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# Participatory Grantmaking: A Test of Rubric Scoring Versus Popular Voting Selection in a Blinded Grantmaking Process

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## Introduction

Under traditional funding mechanisms, small nonprofits struggle to increase their visibility and establish the level of legitimacy needed to compete for funding (McGinnis & Ashley, 2011). Although the results of empirical studies are mixed, most scholars find that size is a consistent predictor of whether an organization receives a grant from foundation and government funders (Ashley & Van Slyke, 2012; Church & Parsons, 2008; Gordon, Knock, & Neely, 2009).

Why size? It is likely that size serves as a proxy for reputational capital and capacity, with larger organizations that have more name recognition inspiring more confidence in their ability to deliver results. And the majority of nonprofits are considered to be “small” — often classified as public charities with budgets under \$5 million. In fact, the Urban Institute’s National Center for Charitable Statistics shows that three in 10 nonprofits have expenses under \$100,000, and over two-thirds have less than \$500,000 in expenses, composing less than 2% of public charity expenditures overall (McKeever, 2018).

Because small, community-based organizations play a critical role in delivering services and expressing diverse community values, it is important to find ways to minimize disparities in their access to philanthropic resources. Frequently mentioned by scholars and critics of philanthropy as one proximate cause of this disparity is the risk perception among foundation boards and program officers. Traditional

## Key Points

- Because small, community-based organizations play a critical role in delivering services and expressing diverse community values, it is important to find ways to minimize disparities in their access to philanthropic resources. Participatory grantmaking is widely viewed as a practice with good potential to mitigate this tendency.
- This article addresses the design of this approach to grantmaking and, specifically, whether changing the decision-making process in addition to changing the decision-makers has an effect on how grants are allocated. It examines the design of two grant review processes — one based on popular voting, the other a more traditional rubric approach — and compares their outcomes to learn whether a more open and discursive process based on popular voting for grantee selection helps to overcome bias against small organizations.
- The article concludes with research implications for participatory grantmaking and grantmaking practice. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to the growing body of empirical knowledge around the design of participatory grantmaking processes.

grantmaking is often criticized as a reflection of the preferences or perspectives of an insular group of foundation staff or board members. Ostrower and Stone (2006) observed that the

*This study is focused on the design of participatory grantmaking and addresses the question of whether changing the decision-making process, in addition to changing the people making decisions, has an effect on how grants are allocated.*

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particularism of philanthropic staff can lead to decisions that do not entirely align with those of the public.

For this reason, considerable effort has been devoted to understanding how small nonprofits can be better equipped to compete for grants, and how to structure grant competitions without placing small organizations at a disadvantage. One proposal to mitigate the tendency for foundations to favor grantees that are larger, older, and urban-based is participatory grantmaking, an approach whose logic is rooted in notions of democratizing access to capital. At its core, participatory grantmaking is about opening up the process of grantmaking decisions to people outside of the foundation as part of an effort to shift the locus of power, control, and voice (Gibson, 2017).

This shift can happen in many forms, with examples that range from the longstanding practice of volunteer committees at local United Ways to technology-enabled public-voting processes that the Case Foundation brought to its Make It Your Own Awards (Gibson, Levine, & Dietz, 2010). The expectation is that greater public and stakeholder involvement in a grantmaking decision is likely to lead to a more diverse grantee mix — with more small nonprofits among them — than often results from a traditional, more insular approach. This assumption derives in part from evidence from public administration, where greater public participation has contributed to

broader redistribution of public resources in some cases (Hong & Cho, 2018).

There are, however, two reasons to challenge the logic behind participatory grantmaking. First, it presumes that the decisions of ordinary people would not be shaped by the same organizational characteristics of potential grantees that influence the decisions of foundation staff and boards. Research on grantmaking clearly shows that donors, both individual and institutional, rely on a number of easily observable organizational characteristics, such as age or size, as proxies for the quality and performance of nonprofits (Weisbrod & Dominguez, 1986). This tendency stems from the fact that donors often operate in environments with a high degree of information asymmetry that limits their ability to monitor a nonprofit's performance. An empirical study by Johnson (2013) looked at grant-decision data from community boards making recommendations for foundation grants and found grantee selection among those boards to be largely consistent with that of traditional boards. Except for one statistically significant difference — community boards more often than traditional ones favored slightly smaller organizations — decision-makers who were more representative of the community tended to select grantees using the same heuristics as members of traditional boards, favoring older and more financially efficient organizations.

Second, there is much more attention in participatory grantmaking to the who, rather than the how; it presumes that changing the people making decisions — without changing the decision-making process or criteria for a successful proposal — is enough to shift the outcome toward more grant opportunities for small nonprofits. As Irvin and Stansbury (2004) point out, proponents of participation have to look beyond the simple assumption that involving the public will impact decisions. In public administration, scholars are more clear that the relationship between community involvement and organizational decisions is mediated by the design of or how the community members are engaged in public participation programs (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006). Thomas (2012) highlights

the value of deliberation in the decision-making process, specifically describing how allowing citizens to participate and discuss their choices in small groups allows for learning that can shape their decisions.

This study is focused on the design of participatory grantmaking and addresses the question of whether changing the decision-making process, in addition to changing the people making decisions, has an effect on how grants are allocated. In particular, we are interested in whether a more open and discursive process based on popular voting for grantee selection helps to overcome the tendency toward bias against small organizations. The sections that follow describe the grantmaking process used in this study to test whether and when small nonprofits had a greater chance of being selected under different types of review conditions, and present the results of an empirical analysis of the data from that grantmaking process. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of this research for participatory grantmaking and grantmaking practice.

### The 500 Cities Data Challenge

In collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the CDC Foundation launched the 500 Cities project in 2015. Using a small area estimation approach, the project's data set provided city-level information on health outcomes, risky behaviors, and use of prevention services for the 500 largest American cities.

The 500 Cities Data Challenge, initiated by the RWJF and administered and managed by the Urban Institute in 2017, invited researchers and practitioners from around the United States to use the 500 Cities data set<sup>1</sup> in combination with other nonhealth-related data to either conduct analyses to answer a cross-sector question or build practical tools to target a cross-sector intervention. The competition was open to private, public,

*To encourage a wide range of submissions from a diverse pool of applicants, the Urban Institute and RWJF team developed a two-stage application process, leveraged their networks, and conducted targeted and social media outreach. The first stage involved a brief letter of intent from prospective grantees; a group from that phase was selected to advance to the full application stage.*

nonprofit, and grassroots organizations seeking to advance understanding of health outcomes relative to other social factors associated with those outcomes, including housing, education, transportation, violence, and civic participation. Through the challenge, 10 projects were funded and the total awards approached \$1 million.

The Urban Institute and the RWJF incorporated elements of equitable and participatory grantmaking practices to conduct research while managing this grant opportunity. One design element was to test different review processes to assess whether their design had an impact on scoring outcomes that would determine which organizations would advance from the idea-submission phase to the full proposal stage.

### The Idea/Letter of Intent Phase

To encourage a wide range of submissions from a diverse pool of applicants, the Urban Institute

<sup>1</sup>This data set and corresponding website sheds light on the geographic distribution of health-related outcomes, providing a unique opportunity for community leaders to bridge the gap between health outcomes and housing, education, transportation, and other key social determinants of health.

and RWJF team developed a two-stage application process, leveraged their networks, and conducted targeted and social media outreach. The first stage involved a brief letter of intent (LOI) from prospective grantees; a group from that phase was selected to advance to the full application stage. Applicants were asked to describe how they would utilize the 500 Cities data with other data to design innovative solutions or conduct analysis that would build a foundation for more comprehensive cross-sector collaboration in their communities. The LOI was designed to present a very low barrier of entry for prospective applicants and involved the submission of either a one-page narrative or a three-minute video.<sup>2</sup> The Challenge team also conducted targeted outreach to identify a broadly diverse set of applicants. The strategy leveraged the RWJF's grantee, partner, and collaborator networks to promote the upcoming grant opportunity and also included direct outreach to networks and organizations that would not traditionally pursue these types of data-focused grant opportunities, but whose missions aligned with the challenge. The team also designed and implemented a comprehensive social media outreach plan that utilized both the RWJF and Urban Institute platforms to increase visibility of the challenge beyond limited listservs.

This strategy yielded a diverse applicant pool of nonprofits, government agencies, universities, private companies, and emerging collaborations from 51 cities in 29 states. In all, the challenge received 75 expressions of interest: 64 were written LOIs and 11 were in video format. In early December 2018, the Urban Institute conducted reviews of the LOIs in two review conditions — a traditional, rubric-based review and a popular-voting review — to determine which applicants would be invited to submit a full proposal.

### The LOI Review Process

From the original 75 LOI submissions, 13 were excluded because they either did not utilize

the 500 Cities data or failed to present an idea that combined the 500 Cities data with other data. The remaining 62 LOIs — 54 letters and eight videos — were eligible for review. Prior to review, the Urban Institute team blacked out identifying information in the written LOI statements to guard against name-recognition bias (Paarlberg, McGinnis Johnson, & Hannibal, 2019); video submissions could not be de-identified in the same manner. Further, financial or organization-capacity information was not requested during the LOI phase.

#### *Rubric-Based Review*

Two researchers from the Urban Institute with expertise in nonprofit and philanthropy read or watched each submission and scored it using a basic rubric that included the following criteria:

- Cross-sector — seeks to answer a well-defined question that advances understanding at the intersection of health and other outcomes; offers a cross-sector intervention to improve health outcomes, prevention, and/or behaviors.
- Data-driven — incorporates 500 Cities data as a major component of the project.
- Advances use of 500 Cities data — serves as an example of how to use the data set through a replicable and open approach.
- Targeted communities — from an organization working in rural and/or underrepresented communities and proposing a project or idea that focuses on improving outcomes for those communities.
- Innovative — uses an unconventional approach or tests a novel application of the data set.
- Feasible — proposes a project or idea that can be completed within the one-year grant period using the proposed funding.

<sup>2</sup>The written submissions were to be no longer than one 8.5-by-11-inch page and single spaced, using an 11-point font and one-inch margins. The video entries were limited to three minutes and an Audio Video Interleave (AVI) format; professional video quality was not required and cellphone recordings were sufficient.

**TABLE 1** Comparison of Review Processes

Characteristic	Rubric Review	Popular Voting
Discussion between reviewers	After scores assigned	During scoring process
Number of reviewers	2	Range from 1 to 6
Reviewers' expertise	Researchers with philanthropy subject matter expertise	Researchers and research support staff without philanthropy subject matter expertise
Scoring mechanism	Points	Star stickers

- Overall quality of application and fit with challenge.

Reviewers were instructed to score each criterion on the following scale: 5 = Excellent, 4 = Very Good, 3 = Good, 2 = Fair, 1 = Poor. The reviewers' scores for each application were then averaged to create total scores, which the project team used to evaluate the strength of each LOI.

### Popular-Voting Review

The popular-voting mechanism, which is gaining popularity through crowdfunding platforms and philanthropy prize competitions as an alternative to traditional expert- or criteria-based participatory review processes, was used as a test case in comparison to the rubric-based review of the challenge applications.

In our popular-voting format, researchers and research support staff from across the Urban Institute — including researchers without expertise in nonprofit and philanthropy — were invited to review the letters,<sup>3</sup> which were placed in random order along the walls in the style of a gallery walk, and asked to attach star stickers to the LOIs they would recommend for advancement to the next stage. Each of the 17 reviewers was assigned to one of six gallery walks and had access to an unlimited number of stickers. They were given up to 60 minutes to indicate applications as most promising, based on general guidance and a brief project overview, but they were not provided a rubric. They were allowed

to converse with other reviewers about the applications while making their recommendations, and all votes were viewable by all reviewers throughout the review process. In total, 120 stickers were allocated across the 54 letters; on average, each reviewer issued eight stickers and spent 26.8 minutes on the review. (See Table 1.)

### Hypotheses

This study sought to measure the comparative success of small organizations in advancing from LOIs to the full application stage under the rubric-based review and the popular-voting review. Each context represents a different design for a participatory-grantmaking approach under conditions where any markers of organization size or capacity have been excluded or de-identified. Thus, any observed difference in outcomes are likely to be the result of the review conditions: rubric versus popular voting.

We hypothesized that there would be no size-related difference in the selection of organizations in the rubric review process, since the LOIs were de-identified, and we expected the quality of the LOIs would be largely consistent. Under the popular-voting condition we expected that smaller organizations would have a better chance of advancing in the application process, since scoring was guided by the innovativeness of the proposal.

These hypotheses were made with several considerations. On the one hand, we might expect

<sup>3</sup> Videos were not included in the popular-voting review because video screens could not be incorporated into the gallery walk.

that there would be no difference in the selection of small organizations in the two review conditions because of the de-identified nature of the review. On the other hand, because there could be a correlation between the size of the organization and the quality of the writing of the LOI or its proposal, we might expect that smaller organizations would be less likely selected under the rubric review process because it encourages a focus on specific evaluation of quality through assessment of the proposal's innovativeness and feasibility. In the popular-voting process, these factors could have guided some reviewers but not others, so we expected that any of these unseen factors that are correlated to nonprofit size may not be as strongly predictive as in the rubric review process.

## Data and Methods

The data used for the analysis were collected from the scoring through the two review processes and were combined with organizational data collected from nonprofits' Form 990 and organization websites for government and private organizations.

- *LOI score/advanced to full application.* In the rubric review, the LOI scores ranged from lowest (27) to highest (81). The average score was 52.85. For this analysis, any organization that scored higher than the average met the threshold to advance to the full application stage. In the popular-voting review, scores ranged from 0 to 6. Any application that received three or more stickers met the threshold to advance to the full application stage.
- *Budget size.* We classified organizations as small, with a budget of less than \$5 million; medium, with \$5 million to \$50 million; or large, with a budget greater than \$50 million. To avoid overfitting the analysis, we condensed the six budget ranges used to classify nonprofit size in previous studies (Frailey & Kardos, 2017) into three categories. We derived budget data from the Form 990 data for nonprofits and universities and government budget data from government sources, but were not able to identify

budget data for the for-profit organizations in the sample.

- *Organization type.* The sample consists of organizations that submitted LOIs for the 500 Cities Data Challenge, including universities, for-profit companies, nonprofits other than universities, and government agencies. We categorized these organizations using information retrieved from their websites. We controlled for organization type in this study because universities, government agencies, and for-profit organizations may have a higher capacity to respond to a data competition.
- *Geography.* The sample includes organizations from 23 states, which were classified into regions determined by the U.S. Census Bureau. We used the Northeast as the comparison group, because historic patterns of nonprofit funding show the largest distribution of funds targeted to nonprofits located in that region (McKeever, 2018).

## Statistical Model

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + r$$

$Y$  is a measure of the score the applicant received. In the rubric review, the scores from each of the two reviewers were averaged to determine the final score. In the popular-voting review, the score is based on the number of stickers received. One specification of the model uses the score as the variable, and in the other the score has been converted to a dummy variable to indicate whether the applicant's score was above the threshold to advance from the LOI stage to the full application stage.

$X_1$  is a dummy variable for whether the organization had a budget less than \$5 million.

$X_2$  is a dummy variable for whether the organization was a nonuniversity nonprofit or either a university, for-profit organization, or government entity.

$X_3$  is a dummy variable for whether the organization was located in the Northeast.

**TABLE 2** Comparison of Selected Applicants

Characteristic	Rubric Review	Popular Voting
<i>Number of Applications</i>		
Reviewed	62	54
Written submission	87.1%	100%
Video submission	12.9%	0%
<i>Number of Applicants</i>		
Advanced	32 (50%)	29 (47%)
Budget Size		
Small (n = 14)	21%	43%
Medium (n = 13)	61%	61%
Large (n = 29)	55%	41%
Organization Type		
Nonprofit (nonuniversity) (n = 26)	50%	46%
University (n = 15)	60%	40%
Government (n = 13)	30%	54%
For-profit (n = 6)	66%	50%
Region		
Northeast (n = 19)	58%	47%
Outside Northeast (n = 43)	46%	46%

Note: 16 of the same organizations were advanced in both review conditions.

### Descriptive Statistics

In a comparison of groups selected for the full application stage, results indicate slight differences. (See Table 2.) A smaller proportion (21%) of the 14 organizations that were considered to be small were selected under the rubric review than with the popular-voting review (43%). We measured the statistical significance of this difference using linear and logistic regression. (See Table 3–Table 6.)

### Multivariate Analysis

In both the linear regression (using assigned scores) and the logistic regression (whether or not an organization met the threshold to advance to the full application stage), small organizations had either a lower score or were less likely to be advanced than were medium-size or large organizations in the rubric review, but size was not a statistically significant factor in the popular-voting review results.

### Limitations

The results of this analysis are limited by the small sample size, which may lead to biased results. Another limitation of this study is how the popular-voting process may have introduced bias into our findings. Many of the reviewers in the popular-voting condition have some research expertise; as a result, this composition of reviewers may on average be more likely to select LOIs that have a more robust research background or rigorous research design. This has the potential to favor organizations that detail more sophisticated data collection or analysis strategies or evaluation.

Still, as an exploratory study, our findings indicate that it is worth further research into the differing patterns of selection under different review conditions in participatory grantmaking. That research may explore the potential moderation effects of deliberation — whether and how open discussion in the popular-voting review



**TABLE 3** Linear Regression: Rubric Review Results

Applicant Characteristic	Coefficient	P-value
Small	-9.13513	0.014***
Nonprofit	2.568994	0.430
Northeast	-0.2891117	0.931
Constant	53.34203	0.000

Note: \*\*\*Significant at 0.05 level; n = 56 (no budget data for for-profit organizations)

**TABLE 4** Linear Regression: Popular Voting Results

Applicant Characteristic	Coefficient	P-value
Small	-0.4212513	0.443
Nonprofit	0.2206041	0.655
Northeast	0.1804207	0.722
Constant	2.112055	0.000

Note: n = 49 (no video submissions reviewed in popular voting; no budget data for for-profit organizations)

**TABLE 5** Logistic Regression: Rubric Review Results

Applicant Characteristic	Coefficient	P-value
Small	-1.971072	0.015***
Nonprofit	0.6614155	0.317
Northeast	0.4829123	0.477
Constant	-0.0570408	0.885

Note: \*\*\*Significant at 0.05 level; n = 56 (no budget data for for-profit organizations)

**TABLE 6** Logistic Regression: Popular Voting Results

Applicant Characteristic	Coefficient	P-value
Small	-0.2161387	0.747
Nonprofit	0.0902846	0.881
Northeast	-0.1610368	0.796
Constant	-0.0855059	0.825

Note: n = 49 (no video submissions reviewed in popular voting; no budget data for for-profit organizations)

process impacted the results, and reviewer expertise — whether reviewer expertise in nonprofits and philanthropy shapes reviewer perspectives in the rubric review condition.

### Discussion

We believe the findings of this research are valuable to both philanthropy practitioners and scholars. Given that grant funders tend to favor large nonprofits and the consistent evidence that small nonprofits have a difficult time securing needed resources, these findings are sobering. Even in participatory contexts (both review conditions in this study were participatory in the most basic sense, in that the decisions were made by people outside the foundation), small organizations can still face funding challenges based on the type of review condition being used.

This emerges as an even more compelling finding given that this outcome can occur even when the application being reviewed is a simple, one-page statement of an idea and no data revealing the size of the organization is included in the review. Overall, the results suggest that grantmakers may need to think seriously not only about how we broaden participation with a more inclusive review process, but also about our use of rubrics and criteria in the selection process.

*Even in participatory contexts (both review conditions in this study were participatory in the most basic sense, in that the decisions were made by people outside the foundation), small organizations can still face funding challenges based on the type of review condition being used.*

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