Article

The Diversity Layer: The Role of Coalitions Among Civil Society Organizations

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Abstract

Some theorists argue that civil society organizations (CSOs) can knit together diverse societies by assembling demographically different individuals. CSO core participants (staff, board members, and engaged volunteers) are, however, often demographically homogeneous. Coalitions—CSOs whose members are organizations—might be an exception. We hypothesize that coalitions have more demographic diversity among their core participants than clubs (organizations whose members are individuals) and non-member organizations. We theorize that coalitions can attain greater diversity because they provide unique strategic efficiencies to members and have a membership stickiness that reduces homophilic membership churn. We test this hypothesis by combining hand-coded data on the membership structure of 5,239 CSOs with demographic data on their core participants. We find that coalitions have more racial diversity (but not more gender diversity) than CSOs with other membership structures. Our findings provisionally suggest that coalitions form the diversity layer of civil society and could help bridge societal divides.

Keywords

civil society organizations, coalitions, diversity, members, social capital

Theorists have long argued that civil society organizations (CSOs) like hobby groups, religious congregations, service clubs, and advocacy organizations foster democracy, in

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part, by knitting together demographically diverse societies (Babchuk & Edwards, 1965; Calhoun, 2011; Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020); as the yarns that bind demographic groups together fray—leaving isolated clusters or polarized factions—democratic backsliding often occurs (Berman, 1997; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Waldner & Lust, 2018). While many CSOs are expected to form around narrowly construed interests and identities (Ressler et al., 2023) and represent those constituencies in a combative political sphere (Andrews & Edwards, 2004), CSOs are also hypothesized to, at times, connect individuals across lines of demographic difference, building a sense of common purpose and collective identity that extends beyond group boundaries (Fulton, 2017; Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020). Indeed, individuals who develop diverse social network ties in CSOs are more trusting of people in general (Glanville, 2016), and societies with more CSOs with overlapping memberships become more trusting and democratic over time (Paxton, 2002, 2007). Such insights harken back to Alexis de Tocqueville's (1840/1969) classic claims that American society was held together by citizens' understanding that their fates were linked to those around them—what he termed "self-interest properly understood" (p. 525)—and that this sense was developed through "the reciprocal action of men [*sic*] one upon another" (p. 515) in CSOs.

Most empirical studies, however, suggest that connections across lines of demographic difference are rarely being built within CSOs. Studies typically show that CSOs' core participants—the people who design, select and run the CSO's activities—often share demographic characteristics (Baggetta, 2016; Edwards et al., 2013; Firat & Glanville, 2017; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1986; Wiertz, 2016). These patterns support the principle of homophily—the tendency of people to associate with similar others (McPherson et al., 2001). Homophily leads CSO participants to recruit people who are demographically similar to themselves, while demographically marginal participants are more likely to leave (McPherson & Rotolo, 1996; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987). Over time, these processes produce internally homogeneous CSOs—situations where there are no demographic differences for participants to bridge. These internally homogeneous CSOs have divided Americans, balkanized civil society, and increased inequality (Kaufman, 2002), contributing to our current moment of low trust and fraying social ties (Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020).

Of course, some CSOs do succeed at bringing together demographically diverse participants. The question is, which ones? The answer to this question is crucial, as civic leaders seek ways to build social connections that might drive an "upswing" in American unity (Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020). We propose a mechanism with the potential to partially answer this question: membership structure.

We ask, how does membership structure affect the demographic composition of a CSO's core participants? We categorize CSOs into one of three membership structure types: (1) *non-member organizations*, which have no members (e.g., food pantries); (2) *clubs* where members are individuals (e.g., sports leagues); and (3) *coalitions*, where the members are organizations (e.g., local arts councils) (Smith, 2010, 2023). *Core participants* are the individuals in the CSO, such as staff, board members, and engaged volunteers who design, select, and run the CSO's activities (Andrews et al., 2010; Skocpol, 2003). They are distinct from *peripheral participants* who affiliate with a CSO through programming created by core participants—like donors, patrons,

clients, or "plug-in" volunteers (Anheier, 2009; Eliasoph, 2011; Johnson & Garbarino, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

We hypothesize that coalitions have, on average, more demographic diversity among their core participants than clubs or non-member organizations because their core participants are drawn from people in the internally homogeneous clubs and non-member organizations that are coalition members—but those organizations have different demographic profiles from each other. We theorize two mechanisms facilitating this outcome: coalitions provide unique *strategic efficiencies* to the organizations that join them, and coalitions have a *membership stickiness* that limits homophilic membership churn.

We test our hypothesis using a recently available data source. Candid, an organization that assembles data on nonprofits, has collected self-reported data on the gender and racial composition of three types of CSO core participants (senior staff, full-time staff, and board members) of more than 15,000 U.S. non-profit organizations. We hand-coded a random sample of 5,239 organizations from that dataset into our three membership structure types (non-member organizations, clubs, and coalitions) using information gleaned from organizations' websites and social media profiles (see Johnson, 2014; Schlozman et al., 2015 for similar categorizations). We then compared the racial and gender diversity of the three available types of core participants across membership structures.[1]

We find that coalitions have significantly more racial diversity (but not more gender diversity) among their core participants than CSOs with other types of membership structures. The results for racial diversity suggest that the coalition structure limits the impact of homophily more than other structure types. We argue this pattern makes coalitions the *diversity layer* of civil society—a subset of CSOs more likely to include demographically heterogeneous participants. The position of coalitions as the diversity layer implies that efforts to bridge demographic differences might be more easily accomplished through organizations with this membership structure—making coalitions an important tool in efforts to knit together diverse societies.

Theory

CSOs are "formal organizations whose participants voluntarily assemble to pursue common purposes" (Fulton & Baggetta, 2022, p. 1187). This broad definition encompasses many kinds of organizations including "labor unions, political parties, churches and other religious groups, professional and business associations, community and self-help groups" among others (Edwards, 2014, p. 20).

CSOs have two broad types of participants, as laid out in Table 1. *Core participants* are the individuals in the CSO who design, select, and run the CSO's activities (Andrews et al., 2010; Skocpol, 2003). Some core participants are leaders—people with the legitimate authority to make binding decisions for the entire organization. They include senior staff and board members. Other core participants are non-leaders—people who do not have broad decision-making authority, yet still actively engage in co-creating the CSO's outputs. They include other full-time staff and

Table 1. Types of CSO Participants.

	Core participants					
Leadership Status	Employees	Volunteers	Peripheral participants			
Leaders	Senior Staff	Board Members				
Non-Leaders	Other Staff	Engaged Volunteers	Plug-in Volunteers	Donors/ Supporters	Patrons/ Subscribers	Clients/ Recipients

Note. Core participants design, select, and run CSO activities. Peripheral participants have looser affiliations with their CSOs.

engaged volunteers. The archetypal engaged volunteer in American CSOs is a member of a voluntary association who pays dues, attends meetings, and participates in activities (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003).

Core participants are distinct from *peripheral participants*—people who affiliate with a CSO through programming created by core participants. All peripheral participants are non-leaders. Common types of peripheral participants include "plug-in" volunteers whose activities are limited to narrow tasks designed, assigned, and managed by staff (Eliasoph, 2011); donors, supporters, and other "checkbook members" who almost exclusively contribute funds (Putnam, 2000); patrons or subscribers who exchange funds for experiences or material benefits (Johnson & Garbarino, 2001); and clients who receive goods, services, or other support (Anheier, 2009).

CSOs have varying mixes of core and peripheral participants that they assemble within three membership structure types (Smith, 2010, 2023): non-member organizations, clubs, or coalitions (see Johnson, 2014; Schlozman et al., 2015 for similar distinctions).

1. *Non-member organizations* have no members. Their core participants are staff and board members. Volunteers, if they exist, are "plug-in" labor that we consider peripheral participants (Jordan & Maloney, 1997; Kim & Mason, 2018; LeRoux, 2009b). Non-member organizations include CSOs like many soup kitchens, performing arts organizations, think tanks, and non-participatory advocacy groups.
2. *Clubs* have individuals as members. Core participants are staff, board members, and engaged volunteers (who are "members" in the classic sense) (Andrews et al., 2010; Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Skocpol, 2003). Clubs include CSOs like many recreational sports leagues, giving circles, religious congregations, professional associations, and participatory activist groups.
3. *Coalitions* have organizations as members. Core participants are staff, board members, and engaged volunteers (who are often representatives of the member organizations) (McCammon & Moon, 2015). Also referred to as assemblies, councils, or networks (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010), coalitions may include any combination of non-member organizations, clubs, other coalitions, or other organization types (e.g., businesses and government agencies).

CSOs and Diversity

Among the many roles CSOs are theorized to play (Edwards, 2014) is the ability to connect people across salient lines of demographic difference (Calhoun, 2011; Edwards et al., 2013; Gawerc, 2021; Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020). This is especially true for clubs, which bring core participants together to actively pursue shared interests—a situation ripe for building social ties (Tacon, 2019). The assumption girding this potential bridging role of clubs is that a meaningful proportion of clubs are internally diverse—that is, their individual core participants differ from one another along salient demographic lines like race or gender.

How internally diverse should we expect clubs to be? While internally diverse clubs certainly exist—like some religious congregations (Dougherty et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2013), community organizing organizations (Wood & Fulton, 2015), and youth groups (Weisinger & Salipante, 2005)—much research suggests diverse clubs are exceptions to a homogeneity rule. Most clubs are internally homogeneous on salient demographic characteristics (Firat & Glanville, 2017; McPherson & Rotolo, 1995; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1986; Wiertz, 2016), including many political organizations (Andrews & Edwards, 2004), religious congregations (Edwards et al., 2013; Emerson & Smith, 2000), recreational groups (Baggetta, 2016), and fraternal orders (Kaufman, 2002).

Homogeneity within clubs is not surprising. Clubs typically emerge from communities of shared interest (Hudson & Hudson, 2013), and shared interests are often structured or sorted along salient demographic lines (Goldberg, 2011). Once an interest community formalizes into a club, further processes of homophily create strong tendencies for the club to maintain or increase its level of internal homogeneity (McPherson et al., 2001). Individuals who are most similar to current participants are more likely to be recruited and to join, and individuals among current core participants who are least similar to other participants are more likely to leave.

Dynamics in non-member organizations are similar. Non-profit employees, especially senior staff, tend to be homogeneous (Rolf et al., 2023). This is partly due to homophily in hiring as recruiters rely on their social contacts or those of current employees to find job applicants and then privilege information about candidates gleaned through these social networks (Bills et al., 2017). Such dynamics are especially common in non-profit organizations with limited hiring resources and needs for skilled employees willing to work at below-market wages (Abzug, 2017). Employers also seek "cultural match" between themselves and new hires (Bills et al., 2017)—and similarity of cultural taste is correlated with demographics (Goldberg, 2011). Many job seekers also identify new job opportunities through their social networks, which tend toward demographic homogeneity (Trimble & Kmec, 2011).

As a result, the core participants in clubs and non-member organizations are likely to share each other's demographic characteristics, as illustrated in ideal-typical form in the lower half of Figure 1. Because clubs and non-member organizations demonstrate strong homophilic tendencies, we refer to them collectively as the *homophily layer* of civil society.

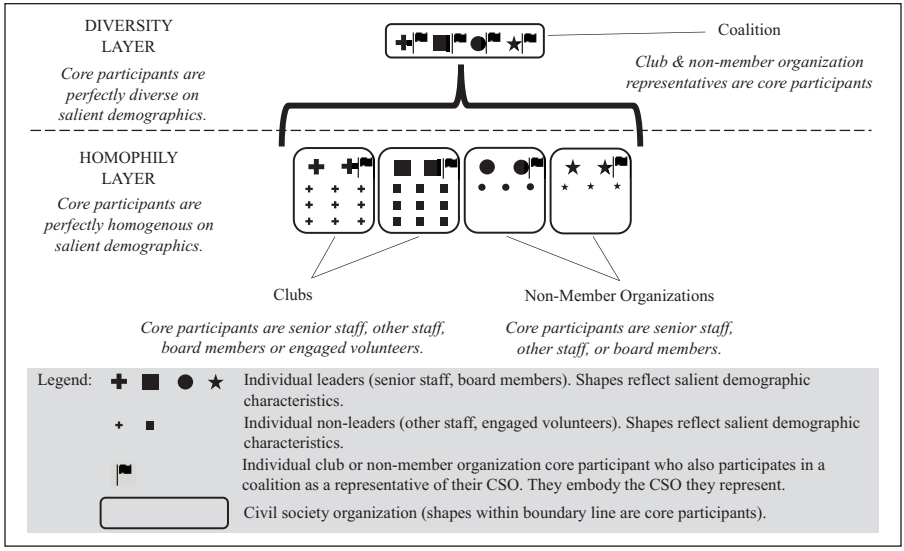

Figure 1. Ideal-Typical Demographic Composition of CSOs in the Homophily Layer and Diversity Layer of Civil Society.

Most discussions of diversity within CSOs begin and end with the homophily layer. Studies either note the overall tendency toward homogeneity or focus on exceptions to the pattern where CSOs achieve some level of internal diversity (Fulton & Wood, 2017; Guo & Musso, 2007; Kim & Mason, 2018; Rolf et al., 2023). There is, however, an additional possibility. The top half of Figure 1 introduces what we refer to as *the diversity layer* of civil society, which is comprised of coalitions (whose members are organizations). We expect the core participants in coalitions to be, on average, more internally diverse than homophily layer organizations (clubs and non-member organizations) because the core participants in coalitions are often drawn from the pools of core participants in the clubs and non-member organizations that have joined the coalition. While each club or non-member organization that joins a coalition is likely to be internally homogeneous, the organizations may differ from one another in their demographic profiles—making it more likely that the individuals who represent their CSOs as core participants in the coalition will collectively reflect the demographic diversity of the set of member organizations.

We theorize two mechanisms underlying why coalitions are more likely than clubs and non-member organizations to break with homophilous tendencies: coalitions provide unique *strategic efficiencies* to the CSOs that join, and coalitions have a *membership stickiness* that limits homophilic membership churn.

Strategic Efficiency

Internal diversity is strategically important; organizations with more internal diversity can connect with a wider array of external resources and creatively draw from more

cultural repertoires to help them achieve their strategic goals (Abzug, 2017; Ganz, 2009). While clubs and non-member organizations may arise for a variety of less overtly strategic aims like information-sharing and community-building (Hudson & Hudson, 2013), coalitions very often form as strategic alliances seeking broader influence on politics and society (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010; Wood et al., 2023). A major part of the appeal of such alliances to prospective organizational members is access to material and symbolic resources unavailable among a club or non-member organization's constituents (Doussard & Fulton, 2020; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017). Beyond specific resources, diversity also confers broader benefits. Internal diversity has become a normatively expected pursuit among U.S. organizations—especially non-profits (Fredette & Bernstein, 2019; Leiter et al., 2011). In turn, some organizations respond to these normative pressures by joining alliances that are demographically diverse, thus garnering greater legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders (Abzug & Galaskiewicz, 2001; Bradshaw & Fredette, 2013; Guo & Musso, 2007).

While clubs and non-member organizations could conceivably diversify *internally* to gain access to new resources and field legitimacy, they face many challenges in doing so. Building and managing a diverse CSO is notoriously difficult (Gawerc, 2021; Walker & Stepick, 2014). CSOs in a given field often garner participants by differentiating themselves in the organizational marketplace along demographic lines like race, class, or gender (Kaufman, 2002). Indeed, starting a club may depend on the trust inherent in social network ties with similar others (Centola, 2013), and maintaining participation is often easier when solidarity can be built upon a foundation of shared identity (Walker & Stepick, 2014).

In lieu of tackling these challenges directly, a club or non-member organization seeking the strategic benefits of diversity can instead join a coalition with organizations comprised of people from other social groups. Some coalitions encourage diverse participation by requiring representatives from every member organization to participate in its activities (e.g., Pipes & Ebaugh, 2002). The coalition itself faces the difficult work of managing diversity (Braunstein et al., 2014; Fulton & Doussard, 2023), but may find it easier among the smaller sets of coalition core participants (e.g., representatives from congregations involved in a faith-based community organizing coalition) than among the full set of core participants in any one of the coalition's member organizations (e.g., all core participants in each religious congregation; see Emerson & Smith, 2000; Emerson & Woo, 2006; Han, 2024). Joining a coalition, then, while not guaranteeing all the possible strategic benefits of internal diversity, may uniquely allow clubs and non-member organizations to get some such benefits with less time and effort.

Membership Stickiness

Coalitions may be more likely than clubs and non-member organizations to maintain attained diversity levels because of additional procedures entailed in joining and leaving coalitions, which produce sticky memberships. Clubs are often "porous" (Wuthnow, 1998); participants can join easily and, when challenged or marginalized, can easily choose to leave (Chamberlain et al., 2020). This ease of exit often leads marginalized

minorities to leave and join other similarly focused clubs that are better demographic matches—a trend that increases the internal homogeneity of both the club they leave and the one they join (McPherson & Rotolo, 1996; Scheitle & Dougherty, 2010).

Coalitions, however, are less likely to be easy-exit organizations because the decision to join and leave is an organizational choice, not an individual one. In many organizations, a decision like joining a coalition is subject to repeated, lengthy discussions among participants (Staggenborg, 2020) and, potentially, protracted collective decision-making processes (BoardSource, 2021; King & Giffin, 2019). The leaders of a coalition may also need to collectively decide whether to admit a new member or allow the departure of a current member—especially if contractual arrangements or other "credible commitments" are built into participation agreements (Levi & Murphy, 2006). Apart from formal arrangements, the repeated interactions of organizations in pursuit of shared goals builds shared knowledge and common approaches to action that can help sustain coalition participation—even if individual representatives are replaced (Van Dyke & Amos, 2017). The bureaucratic procedures built into complex nonprofit organizations (Hwang & Powell, 2009), like many coalitions, may also act as administrative barriers to membership turnover.

Admittedly, bureaucratic procedures and the slow pace of collective deliberation and decision-making can also be barriers to joining a coalition. The strategic benefits for both the joining organization and the coalition, however, may encourage more organizations to get over the joining hurdle, and, once in, may reduce the likelihood that either side will want to see a member leave. The slow process of leaving, then, can stop (or at least delay) departures. In essence, coalitions are not as "porous" as clubs (Wuthnow, 1998). For coalitions that do become internally diverse, the sticky quality of their membership makes it less likely that they will lose that diversity over time.

The Diversity Layer Hypothesis

Both the strategic efficiency and membership stickiness mechanisms motivate the same diversity layer hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Coalitions will have more demographic diversity among their core participants than clubs or non-member organizations.

For example, a community arts alliance (a coalition) might include representatives from multiple clubs like a chamber orchestra, a musical theater troupe, a spoken word poetry club, a baile folklórico (Mexican folk dance) ensemble, and a Shodo (Japanese calligraphy) club. Each organization decides to join the alliance because participation provides access to needed resources (e.g., performance venues, grants) and a connection to a diverse array of communities (e.g., each group could seek patrons for their performances among the peripheral participants of other organizations in the alliance). Once in, each organization in the coalition is unlikely to leave not only because of those strategic benefits, but also because it is organizationally cumbersome to do so. Each organizational member is likely to be relatively (if not entirely) internally

homogeneous on age, education, race, ethnicity, national heritage, and class, but the coalition will likely be more diverse on some or all of those dimensions because it is comprised of representatives from each organization.

Case studies of coalitions suggest that the diversity layer hypothesis is plausible. Woliver (2018), for example, describes the successful, strategic efforts made by the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO) to recruit a wide array of clubs as members. By the early 2000s, the organization boasted more than 120 organizational members, many of which were clubs that were largely internally homogeneous on dimensions like race/ethnicity (e.g., Black Women's Agenda, the Organization of Chinese American Women), age (e.g., the Older Women's League), education (e.g., the American Association of University Women), and class (e.g., the Coalition of Labor Union Women). Core participants in the NCWO were representatives of those clubs, making it likely that NCWO was more internally diverse than many of the clubs that joined it. Similarly, Warren (2001b) describes the way the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas built a multiracial coalition by bringing together representatives from racially and ethnically homogeneous religious congregations, and Wood and Fulton (2015) find similar dynamics in community organizing coalitions throughout the United States.

It is important to note that the proposed diversity layer is not necessarily a harmony layer of civil society. Transforming participant diversity into relationships that exemplify bridging social capital or a sense of collective identity is hardly guaranteed (Weare et al., 2009). Achieving harmony requires careful, sustained effort on the part of CSOs (Braunstein et al., 2014; Han et al., 2021; Yukich et al., 2020). Diversity is, however, a necessary condition for direct cross-demographic connections to be built.

Theorizing the Null Hypothesis

Despite the theoretical expectations and case study evidence, the existence of the diversity layer is not a foregone conclusion. There are several theoretical reasons why coalitions might not be more diverse than clubs and non-member organizations.

First, many clubs and non-member organizations are not completely internally homogeneous. Any demographic diversity within clubs and non-member organizations creates the opportunity for their representatives to form coalitions that are demographically *non*-representative of the majority of their home organization's core participants. Biases in those elevated to organizational leadership positions (BoardSource, 2021; Gibelman, 2000; Pynes, 2000) decrease the chances for diversity and increase the chances of over-representation of socially dominant groups among coalition representatives. The demographics of board members of service-providing non-profits, for example, often do not match the demographic composition of organizations' clientele (LeRoux, 2009a). Similarly, white people are frequently over-represented in non-profit leadership relative to their prevalence in the surrounding community (Fulton et al., 2019; Rolf et al., 2023).

Second, homophilic dynamics can operate in coalitions (McPherson et al., 2001). Coalition leaders will be more likely to recruit organizations whose leaders they know,

and those leaders are likely to share demographic characteristics with the current coalition leaders and with the core participants in the organizations they lead. In some cases, creating demographically homogeneous coalitions will be intentional and strategic, especially in coalitions representing socially dominant groups who already have access to ample resources and seek to further secure their dominance. For example, homeowners' associations from all-white neighborhoods may form a coalition seeking to maintain residential segregation by race (McCabe, 2016). Such a coalition will seek to add more all-white homeowners' associations to increase the scale of their collective effort (i.e., the number of constituents represented) without increasing its demographic diversity.

Third, while an organization's membership in a coalition is sticky, the individual representatives are not. A representative who feels tokenized or marginalized might resign their representative role and be replaced by a representative more demographically similar to other representatives at the coalition (Fredette et al., 2016; McPherson & Rotolo, 1996).

These expectations of no difference in diversity across organization structures are plausible—but so are the strategic efficiency and membership stickiness mechanisms underlying an expectation of greater diversity within coalitions. As such, we turn now to an initial empirical test of the diversity layer hypothesis.

Data and Methods

Testing the diversity layer hypothesis that coalitions will have more demographic diversity among their core participants than clubs or non-member organizations requires large numbers of CSOs of all three membership structure types with relatively fine-grained demographic data on the core participants in each. Candid (candid.org), an organization that provides information about organizations in the non-profit sector, has data that can be enhanced to meet this need.

Candid's primary data collection strategy for U.S. non-profits is to cull data from U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Form 990s—the annual tax returns completed by registered non-profit organizations with more than $50,000 (USD) of annual revenue (and by organizations with smaller budgets that choose to file). Candid also requests additional information from organizations to further populate fields in the organization profiles they publish on the internet. In 2014, Candid began requesting demographic data on three of the four types of core participants in CSOs: board members, senior staff, and other full-time staff. Providing demographic data was voluntary, and data were self-reported by the organization using a survey template designed by Candid. In the first phase of this data collection effort, Candid assembled demographic data on the leaders of 15,470 non-profit organizations. For this project, we acquired the entire 15,470-case demographic dataset from Candid and merged each organization's demographic data with its Form 990 data. Then, we examined a random sample of 5,239 cases from this dataset, classifying each by its membership structure and integrating county-level demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

While Candid's demographic data provide a unique opportunity to study diversity among CSOs' core participants, the organizations in Candid's dataset are not a random

sample of non-profits. The demographic data are voluntarily self-reported; most organizations in Candid's database do not report demographic information (the information in their profile is pulled solely from their IRS Form 990s). Given the field-level legitimacy that diversity confers (Fredette & Bernstein, 2019; Leiter et al., 2011), it is likely that organizations that choose to report demographic information are more internally diverse than those that do not report.[2] In addition, organizations with more resources are more likely to report information to Candid. These reporting biases would be a fatal flaw in the data if our goal were to estimate the actual average level of diversity in U.S. CSOs. Our results should *not* be interpreted this way.

Our goal is to compare subsets of CSOs, all of which share the same upward reporting bias. While all our point estimates will overestimate diversity in the sector, the *differences* in estimates across membership structure types should be unaffected by the reporting bias. We see no reason to expect systematically higher or lower rates of reporting from organizations based on their membership structure.

While the Candid dataset offers a unique, first-time opportunity to study diversity among CSOs' core participants, it is not perfect. Notably, engaged volunteers are (unfortunately but understandably) not included in Candid's data. Organization-level demographic data on engaged volunteers has not been collected at scale—by Candid or anyone else—because it is so difficult to collect.[3] We expect that Candid's data on the other three types of core participants are indicative of the patterns that would be found among engaged volunteers because core participants often move among the four categories within the same CSO (Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Nelson, 2018). The pool of engaged volunteers is often plumbed for both board and staff positions,[4] and people who leave board or staff roles may maintain ties to the CSO as engaged volunteers. We suspect board members are most similar to engaged volunteers because both are voluntary roles (and in our results, the clearest evidence supporting the diversity layer thesis appears among board members).

Candid's demographic data on race and gender are the most complete and allow us to make an initial test of the diversity layer hypothesis on these two dimensions. First, we compare mean levels of gender and racial diversity across the three types of membership structures—coalitions, clubs, and non-member organizations—for each of the three available types of core participants (board members, senior staff, and full-time staff). We then conduct multivariate regression analyses of the diversity of each of the three core participant types, with membership structure as the primary independent variable and controls for other organizational characteristics.

We test our diversity layer hypothesis by operationalizing diversity in three different ways for each multivariate analysis. First, we perform logistic regressions predicting whether the organization's board, senior staff, and full-time staff have no racial or gender diversity (i.e., complete homogeneity). Second, we perform logistic regressions predicting whether each subset of participants in an organization is entirely white or entirely male (i.e., complete socially dominant group homogeneity). Third, we perform OLS linear regressions predicting the level of racial or gender diversity in each subset of participants.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Our dependent variables come from the organizations' self-reported demographic information. Candid asked organizations to report the racial and gender composition of their board members, senior staff, and other full-time staff. Organizations reported racial composition in seven categories: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Other Ethnicity, and Multiracial. Given the small proportions of reported participants from the last four categories, we collapsed them into a single "Other" category, leaving four racial categories in analyses.[5] Organizations reported gender in only two categories: male and female.[6]

Our measures of *no racial diversity* and *no gender diversity* are coded 1 if every person in a core participant type shares the same racial or gender identification (regardless of what that one identification is) and 0 otherwise. Our measures for *entirely white* and *entirely male* are 1 if every person in a core participant type is white or male and 0 otherwise (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics for all measures).

Our continuous measure of racial diversity uses the Index of Qualitative Variation (IQV), which takes into account both the number of racial groups and the proportion of each group represented to generate a racial diversity score that ranges from 0 to 1 (Fulton, 2021a; Rolf et al., 2023).[7] For example, a board of directors with only one racial group represented has a racial diversity score of 0; as the proportion of each racial group on the board becomes more evenly distributed across each of the four racial groups we analyzed, its racial diversity score approaches 1. We applied the IQV similarly to calculate the gender diversity of the organizations' boards and staff.

Independent Variable: Membership Structure

To test the hypothesis that coalitions will have more demographic diversity among their core participants than clubs or non-member organizations, we needed to distinguish non-member organizations, clubs, and coalitions from one another. While the IRS categorizes non-profit organizations into many substantive categories using the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) classification, none of the NTEE codes, alone or in combination, maps neatly onto non-member organizations, clubs, or coalitions. This is because the NTEE codes attempt to capture the tax-exempt purpose of the organization (Gronbjerg, 1994), and organizations with similar purposes may have different structures (Baggetta & Madsen, 2019).

In lieu of NTEE codes, we hand-coded each organization as either a non-member organization, club, or coalition using evidence drawn from their webpages and social media presences (see Johnson, 2014; Schlozman et al., 2015 for similar approaches). We identified each organization's primary internet presence using its Candid profile. For organizations without a website link in their Candid profile, we used Google to search for the organization. For most organizations, their primary internet presence was a website maintained by the organization with a distinct URL; for some organizations, it was a publicly accessible Facebook page or other organization-maintained

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	*M*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum	*N*
Board of Directors					
Racial diversity	0.44	0.29	0	1	4,682
No racial diversity	0.18	0.38	0	1	4,682
Entirely white	0.15	0.36	0	1	4,682
Gender diversity	0.78	0.28	0	1	4,977
No gender diversity	0.08	0.27	0	1	4,977
Entirely male	0.03	0.17	0	1	4,977
Senior Staff					
Racial diversity	0.35	0.33	0	1	2,123
No racial diversity	0.43	0.50	0	1	2,123
Entirely white	0.37	0.48	0	1	2,123
Gender diversity	0.61	0.42	0	1	2,328
No gender diversity	0.30	0.46	0	1	2,328
Entirely male	0.04	0.20	0	1	2,328
Full-Time Staff					
Racial diversity	0.47	0.31	0	1	3,253
No racial diversity	0.22	0.42	0	1	3,253
Entirely white	0.18	0.38	0	1	3,253
Gender diversity	0.60	0.39	0	1	3,326
No gender diversity	0.24	0.43	0	1	3,326
Entirely male	0.02	0.15	0	1	3,326
CSO structure					
Coalition	0.08	0.28	0	1	5,239
Club	0.20	0.40	0	1	5,239
Non-member organization	0.71	0.45	0	1	5,239
Controls					
Annual revenue (x $100,000)	6.26	45.80	0	242	5,202
Age of the organization	26.24	24.59	2	403	5,233
Number of board members	12.09	9.82	0	338	5,212
Number of senior staff	3.84	11.01	0	385	4,094
Number of full-time staff	29.04	155.71	0	5,863	4,824
Racial diversity of the county	0.71	0.21	0.02	0.99	5,233
Proportion of the county is white	0.55	0.20	0.01	0.98	5,233

Source. Demographic data: Candid. Organizational data: IRS Form 990. County data: U.S. Census Bureau.
Note. CSO = Civil Society Organization.

social media profile. We cross-referenced federal Employer Identification Numbers appearing on Candid listings with those appearing on documents posted to websites to ensure we had the correct organizations. Research assistants then examined the organization's primary internet presence for evidence of its type of membership structure.

Organizations were first coded for the presence or absence of "members" of either type (individuals or organizations) (Smith, 2023). For individuals to count as

"members," the CSO needs to involve them as engaged volunteers—that is, people who are not staff or board members but participate actively in designing, selecting, and running an organization's activities. Organizations that call individuals "members" but treat them solely as peripheral participants (e.g., a local public radio station that calls its donors "members") were coded as non-member organizations. Individuals referred to with names, like clients, guests, patrons, patients, supporters, beneficiaries, volunteers, or community members, were not considered "members" unless there was evidence that they provided meaningful input into organizational operations.

While boards of directors are comprised of volunteers, because all registered nonprofits have a board, the presence of a board is not sufficient for an organization to qualify as having individual members. In addition, many boards are distant from the day-to-day activities of the organization (e.g., they meet separately with a few senior staff four times per year). As such, boards do not qualify CSOs as membership organizations.

We further distinguished membership organizations as either clubs or coalitions (Smith, 2010). Organizations qualified as clubs if individuals (and only individuals) could become engaged volunteers, regardless of the title applied to such individuals (i.e., "members" in practice, even if not in name). Membership could be restricted to certain kinds of people (e.g., women, lawyers, Christians), but any person meeting those criteria could join.

Organizations are qualified as coalitions if other organizations can become "members"—as organizations. Organizations that join typically send representatives to meetings or events of the coalition and need to devote organizational attention and effort to the collective co-production of coalition outcomes (programs, activities, actions). Organizations that only offer donations of money or goods or endorsements of ideas or actions (i.e., organization-level peripheral participation) were not considered "members" and therefore did not qualify the focal organization as a coalition. Organizations that divide themselves into subunits—like federated or franchised organizations—were not considered coalitions as the subunits are not organizationally distinct entities that join with other organizations. Organizations with both individual and organizational members were coded as coalitions since they have the structural potential to act as a diversity layer organization in a way that organizations with only individual members do not.

Common non-member organizations include many service-providing non-profits, non-profit media outlets, private schools, museums, libraries, theaters, and other cultural institutions. Common clubs include many recreational sports teams, student groups, professional associations, unions, neighborhood/tenant/homeowners' associations, hobby clubs, fraternal orders, self-help groups, religious congregations, and parent-teacher associations. Content, however, does not define membership structure; a theater with identifiable engaged volunteers among its core participants would qualify as a club, and a professional association run entirely by staff whose members are essentially subscribers would not. Coalitions do not have common content types, as they are combinations of organizations that share content, but there are common naming conventions for coalitions, including words like alliance, campaign, council, committee, network, partnership, united, and (of course) coalition.

Coding definitions, protocols, and processes—along with detailed examples—were included in a 12-page coding manual (see online Appendix A). We trained research assistants on how to apply the coding scheme, and their coding work was regularly reviewed by senior members of the research team. At all times, coders who encountered a case too difficult to code could advance the case to senior members of the project team who would discuss the case and make a final coding decision. To test for coding accuracy, a subset of 828 cases was separately coded by a second coder. The average agreement rate between the second and original coders was 89%. The high rates of agreement suggest that our structure definitions were clear and coding protocols and processes were consistently applied. Of the 5,239 organizations we hand-coded, 3,738 (71%) are non-member organizations, 1,068 (20%) are clubs, and 433 (8%) are coalitions (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics).[8]

Controls

The diversity layer hypothesis posits that differences in the levels of demographic diversity of core participants between coalitions and either clubs or non-member organizations are a function of membership structure. To isolate that effect, we conduct regression analyses controlling for organizational characteristics that could influence diversity apart from structure (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2013; Fredette & Bernstein, 2019). Organizational characteristics are drawn from the organizations' IRS Form 990. Older organizations and those with more financial resources may have more opportunities to develop and maintain a demographically diverse set of leaders. As such, we control for organization *age* and *annual revenue*. Organizations with more participants have more opportunities to be at least minimally diverse, so we control for the *number of board members, senior staff*, or *full-time staff* in models with the corresponding dependent variable.

We also consider organizations' geographic contexts. Participants are generally drawn from surrounding communities. Organizations in less-diverse communities may find it harder to diversify their participants (Rolf et al., 2023). We use U.S. Census data to control for community demographics. Specifically, we construct a county-level racial diversity measure using the same IQV approach as for core participant diversity. In models explaining no racial diversity or levels of racial diversity, we control for the *racial diversity of the organization's county*. In models explaining white homogeneity, we control for the *proportion of the county population that is white*. Because binary gender proportions are relatively consistent across geographic areas, we do not include county-level gender composition in the gender models (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics).

Results

Are coalitions more diverse than clubs and non-member organizations? We begin our test of the hypothesis that coalitions will have more demographic diversity among their core participants than clubs or non-member organizations by comparing diversity statistics across the three types of membership structures. Table 3 displays the mean

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Mean Difference Tests for the Gender and Racial Diversity Levels of Coalitions, Clubs, and Non-member Organizations.

				Mean difference		Coalitions				Clubs				Non-member organizations			
Variable	Coalitions *Mean*	Clubs Mean	Non-member organizations Mean	Coalition—Club	Coalition—Non-member Organization	*N*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum	*N*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum	*N*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum
Board of Directors																	
Racial diversity	.50	.42	.44	.08***	.06***	378	.28	.00	.99	958	.28	.00	1.00	3,346	.29	.00	1.00
Gender diversity	.81	.78	.78	.03*	.03†	408	.26	.00	1.00	1,016	.30	.00	1.00	3,553	.28	.00	1.00
Senior Staff																	
Racial diversity	.40	.32	.35	.08**	.05*	220	.33	.00	1.00	437	.33	.00	1.00	1,466	.33	.00	1.00
Gender diversity	.60	.58	.62	.02	-.02	246	.42	.00	1.00	466	.42	.00	1.00	1,616	.42	.00	1.00
Full-Time Staff																	
Racial diversity	.54	.45	.47	.09*	.07***	323	.30	.00	.98	629	.31	.00	1.00	2,301	.31	.00	1.00
Gender diversity	.63	.56	.60	.07**	.03†	328	.37	.00	1.00	651	.40	.00	1.00	2,347	.39	.00	1.00

Source. Candid.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

level of racial and gender diversity by structure. For racial diversity, we find clear evidence that coalitions are more diverse than clubs and non-member organizations. Using t-tests for differences of means, we find statistically significant differences in the racial diversity of board members, senior staff, and full-time staff between coalitions and each of the other structures. Specifically, in the average coalition, two randomly selected board members have a 50% chance of being racially different, whereas in the average club and non-member organization, the chance is 42% and 44%, respectively. In these bivariate analyses, we also find some evidence of greater gender diversity in coalitions. Specifically, while there is no significant difference in gender diversity in senior staff across structures, boards of directors and full-time staff have higher levels of gender diversity in coalitions than in either of the other structures. In the average coalition, two randomly selected full-time staff members have a 63% chance of being different genders, whereas in the average club and non-member organization, the chances are 56% and 60%, respectively.

Table 4 presents results from the multivariate analyses of racial diversity. The findings are consistent across multiple indicators of racial diversity and three different participation types—coalitions are more racially diverse than clubs and non-member organizations. Across all three participation types, coalitions are less likely to have no racial diversity (although only significant at $p < .10$). Greater statistical certainty is achieved when we limit racial homogeneity to the presence of only white participants ($p < .05$ for boards and full-time staff). Compared to clubs and non-member organizations, coalitions are roughly 30 to 40% less likely to have only white participants.

Considering level of racial diversity, boards of directors and full-time staff are more racially diverse in coalitions than in clubs and non-member organizations ($p < .05$). Among senior staff, the coefficient is positive and significant at $p < .10$. The magnitudes of the differences are meaningful. On average, coalition boards are 15% more racially diverse than club and non-member organization boards, and coalition full-time staff are 20% more racially diverse.[9]

To further aid in the interpretation of the magnitudes of these estimated effects, we generated predicted values for the racial diversity of boards of directors (using estimates from the third column of results in Table 4). A *non-coalition* with average organizational characteristics (see mean Controls values in Table 3) located in a county with the average level of racial diversity (index value of .71) is predicted to have a board racial diversity index value of .51. An average *coalition* in that same county is predicted to have a racial diversity index value of .56. To achieve that same level of board racial diversity in the average *non-coalition* by increasing the diversity of the population around it, the county diversity index value would need to increase to .83. In essence, a county population would have to become much more diverse to induce the kinds of participant diversity gains that the coalition structure affords.

While the results show consistent patterns of greater racial diversity in coalitions, the multivariate results for gender do not bear out the differences suggested in Table 4. Table 5 shows small point estimates and no significant relationships between structure and gender. The most consistent predictor of gender diversity is the number of participants; the more

Table 4. Logistic and Linear Regressions Estimating the Relationship Between CSO Membership Structure and Racial Diversity Among Its Board Members, Senior Staff, and Full-Time Staff.

	Board of directors			Senior staff			Full-time staff		
Independent Variables	No racial diversity[a]	Entirely white[a]	Racial diversity[b]	No racial diversity[a]	Entirely white[a]	Racial diversity[b]	No racial diversity[a]	Entirely white[a]	Racial diversity[b]
CSO Membership Structure									
Coalition[c]	–0.311†	–0.389*	0.055***	–0.182	–0.278†	0.040†	–0.334†	–0.413*	0.049**
	(0.175)	(0.191)	(0.015)	(0.162)	(0.169)	(0.022)	(0.187)	(0.206)	(0.017)
Controls									
Annual revenue[d]	0.062**	0.120***	–0.004*	0.017	0.127***	–0.004	0.018	0.142***	0.001
	(0.019)	(0.023)	(0.002)	(0.025)	(0.031)	(0.003)	(0.028)	(0.039)	(0.003)
Age of the organization[d]	.247***	0.251***	–0.037***	0.262***	0.313***	–0.037***	0.229**	0.372***	–0.028***
	(0.055)	(0.060)	(0.005)	(0.068)	(0.072)	(0.009)	(0.067)	(0.074)	(0.007)
Number of board members[d]	–1.456***	–1.440***	0.024**						
	(0.092)	(0.098)	(0.008)						
Number of senior staff[d]				–1.534***	–1.405***	0.133***			
					(0.109)	(0.113)	(0.012)		
Number of full-time staff[d]							–1.553***	–1.696***	0.071***
							(0.080)	(0.092)	(0.005)
Racial diversity of the county	–2.453***		0.387***	–2.480***		0.399***	–2.590***		.466***
	(0.184)		(0.020)	(0.257)		(0.035)	(0.235)		(0.025)
Proportion of the county is white		3.479***			3.290***			3.937***	
		(0.230)			(0.269)			(0.288)	
Constant	1.797***	–2.921***	0.264***	2.535***	–3.249***	0.049	2.372***	–3.933***	0.050
	(0.242)	(0.280)	(0.239)	(0.344)	(0.403)	(0.046)	(0.356)	(0.479)	(0.037)
N	4,648	4,648	4,648	2,107	2,107	2,107	3,227	3,227	3,227
Adjusted R^2	.109	.123	.097	.136	.144	.124	.258	.280	.186

Note. Standard errors reported in parentheses. CSO = Civil Society Organization.

[a]Log odds reported for logistic regressions. [b]Unstandardized coefficients reported for ordinary least-squares linear regressions. [c]Reference group is clubs *and* non-member organizations. [d]Logged values.

†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 5. Logistic and Linear Regressions Estimating the Relationship Between CSO Membership Structure and Gender Diversity Among Its Board Members, Senior Staff, and Full-Time Staff.

	Board of directors			Senior staff			Full-time staff		
Independent Variables	No gender diversity[a]	Entirely male[a]	Gender diversity[b]	No gender diversity[a]	Entirely male[a]	Gender diversity[b]	No gender diversity[a]	Entirely male[a]	Gender diversity[b]
CSO Membership Structure									
Coalition[c]	0.008	0.814	0.001	0.087	0.254	–0.016	–0.095	–1.028	0.031
	(0.229)	(0.519)	(0.014)	(0.157)	(0.338)	(0.027)	(0.163)	(0.728)	(0.022)
Controls									
Annual revenue[d]	–0.031	0.014*	0.006***	–0.032	–0.087*	0.005	0.066*	0.042	–0.004
	(0.019)	(0.032)	(0.002)	(0.026)	(0.044)	(0.005)	(0.027)	(0.051)	(0.004)
Age of the organization[d]	0.101	0.223*	–0.006	0.167*	–0.185	–0.035**	0.143*	–0.186	–0.029**
	(0.070)	(0.113)	(0.005)	(0.068)	(0.139)	(0.012)	(0.062)	(0.156)	(0.009)
Number of board members[d]	–1.934***	–2.140***	0.105***						
	(0.125)	(0.195)	(0.008)						
Number of senior staff[d]				–1.643***	–1.954***	0.169***			
				(0.115)	(0.309)	(0.015)			
Number of full-time staff[d]							–1.548***	–1.993***	0.091***
							(0.074)	(0.291)	(0.006)
Constant	1.599***	–0.038	0.482***	1.170***	0.747	0.410***	0.302	0.084	0.541***
	(0.230)	(0.360)	(0.019)	(0.312)	(0.546)	(0.052)	(0.303)	(0.575)	(0.043)
N	4,944	4,944	4,944	2,317	2,317	2,317	3,305	3,305	3,305
Adjusted R^2	.147	.132	.060	.108	.110	.062	.222	.189	.073

Note. Standard errors reported in parentheses. CSO = Civil Society Organization.

[a]Log odds reported for logistic regressions. [b]Unstandardized coefficients reported for ordinary least-squares linear regressions. [c]Reference group is clubs *and* non-member organizations. [d]Logged values.

†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

board members, senior staff, or full-time staff a CSO has, the more likely it is to have greater gender diversity (i.e., more equal gender representation).

Discussion

Our findings for racial composition provide clear evidence that coalitions are meaningfully more racially diverse than both clubs and non-member organizations. While the differences across the three types of membership structures do not suggest coalitions are immune to homophily dynamics common in other CSOs (McPherson et al., 2001), they have managed to racially diversify in ways typically discussed as remarkable aberrations from common trends (Edwards et al., 2013; Weisinger & Salipante, 2005; Wood & Fulton, 2015). The difference across membership types identified here suggests that internal diversity in coalitions may be less about remarkable efforts in particular organizations (although some undoubtedly exist) and more about the natural tendencies of internal mechanisms common to coalitions. The results echo research from businesses, suggesting the importance of structural dynamics in diversification—especially relative to programs targeting the thoughts or feelings of individuals (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022).

Our findings for gender, however, are null. This result may be because social networks in the United States are substantially less segregated by gender than by race (McPherson et al., 2001). When current CSO participants turn to their personal social networks to recruit new participants, they will almost certainly find ample numbers of men and women they could invite. Many Americans, however, have few friends or acquaintances of other races (DiPrete et al., 2011), making recruitment across racial lines less likely. It is also possible that the lack of a diversity-layer effect for gender in our analyses is a function of the binary categorization of gender in Candid's demographic data. While Candid, following the U.S. Census, collected gender data in two categories, multiple gender categories exist in society. An analysis that includes more gender categories might show a pattern akin to that for race, as inclusivity for people with non-binary genders likely lags behind inclusivity for cis-gendered men and women in many CSOs.

It is also important to note that our findings apply only to CSOs' core participants. While some evidence exists about the demographic correspondence between various subsets of core and peripheral participants (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2013; Guo & Musso, 2007; Kim & Mason, 2018; Ostrower, 2007; Rolf et al., 2023; Shon et al., 2024), our analysis does not speak directly to the diversity of peripheral participants. Theoretically, we do *not* expect the diversity layer thesis to hold for peripheral participants—and other research is needed to test that hypothesis empirically.

Limitations

While the data we use provide a new and unique look at demographic patterns in CSOs, our study is bound by a few important limitations. First, and most important, is the lack of

demographic data on CSOs' engaged volunteers. As noted above, we suspect that the findings from senior staff, other full-time staff, and (especially) board members are indicative of what we would find if we had data on engaged volunteers. Still, conclusions about engaged volunteers must remain provisional until demographic data on such participants is collected and analyzed.

In addition, the scope of our analysis is limited by the demographic data currently collected by Candid. Not only is the gender item limited to a binary categorization, but many other salient demographics beyond race and gender exist that should be examined, including class, education, occupation, religion, sexuality, ability, and the intersections of such categories.

Finally, while our 5,239 cases provide a relatively broad initial look at diversity across membership structure types, even that N is too small to capture meaningful variation in some categories (e.g., four separate racial categories comprise our "other race" category). Larger samples would allow for analysis of more racial categories, providing a more detailed understanding of differences in diversity.

Implications

Implications for Theory

Our study builds on the tradition of theorizing CSO structures separately from the content (e.g., hobby, sport, religion, service, politics) that CSOs pursue (Baggetta, 2009; Baggetta & Bello-Gomez, 2025; Fung, 2003; Han, 2014; Skocpol, 2003; M. E. Warren, 2001a). Case studies from Lipset et al.'s (1956) classic examination of the internal dynamics of the International Typographical Union to Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa's (2021) work on successful twenty-first century organizing groups have highlighted the importance of organizational structures that are not dependent on the substance the organization pursues. Almost any CSO could, for example, elect board members or give autonomy to work teams or hold social events for core participants—or could adopt other ways to select leaders, structure work, and connect with volunteers. Despite this recognition, research that expands the scope beyond cases studies has often conflated structure and content (Baggetta & Madsen, 2019). This conflation makes it difficult to determine the independent effects of structure and content and to identify the situations when the interaction of the two is relevant.

Our findings about the impacts of membership structure on the diversity of CSOs' core participants highlight the potential of more precisely theorizing particular CSO structures and practices apart from content. Carefully delineating membership structure types could advance understanding on the extent of cross-demographic interactions within diverse organizations (Baggetta & Bredenkamp, 2021; Weare et al., 2009), the techniques organizations use to manage tensions amid diversity (Braunstein et al., 2014), and the impacts of diversity on organizational outcomes (Fulton, 2021b). Similar attention to other structures is likely to reveal an array of important results.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Our study also has implications for practitioners and policymakers. Contemporary American society faces many challenges—and civic leaders are seeking ways for civil society organizations to reconnect a fragmented country (Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020). Our findings suggest that programs and policies intended to improve the quality of interactions among diverse participants, while important across all organizations, could be particularly targeted toward coalitions, where the likelihood of finding a more diverse array of participants is higher. In addition, resources aimed at internally diversifying CSOs with low levels of diversity might be most efficiently directed to coalitions due to the unique bridging potentials of their structure. Founding new coalitions in communities or around issue areas where none are currently active is also a potential strategy for creating internally diverse CSOs. However, the leaders of varied, disconnected organizations are unlikely to have the preexisting stocks of trust and expectations of reciprocity necessary to form a coalition. Local governments or nonprofits with ties to a range of CSO leaders could act as catalysts for coalition formation by bringing potential founders together—fostering cross-organization understanding and trust.

Admittedly, there are many situations where some degree or dimension of homogeneity within a CSO is valuable. We do not contend that internal diversity should be attained—or even sought—by all CSOs. Rather, we note that in a society that is increasingly divided, some degree of bridging in civil society is also valuable—and probably necessary for maintaining stability in a large, democratic republic. We also note that attaining internal diversity is a necessary but insufficient condition for bridging demographic divides; plenty of difficult work building bridges remains (Braunstein et al., 2014).

Implications for Research

Our analyses provide initial empirical support for the diversity layer thesis and suggest several directions for future research. First, empirical expansions will require methodological innovation. We join a growing collection of researchers leveraging recently digitized IRS Form 990 data to answer questions about U.S. civil society.[10] While hand-coding organizations' membership structure types to enhance the 990 data was feasible for our sample, large-scale studies of the nearly 1.5 million non-profits in the IRS dataset will likely require automated coding of non-member organizations, clubs, and coalitions.

Second, membership structure is just one factor explaining diversity. Scholars have suggested that greater levels of diversity could be associated with CSOs that (1) have instrumental purposes (Glanville, 2004), (2) use bridging cultural practices (Braunstein et al., 2014), (3) focus on self-help (Firat & Glanville, 2017), (4) have members who join other CSOs (Paxton, 2007), (5) have members who live in varied neighborhoods (Baggetta, 2016), or (6) are located in more ethno-racially diverse communities (Rolf et al., 2023). Future research could assess how structure stacks up against these explanations.

Third, we theorized two mechanisms underlying the diversity layer hypothesis: strategic efficiency and membership stickiness. We could not test for these mechanisms separately as both predict the same outcome (i.e., greater diversity among coalitions). We speculate that differences in how the mechanisms operate may partially explain why, in our analysis, coalitions are more racially diverse but not more gender diverse. Future studies could be designed to unpack these (and other) mechanisms.

Fourth, our tripartite categorization of membership structures applies in other national contexts—but the relative frequency of each type varies across countries (Johnson, 2014), and local laws and cultures influence which demographic characteristics are salient for questions of diversity (Roth, 2017). Careful comparative research is needed to examine the presence and extent of the diversity layer beyond the United States.

Conclusion

Does the diversity layer exist? We provide an initial test of the proposition that coalitions, by virtue of their membership structure, tend to be more diverse than clubs and non-member organizations. Using our hand-coded extensions of data from Candid on the demographic composition of core participants in U.S. non-profits, we find that the diversity layer proposition holds for racial diversity. Coalitions are less racially exclusive, less likely to be all-white, and more racially diverse than organizations with other structures. The diversity layer thesis, however, does not hold for gender diversity—at least in this initial analysis.

Our work suggests, theoretically and empirically, that coalitions might be able to achieve the necessary condition of internal diversification more easily than CSOs with other membership structures. As such, stakeholders concerned with the fraying of American civil society (Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020) and the concomitant backsliding of American democracy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Waldner & Lust, 2018) should look more closely at coalitions. Countries with more interconnected civil societies become more democratic over time (Paxton, 2002), and civil societies with connections that cut across strong partisan divides can resist elite efforts at autocratization (Rakner, 2021). Founding and fostering coalitions creates the potential for social bridging, and joining coalitions is one way for local CSOs—even internally homogeneous ones—to help establish cross-cutting ties at the community level (Fulton & Wood, forthcoming). While the coalition structure is just one tool in the civil society toolkit, it may prove to be a valuable one in restoring democratic vitality.

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Data Availability Statement

Data are not publicly available due to legal agreements with Candid.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Data are unavailable on the fourth type of core participant: engaged volunteers. We discuss this limitation below.
2. For example, a 2021 Urban Institute study found 70% of non-profits have at least one person-of-color on their board of directors and 63% have at least one person-of-color on staff (Faulk et al., 2021); in our Candid sample the percentages are 85 and 82, respectively.
3. Studies of the correspondence of CSO leader demographics to those of other types of participants suggest that patterns for engaged volunteers will be similar to those of other core participants. Case studies of clubs suggest substantial leader-participant demographic match (e.g., Andrews et al., 2010; Ganz, 2009; Han et al., 2021 M. R. Warren, 2001b; Woliver, 2018; Wood & Fulton, 2015). While on average, boards tend toward racial homogeneity (most often, all-white), there is still meaningful variation in composition across boards (BoardSource, 2021; Kim & Mason, 2018; Ostrower, 2007; Rolf et al., 2023). Staff, especially at lower levels, more closely match local population demographics than boards (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2013; Guo & Musso, 2007; Kim & Mason, 2018; Ostrower, 2007; Rolf et al., 2023; Shon et al., 2024).
4. Candid's first piece of advice for nonprofits seeking board members is "start with your dedicated and active volunteers" (https://learning.candid.org/find-nonprofit-board-members/272068).
5. Datasets with larger numbers of cases will be needed to study a wider array of racial categories, a point we return to below.
6. We acknowledge that a binary gender categorization overlooks important non-binary gender variation. We discuss this limitation below.
7. $(1-\sum p_k^2)[k/(k-1)]$ where k is the number of groups analyzed and p is the proportion of individuals in the kth group.

8. While an 8% coalition rate may seem low, in practical terms, this amounts to approximately 160,000 coalitions in the United States—or about 170 coalitions per U.S. Census core-based statistical area.
9. While CSOs are more likely to appear in urban settings (which have more racially diverse populations), additional analyses (available upon request) show that coalitions are no more likely to appear in urban areas than CSOs with other structures. Controlling for county population (which also correlates with population diversity) also has no impact on the estimated effect of coalitions.
10. See, for example, the Non-profit Open Data Collective (nonprofit-open-data-collective.github.io).

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