Figure 22. The scale ranges from 0 to 7 with a mean of 0.22. The dark blue bars show the mean SMA value by mission for nonprofits that report doing advocacy or lobbying. The light blue

bars show the SMA value for nonprofits that do not engage in advocacy or lobbying. Across all subsectors, advocacy-engaged nonprofits register above the mean on the SMA. International, public benefit, and religious nonprofits that engage in advocacy or lobbying have the highest SMA values.

FIGURE 23: SOCIAL MOVEMENT SCALE BY SUBSECTOR

● Lobbying/Advocacy YES   ● Lobbying/Advocacy NO
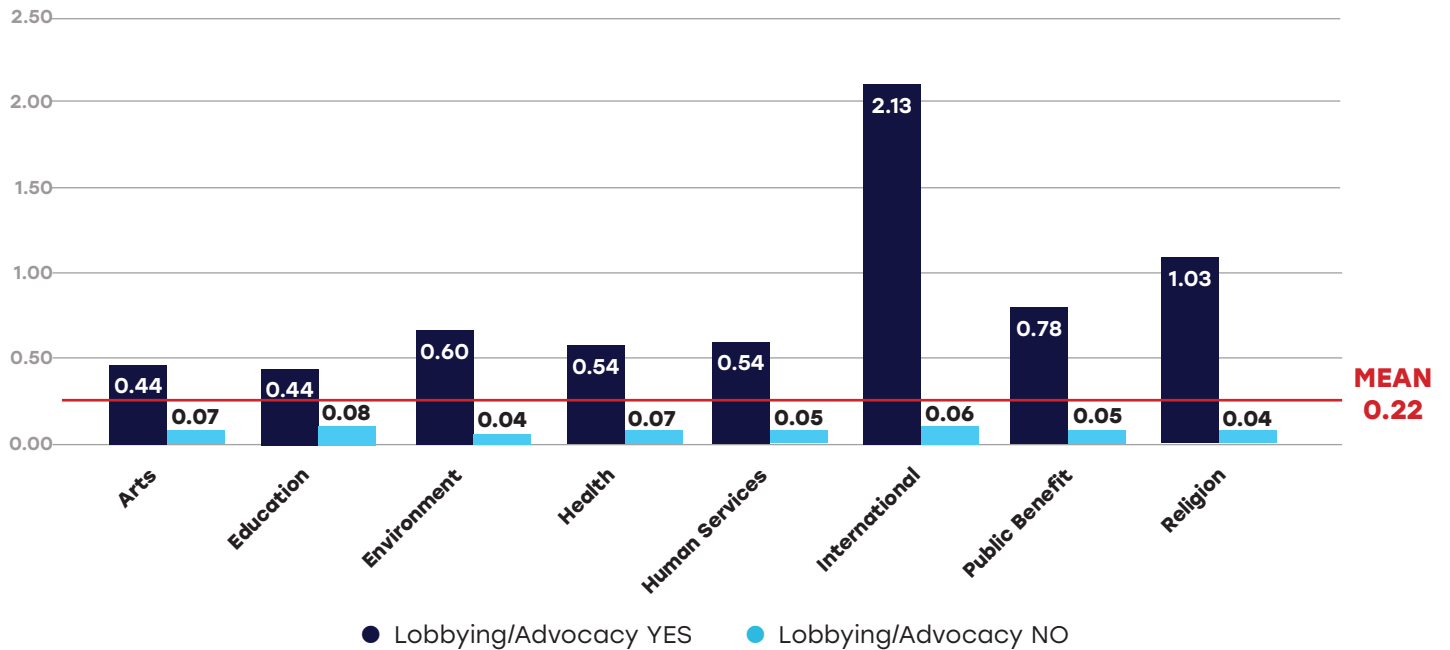
FIGURE 24: SOCIAL MOVEMENT SCALE BY SIZE

● Lobbying/Advocacy YES   ● Lobbying/Advocacy NO
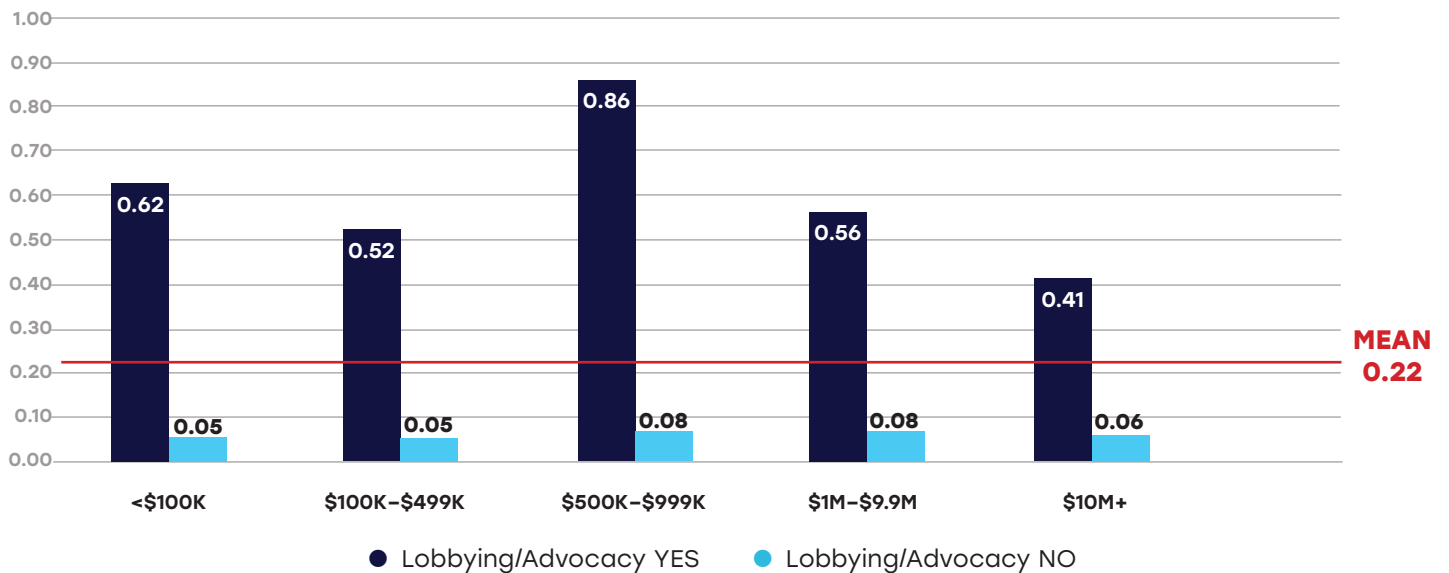
Exploratory factor analysis of these seven social movement activities returned one factor suggesting a single theoretical construct underlies the scale, which has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.734. The mean of the social movement activity scale for policy participators (0.58) is significantly different than nonprofits that do not engage (0.06) (t value 10.85, *p<0.000).

Figure 24 shows the mean values of the SMA scale by organization size (expenditures in 2018). Across all organization sizes, nonprofits that report advocacy or lobbying also score higher on the SMA scale. Interestingly, mid-sized nonprofits ($500,000–$999,000) are the most active in terms of social movement activities. This suggests that "outsider activities" like protests might feel too risky for large organizations and mid-sized nonprofits might have the capacity for these events and a higher risk tolerance.

> **Mid-sized nonprofits ($500,000–$999,000) are the most active in terms of social movement activities.**

Elections Engagement

Charitable nonprofits, while prohibited from endorsing candidates, can engage in election-related activities such as educating voters and voter registration. Similar to civic engagement and social movement activities, nonprofits engaged in advocacy/lobbying are more highly engaged in elections-related activities than non-engaged nonprofits. Twenty percent of advocacy-engaged nonprofits provided voter education, while 18% participated in nonpartisan get out the vote (GOTV) efforts.

FIGURE 25: ELECTIONS ENGAGEMENT

Provide voter education about issues: 20.38% / 2.78%
Participate in nonpartisan "get out the vote" efforts: 17.90% / 3.26%
Conduct nonpartisan voter registration drive: 11.45% / 1.78%
Participate in ballot initiatives: 7.69% / 0.42%

● Lobbying/Advocacy YES   ● Lobbying/Advocacy NO

All forms of election engagement are positively and significantly correlated with nonprofits engaged in advocacy/lobbying. Figure 26 shows the mean values of the Elections Engagement Scale (EES), an additive scale constructed using the four election-related activities in Figure 25. The scale ranges from 0 to 4 with a mean of 0.23. The dark blue bars show the mean EES values for nonprofit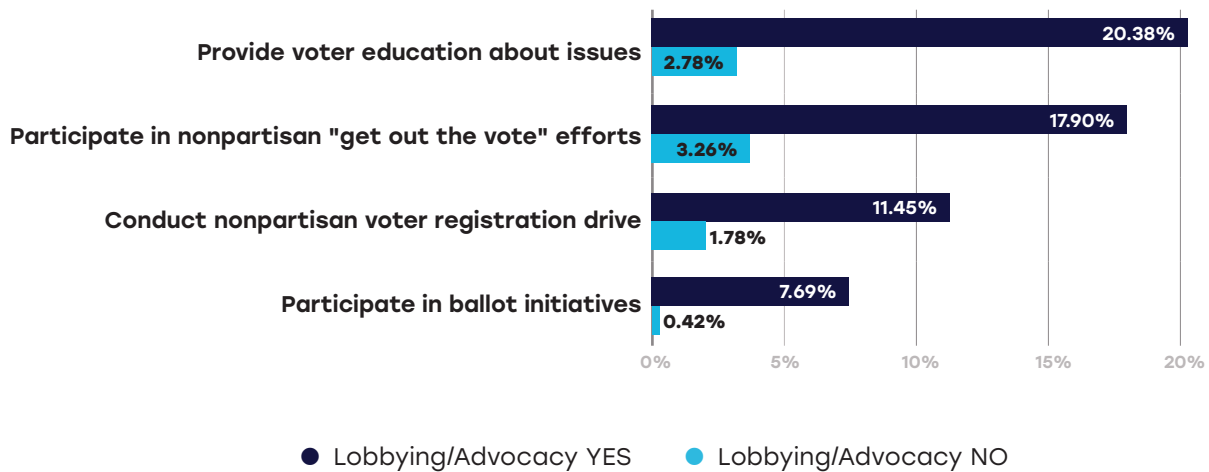s engaged in advocacy/lobbying by subsectors. The light blue bars show the EES values for non-engaged nonprofits. Across all subsectors, nonprofits engaged in advocacy/lobbying register above the mean on the EES. Interestingly, religious organizations register highest on the EES.

FIGURE 26: ELECTIONS ENGAGEMENT SCALE BY SUBSECTOR

- Lobbying/Advocacy YES
- Lobbying/Advocacy NO

MEAN 0.23

Values by subsector (Lobbying/Advocacy YES, Lobbying/Advocacy NO):
- Arts: 0.43, 0.10
- Education: 0.68, 0.13
- Environment: 0.26, 0.02
- Health: 0.55, 0.10
- Human Services: 0.56, 0.07
- International: 0.16
- Public Benefit: 0.76, 0.08
- Religion: 0.99, 0.05
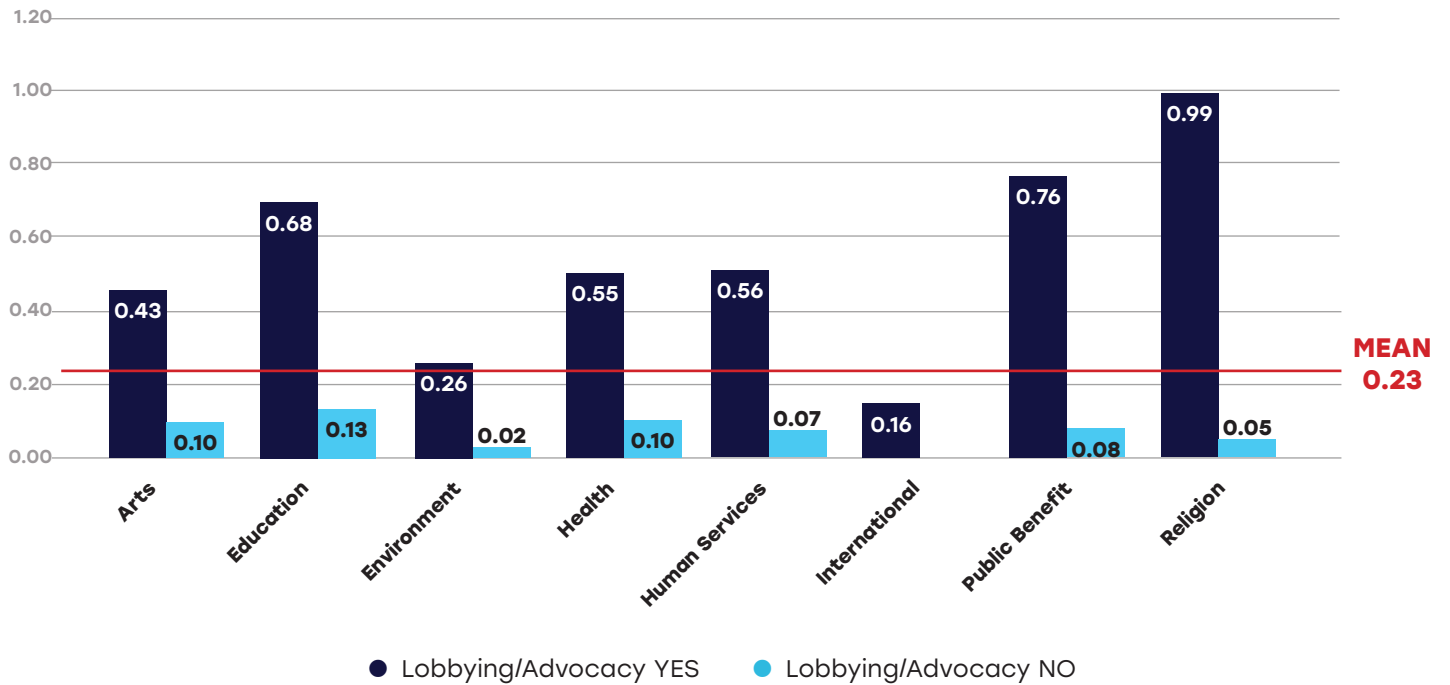
FIGURE 27: ELECTIONS ENGAGEMENT SCALE BY SIZE

- Lobbying/Advocacy YES
- Lobbying/Advocacy NO

MEAN 0.23

Values by size (Lobbying/Advocacy YES, Lobbying/Advocacy NO):
- <$100K: 0.45, 0.06
- $100K–$499K: 0.51, 0.07
- $500K–$999K: 0.66, 0.09
- $1M–$9.9M: 0.59, 0.12
- $10M+: 0.79, 0.29
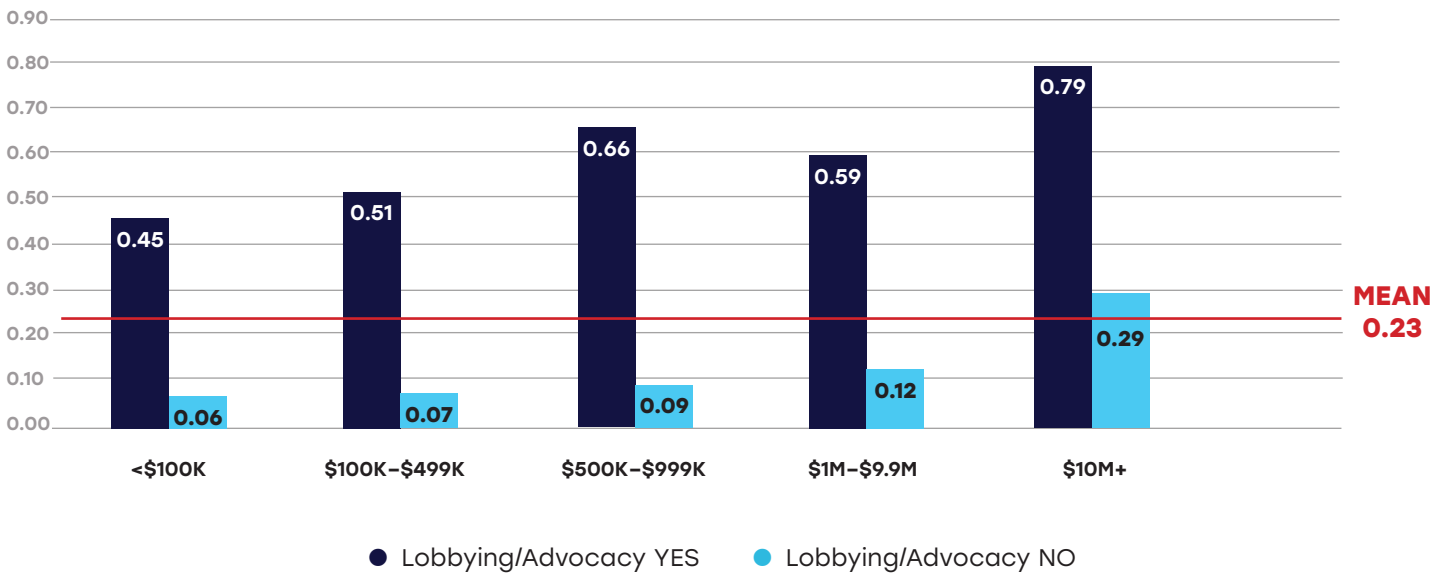
Exploratory factor analysis of these four elections engagement activities returned one factor suggesting a single theoretical construct underlies the scale, which has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.6923. The mean of the elections activity scale for policy participators (0.57) is significantly higher than nonprofits that do not engage (0.08) (t value 11.82, *p<0.000).

TABLE 7: ADVOCACY/LOBBYING AND ELECTIONS ENGAGEMENT

	Advocacy or Lobbying	% Engaged (Weighted Mean)				
		Any Elections Work	Voter Education	Get Out The Vote	Voter Registration	Ballot Initiatives
All Nonprofits	30.7%	13.8%	8.2%	7.7%	4.7%	2.6%
Nonprofits if Advocacy/Lobbying = Y	100%	32.1%	20.4%	17.9%	11.5%	7.7%

Table 7 provides more detailed information about nonprofits' nonpartisan elections work. Overall, 14% of nonprofits (and 32% of advocacy-engaged nonprofits) engaged in some form of elections work. Among all nonprofits, including advocacy-engaged nonprofits, voter education was the most frequent form of elections work. One in five advocacy-engaged nonprofits participated in voter education, and almost one in five (18%) also conducted nonpartisan GOTV efforts.

TABLE 8: FORMS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT BY SUBSECTOR, SIZE, COMMUNITY INCOME, AND RURAL/URBAN/SUBURBAN AREAS

	% of Nonprofits	Advocacy or Lobbying	% Engaged (Weighted Mean)				
			Any Elections Work	Voter Education	Get Out The Vote	Voter Registration	Ballot Initatives
All Nonprofits	100.0%	30.7%	13.8%	8.2%	7.7%	4.7%	2.6%
Subsector							
Arts	11.8%	25.8%	11.2%	6.7%	6.2%	3.9%	1.8%
Education	16.7%	26.1%	16.4%	9.4%	8.8%	6.2%	2.4%
Health	9.7%	39.7%	17.2%	9.2%	10.6%	6.1%	2.0%
Human Services	35.7%	32.2%	13.4%	7.5%	7.4%	4.9%	2.6%
Other	26.1%	30.6%	12.4%	8.6%	7.1%	3.4%	3.4%
Organization Size							
<$100,000	25.5%	17.3%	7.2%	5.6%	3.1%	1.8%	2.2%
$100,000–$499,999	38.2%	25.0%	11.2%	6.1%	6.7%	3.5%	1.7%
$500,000–$999,999	11.8%	35.9%	15.7%	10.6%	8.6%	5.6%	4.3%
$1 Million–$9,999,999	20.2%	47.7%	20.2%	11.5%	12.1%	7.8%	3.3%
$10 Million and Above	4.3%	66.7%	39.2%	19.6%	21.6%	15.7%	5.9%
Community Income Level[1]							
Low	9.2%	49.4%	24.9%	14.7%	16.6%	11.1%	4.4%
Medium–Low	44.2%	32.4%	15.1%	7.9%	9.4%	5.3%	3.1%
Medium–High	27.1%	28.3%	12.9%	8.6%	5.4%	4.8%	2.4%
High	19.6%	23.6%	8.5%	5.2%	4.4%	2.3%	1.8%
Community Urban/Suburban/Rural							
Rural	22.1%	31.1%	11.1%	7.0%	5.4%	3.0%	1.3%
Suburban and Small Cities	48.5%	29.4%	13.3%	7.9%	7.4%	4.1%	2.7%
Urban Core of Metropolitan Areas	29.4%	32.8%	16.6%	9.6%	10.1%	7.1%	3.6%

Notes: [1] Community income levels are based on ratios of a ZIP code's median household income relative to the state median household income. We use the 2018 American Community Survey five-year estimates on the ZIP code level from Social Explorer (**https://www.socialexplorer.com/**) and Berkowitz et al. (2015) to define ZIP code income categories. Low income = less than 60% of state median household income, medium–low income = 60-99.999% of state median household income, medium–high income = 100-139.999% of state median household income, and high income = greater than or equal to 140% of state median household income.

Table 8 offers more insight into the subsector, size, and location of nonprofits engaged in election activities. The table is sorted by the fourth column, which indicates the percentage of nonprofits that did any elections work. Overall, 13.8% of the sample engaged in some elections work. Voter education and GOTV efforts were the most common election activities. Health and education nonprofits led the way in elections engagement with 17.2% and 16.4% of those organizations doing some elections work. Health nonprofits led the way with GOTV efforts (10.6%).

One in five organizations with over $10 million in spending engaged in both voter education and GOTV activities. Elections engagement varied by community income level. One in four nonprofits located in low-income communities reported some form of elections engagement compared to 8.5% of nonprofits in high-income communities. GOTV efforts (16.6%) were the most often reported election activity among nonprofits in low-income communities. Finally, nonprofits located in urban areas reported more elections engagement (16.6%) than nonprofits located in other types of communities. GOTV (10.1%) and voter education (9.6%) were the most widely reported activities by urban nonprofits.

Overall, these findings suggest that nonprofit organizations are actively engaged in elections work, with voter education and GOTV efforts being the most common activities. The fact that larger nonprofits are more likely to engage in elections work may reflect their greater resources and capacity for civic engagement. However, it is worth noting that smaller nonprofits can also play an important role in elections engagement, particularly in local communities where they may have more intimate knowledge of the issues and needs of their constituents.

Further, the finding that nonprofits located in low-income communities are more likely to engage in elections work than those in high-income communities suggests that nonprofits play an important role in promoting democratic participation and civic engagement among historically marginalized populations. GOTV efforts are particularly common among nonprofits in low-income communities, indicating that these organizations are working to overcome barriers to voting and increase political participation among underserved communities.

Finally, the finding that nonprofits located in urban areas are more likely to engage in elections work than those in other types of communities highlights the importance of civic engagement in urban areas, where political power and resources may be concentrated. GOTV efforts and voter education are particularly common among urban nonprofits, indicating that these organizations are working to promote democratic participation and civic engagement among urban residents.

As shown in Table 9, organizations with programs that focus on specific sub-populations that include economically vulnerable groups and those who have been historically marginalized in politics and policy decisions are more likely to be engaged in policy and elections work than other organizations.

TABLE 9: PROGRAM AREAS, ADVOCACY/LOBBYING, AND ELECTIONS ENGAGEMENT

% Nonprofits with Program Area	Advocacy or Lobbying	% Engaged (Weighted Mean)				
		Any Elections Work	Voter Education	Get Out The Vote	Voter Registration	Ballot Initatives
Immigrants	19.0%	43.5%	26.6%	16.1%	18.0%	10.4%	5.9%
Foreign Born	22.6%	38.8%	23.1%	15.1%	15.1%	9.6%	5.2%
Latinx	29.5%	40.4%	22.9%	14.5%	14.8%	8.4%	6.3%
Unhoused	23.5%	40.3%	22.5%	12.2%	14.1%	8.5%	4.8%
LGBTQ+	25.7%	39.1%	22.2%	13.3%	14.5%	8.6%	4.9%
Black	30.6%	39.2%	22.1%	13.4%	14.5%	8.7%	6.0%
POC Focused	**36.5%**	**38.4%**	**21.2%**	**13.2%**	**14.0%**	**8.4%**	**5.3%**
Asian	23.2%	37.8%	20.7%	12.9%	13.1%	7.8%	5.0%
Disabilities	26.4%	40.5%	20.7%	12.8%	13.0%	7.6%	5.3%
Native Hawaiian	19.0%	40.1%	20.5%	12.3%	13.1%	6.6%	4.6%
Families in Poverty	41.1 %	38.2%	20.4%	11.2%	12.7%	7.7%	4.4%
Native American	22.9%	39.6%	20.4%	12.8%	13.3%	7.0%	5.3%
Women/Girls	35.9%	33.6%	18.2%	11.0%	12.2%	6.8%	4.3%
Men/Boys	32.3%	32.2%	18.1%	10.5%	12.3%	6.7%	4.1%
Adults over 65	48.2%	35.8%	18.0%	10.4%	10.4%	7.1%	3.9%
Veterans	22.8%	36.3%	17.9%	10.4%	10.2%	5.9%	5.2%
Adults	51.6%	35.7%	17.5%	10.5%	10.4%	6.6%	3.9%
Young Adults	51.4%	35.0%	17.3%	10.0%	10.3%	6.6%	3.7%
Families	44.1%	34.2%	15.2%	8.8%	9.3%	5.3%	3.1%
General Public	53.0%	33.7%	14.6%	8.4%	8.9%	5.1%	3.2%
Children	64.8%	31.2%	14.0%	8.5%	8.4%	5.0%	2.9%
Other Group	10.4%	36.8%	11.2%	7.8%	4.8%	2.7%	1.9%

Note: Groups are not mutually exclusive and most organizations report more than one program area. As a point of reference, 10.7% of organizations report serving only the general public without any additional program areas of focus, and 26.8% of those organizations engage in advocacy and/or lobbying.

Nonprofits participating in the 2022 PENS project were also asked whether some of or all of their programs focused on serving specific demographic populations, with the ability to select more than one program area. POC-focused combines program foci on Latinx, Black, Native American, Asian, and Native Hawaiian populations. Table 9 shows the distribution of program areas, the percentage of policy-engaged nonprofits in each area, and elections activity by program area. The table is sorted by the fourth column indicating whether nonprofits did any elections work. Nonprofits with an immigrant focus had the highest degree of election engagement: 26% of nonprofits that identified immigrants as a program focus area engaged in election work, primarily GOTV efforts. One in five POC-focused nonprofits engaged in nonpartisan election work, with GOTV activities being the largest focus (14%).

Taken together, these survey results suggest that nonprofit organizations play a vital role in elections engagement, particularly in promoting voter education and turnout, and that their efforts are important in low-income and urban communities and when working with historically marginalized populations. However, there may be opportunities for even greater engagement by nonprofits, particularly in areas such as advocacy and policy reform, which can help address systemic issues and advance public good.

Digital Engagement

A major innovation of the past two decades has been the establishment and growth of social media and the constellation of online activities that now comprise a regular practice for many nonprofits (Goldkind, 2015; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Young, 2017). Most of this digital growth and innovation emerged after the 2000 SNAP survey was conducted: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram all launched between 2004 and 2010. Social media has shaped a new, networked form of engagement for many nonprofits that includes advocacy work.

Eighty-five percent of nonprofits from the 2022 PENS findings report having one or more social media accounts. Approximately 47.3% of all nonprofits used social media to raise awareness of an issue with the public. Nonprofits that engage in advocacy or lobbying reported using social media to raise issue awareness about twice as often (72%) as non-engaged nonprofits (36.5%). The high use of social media in civic engagement may be related to the low barrier to entry.

Nonprofits report using these accounts for a variety of purposes other than advocacy (Table 10). Most nonprofits with social media accounts use them for community and volunteer engagement, fundraising, and gathering and sharing information.

TABLE 10: USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY NONPROFITS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

Uses of Social Media	% Yes
Sharing facts/resources relevant to mission	93.43
Marketing/PR	90.58
Community engagement/events	89.02
Fundraising	81.69
Volunteer engagement	74.51
Gathering information from the community	51.63

TABLE 11: DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION USE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS FOR ADVOCACY?

| Social Media Platform	% Yes
Facebook	46.36
Instagram	25.47
Twitter	18.72
YouTube	12.25
TikTok	2.10
Pinterest	0.98
Snapchat	0.43

Many nonprofits also use social media accounts specifically for advocacy (Table 11). In particular, nonprofits report using Facebook (46.4%), Instagram (25.5%), and Twitter (18.7%) for advocacy.

Almost a third (27.7%) of organizations say they use technology (email, social networking) to some degree (sometimes, frequently, ongoing interaction) to educate about policy (Figure 28). Of those nonprofits, over a third (37.7%) are human services organizations, followed by education (15.3%) and health (12.8%) (Figure 29). Over 30% of smaller organizations ($100,000–$499,000) use technology to educate about policy (Figure 30).

FIGURE 28: USE TECHNOLOGY TO EDUCATE ABOUT POLICY
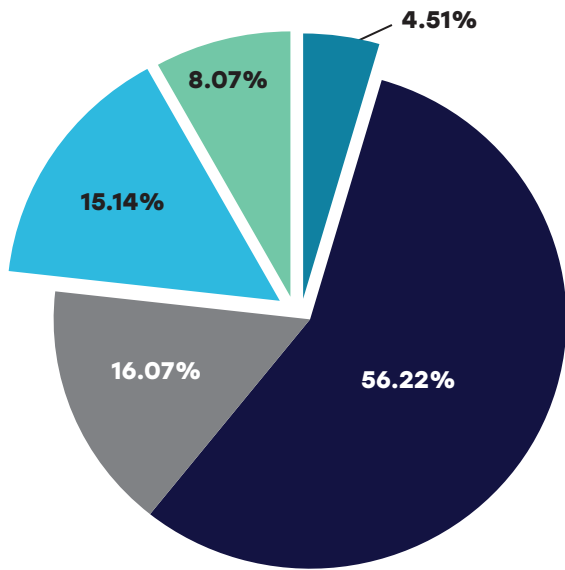
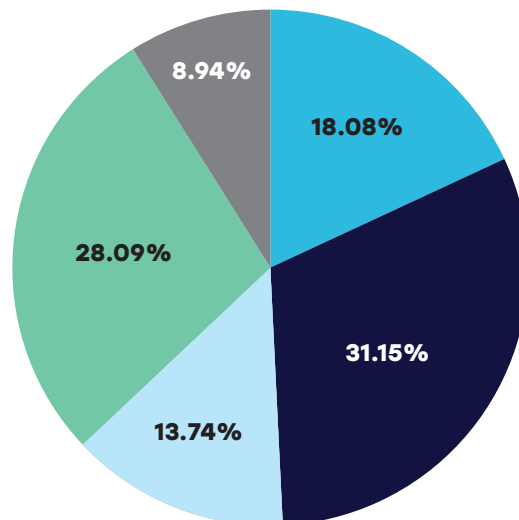

- Never
- Relatively Infrequently
- Sometimes
- Frequently
- Ongoing interaction

FIGURE 29: USE TECHNOLOGY TO EDUCATE ABOUT POLICY BY SUBSECTOR
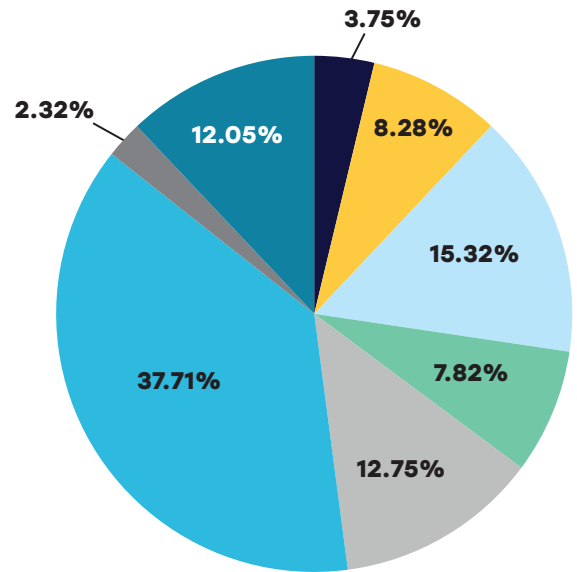
- Religious
- Public Benefits
- International
- Human Services
- Healthcare
- Environment
- Education
- Arts and Culture

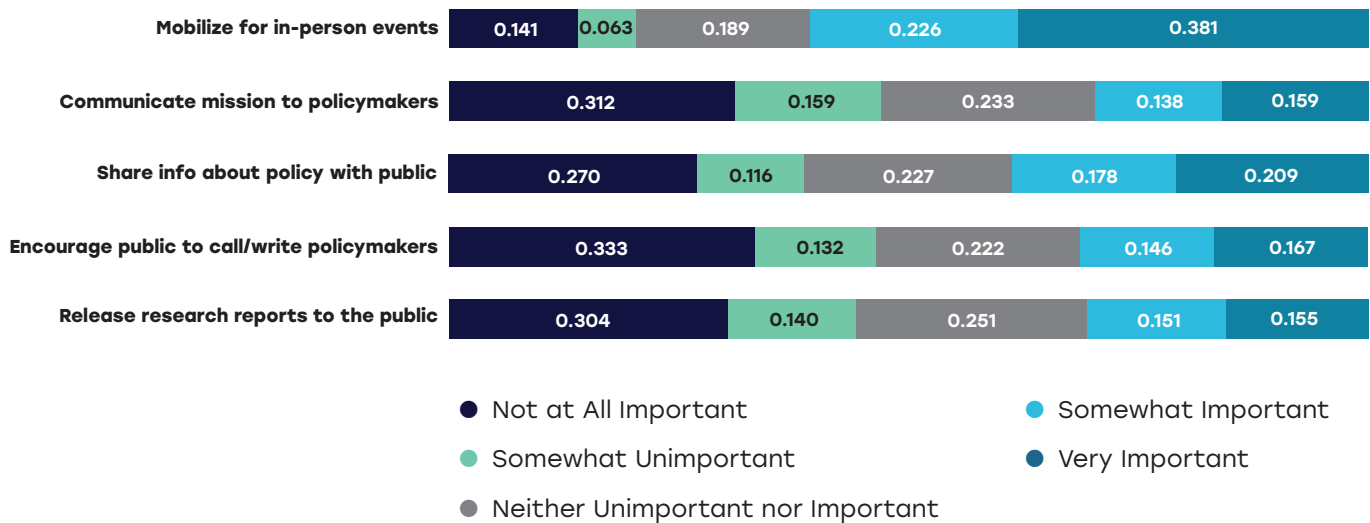**FIGURE 30: USE TECHNOLOGY TO EDUCATE ABOUT POLICY BY SIZE**

- <$100K
- $100K–$499K
- $500K–$999K
- $1M–$9.9M
- $10M+

Nonprofits identify social media as being important for a range of organizational factors. Twenty-one percent of organizations report that social media is "very important" for sharing information about policy with the public. Interestingly, almost 40% (38.1%) say that social media is very important for mobilizing people to engage in *in-person* events.

Almost 40% of nonprofits (38.1%) say that social media is very important for mobilizing people to engage in *in-person* events.

FIGURE 31: HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK SOCIAL MEDIA IS TO…?

	Not at All Important	Somewhat Unimportant	Neither Unimportant nor Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Mobilize for in-person events	0.141	0.063	0.189	0.226	0.381
Communicate mission to policymakers	0.312	0.159	0.233	0.138	0.159
Share info about policy with public	0.270	0.116	0.227	0.178	0.209
Encourage public to call/write policymakers	0.333	0.132	0.222	0.146	0.167
Release research reports to the public	0.304	0.140	0.251	0.151	0.155

● Not at All Important   ● Somewhat Important
● Somewhat Unimportant   ● Very Important
● Neither Unimportant nor Important

Coalitions and Associations

The past two decades have been marked by the growth of a variety of nonprofit coalitions, associations, and affiliated groups. Coalition structures exist along a continuum of complexity and involve combinations of nonprofit organizations banded together for a range of activities that include professional development, joint fundraising, or advocacy.

Over 40% of nonprofits in 2022 (41.4%) reported belonging to a coalition, and 35% reported belonging to an association at the state and/or national level. Figure 32 below shows PENS responses to the survey question: "Is your organization affiliated with any of the following?" for organizations with at least one coalition membership. Thirty-two percent of nonprofits overall belong to a local coalition, 28% to a state coalition, and 22% to a national coalition. When considering overlapping coalition memberships (nonprofits that report belonging to one or more type of coalition), the largest group are nonprofits that belong to all three (local, state, and national), which as shown in Figure 32 amounts to 31% of nonprofits that are members of any coalition, and 13% of nonprofits overall. About a third of nonprofits also state that they belong to a statewide association of nonprofits (30.3%). These associations exist in 44 states and the District of Columbia.[i] Twenty percent (19.2%) belong to a nationwide association of nonprofits.

i **https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/find-your-state-association?gclid=CjwKCAjw586hBhBrEiwAQYEnHVQKtHu-91DuqMe_ k5ZpNvsVrGPII9gZUsxzKTLGieC7c-0uHaY4pBoC5rMQAvD_BwE**

Nonprofits belonging to collaborative working groups such as associations or coalitions advocate at higher rates than non-members. Of nonprofits that belong to local/state/national coalitions, 56.8% advocate or lobby compared to only 12.4% of nonprofits that do not belong to such coalitions. Of nonprofits that belong to state or national associations, 48.6% advocate or lobby compared to only 21.1% of nonprofits that do not belong to such associations. Nonprofits in the study joined coalitions and associations for policy reasons. Over 90% of nonprofits that belong to coalitions or associations of nonprofits reported that it was to some degree important to affiliate with coalitions either "to support/oppose policies/legislation that directly affects the people my organization serves" or "to support/oppose policies/legislation that impacts my organization's ability to operate."

Nonprofits also reported affiliations with 501(c)(4) organizations (8.7%), tax-exempt organizations that "are permitted to engage in wide-ranging advocacy, lobbying, and some partisan electoral activities, but donors may not receive charitable deductions" (Post et al., 2023, p. 261). It is important to note that these affiliations must be carefully managed such that the charitable 501(c)(3) nonprofit is not subsidizing any partisan electoral work of the affiliated 501(c)(4) organizations. They must be separate legal entities, though they can share board members, staff, office space, and equipment. Grants made by the 501(c)(3) to the 501(c)(4) organization must be used for 501(c)(3) permissible purposes. Any portion of such grant used for lobbying will count against the 501(c)(3) lobbying limits.

> **Over 90% of nonprofits that belong to coalitions or associations of nonprofits reported that it was to some degree important to affiliate with coalitions either "to support/oppose policies/legislation that directly affects the people my organization serves" or "to support/oppose policies/legislation that impacts my organization's ability to operate."**

FIGURE 32: ECOSYSTEM OF OVERLAPPING NONPROFIT COALITIONS AMONG NONPROFIT COALITION MEMBERS

Local Coalitions 22.6%

18.3%

3.8%

31.1%

State Coalitions 6.5%

10.5%

National Coalitions 7.2%
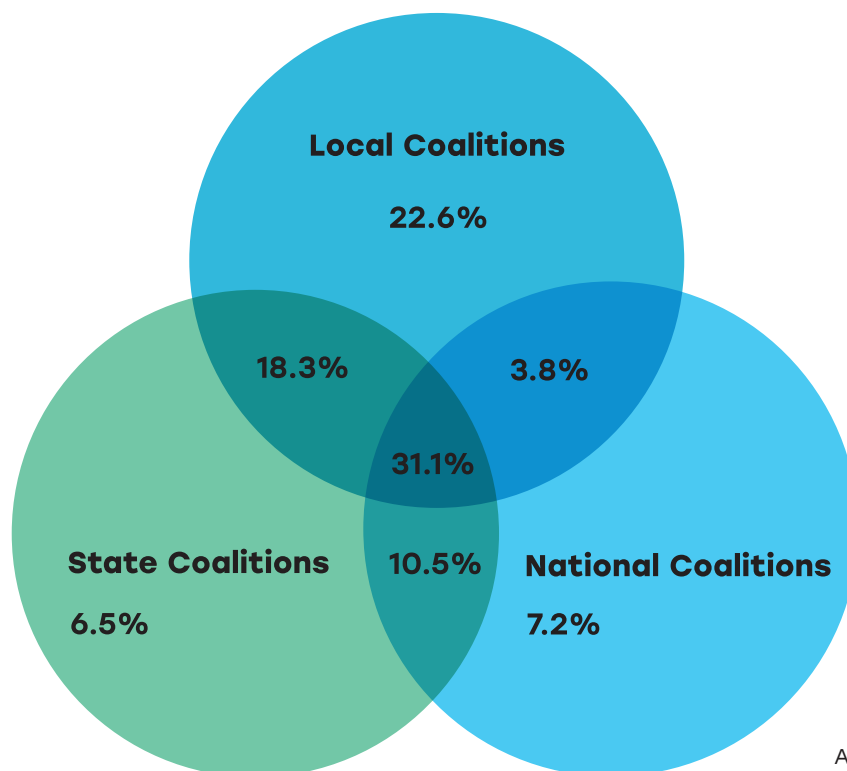
As shown in Figure 35, nonprofits collaborate for a variety of purposes. The Figure shows responses to the question: "To what extent do you collaborate with other organizations for each of the following purposes?" Among those that collaborate, over a third (38.4%) collaborate for community initiatives frequently or on an ongoing basis. Fundraising is another activity that attracts collaboration, with 17% doing so frequently or in ongoing collaboration. Almost a third of organizations that collaborate (29.4%) engage in collaborative service delivery (frequently or ongoing). Half report collaborating for advocacy, with 30.6% doing so on an ongoing basis and 20.1% doing so frequently.

FIGURE 35: PURPOSE OF COLLABORATION
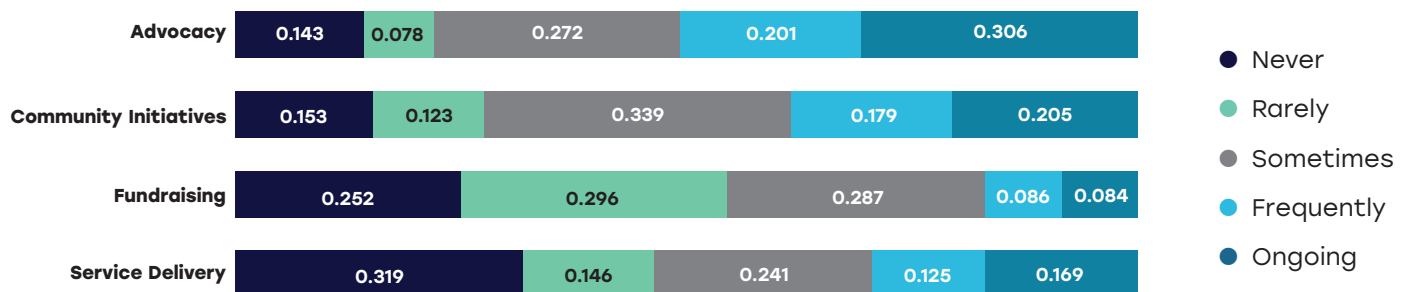
TABLE 12: COMPARISON OF TYPE ADVOCACY BY NONPROFIT COALITION AND NON-COALITION MEMBERS

Type of Advocacy	Coalition %	No Coalition %	Total %
Meet with government officials to talk about your work	70	40	57
Respond to requests for information from government	50	19	32
Invite elected official to particiate in event	47	20	31
Discuss obtaining grants with government officials	49	23	34
Work in a planning or advisory group with government	48	15	29
Discuss legislation with elected officials	39	12	23
Testify at legislative or administrative hearings	21	5	11
Assist in drafting legislation	17	4	9
Assist in developing government regulations	19	4	10

According to one definition, advocacy coalitions "combine a diversity of like-minded nonprofit organizations that share the goal of developing advocacy strategies to influence policymakers to take the interests of their target groups into account" (Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021, pp. 1–2). Table 12 shows responses to the survey prompt, "Several ways of interacting with those in government are presented on the next three screens. Please indicate how frequently, if at all, your organization engages in these activities.

By 'your organization' we mean the executive director, other staff, volunteers, or members of the board." The PENS findings indicate that the coalition membership is not a substitute for advocacy but rather a positive indicator for it. Nonprofits that belong to coalitions engage with government officials at significantly higher rates than non-coalition members. For example, 50% of nonprofits that belong to coalitions respond to government requests for information, compared with only 19% of nonprofits that do not belong to coalitions.

> **As coalition members, nonprofits not only continue to do advocacy on their own but also must be responsive to the coalitions to which they belong.**

As coalition members, nonprofits not only continue to do advocacy on their own but also must be responsive to the coalitions to which they belong. Tables 13 and 14 show responses to the question: "How often do coalitions/associations contact you and urge you to contact policymakers about pending matters of importance?" Most nonprofits indicate they receive requests from and give responses to coalitions once per month. This holds true for local, statewide, and national coalitions. For example, 64% of nonprofits report receiving a request from a statewide coalition once a month, and 65% report responding once per month. This suggests that nonprofits are indeed highly likely to be responsive to requests from coalitions to which they belong.

TABLE 13: REQUESTS FROM AND RESPONSES TO LOCAL, STATE, AND NATIONAL COALITIONS

|	Local Coalitions		Statewide Coalitions		National Coalitions	
	Requests from	Responses to	Requests from	Responses to	Requests from	Responses to
Never	23%	29%	16%	22%	20%	27%
Once/month	59%	59%	64%	65%	59%	60%
2–3 times/month	13%	10%	14%	11%	16%	10%
4+ times/month	4%	2%	6%	3%	5%	3%

TABLE 14: REQUESTS FROM AND RESPONSES TO STATEWIDE AND NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OF NONPROFITS

	Statewide Association of NPOs		National Association of NPOs	
	Requests from	Responses to	Requests from	Responses to
Never	27%	38%	31%	40%
Once/month	57%	54%	52%	50%
2–3 times/month	12%	7%	13%	9%
4+ times/month	4%	1%	4%	1%

To understand why nonprofits join coalitions and associations, the 2022 PENS project asked, "How important are each of the following reasons for your organization to be affiliated with these organizations, coalitions, or associations?" Table 15 shows responses to this question. The most frequent "very important" response is "to obtain information," followed by "to represent my nonprofit's interests" and "to amplify the voice of the people of my organization." Most nonprofits say that very important reasons for joining coalitions and associations are obtaining information (57.3%), networking (57.0%), amplifying the voice of the people in their organization (50.5%), and representing their nonprofit's interests (50.3%).

TABLE 15: REASONS FOR AFFILIATIONS WITH COALITIONS & ASSOCIATIONS
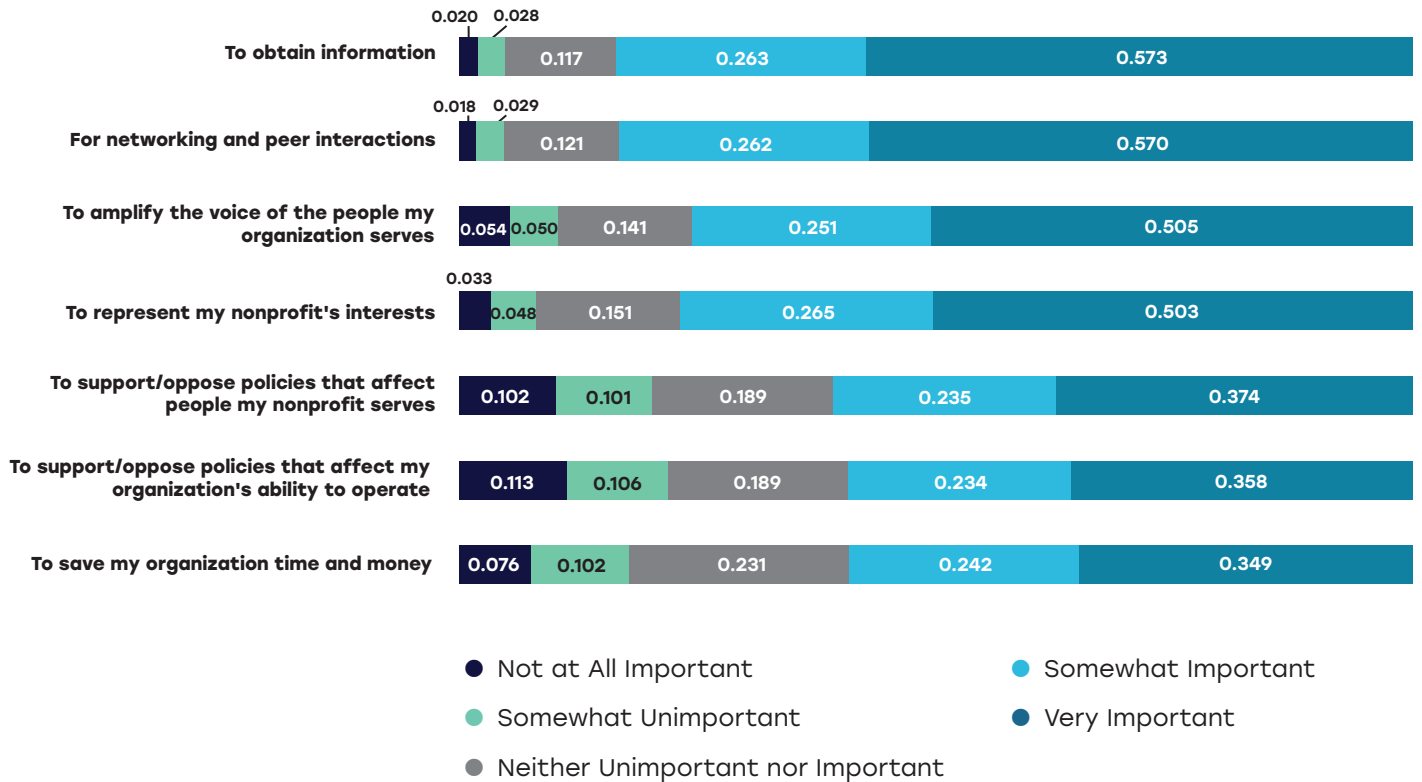
Discussion & Summary

Nonprofits have played a significant role in advocating for many historical events and causes in the United States. Some examples include the civil rights movement, women's suffrage, environmental protection, healthcare reform, and labor rights. The Public Engagement Nonprofit Survey (PENS) project, commissioned by Independent Sector and fielded in 2022, provides insights into how nonprofit activities have changed over the last two decades and how they vary by organization size, geography, communities served, and leadership demographics. This report compared PENS findings to the 2000 SNAP survey to describe changes in nonprofit public engagement over the last 20 years. The report also examined ways that nonprofits engage with public and civic affairs beyond traditional advocacy and lobbying mechanisms and discussed the factors that encourage or discourage nonprofit engagement in policy discussions. Overall, our findings suggest that nonprofits today have the opportunity to further develop their understanding of the types of legally permissible policy engagement to better advocate for their missions and the people and causes they serve.

The 2022 PENS results show that on average, nonprofits 20 years ago had a better understanding of the types of legally permissible policy and democratic participation than nonprofits do today. The study found that while over half of 501(c)(3) public charities that were active in 2000 knew they could support or oppose federal legislation, less than one-third of nonprofits active today are aware of that fact. Similarly, only 31% of nonprofits accurately understand that they can sponsor a nonpartisan forum or candidate debate for elected office, down from 45% in 2000. It should be noted that organization age was not found to be a substantive factor. Organizations founded before the year 2000 are only slightly more knowledgeable today than all other organizations, but even those older organizations are still much less knowledgeable than organizations were 20 years ago.

This lack of knowledge about permissible policy and democratic participation has significant implications for nonprofits, which are key actors in civil society, providing essential services and advocating for the public good. However, if nonprofits are not aware of the legal limits and opportunities of their activities, this may limit their participation in the democratic process. The study also found that a greater percentage of nonprofits today know what is impermissible under current law, including 98% who know they cannot use government funds to lobby Congress and 91% who know they cannot endorse a candidate for elected office. This suggests that nonprofits have become more risk-averse and cautious in their activities, which may be due to increased scrutiny from regulatory bodies, media, and donors. However, nonprofits may also be missing opportunities to engage in permissible policy activities and have a greater impact on policy decisions.

Around 31% of nonprofits report engaging in public policy in the last five years through general policy advocacy activities, formal lobbying activities, or both. This represents significantly lower levels of policy advocacy than nonprofits reported in 2000, when three-quarters reported ever having lobbied for or against a proposed bill or other policy. This decline in policy advocacy may be due to a lack of knowledge about permissible activities, increased regulatory pressure, or a shift in priorities and strategies among nonprofits.

Environmental and health organizations exhibit the highest levels of policy engagement compared to other subsectors, while education, arts and culture, religious, and international organizations show relatively lower rates of engagement. This is similar to the ranking of policy-engaged subsectors in 2000. The study also found that larger organizations are more likely to engage in advocacy and/or lobbying, with two-thirds of nonprofits with budgets of $10 million and above engaging in public policy, compared to 25% of organizations with budgets between $100,000 and $499,999. Smaller organizations are also the least likely to know they are legally allowed to take public policy positions or formally lobby for or against legislation.

The 2022 PENS project explored factors that either encourage or discourage advocacy/lobbying engagement among nonprofits. Mission alignment with the organization is found to be the most significant factor, with 70% of organizations reporting that alignment with their mission encourages policy engagement. This is followed by the organization's attitudes toward advocacy (67%), coalition or membership association activities (63%), and attitudes toward policy decisions (62%). Donor preferences were also found to be an encouraging factor for policy engagement (37%). However, certain factors discourage advocacy/lobbying engagement among nonprofits, including receiving government funding (31%), organizational capacity (46%), and tax law or IRS rules (44%). Interestingly, despite government funding being seen as a barrier to policy engagement, 27% of policy-engaged organizations and 13% of non-engaged organizations view it as an enabling factor. This is consistent with the finding that policy-engaged nonprofits rely more on government grants or contracts (29% of total revenue) than non-engaged nonprofits (14%).

The location where an organization operates may also influence the decision to engage or not engage in advocacy and lobbying. PENS results show nonprofits located in urban core areas and communities of color are more actively involved in policy advocacy than their rural or suburban counterparts. This suggests that nonprofits located in urban centers may have more opportunities to engage with policymakers and advocate for change on behalf of their constituents. Moreover, nonprofits that focus on serving people of color or low-income individuals tend to be more engaged in public policy than those that do not. This may be due to the fact that these organizations are often working with communities that are disproportionately impacted by policies related to housing, healthcare, education, and other critical social issues. Additionally, regardless of location, 38% of nonprofits with programs that focus on people of color report being policy-engaged, compared to 26% of organizations that do not have programs that specifically focus on people of color.

It is also important to note that nonprofits in urban core areas, low-income communities, majority-POC communities, and majority-Black communities were significantly more likely than other organizations to report increasing their policy advocacy engagement over the last five years. This finding is significant because these communities are often underrepresented in policymaking, and the fact that nonprofits in these areas are stepping up to fill that gap could lead to increased political participation and more equitable policy outcomes. However, the smallest organizations were the least likely to increase their policy advocacy efforts, and this finding is a cause for concern. Smaller nonprofits often lack the resources and capacity to engage in policy advocacy fully. Therefore, more support and resources may be needed to help smaller nonprofits increase their policy advocacy efforts and ensure their voices are heard.

There is also evidence that nonprofits that are intentional about diversity and representation are more active in public policy. About 74% of policy-engaged nonprofits have a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statement, compared to only around 58% of non-engaged nonprofits. This suggests that nonprofits that prioritize diversity and representation are more likely to be involved in policy advocacy.

Moreover, organizations with dedicated programs that serve people of color, people who identify as Black or African American, and people in poverty are significantly more likely to have written DEI statements and dedicate resources to DEI initiatives. This finding highlights the important links between DEI, social justice, and organizational efforts to improve societal outcomes for marginalized communities.

Further, nonprofits engage in a wide array of civic, social movement, and election-related activities beyond advocacy and lobbying. For example, 60% of policy-engaged nonprofits took part in a community gathering, 18% were involved in signing petitions, and 20% provided voter education about issues in the 12 months before participating in the 2022 PENS project. Nonprofit membership in a coalition or association does not appear to crowd out advocacy activity by the organization itself. Rather, nonprofits that belong to coalitions engage in advocacy at higher rates than non-coalition members.

Technology also plays a role in educating about policy, with 72% of nonprofits using social media to raise awareness of an issue. Additionally, social media use is crucial for offline mobilization events for 38% of nonprofits.

By understanding all of these factors, nonprofits can better navigate the complex landscape of public policy and advocacy to advance their missions.

In conclusion, the PENS findings suggest the need for greater education and training for nonprofits on the permissible activities related to policy advocacy and democratic participation. Nonprofits should also be encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities available to them under current law, including sponsoring nonpartisan candidate debates and engaging in general advocacy activities. Increased policy engagement among nonprofits has the potential to improve public policy, strengthen democracy by providing diverse voices and perspectives on policy issues, and better help nonprofits achieve their missions by securing supportive policies for the sector and the people it serves. By understanding the trends and implications discussed in this report, nonprofit organizations can better leverage their advocacy efforts and bring about meaningful social change.

Appendix

PENS Methodology and Sample Design

Overview

SSRS conducted a survey of 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations for Independent Sector from June 29, 2022, through January 2, 2023. The study aimed to fill a 20-year gap in data about nonprofit organizations' impacts on public and civic engagement through a nationally representative survey of charitable nonprofits. The survey was led by a partner academic team composed of researchers from American University, George Mason University, and the University of Massachusetts Boston. The findings from this survey will help inform the public, government officials, and funders on the important work of the nonprofit sector.

SSRS interviewed a total of 2,282 respondents who fully completed the survey and an additional 881 respondents who were eligible breakoffs based on the last question answered. This report details the methodological components of the study: sample design, questionnaire design, programming, field operations, data processing, and weighting. The interviews were completed through an internet-based survey.

Sample Design

The sample for the survey was provided by the research team to SSRS. The sample was pulled from the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) Core 990 Public Charity files from 2018. The full file was cleaned to produce a restricted sample frame of 289,229 records, following the sample file preparation and sampling procedure section below.

A proportionately stratified random sample of 29,642 was drawn from the restricted sample frame. The sample was stratified by organization size categories, subsector as specified in the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE), and state.

The survey was fielded to a stratified random sample of U.S.-based 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofits. The sample frame included all active 501(c)(3) nonprofits that were included in the NCCS Core 990 Public Charity file from 2018 that (1) were included in IRS Publication 78 (Oct. 2021 file) or in the IRS Business Master File
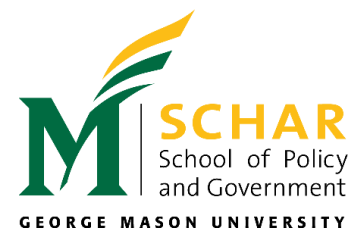
(Dec. 2021 file) as being eligible for tax-deductible contributions (including though a group exemption), (2) that were not listed by the IRS as having their tax-exempt status revoked as of December, 2021, and (3) that had addresses on the form 990 in the 50 U.S. states or the District of Columbia. Certain special entities were excluded from the final sample frame, including hospitals (NTEE E30 and E31), higher education (B40, B41, B42, B43, and B50), private foundations, private operating foundations, organizations operated for the benefit of a college or university—IRC Section 170(b)(1)(A)(iv)—and federal, state, or local government units—IRC Section 170(b)(1)(A)(v). The sample also excludes organizations that reported less than $50,000 in annual revenue on their most recent IRS filing (which is the 990/990ez filing threshold). The resulting sample frame included 289,229 active charitable nonprofit organizations across the U.S.

A 10.5% stratified random sample for the survey was then drawn from the sample frame, stratified by (a) organization size categories based on expenses (five categories: (1) less than $100,000; (2) $100,000–$499,999; (3) $500,000–$999,999; (4) $1 million–$9,999,999; (5) $10 million and above), (b) subsector (26 categories, NTEE A–Z), and (c) state (51 categories). This resulted in a representative sample of 30,155 U.S.-based 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit organizations. Efforts were made to identify contact information for the executive director (or equivalent position), including an email address, for all 30,155 organizations, resulting in a final email contact sample of 21,267 organizations and a separate non-email contact sample of 8,371 organizations, for a total of 29,638 potential respondents. Organizations with email contact information were recruited through a series of email invitations along with physical postcard reminders (with login information to complete the survey online), and the non-email contact sample was recruited through postcard invitations (again with e-survey login information).

TABLE A1: WEIGHTED AND UNWEIGHTED CHARACTERISTICS OF NONPROFITS IN THE PENS STUDY COMPARED TO THE U.S. NONPROFIT SECTOR SAMPLE FRAME

	U.S. Nonprofit Sector	Unweighted Sample	Weighted Sample
Subsector			
Arts	10.6%	15.4%	11.8%
Education	15.7%	15.9%	16.8%
Environment	5.2%	6.4%	6.1%
Health	10.1%	10.0%	9.7%
Human Services	36.4%	33.9%	35.8%
International	2.4%	2.2%	2.4%
Public Benefit	11.7%	11.0%	10.8%
Religion	7.2%	5.2%	6.7%
Organization Size (Total Expenses)			
<$100,000	26.2%	26.4%	25.5%
$100,000–$499,999	39.5%	40.6%	38.2%
$500,000–$999,999	11.2%	13.3%	11.8%
$1 Million–$9,999,999	18.8%	17.5%	20.2%
$10 Million and Above	4.4%	2.2%	4.4%
Region			
Northeast	21.8%	21.0%	21.2%
Midwest	21.9%	26.5%	26.2%
South	32.5%	28.3%	28.7%
West	23.8%	24.2%	23.9%
Community Income Level			
Low Income	8.5%	8.9%	9.2%
Medium–Low Income	39.0%	44.3%	44.2%
Medium–High Income	29.6%	27.3%	27.1%
High Income	22.9%	19.6%	19.6%
Community Urban/Suburban/Rural			
Rural	17.4%	22.7%	22.1%
Suburban and Small Cities	48.4%	48.4%	48.5%
Urban Core of Metropolitan Areas	34.2%	28.9%	29.4%
State Politics (Cook PVI 2020)			
Blue	46.2%	45.4%	45.6%
Purple	35.9%	33.6%	33.5%
Red	18.0%	21.0%	20.8%
Community Demographics (ZIP Code, Census Five-Year Estimates, 2018)			
Avg. Population	27,146	25,687	25,973
Percent Non-White	26.3%	24.8%	25.1%
Percent Black	11.8%	10.7%	10.9%
Percent Poor	30.2%	30.9%	31.0%
Percent Low Education	10.4%	10.5%	10.5%

Notes:

[1] Income levels are based on ratios of a ZIP code's median household income relative to the state median household income. We use the 2018 American Community Survey five-year estimates at the ZIP code level from Social Explorer (**https://www.socialexplorer.com/**) and Berkowitz et al. (2015) to define ZIP code income categories. Low income = less than 60% of state median household income, medium-low income = 60-99.999% of state median household income, medium-high income = 100-139.999% of state median household income, and high income = greater than or equal to 140% of state median household income.

[2] See the Cook Partisan Voting Index, **https://www.cookpolitical.com/cook-pvi**.

[3] Percent poor is based on the U.S. Census rating for percent of households that are below the poverty threshold for their family size.

[4] Percent low education is based on the U.S. Census rating for percent of individuals 25–64 years of age who have less than a high school diploma (or equivalent).

Sample File Preparation and Sampling Procedure

Below outlines the sample selection steps for the project.

I. Sample File Preparation and Cleaning

1. **Downloaded NCCS Core 990 PC files from 2018**

    a. **Inspected for duplicates**

    b. **Full N = 443,751 observations**

2. **Merged with most recent IRS Automatic Revocation List**

    a. **Merged list of automatic revocation as of 12-2021 by EIN (after cleaning and removing duplicates from auto revocation file)**

    b. **Generated variables for revoked and reinstated**

        i. Around 8–9% of orgs in the 2018 NCCS 990 Core files have been automatically revoked for not filing in three years

            1. Around 60% of those organizations refiled with the IRS and were reinstated as of 12-2021

    c. **Dropped 15,027 organizations that were revoked and not reinstated as of 12-2021**

3. **Merged with most recent IRS publication 78 data (release 10-2021) AND most recent IRS Business Master File (release 12-2021) because organizations could be IRS Publication 78 eligible through group exemptions but not listed on the current Publication 78.**

    a. **Dropped organizations that were not listed on IRS Publication 78 as eligible to receive tax deductible contributions list updated as of 10-2021 AND were not covered by a group exemption on the IRS BMF**

        i. Dropped 2,166 organizations that were not on the list of organizations eligible to receive tax deductible contributions and not listed on the BMF under a group exemption

    b. **Dropped 16,820 observations that were not on the most recent BMF**

4. **Dropped 1,100 non-501(c)(3) organizations**

5. **Dropped 1,724 organizations with 990-PF required filing (kept if pf_filing_req_cd=0)**

6. **Dropped 1,289 organizations that were not identified as donation deductible on BMF / Limited to only donation-deductible organizations (kept if deductibility=1)**

7. **Inspected for out of country / out of scope**

    a. **Updated addresses using most recent BMF (12-2021), including street, city, state, ZIP**

    b. **Dropped 106 observations without state listed (identified as located in a foreign country)**

    c. **Dropped 765 non–50 U.S. States/DC (military addresses, Guam, Puerto Rico, etc.)**

    d. **Dropped 13 other observations identified as non-U.S.**

    e. **Dropped 118 observations identified by NCCS as out of scope (outnccs)**

II. Sample Restrictions

1. **Dropped higher education and hospitals (generate Hospitals identifier by adding E30 and E31 (specialty hospitals, which is consistent with the Nonprofit Sector in Brief methodology except that it keeps community clinics/free clinics E32 as a separate category and not hospitals)**

2. **Dropped organizations classified by the IRS as operating and private foundations, hospitals, support of colleges/universities, government units**

3. **Dropped organizations under $50,000 in annual revenue (the 990/990ez filing threshold, consistent with Urban Institute's Nonprofit Sector in Brief methodology)**

III. Strata and Sampling

Strata: organization size, subsector (NTEE A-Z), and state

Size Stratification: Urban's Nonprofit Sector in brief uses the following size categories based on expenses. This approach gives existing data to benchmark against. Use these groups as size stratification groups:

1. $100,000
2. $100,000–$499,000
3. $500,000–999,999
4. $1–4.99 million
5. $5–9.99 million
6. $10 million or more

Questionnaire Design

The initial draft of the questionnaire was developed by the research team, with input and suggestions made by SSRS.

SSRS programmed the study into its data collection platform, Confirmit. Extensive checking of the program was conducted to ensure that skip patterns followed the design of the questionnaire.

The 2022 PENS pretest took place on April 14–15, 2022. A total of eight cognitive in-depth interviews were conducted by a moderator. Executive directors or CEOs from across the U.S. were recruited and provided a $200 honorarium in return for their insight. Overall, the questionnaire flowed smoothly, and respondents provided thoughtful and reasonable responses to the questions. As a result of the pretest, a topline report was created by the moderator with feedback from the interviews. Changes to the survey instrument were implemented prior to launch on June 29, 2022.

SECTION 9

Field Procedures

Survey Administration

The field period for this study was June 29, 2022, through January 2, 2023. A $2 pre-incentive was included in the email and mail survey invitations, in the form of an e-gift code, which was not contingent upon completing the survey. As a thank you for participating in the survey through the web, respondents received $10 in the form of an electronic gift card. The final mailed reminder to the full sample of non-respondents included an additional $1 pre-incentive for half of the remaining sample as a test of survey response strategies.

In order to maximize survey response, the following touchpoints were implemented during the field period:

TABLE A2: RESPONDENT TOUCHPOINT TIMELINE

Data Collection and Respondent Touchpoints	
Data collection began	**Wednesday, 6/29/22**
W1 Postcard invitation mailed	Wednesday, 6/29/22
W1 Email invitation sent	Wednesday, 6/29/22
W1 Email reminder sent	Thursday, 7/7/22
W2b Postcard invitation drops	Wednesday 7/20/22
W1 Email reminder 2 sent	Thursday, 7/21/22
W1 Email reminder 3 sent	Tuesday, 7/26/22
W2a Postcard invitation drops	Wednesday, 7/27/22
W2 Email invitation sent	Wednesday, 7/27/22
W1 Postcard 2 (reminder) mailed	Wednesday, 7/27/22
W1 Email reminder 4 sent	Monday, 8/1/22
W2 Email reminder 1 sent	Wednesday, 8/3/22
W2 Email reminder 2 sent	Monday, 8/8/22
W1 Email reminder 5 sent	Monday, 8/8/22
W3M1 Letter to remaining W1/W2 sample	Friday, 9/2/22
W3 Email reminder 1 sent **to partials**	Tuesday, 9/27/22
W3 Email reminder 1 sent **to all**	Tuesday, 10/18/22
W3 Email reminder 2 sent **to all**	Monday, 11/14/22
W3 Email reminder 3 sent **to all**	Wednesday, 11/30/22
W3M2 Letter to remaining W1/W2 sample *50% visible cash/50% standard*	Thursday, 12/1/22
W3 Email reminder 4 sent **to all**	Tuesday, 12/13/22
W3 Last call email reminder sent	Tuesday, 12/20/22
Data collection closed	**Monday, 1/2/23**

Screening Procedures

Prior to participating in the survey, all potential respondents were provided with an informed consent agreement to review. They were then given the opportunity to either agree to participate or opt out of the survey.

Study Response Rate

The overall study response rate was 7.8%. The response rate was calculated using AAPOR's Response Rate 1 formula where the number of completes is divided by (the number of completes + the number of partials + the number of those invited but who have not responded).

TABLE A3: STUDY RESPONSE RATE

Category 1 (Interview)	**3,163**
Completed Interview	**2,282**
Partial Interview	**881**
Category 2 (Eligible, Non-Interview)	**24,703**
Category 3 (Unknown Eligibility, Non-Interview)	**1,772**
Study Response Rate	**7.8%**

Weighting Procedures

The data were weighted by applying a base weight followed by unknown eligibility and nonresponse adjustments.

Base Weight

The base weight, d_{0i}, also referred to as a "sampling weight" or a "design weight" adjusts for sampling rates within strata. The base weight (d_{0i}) for each piece of sample drawn from size stratum i is $d_{0i} = N_i/n_i$ where N_i is the size of sample frame in stratum i and n_i is the amount of sample released in stratum i.

Unknown Eligibility Adjustment

It is typically not possible to determine whether all sampled units are members of the target population and thus eligible for the survey. In the case of an address-based sample for a general population study, for example, a sampled address would need to be an occupied residential housing unit to be eligible for inclusion. In the case of this study, eligibility was based on knowledge of confirmed nonprofit organization email address and mailing addresses from publicly available records. We handle cases with unknown eligibility by distributing their weights among the cases for which eligibility is known. This unknown eligibility adjustment, $a1$, can be expressed as:

$$a_1 = \begin{cases} \sum_{i \in s} d_{0i} \Big/ \sum_{i \in s, KN} d_{0i}, & i \in s, KN \\ 0, & i \in s, UNK \end{cases}$$

Where d_{0i} is the base weight for case i, s is the entire sample, s, KN is the subset of sample for which eligibility status has been determined, either eligible or ineligible, and s, UNK is the subset sample for which eligibility status could not be determined. Note that these two groups account for the entire sample and do not overlap, i.e., $s, KN \cup s, UNK = s$ and $s, KN \cap s, UNK = \emptyset$. The unknown eligibility adjusted base weight, d_1, for unit i is the product of the base weight and the unknown eligibility adjustment, or $d_{1i} = d_{0i}a_{1i}$. The unknown

eligibility adjustment was made independently within classes of sample defined by size strata and type of nonprofit. Cells with fewer than 30 cases were combined with other cells to reduce the variance of the weights.

Nonresponse Adjustment

The next weight adjustment is a nonresponse adjustment that accounts for nonresponding sample units. The weights of eligible nonresponding sample units were distributed among the eligible respondents. The nonresponse adjustment, a_2, can be expressed as:

$$a_2 = \begin{cases} \sum_{i \in s, E} d_{1i} \Big/ \sum_{i \in s, ER} d_{1i}, & i \in s, ER \\ 1, & i \in s, IN \\ 0, & i \in s, ENR \end{cases}$$

Where d_{1i} is the unknown eligibility adjusted base weight for case i, s, E is the set of all eligible cases, s, ER is the set of all eligible respondents, s, IN are cases that are ineligible, and s, ENR are eligible nonrespondents (i.e., cases that were determined to be eligible but never completed the survey). The nonresponse adjustment was made within the same classes used for the unknown eligibility adjustment.

The nonresponse adjusted base weight, d_2, for unit i is the product of the base weight, the unknown eligibility adjustment, and the nonresponse adjustment, or $d_{2i} = d_{0i}a_{1i}a_{2i}$.

We included two nonresponse adjustments, which results in two weight variables. One includes fully completed interviews (n=2,282) and the second includes partially completed interviews (n=3,163).

Weight Summary

TABLE A4: NONRESPONSE ADJUSTED BASE WEIGHT SUMMARY (COMPLETES)

Category	Values	Unweighted	Weighted
	<$100,000	26.4%	25.5%
	$100,00–$499,000	40.6%	38.2%
Size Stratum	$500,000–$999,999	13.3%	11.8%
	$1–9.99 million	17.5%	20.2%
	$10 million or more	2.2%	4.3%

TABLE A5: NONRESPONSE ADJUSTED BASE WEIGHT SUMMARY (COMPLETES AND ELIGIBLE BREAKOFFS)

Category	Values	Unweighted	Weighted
	<$100,000	25.1%	25.5%
	$100,00–$499,000	40.0%	38.2%
Size Stratum	$500,000–$999,999	13.5%	11.8%
	$1–9.99 million	18.7%	20.2%
	$10 million or more	2.6%	4.3%

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