

Nonprofit mission clamp: exploring how nonprofit leaders manage activity-related policy risks

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how nonprofit leaders adapt their strategies when state policies conflict with their missions, drawing on the case of transgender-serving organizations in a conservative-majority US state. Based on prospect theory and nonprofit risk management literature, it analyses how leaders respond to policy risks and reshape organizational strategies and structures that reduce mission impact to avoid potential sanctions.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is a qualitative interview study with 20 leaders across eight transgender-serving nonprofits in one conservative-majority US state. Leaders were asked to describe how pending and new legislation necessitated, if any, actions and changes to the organization. Data analysis included iterative coding and reflective memos to categorize participant descriptions and connect sorted data to insights for nonprofit risk-management research.

Findings – Leader behaviors are sorted into two categories: anticipatory civic engagement to prevent policy risk and defensive operational redesign to avoid policy risk. Anticipatory civic engagement involved actions that reduced the punitiveness of legislation and warning program participants about how to navigate new laws. Defensive operational redesign involved shifting job expectations for staff and volunteers, engaging low-risk collaborations and shrinking operations in response to lack of successors. These moves stabilized the organizations and protected personnel from legal risks while reducing service impact.

Practical implications – This study underscores the critical role of consistent, effective nonprofit external affairs, as well as leadership with political awareness and astuteness, in preventing future legal risks.

Originality/value – Previous research in risk management has focused on nonprofit “mission creep” where growing nonprofits exercise strategic decision-making to ensure focus. This study instead focuses on nonprofit “mission clamp” where regulatory forces and policy threats, in this case legislation impacting transgender-serving nonprofits, require leaders to shift their management practices to prevent or circumvent new risks and sanctions.

Keywords Nonprofit risk management, Nonprofit leadership, Transgender policy

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Nonprofit risk management literature frequently warns leaders about “mission creep,” which is when nonprofits expand their focus beyond the scope of their original mission (Gooding, 2012), sometimes to the point that they drift into a purpose for which they are not legally registered (Rosenbaum, 2020). Propensity toward mission creep is a potential weakness in nonprofit strategy (Jonker and Meehan, 2008). It is often the result of additional needs among the community served or other opportunities in the organizational environment (Bielefeld and Andersson, 2021), including the policy environment (Levine Daniel and Fyall, 2019; Stone, 1989). The purpose of anticipating “mission creep” is to ensure nonprofits use their agency to build coherent, focused capacity and avoid internal weakness from poor planning. However, risk management literature has not similarly emphasized policy threats or required limits on nonprofit missions. This article takes up exploring this issue in the context of policy threats to transgender-serving organizations and refers to the general phenomenon at play as nonprofit “mission clamp.”

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The missions that nonprofit organizations concentrate on have repeatedly been reshaped by state and federal government actions like redirected preferred institutionalized partnerships (Kennedy and Bielefeld, 2002), limited grant program availability and eligibility (Chaves, 1999) and ongoing nonprofit advocacy restrictions (SeEVERS, 2005). In polarized cases like transgender rights, state-level partisan policies enabled through federalism are another possible threat to the missions of relevant nonprofit organizations (Taylor *et al.*, 2024). Changing political constraints often require nonprofit leaders to pivot their strategies and adapt their organizations to new risks and environments (Lutz Allen *et al.*, 2013; Walk *et al.*, 2024). These challenges are especially salient to nonprofit organizations with missions on the fault lines of political polarization (Lecy *et al.*, 2019), because they must be responsive to both general nonprofit policy and activity-detering policies. Activity-detering policies may have particularly punitive effects on the integrity of nonprofit missions (Goelzhauser and Konisky, 2020). The current overall scope of government suppression of nonprofit activities that are contrary to its administrative agenda is expansive, with nonprofits ranging across several salient policy fields (Sandfort, 2010) such as climate change, immigration, physical and mental health services, higher education and more.

This paper presents an analysis of how nonprofit leaders attenuate their strategies to the onset of activity-detering state policy using the subsector focused on supporting the transgender community as a focus (Aultman *et al.*, 2017; Wang and Cahill, 2018). Descriptive accounts presented here detail how leaders from a network of eight 501(c)3 nonprofits in one conservative-majority state that provide youth and family mental health programs for transgender people and their loved ones respond to mounting politicization and new legislation. I used a grounded theory approach to interviewing and analyzed the common strategic shifts shared by leaders. Leader strategies are grouped into two categories: anticipatory civic engagement and defensive operational redesign. These steps were taken to manage risks associated with navigating legal ambiguities relevant to sharing information with families, access to mental health licensures for staff, forming network connections, offering training to outside organizations and lack of incoming leadership. I conclude by suggesting that these exploratory findings can inform future explanatory research on how nonprofit leaders engage in risk management when state or federal policies are misaligned with their missions. Additionally, this study implies the critical role of consistent and effective nonprofit external affairs, particularly leadership with political awareness and astuteness (Hartley, 2018; Hartley and Fletcher, 2008), for the purpose of preventing future legal risks.

Nonprofit risk management for mission integrity

Risk management strategies that ensure the integrity of nonprofit missions can foster sustainable capacity building and consistent attention to relevant outcomes of interest (Kapucu *et al.*, 2011; De Vita *et al.*, 2001; Searing *et al.*, 2023). Risk management, which is how an organization prevents or responds to what could go wrong, is a principle that is often implicitly embedded in all nonprofit management research (Bracci *et al.*, 2021; Young, 2009). It is incorporated into nonprofit research streams such as board governance (Molk and Sokol, 2021; Ostrower and Stone, 2006), strategic planning (Bryson, 2010; Seo *et al.*, 2025) and financial sustainability (Chang and Tuckman, 1990; Denison *et al.*, 2019). The relevance of nonprofit risk management to nonprofit leadership is also evident in the content written on risk management for audiences of nonprofit practitioners (Herman *et al.*, 2004; Mancuso, 2012) and professional development materials provided by the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (<https://nonprofitrisk.org/>) (Nonprofit Risk Management Center, 2026). Such sources advise nonprofit leaders to assume, avoid, control, transfer or monitor risks where possible (Eisenstein, 2022).

Both professional and scholarly publications have highlighted how nonprofit leaders may not intuitively call their efforts to protect their missions risk management (Grace, 2018). Risk management tools for nonprofit organizations can differ from public and private risk

management because of nonprofit specific obligations like following the non-distribution constraint, mission integrity and accountability to funders in multiple sectors (Chen and Bozeman, 2012). But, the core concerns are shared, such as ensuring a sustainable financial foundation (Park and Matkin, 2021), trying out new innovations (Sax and Torp, 2015; Borgelt and Falk, 2007) and preventing organizational demise (Hager, 1999; Searing, 2020) across the nonprofit lifecycle (Andersson *et al.*, 2016; Bess, 1998).

When nonprofit leaders make decisions under the constraint of risk, those choices can be understood through the lens of prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Prospect theory explains that individual attitudes toward uncertainty weigh gains and losses unevenly (Levy, 1992). Specifically, individuals value potential losses more than the potential gains that come from an uncertain decision. Nonprofit scholarship directly assessing risky choices has considered issues including reputational risks for appearing overly political (Berry, 2023) and engaging programs with hard-to-measure outcomes that appear wasteful (Schmid and Almog-Bar, 2020). Both cases confirm the general principle of prospect theory and that nonprofit leaders are hesitant to capture the benefits of activities like lobbying and innovative programming because of the potential for losing stakeholder support.

The series of risky decisions nonprofit leaders make when planning organizational behaviors are then collectively understood as risk management planning (Azjen, 1991). When applied in practice, the risk management planning process is often split into risk prevention and risk response. Strategic planning tools, also rooted in prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), are additionally useful for evaluating trade-offs, like logic models for program plans (Herranz, 2010) and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis (Ronchetti, 2006). The guiding principle at the center of most, if not all, strategic planning tools is a single mindedness about the organization's mission.

The colloquialism, nonprofit mission creep, is a commonly used term that signifies the risks to individual nonprofits operating coherent and effective sets of programs (Rosenbaum, 2020; Jonkers and Meehan, 2008; Gooding, 2012). As nonprofits grow, they risk undertaking demand for programs without sufficient capacity and spreading themselves thin, hence the metaphor of mission creep. In addition to being a risk management issue, it is often central to research on who nonprofit organizations intend to serve or leave behind (Joyce and Szykman, 2003). The term itself gained additional traction after it appeared in Jonkers and Meehan's (2008) case study article on how a rural development organization was able to maintain its focus on helping poor farmers with landownership rights despite callings to related issues. Often at the core of discussions of mission creep is an assumption that leaders within the nonprofit have the agency to make decisions to either grow or shrink the organization and make those decisions according to their associated risks (De Vita *et al.*, 2001). However, what this colloquialism for mission risk management misses by centering leader agency to say yes or no to new opportunity is equally uplifting analogous discussions of political risks and coercive limits on nonprofit leaders and nonprofit missions.

Political risks from shifting laws and government regulations that thwart the activities of nonprofits are frequently discussed in literature on nonprofits operating in both authoritarian contexts (Toepler *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2017; Cavatorta, 2013) and in countries undergoing democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016). Authoritarianism, which is strict obedience to government power (Bermeo, 2016), has recently become the relevant political perspective to frame this empirical issue because of impositions on nonprofits civil liberties (Gazley and Alexander, 2025) and growing foreclosure of pluralism in civic space (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). For example, Gazley and Alexander's (2025) case study of migrant serving nonprofits in Texas describes how state actions restrict their activities through criminalization, targeted administrative restrictions and stigmatization. From a nonprofit leadership perspective, these broader political shifts represent increased salience of responding to political risks that can result in cut programs or organizational death (Searing, 2020). To use an analogous metaphor to nonprofit mission creep, such political risks are like a surgical clamp that cuts off the blood supply of leadership necessary to implementing organizational

missions, especially for nonprofits operating in politically polarized spaces (Lecy *et al.*, 2019). Thus, additional research is needed to understand the process of nonprofit mission clamp and how nonprofit leaders circumvent political risks and understand loss aversion between mission integrity and potential sanctions.

When considering what political forces might deter or clamp nonprofit missions, the list of possibilities is extensive and additive. Insights for managing risk from targeted policy changes that limit activities may overlap with other threats such as funding shocks (Thornton, 2023), reputational attacks (Jones *et al.*, 2019), cybersecurity breaches (Gardner *et al.*, 2023), collaborator instability (Reckhow *et al.*, 2020), population demographic shifts (LePere-Schloop *et al.*, 2025), health crises (Paarlberg *et al.*, 2020) or environmental disasters (Gazley and Cash, 2024). Among these, activity-detering policy shifts may be uniquely difficult to hedge against because they change the rules of the game regarding what nonprofits legally have permission to do and are backed by state enforcement powers. For example, consider the way, if ratified, the proposed rule to halt public service loan forgiveness benefits to nonprofit employees would reshape the nonprofit subsectors working on issues that conflict with the federal administration's position on national security (Girardin, 2025). Thus, this study draws on the case of transgender-serving nonprofits, a subsector that has been responding to strict state policies that deter their missions and work with youth and families since 2021, to explore how nonprofits manage mission clamp.

Study context: state policies restricting transgender-serving nonprofits

Organizations serving the interests of the LGBTQ + -community [1] in the United States have a storied history of navigating political pressures that impact their activities and their constituents. One of the earliest examples of this is the story of the Society for Human Rights, which was founded in 1924 in Chicago under the mission to combat prejudice against homosexuals. It was forced to disband due to political pressure (PBS, 2026). Flashing forward to more recent history relevant to LGBTQ + -serving organizations, the 2000 and 2010s were marked by political success for LGBTQ + adults, including the expansion of legal same sex marriage (Hodges, 2015) and workplace protections on the basis of sex becoming inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity (Clayton County, 2020). However, the 2020s have been marked by policy setbacks for organizations seeking to affirm LGBTQ + -youth.

Beginning in 2021, legislation that restricts informational and health resources for LGBTQ + youth began to diffuse across the United States, including bans on inclusions of LGBTQ + representation in public school curriculum (Moody, 2022) and bans on developmentally-appropriate hormone replacement therapy for adolescents (Dawon and Kates, 2025). These state-level policies indirectly impact LGBTQ + youth by directly regulating the behaviors of public-school teachers and healthcare providers. The practical implications of these policies have included additional burden on teachers' (McQuillan *et al.*, 2025) and mental health professionals' (Barsky and Simpson, 2025) legal literacy (Decker, 2025) and additional travel burdens adolescents face to accessing care in states without new policies criminalizing care (Borah *et al.*, 2023). Such policies impact nonprofit organizations with missions to support positive youth development for LGBTQ + youth that collaborate with schools and hospitals or that are staffed by licensed healthcare providers. As a result, LGBTQ-serving nonprofits are struggling with financial shortfall (Dale, 2022; McNeill, 2025).

Research evaluating the service impacts of community-based organizations providing programs for LGBTQ + youth often speak to issues of nonprofit leadership alongside main analyses on program outcomes like HIV prevention, mental health support or youth empowerment (Adams *et al.*, 2018; Allen *et al.*, 2012; Fish *et al.*, 2019). Related to this project on mission clamp are evaluations that highlight issues like staff capacity and limitations that come from reliance on volunteers to run programs (Allen *et al.*, 2012; Christensen *et al.*, 2023)

and conflicts between program manager vs their funders vision of how to implement programs for LGBTQ + communities (Ramanadhan *et al.*, 2023). Each of these leadership and capacity building issues is further shaped by the policy contexts and risks that recent legislation poses for programs. In the following section, I detail the methods I used to explore how such nonprofits adapted to the need to incorporate these new legal risks into their strategies.

Methods

The reported findings are from a qualitative, grounded [2] study of nonprofits with programs that serve transgender youth and their families in one US state with a clear conservative majority. The selected state ranks among the ten most ideologically conservative states in the country according to established measures (Berry *et al.*, 2023). The research purpose guiding the study is to uncover how those organizations prevented and responded to political risks from new legislation. The study was approved in January 2024 and passed an additional investigation in April 2024 by an Institutional Review Board for ethical compliance. All interviews were conducted between February and July 2024. No new state-level policy changes or laws on transgender issues passed during the study window. The interview data collected represents the stories of eight different nonprofit organizations, composed of voices from 20 total people, including 11 nonprofit staff members and 9 volunteers.

I identified the sample frame of nonprofits through organizations assigned the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) code “R26” for LGBTQ rights and identified 24 organizations providing youth related programming in the study state. After contacting all the organizations, I received replies from 12, and the consent of eight organizations to participate in my study. After obtaining informed consent, I conducted interviews with the nonprofit leaders in locations most preferred by the participant. Most interviews were conducted in-person at participants’ homes, coffee shops, Church meeting rooms, or public library meeting rooms and the rest virtually. Interviewees were offered a \$50 cash incentive via gift card for study participation [3]. Interviews were approximately one to two hours long. I assigned aliases to each participant to protect their identities. Table 1 displays their quantifiable characteristics. Additional identifying information connecting the organization’s administrative information to the demographic information about people who participated in this study is not included to protect all participants.

Interview protocol

Interviews were semi-structured and began with questions about perceptions of the local community’s attitude on transgender people and the way the organization was able to reach its target populations. Topics ranged from the history of the organization’s founding, how involved the leader is in the operation of programs, experiences with advocacy, the local and state-level political environment, how the organization responded to recent legislation and judicial decisions and what stance or response the leader believed the organization should

Table 1. Interviewee characteristics

Leader (<i>n</i> = 20)	Number (%)
Average age	38
Paid staff	2/11 (18%)
Parent	18/20 (90%)
Non-white	3/20 (15%)
Graduate degree	13/20 (65%)
Rural county	5/20 (25%)
Source(s): Author’s own work	

implement. Sample questions are available in [appendix](#). After each interview, I recorded a voice memo with relevant field notes and immediate reflections.

Analysis process

Interviews, field notes and reflections were transcribed, anonymized and coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO 20. I followed a grounded theory approach to interviewing and qualitative analysis that focused on allowing leaders to emphasize the aspects of their narratives that were most salient in their own eyes. The analysis of data itself combined both deductive and inductive coding practices ([Saldaña, 2021](#)). The deductive analysis involved applying codes based on known mechanisms of how state policies interfere with nonprofit leadership issues, while the inductive analysis involved following the saturation of concepts that connected back to ideas in nonprofit risk responses ([Corbin and Strauss, 1990](#); [Creswell and Creswell, 2013](#)).

Analysis of coded material began with re-reading the full interviews from each leader and writing a short summary of each leader's knowledge of relevant law and their telling of the organization's risk assessments and responses compared to their peers. Three of the eight organizations reported being investigated by the state governor's office to ensure their compliance with new legislation, by virtue of previous relationships with either schools or healthcare providers. I grouped my findings on risk responses into two umbrella categories: anticipatory civic engagement and defensive operational redesign. I detail how both unfold below in the findings section.

Findings

A. Anticipatory civic engagement: nonprofit lobbying reduced punitive legislation

While leaders in every organization described anticipated legislative shifts, in four out of the eight, they proactively engaged government officials to oppose proposed bills as part of their risk prevention efforts. Anticipatory civic engagement is a theme that inductively surfaced from analyzing this dataset and refers to when nonprofits would engage in lobbying to reduce the severity of the penalties embedded in legislation they anticipated would be passed. These activities included calling and writing to elected officials, speaking at public hearings and requesting meetings with legislators on proposed legislation. The organization that spent the most significant amount of time engaging in anticipatory civic engagement is run by two leaders who founded a free support group program for fellow parents of transgender youth. They shared their story of their multiple meetings with legislators with the goal of preventing a youth gender-affirming care ban.

In trying to forestall this, we talked [to] 12 [state legislators]. You know, of all stripes, trying to get them to just understand what our experience is. We [told] them our story, and what the experiences are from many other parents. We talked to the leaders of the Senate and the House. Some of it was good. But, then to tell us that they're going to go on science. And then the science they're going on is that 80% desisting study that's been debunked. That's the party line, isn't it? So, they believe what they want to believe. Our pitch was . . . let's just tell you the story. You know, we're normal, everyday people. They took our meetings because we got a reputation as being reasonable citizens saying they're making it harder for parents to raise kids . . . Thank God, you know the session didn't do, you know, tremendous harm this time. They weren't saints, but they could have done worse, and they didn't.

The two leaders described being able to make the most connection with legislators by building their reputation as "reasonable citizens" who are "normal, everyday people." And while they described their sense of relief that, "Thank God, the session . . . didn't do tremendous harm this time," when they saw success with more punitive versions of bans on gender affirming care dying in committee, their experience also highlights how they felt their concerns ultimately went unheard when a ban did pass. They make sense of it through partisan differences,

remarking that the legislators are “believing what they want to believe,” and “that’s the party line, isn’t it?” Following the passage of the care ban, these same two leaders shared how they facilitated programming to make sure their constituent parents understood what the law meant, hosting one of their largest meetings with over 75 families.

For the remaining four organizations that chose not to engage in any sort of risk prevention, the interviewees spent time discussing how they were balancing the perceived utility of lobbying with the mental health effects of speaking to individuals who they anticipated would disagree or not listen to their concerns. Among the parents, four interviewees reported having politically engaged children who they prevented from attending youth demonstrations outside of the state house or volunteering testimony at committee meetings. The parents reported doing this because they feared these actions would place their child in harms way and offer little return.

Overall, preventative risk management by the nonprofit leaders in this sample can be understood as a function of the leaders’ ability to connect with legislators and the leaders’ perception of the utility of the action taken.

B. Defensive operational redesign: protecting staff and maintaining programming

The passage of legislation that limits youth access to LGBTQ + content at school and to gender-affirming care raised the issue of defensive operational redesign for the sample of nonprofit organizations in this study. Defensive operational redesign refers to the ways organizations shift their structures, programs and practices as a reaction to sources of risk from changes in the legal and sociocultural landscape. These issues presented as concerns for transgender-serving organizations that collaborate with schools and hospitals, those that have staff who are licensed healthcare professionals, and those that face growing disinterest from volunteers and individuals in taking over leadership roles in the organizations. Each of these three issues prompted the organization to redesign the way they run their programs, communicate with their service recipients and keep programs going.

B.1. Inter-organizational collaboration. First, with respect to limitations on collaborations with schools and hospitals, when asked about these collaborative relationships, seven of the eight organizations in the sample viewed themselves as a resource that schools and hospitals could refer parents and youth to for social support. A few leaders took this a step further and assumed a connection between their organization’s declining membership and falling referrals from those sources given new legislation. While this claim would benefit from quantitative verification, the qualitative aspect of leaders’ replies highlighted the increased salience of the school sector in the ability to form future partnerships. For instance, one of the organizations in the sample conducts LGBTQ + ally training with organizations and explained concerns about bringing their trainings into public schools.

We do trainings, anywhere from schools to counselors to counseling groups to businesses, governmental agencies. Always by request and our invitation . . . The one tough place to get formal trainings is inside a school. That is almost never, it’s usually groups outside where there’s school counselors or things like that. It has to be a charter school before they’ll ever get around to asking us. Cause they don’t want to deal, I assume, with the, um, somebody going to the school board and saying, oh my God, they’re talking about other human beings. How dare they do that.

She goes on to explain how, in the past, they were able to bring their training to nonprofit associations for schoolteachers or other parent–teacher nonprofit entities that overlap with public school personnel and students, but they have never been invited into a public-school setting directly. In the future, her organization plans to scale down to training by request only and to approach teacher or parent nonprofit groups that are directly associated with K-3 public schools settings impacted by the curriculum ban law with more caution.

B.2. Job design and responsibilities. Related to strategically positioning collaborations, many of the organizational leaders in the sample also discussed concerns about protecting staff

from licensure sanctions imposed by the state's youth gender-affirming care ban. Four organizations are impacted by this concern. Two of the organizations have multiple full-time, licensed mental health professionals on their staff, as well as trainees and two more are completely volunteer-run organizations whose executive directors also are a full-time nurses. One of the two completely volunteer-run organizations is directed by a nurse who shared that, while she is not sure how the law impacts her, if anyone does call her looking for resources on gender-affirming care, she would be referring them to the facilitator of a chapter of her organization in a different city who is not a healthcare provider. The two larger organizations that have mental health professionals on staff essentially manage the possibility of licensure sanction in the same way. They both shared stories about having to balance telling their providers to stay silent on sharing resources to protect their licenses and having staff who are not healthcare professionals take on resource-sharing responsibilities as part of separate youth programming initiatives. For instance, one leader explains how, "we stay within the bounds of the law."

As a nonprofit there are, besides the medical ban and the gag order on licensed health . . . well, the gag ban is on licensed healthcare practitioners, professionals, whatever the term is used in the statute. Our reading of that is that it extends to mental healthcare professionals. So, this creates, I mean, it's hell. For any therapist, any mental healthcare worker who's licensed because, you know, a doctor has a patient come in, uh, a therapist has a client come in who's under 18, and they are terrified because their prescription was suddenly just cut off. They're terrified that, you know, they may have . . . started blockers and now suddenly their body's gonna start changing. And the state says, I'm sorry, you have to sit there and watch this person in distress and do nothing. So, we have been very careful about how we approach this. So, we stay within the bounds of the law. Anybody who's a licensed mental healthcare professional or an intern working towards becoming an MSW, even though I do not believe that they're covered, I'm not gonna take a chance at their careers. Because they would've gone through all this process just to be licensed. They're not willing to take the risk either. I'm not even open to having that discussion with them . . . So, you know, there are folks who are not licensed who can provide that information. So, you know, we'll stay within the bounds of the law. But, there are way too many other services that our folks provide to risk losing them.

B.3. Board succession. Finally, leaders across all eight organizations explained how recent legislation and the overall political environment have fueled both their own burnout and dwindling interest from future leaders in taking over their organizations. One leader, who has led her volunteer-run organization for six years, summarized her feeling of burnout succinctly, sharing that, "Yes, I have to have my hands on what was going on in the community. But now it's so depressing. I don't wanna know. And someone else needs to step up." Three of the organizations in this study are local chapters of national organizations that place term limits on the local chapters governing boards. All of these organizations' leaders shared some version of a story where they are finding loopholes in those policies in order to keep the organization open. For instance, one leader described how her team of four people "flip flop" who is the president, vice president, treasurer and secretary in the face of ongoing disinterest.

We just flip flop roles so, the officers have to flip flop. Like me and [the other leader] flip flop being vice president and president. Just so we're not in it too long in each position. And then secretary treasurer, like, they haven't flip flopped yet, but they're coming up on needing a flip flop if we don't get some other people in that are interested [in being on the board].

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study is to analyze how nonprofit leaders recalibrate their program strategies when state policies conflict with their missions, drawing on the case of transgender-serving organizations. Building on literature in nonprofit risk management, this study focuses

on how policies impacting transgender youth limit nonprofit programs and force adjusted practices within relevant 501(c)3 organizations. Thus, this study contributes to scholarship on how nonprofit leaders approach shrinking their organization's mission and operations in response to policy risks. The findings suggest that nonprofit "mission clamp" is dealt with by triaging legal shifts through anticipatory civic engagement and defensively redesigning operations for staff and participants. These choices reflect leaders' risk management responses and ability to keep their organizations' practices within the bounds of new laws. However, while such shifts are made to preserve their mission and programs for their clients, they can come at the cost of mission impact.

Resonant with prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Levy, 1992), the primary takeaway from this study is descriptions of how nonprofit organizations strategically scale back the programs associated with their missions because of the new risk of sanctions that come with activity-detering legislation. While this trade-off is a clear implication of prospect theory, this study uncovers that nonprofit leaders digest these political risks and that they carry over to everyday organizational actions like civic engagement, job design choices, collaboration and staffing. These choices have implications for the intended program impacts of organizations and are related to critical outcomes like HIV prevention and mental wellness in this study context (Adams *et al.*, 2018; Allen *et al.*, 2012; Fish *et al.*, 2019, 2025).

If nonprofit leaders and funders seek to preserve the impact of their organizations, the most imminent solution based on this study is to invest in external affairs, such as by maintaining relationships with legislators who can protect the organization and client populations from the possibility of unforeseen legal risks in the long term. This is especially evidenced by the experiences of leaders in the LGBTQ + -serving nonprofit sector, who were operating in the United States with significantly more support in the previous decade. As such, future research could describe how nonprofit and public leaders exercise political awareness (Thorson, 2014), build trust (Ohemeng *et al.*, 2020) and strategically garner stakeholder support as part of their risk management plan. These changes in individual outcomes are additionally connected to broader concerns about how democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016) shape nonprofit civil liberties (Gazley and Alexander, 2025) and the foreclosure of civic space in anti-pluralist democracies (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).

While this study of political risks to nonprofit leaders is conducted in a high salience subsector, it is limited by its small-N and single state design with a hard-to-reach population. Findings may be transferable to similar subsectors and reversed partisan settings but should be understood within their scope. Despite these limitations, this study contributes a lens toward nonprofit "mission clamp" and how nonprofit leaders experienced and managed policy deterrence. Future research should take efforts to compare responses across severity of legislation, process trace leaders' risk-management responses from the point new legislation is anticipated and consider downstream chilling effects on service outcomes.

About the author

Shaun Khurana is an assistant professor at the University of Florida IFAS. His research program considers nonprofit and public management questions regarding risk management, administrative burden and performance accountability.

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Appendix

Example interview questions

- (1) Tell me about your organization. What is its origin story and mission?

- (2) Can you please share a bit about your role within the organization and the specific responsibilities you handle on a day-to-day basis?
- (3) How does the organization aim to support trans youth, especially in the context of challenges related to recent policies?
- (4) Could you describe the programs, services or initiatives the organization has in place to enhance the well-being of trans youth?
- (5) What challenges does the organization encounter when dealing with recent legislation, and how do you address or overcome these challenges?
- (6) Could you share specific strategies that have been developed to upkeep the reach of your programs?

Notes

1. LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. The acronym generally refers to and links together the experiences of gender and sexual minorities.
2. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that inductively builds theory directly from data systematically collect based on a research purpose, rather than testing a hypothesis. The focus is on understanding processes by discovering patterns, categories and concepts from participants' experiences.
3. Source: American Political Science Association, Volcker Junior Scholar Research Grant.

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