CROSS-SECTOR DYNAMICS OF ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

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Dedicated to the people who do the thankless work of supporting vulnerable communities, families, and youth in good times and hard times. You have my gratitude and admiration.

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CROSS-SECTOR DYNAMICS OF ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

This dissertation examines how nonprofit organizations influence individuals' experiences of administrative burden in their interactions with governments, with a focus on issues in transgender health. I examine the validity of the theoretical assumption that nonprofits reduce burdens in citizen-state interactions, using transgender legal name changes and hormone replacement therapy access as test cases. The practical value of such a project is a deeper understanding of how nonprofits generally help vulnerable populations navigate policy implementation and specifically help with the possible identity development milestones of the US transgender community. In the first chapter, I argue that nonprofit help is indirect and that it can produce a quantifiable effect. Using an instrumental variables strategy, I demonstrate that nonprofit help is associated with an increase in reported respectful treatment during transgender legal name change proceedings. This result suggests that having a nonprofit ally helping an individual through an administrative process can reduce administrative burdens. The second chapter explores how "know your rights" information from nonprofits affects burden perception among groups with varying levels of anticipated stigma. An original survey experiment compares the perceptions of women and transgender people's anticipated burden in a hypothetical legal name change hearing. Results show that educational nonprofit assistance produces a significant reduction in perceived administrative burden for those anticipating high levels of stigma, which indicates that nonprofit information targeted at vulnerable populations may be an effective communication strategy. In the third chapter, I develop a typology distinguishing nonprofits from guardians and other institutions that directly control administrative burdens. I apply the typology in a qualitative analysis of interviews and explore how parents make consent decisions for transgender healthcare, inclusive of the influence of nonprofit-run and informal parent peer programs. The analysis suggests that these peer settings provide normative value and community validation, which help parents process the psychological costs of uncertainty. Overall, the chapters demonstrate that nonprofits play complex and activity-specific roles in mediating administrative burdens, with their effectiveness varying based on the level of local involvement, clients' anticipation of stigma, and community-building capacity.

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Introduction

Understanding the roles and behaviors of nonprofit organizations in mitigating administrative burdens requires forging and testing hypothesized linkages between public and nonprofit management literatures (LePere-Schloop and Nesbit, 2023a, 2023b). Nonprofits have been implicated in research on administrative burdens, which is a policy process theory that focuses on friction at the interfaces where people interact with governments (Herd and Moynihan, 2019). Interactions required for administrative processes may occur directly with government officials or indirectly with private sector or nonprofit employees and volunteers that are implementing policies or otherwise regulated by governments; a hybrid combination is also likely in many context (Jakobsen et al., 2019). More complex administrative burdens often require more interactions with administrators and are also more likely to involve actors from multiple sectors (for example, Barnes, 2021). The involvement of actors from multiple sectors in administrative processes has been considered in previous research studying when and how cross-sector contracting and collaboration are effective managerial strategies for achieving public policy goals (Brown and Potowski, 2003; Ansell and Gash, 2008). But, what the positioning of actors from different sectors relative to public policy goals means for the people who need to navigate administrative burdens to access programs and services has been underexplored. Understanding the managerial dynamics here are significant to severity of how administrative burdens shape access to public programs vital to individuals' health and wellbeing.

The underlying assumption in research on administrative burdens is that nonprofit involvement should decrease a clients' degree of administrative burden (Halling and Baekgaard, 2024). However, the layers of principal-agent relationships between governments and nonprofits suggest more complicated predictions (Bogart, 1995). Nonprofit organizations vary in degrees of overlap with government organizations and regulatory priorities. In instances where nonprofits are contracted and funded by governments to deliver social services, those organizations are the face of a certain policy goal and directly control administrative burdens. Government-funded nonprofits need to demonstrate their compliance with implementing regulatory requirements from their federal, state, or local government funders, but they can directly shape their clients' experiences with the administrative burden they either must apply to or can choose to apply to them (Wiley and Berry, 2018). For nonprofits in a collaborative relationship with governments, such as in strategic public-private partnerships or coordinated emergency relief efforts, the level of interlock with government will similarly dictate the client's downstream experience of administrative burden. Conversely, for nonprofits that have missions and operations that are independent from government, other than compliance with 501(c)(3) tax status regulatory requirements, their client-serving activities are free of added external regulation and may attempt to shape people's experiences of administrative burdens in interactions with governments. But such effects will be indirect at best.

More research is needed to clarify if such non-contractual or non-collaborative nonprofit involvement in government regulated administrative processes increases or decreases individual experiences of administrative burden. Such research would especially bring into focus the influence of activities in small, community-based, or grassroots nonprofits (Toepler, 2003). Drawing on Salamon's (1987; 1989) theoretical framework for the relative advantages of government and nonprofit organizational forms, each chapter of this dissertation will study the influence of nonprofits in shaping individuals' experiences of administrative burden by addressing each of the following questions:

- Does the presence of nonprofit help shape people's reported level of administrative burden in a citizen-state interaction?

- Does the provision of information by nonprofits specializing in relevant vulnerable groups shape their perceptions of administrative burden?
- How do nonprofits interact with other citizen-side actors who shape the production of administrative burden?

By developing hypotheses for each of these questions, and testing them with empirical data, there are opportunities to understand the role of nonprofit organizations in shaping their clients' experience with administrative burdens, contribute to the theoretical assumptions of administrative burdens, and inform the approach and validity of nonprofits’ service delivery strategies.

Theoretical Background: Administrative Burden and Nonprofits

Nonprofits emerge as relevant actors in policy systems where the administrative burdens of interacting with governments are designed and implemented in restrictive and onerous ways. Their relevance can be derived from the defining logistical and political features of the administrative burden framework. First, from a logistical perspective, administrative burdens can be understood as the costs of interacting with governments including learning, psychological, and compliance costs (Harvey, Herd, and Moynihan, 2015). Learning costs are barriers to the information necessary to understand how to use public programs and services. They can come in the form of time trying to gather and process information, accessibility of the information of interest, and client awareness of requirements. Psychological costs describe the stress, stigma, autonomy loss, and other mental strain resulting from administrative criteria. These costs can be particularly harmful in settings where the recipient faces high stigma or social rejection due to societal norms. Compliance costs are the tangible dollar and time costs that a person must take on as part of complying with the requirements of a policy, such as waiting in line or filling out forms. As citizens observe these costs to anticipate the potential negatives of interacting with providers (Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thompson, 2021), they may seek the help of external resources such as nonprofit organizations to navigate any complexities that are difficult to manage alone.

Second, from a political perspective, administrative burdens are constructed both in the policy design and implementation phases of the policy process in ways that are intended to determine access (Hill, 2014). Originating with Kahn, Katz, and Gutek's (1976) work on bureaucratic encounters, political scientists have long theorized about how the frictions of individuals' interacting with the government are a site of politics, where who gets certain resources is subject to political values, attitudes, and beliefs. In this way, administrative burden can perpetuate stereotypes of the inefficiency of government (Moe, 1989) and shape the legitimacy of democracies because it affects public perceptions of the effectiveness or equity of public organizations (Burden et al., 2012). If administrative burdens are restrictive enough to systemically keep enough individuals or communities out of government provided services or opportunities, nonprofits could also emerge to address problems for which there is sufficient demand (Yan, Guo, and Paarlberg, 2014).

With nonprofits emerging to fill gaps caused by administrative burdens for logistical or political reasons (Weisbrod, 1975), their configurations and relationships with government are also a key factor to consider in whether and how they address such burdens (Bingham, 2011; Brandensen and Johnston, 2018). For nonprofits that are contracted by or collaborate with governments (Emerson et al., 2012), observing their value and mission alignments would suggest whether they are interested in using their direct control of service delivery processes to heighten or reduce administrative burden (Bogart, 1995). However, for nonprofits that emerge as a response to the onerous logistical or political nature of administrative burdens, and are not accountable to the interests of a government funder or collaborator, their intentions are likely to reduce administrative burdens (Tiggelaar and George, 2023). How they approach administrative burden reduction will depend on the kinds of activities they implement that are consistent with their 501(c)(3) exempt purpose (Hansmann, 1980). For example, in this dissertation, I consider nonprofits that provide legal, educational, and social support and observe their effects.

The challenge for nonprofits that aim to help people navigate government processes is that they do not directly design policies or exert control over the behavior of government officials. Nonprofits will be limited to assisting individuals in navigating the logistics of a specific administrative process or lobbying for policy changes. The same reasons why nonprofits are inherently unable to entirely supplement the work of governments can be used to characterize why they would fail to reduce citizen experiences of administrative burdens (Salamon, 1987, 1989; Steinberg and Powell, 2006). Nonprofit management literature studying relative advantages of government versus nonprofit service provision has relied on how Salamon (1987) originally conceptualized nonprofit's market weaknesses with four categories: philanthropic amateurism, philanthropic insufficiency, philanthropic particularism, and philanthropic paternalism. I define and apply them to the administrative burden framework below.

Amateurism and insufficiency are problems of under-provision by nonprofits and name the phenomenon of when unprofessional amateurs organize nonprofits or nonprofits lack sufficient resources. The lack of technical expertise or other resources often results in shortcuts that are likely to worsen the challenges of navigating administrative burdens. Particularism, which involves nonprofits limiting service provision to certain sub-groups, and paternalism, which involves nonprofits limiting their approach to a specific cultural paradigm, are problems of over-exclusion from nonprofit services. These kinds of nonprofit organizing challenges point to failures to reach clients who are in need or would benefit from nonprofit help under a more inclusive mission or culturally sensitive approach. Over-exclusion issues suggest that there would be limited or no nonprofit utilization navigating administrative processes and no effect on administrative burden. If these conditions are situationally true, nonprofits cannot subsidize offering their services below costs when they are not calibrated to properly meet the level of demand (Steinberg and Weisbrod, 2006: Anheier and Topler, 2020). Given a lack of empirical evidence to verify these expectations, I take up the project of studying how nonprofits influence administrative burden with the pressure points of amateurism, insufficiency, particularism, and paternalism in mind.

Contextual Background: Transgender Health

When considering policy contexts where nonprofits help with administrative burdens that involve serious efforts to verify valid use and political forces limiting access, issues in transgender health are noteworthy cases (Pamfile et al., 2024; Stroumsa, 2014). Transgender health or transgender care is an umbrella term that encompasses the range of social, legal, psychological, and medical services provided to transgender people, often based on diagnoses of gender dysphoria[1] (APA, 2017) or gender incongruence[2] (WHO, 2025). The term transgender has evolved to represent multiple kinds of social, gender-nonconformity beyond its traditional referent to someone who moves their gender identity horizontally from traditional conceptions of male to female or female to male (Stryker et al., 2008). Transgender identity is separate from sexual orientation categories like lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but overlap due to shared “queer phenomenology” (Ahmed, 2020), which means subversion of expected orientations of the body,

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[1] Gender dysphoria is a psychiatric diagnosis for significant distress experienced by individuals due to incongruence between their experienced or expressed gender, and their sex assigned at birth. This diagnosis and emphasis on distress replaced the previous term “gender identity disorder” that named cross-sex identification itself a pathology (American Psychiatric Association, 2017).

[2] Gender incongruence is a sexual health diagnosis for persistent and consistent mismatch between a person’s gender identity and biological sex (World Health Organization, 2025).

sexuality, and gender expression. Both normative and openly queer or nonconforming transgender people utilize transgender care options, which is relevant to understanding the varying motivations to navigate requirements for gender affirming interventions. In this dissertation, I focus on nonprofit help with administrative burdens in two gender affirming care interventions: legal change of name and hormone replacement therapy.

There is no one-size-fits-all prescription for alleviating gender incongruence and gender dysphoria, especially given its degrees of intensity and directionality (Kattari et al., 2019). Each individual will determine which care options to use based first on their personal health goals and motivations, and then on their ability to navigate the administrative burdens of care utilization (Velasco et al., 2022). Past research tracking the use of gender-affirming interventions typically sorts transgender populations by their sex assigned at birth and differentiates between self-disclosed gender-normative and gender-nonconforming members of assigned male and female groups (Ceja et al., 2024). For legal name change, transgender identity is not directly reflected in the learning and compliance costs of access, since the process can be used for a broad variety of reasons. However, in the U.S., transgender name change applicants must state their reason is gender affirmation and have historically been treated poorly in courthouse interactions and denied petitions (Bender-Baird, 2024; Steadman, 2021; Thomas, 2021). For medical care options, administrative burdens include demonstrating compliance with diagnostic criteria, obtaining letters of support from mental health professionals, navigating insurance coverage and costs, the potential for stigma in interacting with providers, and navigating health information and misinformation (Feldman et al., 2021; Kachen and Pharr, 2020; White Hughto et al., 2016; Xavier et al., 2013). Demonstrating compliance with diagnostic criteria can be particularly complicated for gender-nonconforming individuals. For both legal name changes and hormone replacement therapy options, adolescents with gender incongruence need parental consent to proceed (Kennedy, 2008).

In addition to legal or medical professionals’ standards, the administrative burdens in transgender health reflect political actors' attitudes on traditional gender norms (Lombardi et al., 2022; Trump, 2025). With rising rates of adolescents openly reporting transgender identification (Herman et al., 2022), increasing public scrutiny of practices in transgender health have resulted in some U.S. states implementing blanket restrictions on adolescent access to medical interventions (Kremen et al., 2021). The primary organization governing best practices in transgender health is called the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) (Coleman et al., 2022). Founded in the late 1970s, WPATH is a nonprofit professional association that hosts academic research conferences, coordinates networks of providers, and, most critically, brings together a large body of experts to review research and produce a Standards of Care (SOC) guide for medical providers. Their longstanding consensus is that gender-affirming care is no panacea, given the range of lower quality-of-life outcomes among the transgender population compared to the cisgender population but serves a vital role in alleviating gender dysphoria (Kuiper and Kettenis, 1988). Groups advocating to ban trans care often condemn the most recent SOC guidance for affirming gender-nonconforming expression and the shifts away from calling transgender a disorder in diagnostic criteria, among multiple arguments to distrust WPATH and induce disgust (Caraballo, 2022). This strategy has proven politically successful in increasing barriers to accessing medical care options and could have spillover effects on access to legal name changes. The mix of real concerns that can inform future research on transgender health and contrived misinformation about the nature and validity of care use is challenging to separate.

Faced with logistical ordeals and negative political signals, nonprofit organizations that serve the transgender community can play an essential role in helping people navigate learning and compliance costs and managing the associated psychological costs of care options. Both ad hoc community efforts and formal nonprofits have played a critical role in movements focused on the lesbian, bisexual, and gay community, and many have expanded their missions to include issues affecting the transgender community (Mananzala and Spade, 2008). LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations offer identity-specific programs and services that fill gaps left by generalist nonprofit organizations and respond to needs specific to LGBTQ+ people (Smith, 2005; Eger, 2021). They can also be a source of identity-based representation and support, which is especially salient in the face of politicization (Narendran et al., 2025). However, these strengths of identity-specific missions may also be points of weakness for organizations to formalize consistent resources and capacity to achieve their missions. In this project, I will draw on cases of nonprofit help with transgender legal name changes and access to hormone replacement therapy to contribute to understanding whether nonprofits help with administrative burdens.

Scholarly Contributions

This dissertation project will comprise three separate studies on whether and how nonprofit organizations help with administrative burdens in transgender health. Nonprofit organizations generally enjoy more positive social regard compared to other sectors and are associated with alleviating inequalities, while public organizations often face criticism for implementing ineffective bureaucratic processes. Looking past perceptions of government or charitable activities and understanding the role organizations play, both in the market of public service provision and in the minds of citizens, requires empirical investigation. This dissertation contributes to understandings of administrative burdens imposed by governments and the potential help provided by nonprofits by investigating whether and when the interplay of their rules and responses minimizes administrative burden. The findings have implications for how scholars understand when public and nonprofit organizations help or harm citizen-state interactions. Negative findings regarding nonprofit effectiveness in helping with administrative burdens broaden scholars' understanding of the limitations of nonprofit organizations influence in citizen-state interaction problems. The ways in which voluntary failure, when nonprofits cut corners or offer inadequate representation, translates to nonprofit clients' experiences of service delivery is directly addressed. This dissertation project also offers findings pertinent to citizen-nonprofit-state interactions by examining psychological costs as the dependent variable and elements of voluntary failure theory as the independent variables. Most research on administrative burden evaluates individual public or nonprofit programs. This project overcomes this bottleneck by using data that can explore the dynamics of multi-sector social service delivery and offer implications for research on administrative burdens and nonprofit strategies.

Dissertation Chapters Overview

In this dissertation, I investigate how the activities of nonprofit sector organizations shape individual people's experiences of administrative burden in interactions with the government, drawing on empirical studies of issues in transgender health. I begin by questioning the assumption in current administrative burden literature that nonprofit involvement can mitigate the onerous nature of citizen-state interactions. By drawing on the context of transgender legal name change and health care access, which are administrative processes marked by political controversy, regulation by public policy, and LGBTQ+ nonprofit sector involvement, I test this assumption and contribute to understanding under what conditions and to what degree nonprofit involvement shapes administrative burdens.

In the first chapter, I hypothesize that nonprofit help is indirect, but I find that it can produce a positive, quantifiable "allyship" effect. Previous policy analysis studies have evaluated how changes in policy requirements that reduce learning, compliance, and psychological costs can increase participation in public programs (Fantoni, 2024; Pierce and Moulton, 2023;). However, in policy contexts or times where such government reforms are unlikely, individuals may utilize help from nonprofit organizations to navigate administrative burdens. I study how utilizing nonprofit help navigating the process of legal name change shapes the individual's reported burden in their interaction with a county-level judge. I use data from a large survey of U.S. transgender people in 2015 (n=6,155), matched with original state-level data on the name-change support programs offered by nonprofit organizations. Using an instrumental variables strategy, I find that the presence of legal nonprofit help is associated with an increase in rating of respectful treatment, suggesting that having a nonprofit "ally" help an individual through an administrative process can lower administrative burdens.

In the second chapter, I assess how nonprofit-provided "know your rights" help and anticipated stigma shape citizen perceptions of administrative burdens. Information provision is a known tool for reducing the learning costs of administrative processes (Bhanot, 2020; Flanagan et al., 2021; Hock et al., 2021). However, research has yet to evaluate if nonprofit organizations that specialize in reducing information asymmetries for vulnerable populations produce benefits from particularizing their focus on clients with a predisposition to anticipate stigmatized treatment. To address this concern, I use an experimental design to compare how women (lower anticipated stigma) and transgender people (higher anticipated stigma) perceive a vignette, legal name change hearing with a judge, when provided with "know your rights" information. Based on my survey experiments, I find that educational nonprofit help only produces a significant reduction in perceptions of administrative burden for those highly anticipating stigma. This implies that nonprofit specialization in vulnerable populations is an efficient choice for targeting information needs.

In the third chapter, I develop a typology of citizen-side actors for the administrative burden literature, distinguishing between nonprofit organizations and legal guardians, as well as other individuals and institutions that have indirect or direct control over administrative burdens. I perform a qualitative analysis of 25 families with transgender minors to inductively explore how and why parents' consent to youth transgender healthcare and the indirect role of involvement in nonprofit-run and informally organized parent peer programs in shaping parent decision logics. This study suggests that such peer-based programs provide normative value and are an ideal setting in which to process the psychological costs of uncertainty with community validation.

Overall, the chapters demonstrate that nonprofits play complex and activity-specific roles in mediating administrative burdens, with their effectiveness varying based on the level of local involvement, targeting efficiency, and community-building capacity. The results speak to practitioners needs by pinpointing where to invest efforts into improving programs that involve helping clients navigate administrative burdens.

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Chapter 1: The Allyship Effect: Nonprofit Help with Administrative Burden

Abstract

Individuals often use nonprofit sources of help to navigate administrative burdens. Like administrative burden reforms directly implemented by governments, nonprofits can indirectly address learning costs through information provision and compliance costs through ensuring eligibility. However, nonprofits are limited in addressing psychological costs beyond being a committed ally to their clients. This study investigates how nonprofit sources of help shape the degree of psychological costs reported in citizen-bureaucrat encounters by using a large-N survey of transgender and gender-diverse people's experiences filing for legal name changes and original state-level data on the network characteristics of nonprofit help. I use an instrumental variables strategy to find that nonprofit help is associated with an increased rating of respectful treatment by bureaucrats. Additional exploratory analysis shows assistance from nonprofits that employ legal staff or offer online self-help guides are associated with burden relief. These findings suggest the mechanism of successful help is improving the service seekers' knowledge of bureaucrat behavior in administrative processes.

Introduction

Administrative processes tend to be characterized as burdensome for the required knowledge (learning costs), time investment (compliance costs), and frustration incurred (psychological costs) by applicants (Herd and Moynihan, 2019; Halling and Baekgaard, 2023). Research on administrative burdens has demonstrated how such costs determine government accessibility, meaning whether eligible individuals successfully receive public benefits (Fox et al., 2020; 2023). There is additional "bite" to administrative burdens, which are more than little inconveniences, as barriers to service access can relate to downstream detrimental health effects (Heinrich, 2016). In some policy contexts, governments have implemented reforms that reduce administrative burdens and increase government program accessibility or use (Benish et al., 2024). Such administrative burden reforms typically involve shifting policy design or management practices to make administrative processes more intuitive, quicker, and less stressful. However, in contexts where the political will to reduce administrative burdens is low (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2021), nonprofit organizations can supplement gaps in burden reforms by helping individuals navigate administrative processes and receive benefits (Salamon, 1987).

Previous research considering nonprofits and administrative burdens has highlighted how nonprofits publicly contracted to deliver services can directly do so with a low default level of administrative burden, such as in domestic violence services (Wiley and Berry, 2018). In settings where nonprofits are not the government-contracted service providers, they can indirectly shape administrative burdens by helping citizens navigate governments. That kind of nonprofit help facilitates government service access by addressing the limited time, monetary resources, or administrative knowledge that would have otherwise left someone without the needed support (Nisar, 2019). Examples of such help include nonprofits assisting immigrants with visa processes

(Yu, 2023) or legal aid societies providing representation for disability claims (Hoynes et al., 2022).

Nonprofit help is especially relevant for groups anticipating high psychological costs in their interactions with front-line decision-makers (Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2024; Lasky-Fink et al., 2024). The stress of citizen-state interactions is often exacerbated by the intersection of demographic and institutional factors (Jakobsen, James, Moynihan, and Nabatchi, 2019), such that vulnerable individuals may frequently prefer help from a source external to government. In some ways, nonprofits help individuals navigate administrative processes by mimicking the mechanisms of government-led reforms to reduce administrative burdens. They can alleviate learning costs through information provision, compliance costs through ensuring clients are seen as eligible, and psychological costs by being a committed ally and supporter of their client (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey, 2015; Tiggelaar and George, 2023). However, nonprofit help can also be limited in addressing psychological costs when their efforts cannot shift stigmatizing administrative language or behaviors of public employees that applicants find stressful. Given their capacities and limits, this study seeks to understand how nonprofit help with administrative processes shape the psychological costs of bureaucratic encounters.

This study assesses the allyship effect of nonprofit help on psychological costs by focusing on nonprofit-provided programs for transgender people in the US to access a legal name change (Elias, 2017, 2022; Larson, 2022). This context is one of many areas where the historical treatment of policy users echoes patterns of poor treatment by bureaucrats and avoidance on the part of citizens (Butz and Gaynor, 2022). Ongoing negative policy constructions of transgender people imply both high demand for nonprofit help and limited supply of willing and qualified assistance (Schneider and Ingram, 2005). The empirical relevance of this context to understanding this research question comes from the variation in the availability of nonprofit help, levels of burden in the legal name change process by states, and uses of discretion by county-level judges in legal name change hearings. Like previous research on how nonprofit performance management strategies shape client outcomes (Carnochan et al., 2014), this work considers the quality of the nonprofit help provided as a major factor in theoretically relating nonprofit efforts to mitigated psychological costs.

The study begins with background on solutions to administrative burdens and the need to investigate nonprofit help with psychological costs. I use the theoretical role of nonprofits generally, and nonprofit age and human resource quality specifically, to develop hypotheses about how nonprofit availability and quality relate to the psychological costs of a bureaucratic encounter (Kahn et al., 1976). Hypotheses are tested with data from a large survey of U.S. transgender people in 2015 (n=6,155), matched with original state-level data on the name-change support programs offered by nonprofit organizations. Next, the findings from OLS models and instrumental variables estimation are presented. The results show that nonprofit help is associated with increasing perceptions of being treated with respect by government officials. And, in exploratory analysis of users of nonprofit help, I find that measures of human resource quality may be driving that shift. Based on these findings, I conclude by suggesting that nonprofits help with psychological costs by improving the service seekers' knowledge of bureaucratic behavior in administrative processes.

Government-Led Administrative Burden Reforms

Accessing benefits requires an individual to meet various policy requirements and undergo bureaucratic scrutiny (Moynihan et al., 2022). Administrative burdens are the costs of participating in the administrative process that typically stem from formal policy requirements and bureaucrats' informal, discretionary behaviors (Herd and Moynihan, 2019). Recent studies have considered how government reforms can reduce administrative burden and improve program uptake by targeting learning, compliance, or psychological costs (Baekgaard et al., 2021). Learning costs, or citizen knowledge of when and how to navigate programs, can be reduced through information-sharing, such as using targeted communications to clarify service use processes (Flanagan et al., 2021). Compliance costs, or the effort expended by citizens to uptake a service, can be addressed by reducing requirements to the minimum threshold, such as in documentation requests (see, for example, Pierce and Moulton, 2023, for the case of mortgage assistance). Psychological costs, or the stigma associated with pursuing and accepting benefits, can be curtailed through efforts to protect the user's self-image, such as through minimizing stigmatizing language (Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2024).

Administrative burden reduction efforts generally involve legislative shifts or innovative managerial changes within a public organization's span of control (Camillo, 2021; Benish, 2024). The ideal government-led burden-reduction strategy both benefits citizens and is more streamlined for the service-providing organizations (Herd and Moynihan, 2019). However, changes to government programs that make them less burdensome for citizens are not necessarily more straightforward for the agency. For instance, reduced documentation requests from citizens can shift the burden of tracking down and verifying information onto public employees (Pierce and Moulton, 2023). Similarly, introducing e-government filing platforms can invite increases in applications without necessarily increasing the rate at which such filings comply with requirements (Fantoni, 2024). In this way, shifting burdens in administrative processes does not always minimize overall transaction costs (Williamson, 1989), raising concern about the political willingness of agencies to take on more cases and more overall work.

Decisions to make administrative processes more or less accessible are tied to the ideological goals policymakers or public managers seek to achieve (Herd and Moynihan, 2019). Those political preferences are expected to be represented in the designations built into enabling statutes by legislators, administrative rules from agencies, and uses of discretion by managers in their interactions with individuals. For example, Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2021) used a survey experiment to find that the extent to which policy targets are constructed as deserving or entitled to government programs by policymakers directly relates to their political approval for the level of burden built into program rules. Johnson and Neshkova (2023; 2024) also conducted survey experiments and found that bureaucrats are increasingly willing to exercise their discretion to "unburden" elderly welfare clients with increasing vulnerabilities but did not behave similarly for Black clients with increasing vulnerabilities, all else equal.

These studies suggest that policy designers and implementers lack the incentive to reduce burdens for individuals from negatively constructed groups. Also, it is noteworthy that literature using administrative data to evaluate real government innovations to minimize administrative burden mainly concentrates on politically desirable policy targets, with survey experiments filling the gaps for understanding the experiences of negatively constructed groups (Halling and Baekgaard, 2024). This practical trend raises the relevance of conducting empirical studies of nonprofit guided help with administrative burdens for populations negatively constructed by policy.

Nonprofits Mimic Government-Led Burden Reforms

Nonprofit organizations can supplement gaps in government-led burden reforms by helping individuals navigate administrative processes and receive benefits (Salamon, 1987). Classic economic theories of sectors posit that when governments neglect policy demands, communities can organize themselves in the nonprofit sector to address unmet needs and realize minority policy preferences (Salamon, 1987; Steinberg, 2006). In public administration broadly, this premise underlies research on government-nonprofit relations and has similar leverage for conceptualizing the behavior of nonprofit actors in helping with administrative burdens. When nonprofits cannot directly provide alternative services, they can ease the burden placed on the individual by helping them navigate bureaucratic rules, processes, behaviors, and interactions (Masood and Nisar, 2021; Tigelaar and George, 2023).

In some ways, the tools nonprofits use reflect those that governments are known to use internally to reduce administrative burdens. Regarding learning costs, just as governments may adjust information communication methods about the administrative process, nonprofits can similarly close gaps in their clients' administrative knowledge. For example, nonprofits helping immigrants navigate their legal status in the United States must be responsive to changes in administrative law to remain effective (Yu, 2023). Their organized efforts help ensure that clients work from the most up-to-date procedural information and avoid setbacks or other administrative errors that may result from a lack of expertise. Regarding compliance costs, just as governments may shift the work of determining eligibility from citizens onto public employees, nonprofits can absorb this task from their clients. For example, nonprofit legal aid societies that help disabled individuals remain enrolled in social welfare programs are associated with more successful applications and renewals because of their experience with the matter (Hoynes et al., 2022).

Nonprofits’ Indirect Influence Over Psychological Costs

Regarding psychological costs, nonprofit help in navigating an administrative process will often not be able to fully mimic a government's internal intervention. When nonprofits are contracted to deliver services, they are in a position of control over psychological costs because they direct the design and implementation of services. For example, nonprofit-run domestic violence shelters funded by governments are known to engage in “workarounds” that ensure grant funding is allocated in ways that both meet performance monitoring standards and make their services less psychologically costly to survivors of gender-based violence (Wiley and

Berry, 2018). This nonprofit management strategy is similar to a government initiative to be mindful of stigmatization (Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2024). However, when nonprofits navigate government alongside their client, I argue their efforts to reduce psychological costs do not reach equal lengths because they can be a committed ally and supporter of their client but cannot directly alter necessary parts of application processes and administrator interactions (Tiggelaar and George, 2023). Such nonprofits may separately try to advocate for shifting the stigmatizing administrative language or behaviors of public employees that applicants find stressful. They also might try to match their clients to known bureaucratic environments free of discrimination or unequal treatment when possible. But nonprofits have limited reach in directly and legally enforcing a specific pattern of respectful bureaucrat behavior. Despite limitations on nonprofit-provided programs, nonprofits do implement activities to mitigate psychological costs, which suggests support for the common assumption that nonprofits lower administrative burden.

H1: Nonprofit help is associated with service recipients experiencing a lower degree of psychological costs

Understanding whether nonprofits effectively mitigate psychological costs also requires further consideration of the nonprofit helpers' characteristics (Fyall, Moore, and Gugerty, 2018). In general, nonprofit effectiveness is understood as a consequence of strong performance management strategies (Kendall and Knapp, 2000; Poister, Aristigueta, and Hall, 2014). Given this study’s focus on clarifying the effect of nonprofit help with psychological costs, I consider nonprofit organizational age (Chun and Rainey, 2005a, 2005b) and nonprofit human resource quality (Word and Sowa, 2017) to be two relevant indicators of effectively planning and implementing helping behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). These characteristics offer relevant information on the amount of experience and expertise the organization can provide to their clients.

Greater organizational age is theoretically associated with stronger organizational performance (Dart et al., 1996; Chun and Rainey, 2005a, 2005b; Pandey and Rainey, 2006). This is because older organizations are more likely to engage in strategic planning (Stone, 1989; Crittenden and Crittenden, 2000), which positions them to reflect on past performance and update organizational practices to boost performance. For example, consider the implementation of volunteer income tax assistance programs by United Ways across the United States. Since the early 2000s, the campaign to connect low-income families to free tax preparation services has expanded across the US, with local chapters continuously learning from each year of program implementation (United Way, 2021; DeBacker et al., 2024). The age of the organizations represents their years of experience and extended institutional memory of policy-relevant knowledge. This factor translates to more direct experience offering assistance with the administrative burdens of benefit receipt. It may also mean more knowledge about the street-level bureaucrats on the other side of the citizen-state interaction. Based on this logic, I hypothesize that the age of the nonprofit will moderate the effect of help on psychological costs.

H2: Older nonprofits have a stronger association with service recipients experiencing a lower degree of psychological costs than younger nonprofits.

Nonprofit human resource quality also may predict when nonprofit help will be effective (Word and Sowa, 2017). Nonprofit helpers may be either staff members or volunteers, and their interchangeability and necessary level of investment and expertise depend on the human service delivery tasks (Handy, Mook, and Quarter, 2008). Legal aid nonprofits that can keep full-time attorneys versus those that rely on one-off volunteer event efforts provide one contrasting example. The differences between having a one-time volunteer and a dedicated professional raise concerns over "philanthropic amateurism" and the effectiveness of those with limited experience and expertise doing charitable work (Salmon, 1987; Schnable, 2021). The non-distribution constraint, monetary resources, and salary limitations of nonprofit employment create additional barriers to using consistent and paid labor versus volunteer labor (Frumpkin and Keating, 2011). This motivates the expectation that the extent of quality time and job experience a person in a nonprofit organization engages in relates to their effectiveness at reducing psychological costs.

H3: Nonprofits that employ salaried, professionalized staff have a stronger association with service recipients experiencing a lower degree of psychological costs than volunteer-run nonprofits.

Empirical Context: Help for Transgender Petitioners with Legal Name Changes

My hypotheses are tested in the context of US transgender peoples' legal name change hearings with a judge. Transgender people are common users of legal name change processes, as some members of the community adopt a name different from that listed on identity documents (ID) given at birth to match a post-transition gender (Vance, 2018). Evidence for the benefits of having a legal name congruent with one's post-transition gender on IDs include smoother interactions when presenting documentation to officials (Strode et al., 2024) and increased likelihood of higher income and stable housing. On the other hand, maintaining one's pre-transition documentation is associated with postponed health care utilization and waiting to enroll in public programs (Hill et al., 2018). However, the process to change one's legal name is relatively complex, and compliance and psychological costs can compound additively with potentially stigmatized understandings of transgender identity as the reason for filing (Herd and Moynihan, 2024). Consistent with government failure theory (Salamon, 1987; Steinberg, 2006), nonprofit organizations have taken on the demand to provide help navigating the process. The National Center for Transgender Equality's (NCTE) directory of nonprofits offering free or affordable legal name change assistance is one of the most visible lists of the network of nonprofit actors covering this issue (2017).

Each U.S. state provides a statute specifying their oversight of name change processes, as there is no federal civil procedure for legal name changes (Rennick, 1997). In terms of compliance costs, all petitioners must correctly file the required paperwork and documentation to the court with the appropriate jurisdiction for their home address. Some states require a criminal background check and require the petitioner to publish notice of their name change hearing in a newspaper. States that require a public announcement see fewer petitions from transgender people due to privacy and safety concerns (Steadman, 2021). After filing paperwork, all states require the person to have a hearing with a judge, which is scheduled at the court's discretion and can range from weeks to months following the filing of paperwork. In the hearing, the petitioner usually provides their reason for pursuing a legal name change and answers questions at the judge's discretion. Psychological costs can be part of the interaction with the judge or court officials based on their use of discretion or lines of questioning as well as stress from lack of knowledge of or familiarity with court proceedings on the part of the petitioner.

Case law documenting hearings signals that one determinant of a successful legal name change petition is proving to a judge that the name change is not sought to avoid legal obligations (i.e., creditors, alimony) or commit fraud (Thomas, 2021). Historically, judges have over interpreted the financial fraud criteria to deny name change petitions filed by transgender individuals (Currah, 2022; Bender-Baird, 2024). The practice persists in some jurisdictions today. For example, Columbia County Superior Court Judge J. David Roper of Georgia stated on court records that he only approves name changes for transgender petitioners to gender-neutral names, and denies changes to traditionally male or female names, on the interpretation that adopting a name out of accord with the gender roles of a person’s birth sex is a form of fraud (Wursthorn, 2023). Three filers, represented by a transgender-serving legal nonprofit, jointly contested this outcome, and the Georgia appellate court reversed Roper’s decision, finding it to be an “abuse of discretion” outside the scope of the legal term, fraud (Lambda Legal, 2017). In counties where transgender filers may be uncertain about how their name change paperwork and person will be received by a judge, nonprofit helpers can be especially useful in navigating such administrative burdens.

Data, Sample, and Measurement

Data from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) documents individuals’ experience in their hearing with a judge when filing for gender-affirming legal name change orders. The USTS was fielded from mid-August to mid-September in 2015 by the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) to document the experiences of transgender adults in the United States (James, 2019). The USTS represents an internet-based convenience sample of n=27,715 transgender people in the United States. Calls for USTS participation were circulated with the help of about 400 partner organizations across the US. While the data are not from a random sample, the sample group represented in the survey is one of the largest available of the US transgender community. Studies that use random samples of transgender individuals have found that trans people are more likely to be people of color than is represented in this sample (Flores et al., 2016). As a corrective for sampling bias the USTS provides U.S. race population weights, which are used here to balance the sample towards population means (James et al., 2016).

The study sample was identified as a subset of USTS survey takers. Almost half (49%) of all survey takers answered that none of their IDs or records had the name they preferred, with 44% (n=12,194) of all survey takers making some attempt to change their name legally. Of survey takers who attempted to change their name legally, 60% (n=7,706) responded yes to, “for your legal name change, did you interact with judges or court staff?” while the remaining 40% either had their petition denied before a hearing occurred (12%) or were granted their request without a hearing (28%). This study examines the sample of individuals who had a legal name change hearing (n=6,511 total people and n=5,855 after dropping observations for missing values in control variables) to understand how having help from nonprofits shaped administrative burdens in the hearing with the judge. It is important to note that 93% of petitioners who made it to the hearing stage of the process reported successfully having their name changed. However, the survey did not ask how many petition attempts this took. This high success rate likely represents repeated, persistent petitioning, potentially at multiple courts in a person's home state, until a name change is achieved.

I used two measures of psychological costs as the outcome variables. They include two USTS questions that ask respondents, "when you interacted with judges or court staff, were you treated with respect?" on a three-item scale (always/sometimes/never) and "I received unequal treatment/service" on a two-item (yes/no) scale. I interpret these measures as psychological costs, or stigma induced in the administrative process (Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2024). In the sample, 75% of respondents indicated "always" feeling respected; 91% of respondents answered "no" to receiving unequal treatment.

To specify independent variables, I relied on a USTS question that asked, "did you get legal help to change your name?" with options including "nonprofit help", "private attorney help", "friend help", and "other help". Within the study population, 14% of survey takers indicated utilizing help from a nonprofit, 8% indicated hiring a private attorney, 10% indicated having help from a friend, and 6% indicated some other form of help. To test the first hypothesis, I created and used a nonprofit dummy variable to test association with psychological costs and included controls for using other forms of help.

Data on nonprofit organizations are sourced from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy's Equitable Giving Lab's list of LGBTQIA+ nonprofit organizations and the NCTE's legal assistance directory (Pruitt and Skidmore, 2023; NCTE, 2017). From these data sources, I took two steps to identify a list of organizations offering name change help to transgender people. First, I filtered out organizations that opened in 2015 or later and those whose purposes or websites did not offer name change support (e.g., sports teams, arts and culture) determined either by their name, mission statement listed on GuideStar Candid, or website. Second, I added generalist nonprofit organizations found to have partnerships with LGBTQIA+ serving nonprofits to provide name change support. I identified these via information on the websites of organizations from the initial list and cross reference to the NCTE's name change help directory. In many cases, these generalist organizations were partnerships between LGBTQIA+-specific legislative advocacy organizations and generalist legal aid groups. In total, I identified 68 organizations, active prior to 2015, with online records of providing name change assistance to the trans community. Using the final list of organizations that offer identity document support to the transgender community, I collected the number of organizations active in each state, calculated each organization's age (in years), and created three dichotomous variables for whether the nonprofit offered online self-help information, in-person assistance, and staffed attorneys. I used the organizational age variable to test the second hypothesis and the staffed attorneys variable to test the third hypothesis. For these analyses, I focused on the subsample of individuals who answered yes to utilizing nonprofit help (n=803).

I aggregated the nonprofit organizations' characteristics to the state level to match them to the USTS data by the respondents' birth state. This is because USTS respondents' locations are most coarsely observable at the state level to protect respondents from being identifiable, which limits the geographic precision of the matched nonprofit network characteristics. Based on the full list of nonprofit organizations, most states have only one active organization. For those with more than one (i.e. California, New York, etc.), I aggregated the measures to the state network-level to indicate whether any nonprofit source of help in the state offered online self-help information, in-person assistance, staffed attorneys, and use the age of the oldest nonprofit in the state's network to indicate the years of experience and institutional memory of those leading name-change assistance efforts.

The nonprofit network data describes characteristics of the state-level capacity in transgender name change assistance and represents four distinct models of nonprofit support. First, there are states where the nonprofit help is exclusively online self-help guides, such as The Campaign for Southern Equality's resource guide for Arkansas. Second, there are states where the nonprofit support appears to come from peer and volunteer support within the LGBTQIA+-focused nonprofit organization, such as by the LGBT Community Center of Colorado. Third are states with LGBTQIA+-serving nonprofits using volunteer attorneys to offer legal assistance. For example, the QLaw Association of Washington is a bar association of LGBTQIA+ identifying attorneys that offered pro bono help with identity documents. Fourth are states with collaborations between LGBTQIA+-specific nonprofit organizations and statewide legal aid organizations. For instance, in Indiana, queer community associations like Indiana Youth Group or Transgender Resource Education and Enrichment Services direct their members to Indiana Legal Services' LGBTQ+ program, where potential clients can receive *pro bono* help from full-time attorneys. Online records of nonprofit identity document support are limited, potentially lacking records of activities that did not produce a digital footprint. But they are also likely representative of the communication strategies used by organizations to target their services.

I also include relevant control variables in the analyses. The person-level control variables used from the USTS include sex assigned at birth, age, race, education level, household income, and family support for respondents' transgender identity (Fuller and Riggs, 2018; Campbell et al., 2024). I also collected data relevant to understanding court behavior in name change petitions. These include dichotomous variables for whether the state law requires a background check or newspaper publication to file a legal name change, whether the state law or court administrative forms indicate the use of a fraud criteria, whether county-level court judges are elected or appointed, and whether the state governor was Republican. Data on background checks and newspaper publication requirements come from reading state statutes; this is cross-checked with the 2015 data on identity document policy available from the LGBT Movement Advancement Project (Dechman et al., 2019). State statutes on name change active in 2015 were sourced via LexisNexis and state court change of name petition forms were sourced through state supreme court association websites. Data on judges is sourced from the Brennan Center for Justice (Waldman et al., 2024) and the party of the state governor in 2014 from the openICPSR State Governors Data (Kaplan, 2021). The descriptive statistics of the full sample and the subsample of users of nonprofit help are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Full Sample with Complete Controls

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Respected	5855	2.726	.501	1	3
Unequal Treatment (Yes/No)	5855	.091	.287	0	1
Name Change Granted	5855	.936	.245	0	1
Nonprofit Help	5855	.137	.344	0	1
Paid Attorney Help	5855	.085	.279	0	1
Friend Help	5855	.108	.311	0	1
Other Help	5855	.066	.249	0	1
Fraudulence Criteria on Court Forms	5855	.263	.44	0	1
News Paper Publication Req	5855	.119	.324	0	1
Background Check Req	5855	.156	.363	0	1
Elected Partisan Judge	5855	.244	.43	0	1
Republican Governor	5855	.64	.48	0	1
Assigned Male at Birth	5855	0.518	.5	0	1
Age	5855	2.117	.756	1	4
White	5855	0.85	0.352	0	1
Education Level	5855	3.44	.676	1	4
Household Income	5855	11.701	4.976	1	18
Family support	5855	2.307	1.232	1	5

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Nonprofit Help Sample with Complete Controls

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Respected	803	2.695	.517	1	3
Unequal Treatment (No/Yes)	803	.117	.322	0	1
Name Change Granted	803	.909	.288	0	1
Nonprofit Network Age	803	16.883	11.755	1	67
Online Nonprofit Resources	803	.781	.414	0	1
In-person Nonprofit Resources	803	.787	.41	0	1
Legal Staff	803	.105	.306	0	1
Fraudulence Criteria on Court Forms	803	.168	.374	0	1
News Paper Publication Req	803	.05	.218	0	1
Background Check Req	803	.112	.316	0	1
Elected Partisan Judge	803	.286	.452	0	1
Republican Governor	803	.701	.458	0	1
Assigned Male at Birth	803	0.466	.499	0	1
Age	803	2.036	.677	1	4
White	803	0.78	0.417	0	1
Education Level	803	3.512	.683	1	4
Household Income	803	11.209	5.13	1	18
Family support	803	2.346	1.205	1	5

Methods and Identification Strategy

The challenge of testing a hypothesis on the effect of nonprofit help with psychological costs is the potential for reverse causality on who makes the decision to seek nonprofit assistance. People who are more prone to feeling stress or sensitive to stigmatization in administrative interactions may be more likely to seek help, making attributing causality to a simple regression estimate problematic. A simple estimate would only represent the correlation between use of nonprofit help and predisposition to psychological costs. In Table 3, I directly compare the demographic characteristics of the full sample of individuals with those who said yes to utilizing nonprofit help. I find that there are no significant differences in their characteristics. In both groups, the average person is a white college graduate between the ages of 24 and 36 with a household income in the $40,000 range. This lends some credibility to OLS estimates, but the potential endogeneity of sensitivity to psychological costs or the self-perceived need to ask for help remain unobserved variables.

Table 3. Comparison of Means in Full Versus Nonprofit Help Users Samples

Variable	Full Sample Mean (n=5855)	Nonprofit Sample Mean (n=803)	Min	Max
Assigned Male at Birth	.518	.466	0	1
Age	2.117	2.036	1	4
White	.85	.780	0	1
Education Level	3.44	3.512	1	4
Household Income	$47,000	$42,000	0	$150,000+
Family Support	2.307	2.346	1	5

To address this concern, I show results for both linear OLS regressions with state fixed effects and use an instrumental variables (IV) approach. In choosing an instrumental variable that is related to the independent variable, nonprofit help, but is only related to psychological costs through the use of nonprofit help, I choose to use the number of nonprofits in the respondents' state as an instrument. This sets up the two stage least squares (2SLS) estimator to represent the effect of nonprofit help on psychological costs driven by the density of nonprofit assistance. The local availability of nonprofit helpers plausibly influences a person's likelihood of choosing to use nonprofit help. But it can be assumed to not directly shape psychological costs, except through the use of services. This estimation strategy cuts out selection on the demand for nonprofit help and instead speaks to the effects attributable to the geographically relevant supply of nonprofits (Bollen, 2012).

The IV estimation involves a 2SLS procedure. To begin, I regress the use of nonprofit help on the number of nonprofits to establish a first stage relationship. Then, I regress psychological costs on the predicted values from the first stage regression, which serve as an instrumented measure of nonprofit help. The equations are presented as follows.

$$NonprofitHelp_{is} = NumberNonprofits\beta_{is} + \varepsilon_{is} \quad (1)$$

$$PsychCost_{is} = \widehat{NonprofitHelp}\beta_{is} + \varepsilon_{is} \quad (2)$$

Findings

To test the first hypothesis on whether nonprofit help lowers psychological costs, I present results from both OLS and IV estimates. The linear OLS regressions include state fixed effects (α_s), a vector of person-level control variables (X), race-based survey sampling weights, and standard errors clustered at the state-level. Results from this regression are listed in Table 4. I provide results for samples with both incomplete (n=6,511) and complete (n=5,855) control variables for both dependent variables.

Table 4. Nonprofit Help with Psychological Costs, State FE

	(1) Respected	(2) Respected	(3) Unequal Treatment	(4) Unequal Treatment
Nonprofit Help	-0.054*	-0.046	0.028*	0.027*
	(0.028)	(0.037)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Paid Attorney Help	-0.017	-0.010	0.028	0.036*
	(0.040)	(0.037)	(0.018)	(0.019)
Friend Help	-0.045**	-0.047**	0.005	0.005
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.019)
Other Help	-0.028	-0.021	-0.024	-0.030
	(0.030)	(0.028)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Male at Birth	0.002	0.021	0.017*	0.012
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Age	0.073***	0.061***	-0.022***	-0.020**
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.007)	(0.009)
White	-0.038**	-0.047**	0.011	0.007
	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Educ	-0.004	-0.019	0.001	0.006
	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.007)	(0.007)
HH Income		0.006***		-0.002***
		(0.002)		(0.001)
Family Support		-0.054***		0.026***
		(0.006)		(0.004)
Constant	2.636***	2.743***	0.094***	0.044*
	(0.065)	(0.066)	(0.023)	(0.025)
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	6,511	5,855	6,511	5,855
R-squared	0.027	0.049	0.016	0.033

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The results presented in Table 4 suggest that utilizing nonprofit sources of help is associated with increasing degrees of psychological costs, showing a significant negative relationship with respect and positive relationship with unequal treatment. In fact, all four forms of help are negatively associated with feeling respected by judges and courthouse officials. Additionally, the nonprofit and privately hired attorney form of help are positively associated with answering yes to experiencing unequal treatment. This model confirms a selection bias where people who feel higher degrees of burden are associated with asking for nonprofit help, but without directionally clear estimation due to missing variables and cross-sectional data, this model cannot speak to if psychological costs are corrected by the actions of utilizing nonprofit help.

The OLS regression with state fixed effects results in Table 4 address concerns about factors that are constant over time, such as legal requirements or courthouse culture. The result shows the negative association between nonprofit help and psychological costs are robust to person-level controls and state fixed effects but does not address the person-level omitted variables of concern about sensitivity to psychological costs. An IV regression addresses this issue by using the number of nonprofits in the state as an instrumental variable that is both relevant to using nonprofit help and exogenous to person-level psychological costs inflicted by a judge.

Results from the first stage estimation are available in Table 5 and the instrumental variables estimation are available in Table 6.

Table 5. First Stage: Number of Nonprofits and Nonprofit Help

	(1) Nonprofit Help
Number of Nonprofits	0.023***
	(0.002)
Control	0.086***
	(0.005)
Observations	6,511
R-squared	0.035

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 6. IV Estimation of Nonprofit Help on Psychological Cost

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Respected	Unequal Treatment	Respected	Unequal Treatment
$\widehat{Nonprofit}\ Help$	0.121*	0.047*	0.128	0.128
	(0.062)	(0.024)	(0.338)	(0.189)
Control	2.709***	0.085***	2.752***	0.075***
	(0.017)	(0.006)	(0.037)	(0.020)
Observations	6,511	6,511	51	51
R-squared	0.000	0.001	0.014	0.010

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The results in Table 5 support the presence of a first stage relationship between the number of nonprofits in the respondent's state and increased probability of using nonprofit help. Using the fitted values from the first stage estimation, Table 6 shows the results of a 2SLS estimation of the transformed values of nonprofit help on psychological costs, both at the individual-level and aggregated at the state-level. The findings indicate that utilizing nonprofit help is associated with a 12% increase in reporting respectful treatment and a 5% increase in reporting unequal treatment. This result indicates mixed support for hypothesis 1 that nonprofit help alleviates psychological costs and suggests the need for a deeper understanding of the nature of nonprofit help. The differences in the finding in Table 4 and Table 6 represent the strengths of their respective estimation strategies.

In Table 7, I use a linear OLS regression to estimate the relationship between the characteristics of the nonprofits in the respondents' network and psychological costs, controlling for state level name change policy characteristics and person level demographics.

Table 7. OLS of Characteristics of Nonprofit Help on Psychological Costs

VARIABLES	(1) Respected	(2) Unequal Treatment
Nonprofit Network Age	-0.000*	0.000
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Nonprofit Legal Staff	0.141*	-0.062
	(0.079)	(0.037)
Online Nonprofit Resources	0.166***	-0.033
	(0.050)	(0.057)
In-person Nonprofit Resources	0.040	-0.002
	(0.057)	(0.035)
Fraudulence Criteria on Court Forms	-0.036	0.077*
	(0.064)	(0.045)
News Paper Publication Req	-0.049	0.006
	(0.118)	(0.059)
Background Check Req	0.051	-0.013
	(0.066)	(0.051)
Elected Partisan Judge	0.096*	-0.078***
	(0.048)	(0.019)
Republican Governor	0.056	-0.0156
	(0.046)	(0.023)
Male at Birth	0.031	0.015
	(0.092)	(0.023)
Age	0.0843	-0.034
	(0.071)	(0.0301)
White	0.042	-0.042
	(0.065)	(0.029)
Educ	-0.073*	0.044***
	(0.038)	(0.012)
Income	0.011*	-0.001
	(0.006)	(0.002)
Family Support	-0.056***	0.019
	(0.015)	(0.012)
Constant	2.534***	0.058
	(0.212)	(0.133)
Observations	803	803
R-squared	0.080	0.034

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The models in Table 7 show no relationship between nonprofit network age and psychological costs that rejects hypothesis two. However, the presence of legal staff, compared to peer volunteers is statistically significant. More specifically, the presence of legal staff compared to volunteers increases the probability a person feels respected in their hearing with a judge by 14% supporting hypothesis three. Additionally, the presence of online self-help resources indicates an increased probability of feeling respected in a hearing with a judge. These findings support the notion that professionalized assistance, and resources are useful in a setting with high administrative complexity.

Discussion and Conclusion

People facing administrative burdens in their interactions with the state may choose to draw on nonprofit help to navigate the processes. The purpose of this study was to articulate how nonprofits can shape administrative burdens and bring attention to the indirect nature of nonprofit-led burden reduction. The indirect nature of nonprofit help raises questions about its effectiveness at reducing psychological costs, since the only direct mechanism of nonprofit help with psychological costs is being a supportive ally to their client. Thus, this study sought to empirically test whether nonprofit help is associated with reduced psychological costs and determine which kinds of nonprofits can be characterized as successful helpers. To better assess a causal estimate due to nonprofit help and psychological costs being endogenous, I used an instrumental variables approach and found that nonprofit help increased both reported levels of respect and levels of unequal treatment.

In trying to understand why the presence of nonprofit help would increase the identification of both respectful and unequal treatment, the results of the regressions of nonprofit characteristics offer a possible explanation. While greater nonprofit institutional memory is not associated with psychological costs, both the presence of paid lawyers on the nonprofit staff and online self-help resources has a statistically significant negative association with these costs (e.g., their presence lowers costs in the form of increasing felt respect). This result suggests greater administrative literacy as a mechanism. Previous research on administrative burdens has demonstrated that greater understanding and knowledge of processes relate to lower levels of psychological costs in the process and greater likelihood of application success (Masood and Nisar, 2021). Practically speaking, both the self-help guides and lawyers play the role of communicating what the requirements of the process are and what to expect from an interaction with the judge. Through the aid of preparation, individuals are better able to assess both positive and negative psychological costs. The findings highlight how not all nonprofit help is equal, and specifically that the substantive resources of nonprofits, including professional education of nonprofit personnel and information communication strategies matter to evaluations of psychological cost.

The analysis should be considered in light of multiple data limitations. First is the complicated nature of creating representative and large samples of transgender people in the United States. While internet-based surveys suffer sampling bias, the norm of discomfort around adding LGBTQIA+ survey questions in random samples limits data availability for this topic. Queer data norms are slowly shifting (Guyan, 2022; Meyer and Millisen, 2022), for instance with the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity questions in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. Another limitation is missing data from the use of online records on nonprofit web pages to characterize the activities of LGBTQ+ nonprofit networks.

Additionally, this study uses citizens' perception of psychologically costly bureaucratic encounters as the outcome variables of interest. While the data does not offer another means of knowing if the bureaucrat was disrespectful of the client or treated the client unequally in some legal manner of the word, understanding how the bureaucrat's behavior makes the client subjectively feel is of relevance to understanding the psychological administrative burdens of bureaucratic encounters (Pandey, 2023). One point for practitioners who offer help would be to prepare applicants not just to be compliant with the law, but for the experience of directly communicating with a bureaucrat and how they can expect that person to implement the law as part of that interaction.

Another consideration is the transferability of findings from this context. Nonprofit help with administrative burden is a phenomenon that has many other iterations, such as programs that assist with income tax preparation, nonprofits that support incarcerated individuals, or women's shelters that help prepare protective orders. In those other instances, the financial status of the individual is the likely determinant of whether they choose (or qualify for) nonprofit help over other privately hired help. Concerns over anti-transgender stigma leave eligibility requirements open for anyone to choose nonprofit help. However, the same reasons for which nonprofit help may be a relevant substitute for privately hired help may also represent limited availability of quality, experienced sources of help. The capacity of such helpers is especially apparent in the nature of the majority online only nonprofit resources available in the southern United States seen in the data collected here.

This study has the potential to encourage additional research on resources and nonprofit helpers that shape administrative burdens. This help can be both in navigation assistance and in other forms such as 501(c)(4) advocacy for policy reform or nonprofit efforts to subvert state processes (Levine Daniel and Fyall 2019; Beaton et al., 2021). Future researchers interested in understanding the role of nonprofit help with administrative burden should investigate a citizen's willingness to ask for help, especially comparing stigmatized policy settings. A qualitative view of this phenomena could compare how clients make sense of events unfolding in their interactions with the state among citizens who did and did not have external help. As this study demonstrates through efforts to quantify an allyship effect, understanding the resources on the citizen side of a citizen state interaction is necessary to developing a more complete understanding of the nature of administrative burdens.

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Chapter 2: Dynamics of Anticipated Stigma, “Know Your Rights” Information, and Citizen Perceptions of Administrative Burden, Fairness, and Performance

Abstract

Does procedural knowledge change citizens’ perceptions of negative bureaucratic encounters? Previous research suggests an individual’s tolerance for discourteous interactions with state authorities is grounded in their knowledge of administrative processes and identity-based reference points for anticipated stigma. This study considers how bureaucrat language and nonprofit information provision affect citizens’ perceptions of administrative burden, fairness, and organizational performance for groups with different levels of anticipated stigma. Hypotheses are tested with two survey experiments simulating legal name change hearings sought for maiden name reversions (experiment 1) or gender transition (experiment 2). I find that negatively phrased bureaucrat language predicts increased perceived administrative burden for all but predicts decreased perceived performance only for non-stigmatized groups. Additionally, providing information on administrative procedures only improved perceptions of fair treatment after a negative interaction for groups anticipating stigma. Implications for citizen-state interaction research and identity-based reference points for perceptions of state authority are discussed.

Introduction

Educational efforts that teach individuals how to interact with legal authorities are a common, self-defensive phenomenon, especially in minority communities (Denvir, Balmer, and Pleasence, 2013). Information may come both from informal sources in a person's network, such as in intergenerational conversations in Black communities about interacting with police (Wylie, Malloy, Fine, and Evans, 2024), and from formal sources like nonprofit "know your rights" programs, such as those educating LGBTQ+ people how to navigate employment law and policy (Baker and Lewis, 2017). These information sharing efforts seek to empower people who anticipate stigmatized treatment to participate in opportunities and programs (Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2024). Such initiatives are often offered by nonprofits and targeted towards vulnerable populations that are eligible for a benefit or service but avoid seeking help for perceptual reasons like fear of denial or humiliation (Soss, Fording, Schram, 2011; Brant, 2025). Does this information change how individuals ultimately perceive interactions with bureaucrats? Public management research on administrative burdens and performance information framing suggests information provision on administrative processes should have a positive effect on citizen perceptions (Hock, Jones, Levere, and Wittenburg, 2021; Oliver and Mosley, 2014). This study aims to bring these factors together by examining how information explaining administrative processes shapes citizen perceptions of their bureaucratic encounters and if this linkage varies with respect to bureaucrat behavior and identity-specific reference points for anticipated stigma (Tajfel and Turner, 1978; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007; Houston and Harding, 2013).

To account for anticipated stigma in this study, I draw on attributional ambiguity theory from cognitive science (Crocker et al., 1991) to conceptualize how differences in identity group membership shape perceptions of administrative burden, fairness, and perceived organizational performance after a negative citizen-state interaction. Attributional ambiguity is the uncertainty that negative interactions are driven by discrimination. For example, the theory has been used in the study of leadership to show if and when women (Brower et al., 2017) and Latinos (Hoyt et al., 2007) attribute negative performance feedback to prejudice. This study seeks to understand how attributional ambiguity extends to citizen-state interaction research relevant to public management (Jakobsen et al., 2019). By comparing how individuals from more and less stigmatized groups react to clarifying information on administrative procedures, with reference to positive or negative interactions with an administrator, this study offers insights into the perceptual effects of initiatives to inform and prepare stigmatized individuals to navigate interactions with the state.

To test hypotheses about how attributional ambiguity is a factor in citizen perceptions, I draw on variation by gender identity in the administrative process of seeking a legal name change. I administered two survey experiments simulating legal name change hearings sought for maiden name reversions (experiment 1) or gender transition (experiment 2) with respective samples of cisgender[3] women and transgender people. The vignettes provided to respondents differed by neutral or negative language attributed to a judge and the provision of information about how judges administer legal name change hearings. Respondents were then asked to report their perceptions of administrative burden, fairness, and perceived organizational performance. Through regression models, I find that negatively phrased bureaucrat language predicts increased perceived administrative burden for all but decreased perceived performance of the judge only for cisgender women. Additionally, providing information on administrative procedures only

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[3] I adopt the definition of cisgender as “a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex registered for them at birth; not transgender” (Merriam Webster, 2025). As such, the category cisgender women only include females who identify as women and excludes other combinations of sex and gender identity categories.

improved perceptions of fair treatment for transgender people. By comparing how the effects of bureaucrat language and information on administrative procedures differ between cisgender women and transgender people, my results suggest that the salience and responsiveness of perceptual phenomena are contingent on the anticipated stigma of attributional ambiguity.

Placing this study in context with previous literature, I provide background on citizen-state interaction research focused on citizen perceptions, procedural fairness, and social identity. This research is used to justify the design of two survey experiments. I present findings and models in concert with the theoretical expectations and discuss their implications for public management research and practice.

Negative Cues and Citizen Perceptions

Citizen perceptions of their encounters with government officials are relevant to the integrity of public-facing bureaucracies because they are a locus of the politics-administration dichotomy (Gutek, 1976; Kahn, Katz, and Gutek, 1976; Rosenbloom, 2008). A bureaucrat can take roles in interactions with citizens such as co-production, eligibility determinations, or deterrence (van Eijk, and Steen, 2022). The ways in which bureaucrats use the discretion granted to them is administrative in so far as it reflects the authority delegated to them by legislative systems (Flohr Nielsen, J., and Høst, 2000); but within their span of control, bureaucrats may reflect political sentiments in their interactions with citizens (Hupe 2022). These could be positive, such as when demographically representative bureaucracies reduce inequities (Lim, 2006), or negative, such as when bureaucrats' choice of language or behaviors reinforce stigma and stereotypes about deservingness (Schneider and Ingram, 1993; Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2024). Negative interactions in particular can worsen citizens' perceptions of bureaucrats (Du and Zhu, 2024) and reinforce a negative image of government (Walle et al., 2005).

The role of negative information in citizen perceptions is a theme identified in prior lines of public management research (Rozin and Royzman, 2001; James and Van Ryzin, 2017; Van den Bekerom et al., 2021). In general, human perceptions are particularly responsive to negative cues or negative information, especially when compared to positive cues. This phenomenon is known in social psychology as negativity bias, or the tendency of humans to give greater weight to the bad than the good (Baumeister, 2001). Economic research often refers to this concept as loss aversion given evidence of affective asymmetries towards the negative in perceptions of numerically equal monetary losses and gains (Tversky and Kahneman, 1991). Translated to citizen-state interaction research, the presence of negative cues from bureaucrats would entail citizens shifting their perpetual evaluations of bureaucrat behavior (Esaiasson, 2010). The effects of negative information on citizens' perceptions of the government has included citizens' administrative burden tolerance (Halling, Herd, and Moynihan, 2023), perceptions of fair treatment (Esaiasson, 2010; Herian, 2012), and perceptions of bureaucrats' performance (Deslatte, 2020). This study incorporates these three kinds of citizen perceptions as they respectively represent how citizens view the hassles, rules, and decision maker in their interactions with the state.

Perceived Administrative Burden

Sensitivity to negative cues is built into conceptualizations of administrative burden (Herd and Moynihan, 2019). Defined as "an individual's experience of policy implementation as onerous" (Herd, Moynihan, and Harvey, 2015), administrative burden includes both the actual hurdles of accessing government-provided benefits and citizen's perceived tolerance for burdens (Halling, Herd, and Moynihan, 2023). Past studies consider actual burdens as learning, compliance, and psychological costs and its perceived form as phenomena like frustration (Jilke et al., 2023; Herd and Moynihan, 2019). This work finds that previous social program users perceive higher burdens and are more supportive of reduced burden (Halling, Herd, and Moynihan, 2023; Barnes, 2023; Haeder and Moynihan, 2024) but those most in need of services experience lower actual burden in units of interactions because of more experience with bureaucracies (Vogel et al., 2025). A certain level of administrative burden is transactionally required within reason for benefit access (Doughty and Baehler, 2020). Concerns about reasonableness have translated to studies finding that visible organizational inefficiencies like low capacity and understaffing are associated with higher perceived burdens (Barnes and Henley, 2023). Additionally, signs of a lack of procedural fairness also predict lower burden tolerance (Campbell and Ahn, 2023). This research suggests that having negative interactions with bureaucrats are expected to be associated with higher degrees of perceived administrative burden.

> *H1a: Bureaucrats' use of negative language, compared to neutral language, increases citizens' perceptions of administrative burden.*

Perceived Performance

Citizen perceptions of government performance are also shaped by negative information, so much so that bureaucrats are often assumed to be lower quality and less effective professionals than workers in private and nonprofit organizations (Davis, 2021; Hupe, 2022). Previous research has shown that the subjective nature of how the public evaluates the performance of government service providers results in underestimating the actual quality of service provided (Meier and O'Toole, 2012). Evidence for this anti-public sector bias comes from varying settings, including schools (Song and Meier, 2018) and healthcare facilities (Meier et al., 2022). Experiences or local news of poor citizen-state interactions, such as those in policing, can also fuel citizens' negative imagery of government and desire to disengage with front line bureaucrats (Drolc and Shoub, 2024). Despite their immersion in public sector work, even bureaucrats are subject to the same biases as general citizens and service users in their perceived performance appraisals (Rutherford et al., 2020). In an environment in which negative messaging about the public sector workforce shapes the public's perception of their performance, higher levels of transparency (Porumbescu, 2017) and accountability (Amirkhanyan, 2011) have been linked to higher levels of perceived government effectiveness. In the absence of efforts to clarify bureaucrat behaviors, bureaucrats' use of negative language in citizen-state interactions are expected to be associated with lower citizen perceptions of government effectiveness.

H1b: Bureaucrats' use of negative language, compared to neutral language, decreases citizens' perceptions of bureaucrat performance.

Perceived Fairness

Procedural fairness, or the extent to which bureaucrats' rule enforcement process is seen as fair, is another perceptual concept relevant to understanding how citizens evaluate the fair implementation of the "rules of the game" in their bureaucratic encounters (Esaiasson, 2010). Procedural fairness theory argues people, across cultural settings, care about fair decision-making processes as part of their social exchanges (Brockner et al., 2000). Procedural fairness is individually demanded as a moral right (Miller, 2001) and, within social exchanges, is observed as respectful treatment (Tyler et al., 1996). Applied generally, procedural fairness theory would posit that when a person with authority renders a decision about an accused person, an unfavorable decision can be received with more acceptance or perceived as fairer if the decision process is viewed positively (Cremer and Tyler, 2007) The theory has been applied to studies of police-community interactions, which finds citizen perceptions of high procedural fairness relate to improved cooperation with state authority (Tankebe, 2009). Past public management research has also applied procedural fairness theory to understand its positive valence and finds that its presence improves public employees' perceptions of government decision-making (Rubin and Weinberg, 2016) and citizens' perceptions of government procedures (Herian et al., 2012; Pederson et al., 2017). However, procedural fairness theory has limited applications in public management as a negative source of information or if negative bureaucrat behavior hurts fairness (Cremer and Ruitier, 2003). When the fairness of a process is ambiguous, people are more likely to rely on prior attitudes as a guide (Doherty and Wolak, 2012), which lean negatively given declining confidence in government. The influence of negative cues suggests that when citizens notice negatively conducted procedures, it worsens fairness perceptions.

> *H1c: Bureaucrats' use of negative language, compared to neutral language, decreases citizens' perceptions of fairness.*

Mediating Role of Information Provision and Social Identity

Citizen perceptions resulting from a bureaucratic encounter, despite being rooted in a person's pre-existing beliefs (Doherty and Wolak, 2012), are sometimes malleable when additional information is provided. Across domains of public management research, information that helps individuals learn about administrative burdens (Hock et al., 2021), explain performance information (Noda, 2020), and understand administrative procedures (Van den Bos et al., 1998), can play a clarifying role. Additional knowledge of administrative burdens can improve a person's experience interacting with the government by minimizing learning costs and reducing their uncertainty about what is required of them to comply with policy requirements before the interaction (Benish et al., 2023). Regarding procedural fairness, accessible information on administrative procedures makes the decision rules bureaucrats apply more transparent and reduces ambiguity. Such descriptive information can help both citizens and bureaucrats can share more of the same reference point for how a process is mandated to be administered, addressing the procedural dimension of fairness. The same pathway is true for fully clarifying performance information, especially cross-sector comparisons (Meier et al., 2022), except for partisan biases (Baekgaard and Serritzlew, 2020). The influence of clarifying information is generally expected to improve citizen perceptions and play a mitigating role for negative bureaucrat behaviors (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012)

H2: The provision of educational materials positively affects citizens' perceptual outcomes.

H3: The effects of negative language on perceptual outcomes are diminished by the presence of educational materials

While information can play a role in updating perceptions, the aspects of perception rooted in a person's social identity may differentiate the magnitude of the effect of information. This expectation is tied to a key assumption of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Ashford and Mael, 1989) that group membership informs a person's self-concept and expectations for the results of social exchanges. Social identity has been most influential in public management research on bureaucratic representation and the positive effects of demographic matching by race and sex (Marschall and Ruhil, 2007; Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009; Meier and Nicholson-Crotty, 2006).

Another analytical unit of social identity relevant to citizen-state interactions, in addition to intragroup demographic matching, is intergroup relations (Ramiah et al., 2011). Intergroup relations involve group members' recognition of how outside members categorize their social group. This boundary informs expectations of when to anticipate stigmatized treatment, exclusion, prejudice, or discrimination (Cuhardar and Dayton, 2011; Sawyer et al., 2012). But, in short-lived social exchanges, including citizen-state interactions, it may not always be clear to the citizen whether an unfavorable interaction was the result of prejudice. This phenomenon of uncertainty is called attributional ambiguity (Crocker and Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1991) and is often colloquially called microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Differences in group membership would suggest that the perceptions of individuals from groups anticipating stigmatization would be more strongly impacted by a negative citizen-state interaction, all else equal, than those from groups without the same reference points for intergroup conflict. Clarifying information is often expected to reduce the effects of language that have an ambiguous connection to prejudice and, if successful, be more meaningful to groups that anticipate stigmatized treatment.

H4a: Bureaucrats' use of negative language, compared to neutral language, more negatively shape citizens' perceptual responses for citizen groups who more frequently anticipate stigmatized treatment

H4b: Being provided with educational materials more positively affects citizens' perceptual outcomes for citizen groups who more frequently anticipate stigmatized treatment

H4c: The effects of negative language on perceptual outcomes are more strongly diminished for respondents provided with educational materials from citizen groups who more frequently anticipate stigmatized treatment

Empirical Context

I use the case of legal name change hearings with a judge to study how attributional ambiguity moderates the effects of negative bureaucrat language and information provision on citizen perceptions of their bureaucratic encounters. In the United States, except for when a woman changes her last name after marriage, legally changing one's name requires filing a name change petition with a local or state-level court and receiving judicial approval (Emens, 2017).

Case law documenting name change hearings signals that one determining element of a successful legal name change petition is proving to a judge that the name change is not sought to avoid legal obligations (i.e., creditors, alimony) or commit fraud (Thomas, 2021). This precedent is rooted in state statutes or past case law, but no script or manner for questioning petitioners is prescribed to judges. Different judges' use of language in implementing a fraud check in name change hearings is likely attenuated to the petitioner (Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). Past work has shown how unfair treatment by street-level managers correlates with clients' identities and perceptions of client deservingness (Oberfield and Incantalupo, 2021).

Two of the most frequent kinds of petitioners for legal name changes are women filing for a reversion to a maiden name in divorces to remove association from an ex-spouse and martial family (Embelton & King, 1984), and transgender people filing for a change of first name to have a name that better reflects their gender identity (Vance, 2018). Procedurally, all petitions are subject to a check for fraud. Historically in the US, maiden name reversions would signal disqualification for women from rights gained in marriage like bank loan eligibility and property ownership (Emens, 2017). But as civil rights law has shifted towards granting women equal protection in financial opportunities, concerns about unmarried women committing financial "fraud" under married or maiden names have mostly diminished, apart from marital status rules for eligibility-based welfare programs (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007). For transgender petitioners, the fraud check is associated with a historical pattern of name change petition denials based on the stereotype that trans individuals are deceitful for representing themselves as the opposite or an ambiguous sex, other than the one assigned at birth (Bettcher, 2009; Currah, 2022; Bender-Baird, 2024). Recent case law appealing denied transgender name change petitions have challenged whether the social perspective that transgender identity is fraudulent falls within the legal meaning of fraud, with rulings favoring transgender name change petitioners (In re Feldhaus, 2017). In all legal name change petitions, the judge is provided with the discretion to interpret and apply the rule of law.

In terms of navigating the administrative burdens of the legal name change process, there are active nonprofit organizations that offer identity-targeted "know your rights" programming inclusive of sharing legal information about seeking legal name changes in the respective contexts. Example resources come from organizations like the WomensLaw.org initiative and Advocates for Trans Equality. Information on name changes typically directs readers to legal name change statutes or provides a plain language explanation of the legal name change procedure.[4] For women, this advice on legal maiden name reversion is often embedded in concerns about managing financial separation or choosing whether to wrap a name change petition into divorce proceedings if there are ongoing concerns of domestic violence. For transgender people, advice on gender-affirming legal name change is connected to concerns about safely coming out at school or work and leveraging legal authority to help with use of a different name. These organizations exemplify nonprofit particularism in practice (Salamon, 1989) and efforts to solve information asymmetries for minoritized groups. With external validity in mind, I used the content provided by relevant nonprofit organizations as a reference point for incorporating the role of educational materials in my research design.

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[4] This observation is based on reviewing the websites of state- and national-level legal aid nonprofits in the US that serve women and transgender people, identified via GuideStar and filtering by National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities codes for Women's Rights (R24) and LGBTQ Rights (R26).

When considering how female divorcees or transgender people may be using the legal name change process to reflect their identities, attributional ambiguity in the interaction with the judge is of particular concern for transgender petitioners. Maiden name reversions as part of divorce are a common and culturally accepted practice in the US, and name change proceedings are typically embedded as the last step in a set of divorce proceedings (Leissner, 1997). However, the same level of cultural acceptance is much lower for recognizing a new name adopted by a transgender person, with almost half of Americans reporting uneasy feelings, disgust, and whiplash when considering transgender inclusive policies (Miller et al., 2020; Blazina and Baronavski, 2022). This trend is apparent in the common media framing of transgender identity as "new" and "disruptive" by opponents of equal protection based on gender identity, despite the long historical record of gender diverse people being present and seeking status in society across cultures (Stryker, 1998). If the average member of the majority group is expected to hold some level of stigmatized view around transgender identity, transgender petitioners are likely to file a legal name change petition with this reference point from lived experience in mind. This all would suggest that a negatively phrased question on fraud in name use is more likely to be perceived as rooted in prejudiced beliefs by transgender people compared to cisgender women.

Research Design and Participants

Given the gendered nature of legal name change petitions, I used samples of cisgender women and transgender people to compare perceptions among relevant policy targets who, on average, have low and high reference points for anticipating stigmatized treatment relative to one another. I designed two 2x3 between-subjects vignette survey experiments simulating legal name change hearings with a judge to test my hypotheses. This method has previously been used in other public management studies on citizen-state interactions (Jilke et al., 2016;

Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017). Samples of cisgender women and transgender people were recruited from the professional survey service Prolific. Based on a power analysis using G*Power, I estimated that I would need at least 100 respondents per vignette block (or a total of 600) to conduct a robust intergroup analysis. I requested 750 respondents for each survey, accounting for potential manipulation check failures. The development process included programming the research instrument in Qualtrics, gaining institutional IRB approval, pre-testing both instruments with a small group of faculty and graduate students, and pre-registering expected linkages.[5] The Prolific survey service drew study samples from populations of 32,503 cisgender women and 2,662 transgender people who are US citizens by birth and over the age of 18. All data were collected in September 2024. The survey for women closed within one hour, and the survey for transgender people closed in 5 days.

Experimental Procedure

All respondents were presented with a version of the following vignette scenario made particular to the gender identity of the sample. Two parts of the vignette were manipulated to represent the independent variables “negative language” and “information provision”.

> “Please read the following carefully. Imagine that you are filing a petition for a legal name change order with the goal of **reverting to your maiden name as part of a divorce [having your name better reflect your gender identity]**. As you prepare the paperwork necessary to file your case, you find a series of court-provided forms for filing a legal name change petition via your local circuit court’s website. The steps for a legal name change include
>
> - completing the court-provided forms
> - having them notarized
> - submitting them to the court recorder
> - scheduling and attending a hearing with a judge

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[5] View the pre-registration at osf.io/cvpn6

- updating your name on your social security card, driver's license, and other identification documents

After allocating some time to completing the paperwork, you successfully file your petition for a legal name change and schedule your hearing with the circuit court judge.

In your court-ordered hearing the judge asks, "can you verify that you **are [are not]** changing your name to **represent the one you intend to commonly use [commit fraud or avoid felony charges under your current name]**?"

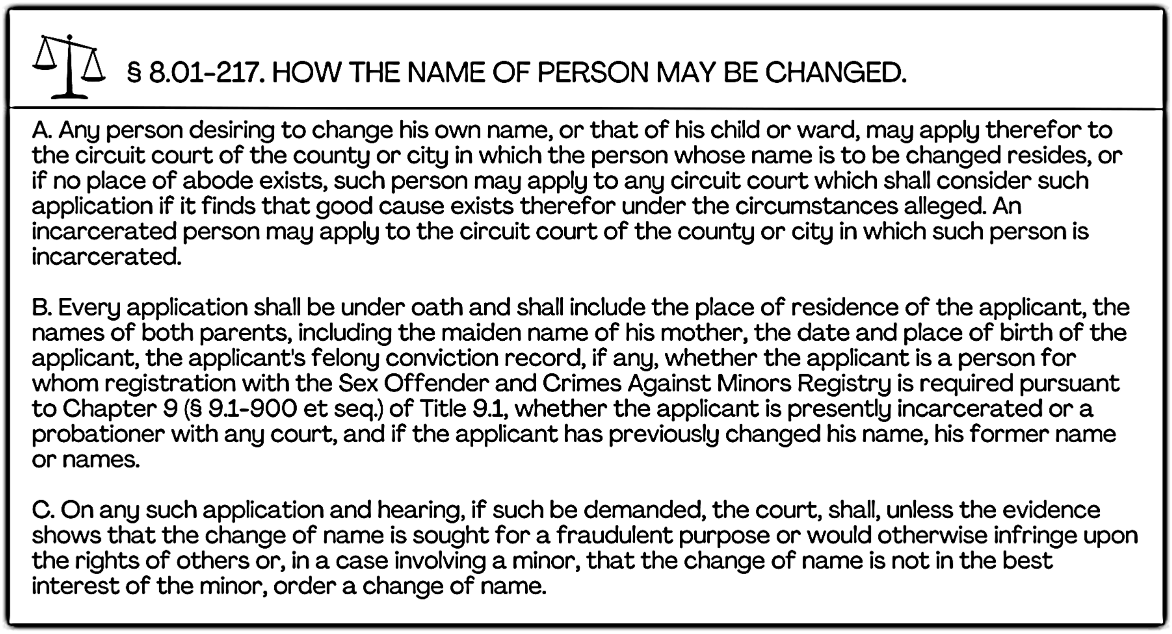
[If treated] As part of preparing for your hearing, you come across some online educational materials made available by a **women's rights [transgender rights**] nonprofit. They provide **the state law [an explanation of the law**], which says: **Law Information Card [Procedure Information Card**]"

For the negative language measure, and to accurately reflect how judges question petitioners in the name change hearing vignettes, I read sample court transcripts of legal name change hearings in the US and consulted a local judge. This informed how I selected language for two possible hypothetical questions posed to by the judge in the survey vignette. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two language conditions. If randomly assigned to the neutral language condition, the respondent vignette will need with the question, "Can you verify that you are changing your name to represent the one you intend to commonly use?" If randomly assigned to the negative language condition, the respondents vignette will end with the question, "Can you verify that you are not changing your name to commit fraud or avoid felony charges under your current name?"

I also manipulated the presence of nonprofit-provided information, creating three randomly assigned information conditions: no information, information on the law, or information on procedures. When information was provided, it was either attributed to a women's rights nonprofit for the sample of cisgender women or a transgender rights nonprofit for the sample of transgender people. In both the law and procedure information conditions, respondents received a 250-word informational cards that included content on who has the right to change their name, the restriction on individuals with criminal charges to change their names, where and how to file a name change petition, and most critically that the role of a judge is to determine that a name change is not sought for fraudulent purposes.

The full vignette language is available in the Appendix. Images of the two "Know Your Rights" information cards seeking to educate petitioners about the legal name change process are show below in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The text of the law information condition is based on Virginia's name change statute (§ 8.01-217, 2015) because it contains all of the informational elements within one statute rather than across multiple laws, administrative rules, and precedents in case law. The procedure description is based on that provided by the legal organization JUSTIA, which conducted a 50-state survey on name change law and is a primary source of legal aid information (2024).

Figure 1. Law Information Condition



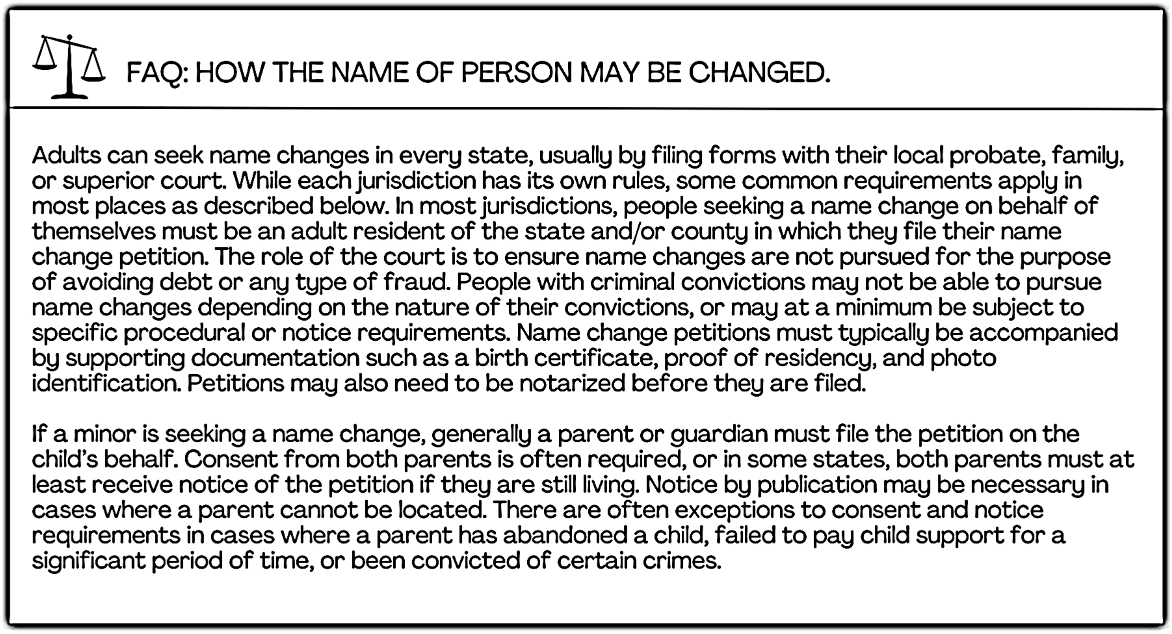
§ 8.01-217. HOW THE NAME OF PERSON MAY BE CHANGED.

A. Any person desiring to change his own name, or that of his child or ward, may apply therefor to the circuit court of the county or city in which the person whose name is to be changed resides, or if no place of abode exists, such person may apply to any circuit court which shall consider such application if it finds that good cause exists therefor under the circumstances alleged. An incarcerated person may apply to the circuit court of the county or city in which such person is incarcerated.

B. Every application shall be under oath and shall include the place of residence of the applicant, the names of both parents, including the maiden name of his mother, the date and place of birth of the applicant, the applicant's felony conviction record, if any, whether the applicant is a person for whom registration with the Sex Offender and Crimes Against Minors Registry is required pursuant to Chapter 9 (§ 9.1-900 et seq.) of Title 9.1, whether the applicant is presently incarcerated or a probationer with any court, and if the applicant has previously changed his name, his former name or names.

C. On any such application and hearing, if such be demanded, the court, shall, unless the evidence shows that the change of name is sought for a fraudulent purpose or would otherwise infringe upon the rights of others or, in a case involving a minor, that the change of name is not in the best interest of the minor, order a change of name.

Figure 2. Procedure Information Condition



FAQ: HOW THE NAME OF PERSON MAY BE CHANGED.

Adults can seek name changes in every state, usually by filing forms with their local probate, family, or superior court. While each jurisdiction has its own rules, some common requirements apply in most places as described below. In most jurisdictions, people seeking a name change on behalf of themselves must be an adult resident of the state and/or county in which they file their name change petition. The role of the court is to ensure name changes are not pursued for the purpose of avoiding debt or any type of fraud. People with criminal convictions may not be able to pursue name changes depending on the nature of their convictions, or may at a minimum be subject to specific procedural or notice requirements. Name change petitions must typically be accompanied by supporting documentation such as a birth certificate, proof of residency, and photo identification. Petitions may also need to be notarized before they are filed.

If a minor is seeking a name change, generally a parent or guardian must file the petition on the child’s behalf. Consent from both parents is often required, or in some states, both parents must at least receive notice of the petition if they are still living. Notice by publication may be necessary in cases where a parent cannot be located. There are often exceptions to consent and notice requirements in cases where a parent has abandoned a child, failed to pay child support for a significant period of time, or been convicted of certain crimes.

These two manipulations resulted in six different conditions. Given the use of a between-subjects design, each respondent was assigned to only one of these conditions. To verify that respondents recognized the primary experimental manipulation, I asked participants after viewing their assigned vignette, “Which phrase appeared in the question the judge asked?” I asked this question before the dependent variable questions. This resulted in a sample of n=653 cisgender women and n=669 transgender people who answer the question correctly. I excluded survey responses that failed the attention check question to more accurately interpret the treatment effect of negative language and subsequent analyses.[6] The final sample of those who passed the attention check for each block is reported below in Figure 3.

Figure 3. 2x3 Experimental Design		Information		
		(0) Control (No Card)	(1) Law (Figure 1)	(2) Procedure (Figure 2)
Language	(0) Neutral	n=113 women n=114 trans ppl	n=101 women n=102 trans ppl	n=103 women n=111 trans ppl
	(1) Negative	n=116 women n=123 trans ppl	n=103 women n=106 trans ppl	n=117 women n=113 trans ppl

Dependent Variables

After respondents were presented with a randomly assigned vignette about a legal name change hearing, I asked six 5-point Likert scale survey questions about their perceptions of the interaction. The order of the questions was randomized across respondents. The first outcome of interest was administrative burden. Based on previously adopted measures (Jilke, Bækgaard, Herd, and Moynihan, 2023), participants were asked about their perception of the episodic burden of the interaction with the question, "To what extent do you anticipate feeling frustrated if a judge posed this question to you in court (1=not frustrated at all to 5=very frustrated)?" They were also asked about their perception of the total burden of the process with the question, "How

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[6] Analyses including survey respondents who did not pass the manipulation check reveal larger but directionally similar coefficients and smaller p-values for the main effects. The results presented represent a more conservative estimation of the same effects.

would you rate the level of difficulty of the overall name change process (1=not difficult at all 5=very difficult)?"

Respondents were also asked to indicate their perceived performance of the vignette bureaucrat. Based on previously adopted measures (Flink and Xu, 2024), participants are asked, "How would you rate the effectiveness of the judge's question in this context (1=not effective at all to 5=very effective)?" I also asked questions to measure perceived fairness. Respondents were asked three questions based on a previously validated scale (Colquitt et al., 2015), including "Did the judge act fairly (1=not at all to 5=very)?", "Did the judge do things that are fair (1=not at all to 5=very)?", and "Did the judge behave like a fair person would (1=not at all to 5=very)?" I used these three items to construct a measure of perceived fairness with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.92 for the sample of women and 0.94 for the sample of trans people. The transgender respondents reported slightly higher average frustration and total burden, and lower perceived fairness and effectiveness than cisgender women.

Sample Characteristics

With the additional goal of addressing the external validity, after the dependent variables, I also asked if respondents had previous experience with reverting to a maiden name or gender-affirming legal name change from their real life. For those who answered yes, I asked the open-ended question, "Describe what you recall happened in your proceedings with the judge?" These qualitative responses were categorized based on the reported language used by judge and analyzed to better interpret and discuss the results of dependent variables.

To account for attitudinal differences on courts (Poznyak, 2014; Brady and Kent, 2022), I asked all respondents, three 5-point Likert scale questions including, "How much do you trust the judicial branch of government (e.g., courts, judges)?", "How fair do you believe the judicial branch is in its rulings and judgments?” and “How protected do you think the judicial branch is from political influence? The order of these questions was randomized to minimize a vignette priming bias with half of respondents receiving them before the vignette and half after the dependent variables. I used these three items to construct a measure of trust in courts with a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.84 for the sample of women and 0.88 for the sample of trans people. Finally, for demographic characteristics, I collected data on the respondents’ age, race, marital status, education level, income, region, and sexual orientation as the final survey questions.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 and Table 2 present the descriptive statistics for the samples of cisgender women (n=653) and transgender individuals (n=669), respectively. I also collected and included data from the 2022 American Community Survey to indicate how representative the sample of women drawn from Prolific compared to national demographic averages. Similar data is unavailable for transgender people in the US. The cisgender women in the sample had a mean age of about 42 years, while the transgender sample was notably younger, with a mean age of about 31 years. Among the cisgender women, 61% reported being married while 11% reported divorcing; 82% of married women respondents indicated changing their last name at the time of marriage. Divorcees who had to appear in front of a judge for their maiden reversion represent only 2% of the sample. Among transgender people, 72% of respondents reported ever socially adopting a new first name, and 30% reported legally changing their first name. Of those transgender respondents who legally changed their names, 64% (21% of the full sample) reported having to appear in front of a judge. The transgender sample reported slightly lower average trust in courts compared to cisgender women.

I also reviewed data from the respondent's Prolific profiles to verify their status as a cisgender woman or a transgender person through items including the respondents reported sex assigned at birth, reported legal sex, and reported answer to the yes or no question, "Are you transgender?" All of the cisgender women who took the maiden name reversion version of the experiment selected the option female for sex at birth. Among the transgender respondents, 53% reported identifying as a nonbinary gender and the remaining 47% of transgender respondents selected man (16%) or woman (26%). For sex assigned a birth, 61% of all transgender respondents selected female. Of the 53% of transgender respondents self-identifying as nonbinary, 73% of them selected assigned female at birth.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Sample of Cisgender Women (n=653)

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	National Averages for Females (ACS)
Age	41.72	13.30	18	93	47
White (%)	0.73	0.44	0	1	0.63
Married (%)	0.45	0.50	0	1	0.51
College Educated (%)	0.66	0.47	0	1	0.45
Income <$50,000 (%)	0.32	0.47	0	1	0.37
South (%)	0.41	0.49	0	1	0.37
Lesbian (%)	0.03	0.18	0	1	0.02
Past, In-Person Maiden Name Reversion with a Judge (%)	0.02	0.14	0	1	.
Trust in Courts	2.86	1.01	1	5	.
Frustrated	1.79	1.13	1	5	.
Total Burden	3.36	1.11	1	5	.
Perceived Effectiveness	3.60	1.20	1	5	.
Perceived Fairness	3.94	0.76	1	5	.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Sample of Transgender People (n=669)

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age	30.81	9.55	18	75
White (%)	0.65	0.48	0	1
Married (%)	0.17	0.38	0	1
College Educated (%)	0.55	0.50	0	1
Income <$50,000 (%)	0.55	0.49	0	1
South (%)	0.39	0.49	0	1
Nonbinary (%)	0.53	0.50	0	1
Assigned Female at Birth (%)	0.61	0.49	0	1
Past First Name Change (%)	0.31	0.46	0	1
Trust in Courts	2.32	1.05	1	5
Frustrated	2.04	1.17	1	5
Total Burden	3.49	1.02	1	5
Perceived Effectiveness	3.31	1.25	1	5
Perceived Fairness	3.77	0.83	1	5

Tables 3a and 3b presents the pairwise correlations among the dependent variables, which follow similar patterns for both groups. There is a strong negative correlation between frustration and perceived effectiveness and perceived fairness. Perceived effectiveness and perceived fairness are strongly positively correlated, implying that respondents who viewed the court system as more effective also tended to perceive it as fairer.

Table 3a. Pairwise Correlations of Dependent Variables and Trust, Cisgender Women

	Frustrated	Total Burden	Perceived Effectiveness	Perceived Fairness	Trust in Courts
Frustrated	1				
Total Burden	0.331	1			
Perceived Effectiveness	-0.495	-0.231	1		
Perceived Fairness	-0.599	-0.261	0.640	1	
Trust in Courts	-0.167	-0.167	0.247	0.280	1

Table 3b. Pairwise Correlations of Dependent Variables and Trust, Transgender People

	Frustrated	Total Burden	Perceived Effectiveness	Perceived Fairness	Trust in Courts
Frustrated	1				
Total Burden	0.261	1			
Perceived Effectiveness	-0.426	-0.230	1		
Perceived Fairness	-0.557	-0.257	0.629	1	
Trust in Courts	-0.033	-0.271	0.280	0.240	1

Before implementing ANOVA and OLS regressions to test hypotheses on the treatment effects of negative language and information, I manually checked that the six experimental groups were randomly assigned. Table 4a and 4b presents a balancing test of means across treatment assignment for key variables among all respondents. The results indicate that randomization was successful; the treatment groups are generally well balanced, with no significant differences in age, race, education, income, region, trust in courts, or previous legal name change across conditions.

Table 4a. Balancing Test of Means across Treatment Assignment, Cisgender Women

	Age (#)	White (%)	College (%)	Income <$50,000 (%)	U.S. South (%)	Trust in Courts (5-point scale)	Previous Legal Name Change (%) (Married Women)
1	43.8	0.72	0.62	0.31	0.39	2.78	0.81
2	41.1	63.5	0.69	0.36	0.38	2.73	0.90
3	42.2	0.81	0.60	0.37	0.40	2.82	0.83
4	42.2	0.72	0.60	0.33	0.43	2.70	0.80
5	41.4	0.75	0.75	0.27	0.45	2.73	0.86
6	42.4	0.73	0.71	0.30	0.39	2.57	0.83

Table 4b. Balancing Test of Means across Treatment Assignment, Transgender People

	Age (#)	White (%)	College (%)	Income <$50,000 (%)	U.S. South (%)	Trust in Courts (5-point scale)	Previous Legal Name Change (%)
1	29.9	0.65	0.53	0.59	0.42	2.36	0.30
2	31.1	0.67	0.54	0.54	0.38	2.24	0.30
3	32.4	0.69	0.55	0.47	0.41	2.24	0.29
4	30.8	0.66	0.58	0.50	0.33	2.27	0.29
5	31.1	0.64	0.53	0.56	0.44	2.39	0.25
6	29.9	0.59	0.59	0.61	0.37	2.21	0.40

*p<0.05; **p<0.01

Table 5 presents the mean values of the outcome variables frustration, perceived burden, perceived effectiveness, and perceived fairness by experimental condition and split up by gender identity. Overall, averages for frustration are below 2, and averages for total burden, perceived effectiveness, and perceived fairness are above 3 for all treatment groups.

Table 5. Outcome Variables Means by Experimental Conditions and Gender Identity

Experimental Condition	(1) Neutral Language, No Information				(2) Negative Language, No Information			
	Women (n=113)		Trans (n=114)		Women (n=116)		Trans (n=123)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Frustrated	1.73	1.00	1.86	1.11	2.00	1.28	2.19	1.23
Total Burden	3.35	1.10	3.39	1.08	3.33	1.16	3.51	0.99
Effective	3.78	1.15	3.43	1.31	3.27	1.40	3.24	1.25
Fair	3.96	0.72	3.82	0.84	3.86	0.82	3.73	0.80
Experimental Condition	(3) Neutral Language, Legal Information				(4) Negative Language, Legal Information			
	Women (n=101)		Trans (n=102)		Women (n=103)		Trans (n=106)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Frustrated	1.78	1.10	2.15	1.17	1.88	1.19	2.08	1.19
Total Burden	3.35	1.14	3.62	0.94	3.53	1.06	3.57	1.07
Effective	3.67	1.11	3.27	1.18	3.55	1.19	3.17	1.25
Fair	3.82	0.81	3.59	0.88	3.93	0.76	3.68	0.79
Experimental Condition	(5) Neutral Language, Procedure Information				(6) Negative Language, Procedure Information			
	Women (n=103)		Trans (n=111)		Women (n=117)		Trans (n=113)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Frustrated	1.50	0.90	2.09	1.22	1.85	1.18	1.88	1.05
Total Burden	3.26	1.10	3.53	1.03	3.35	1.12	3.32	0.98
Effective	3.87	1.04	3.27	1.24	3.49	1.20	3.47	1.26
Fair	4.05	0.69	3.76	0.86	4.03	0.73	4.06	0.77

Results

To test my hypotheses, I conducted simple difference in means tests and ran OLS regressions. Tables 6a and 6b display the t-tests, and the only significant difference in mean values are for the effect of negative language on cisgender women's perceived effectiveness.

Table 6a. T-Test Results for Cisgender Women

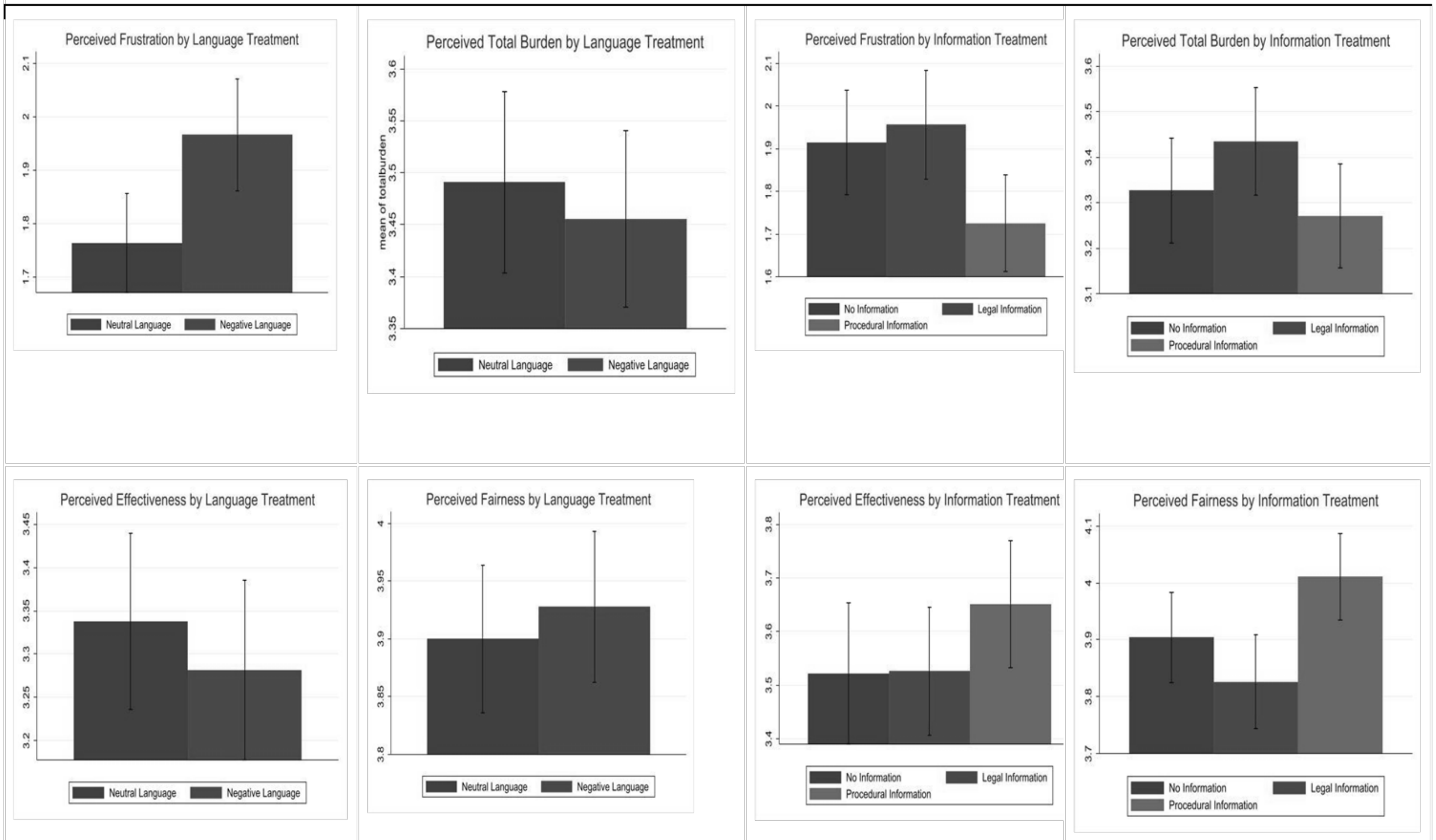

Table 6b. T-Test Results for Transgender People

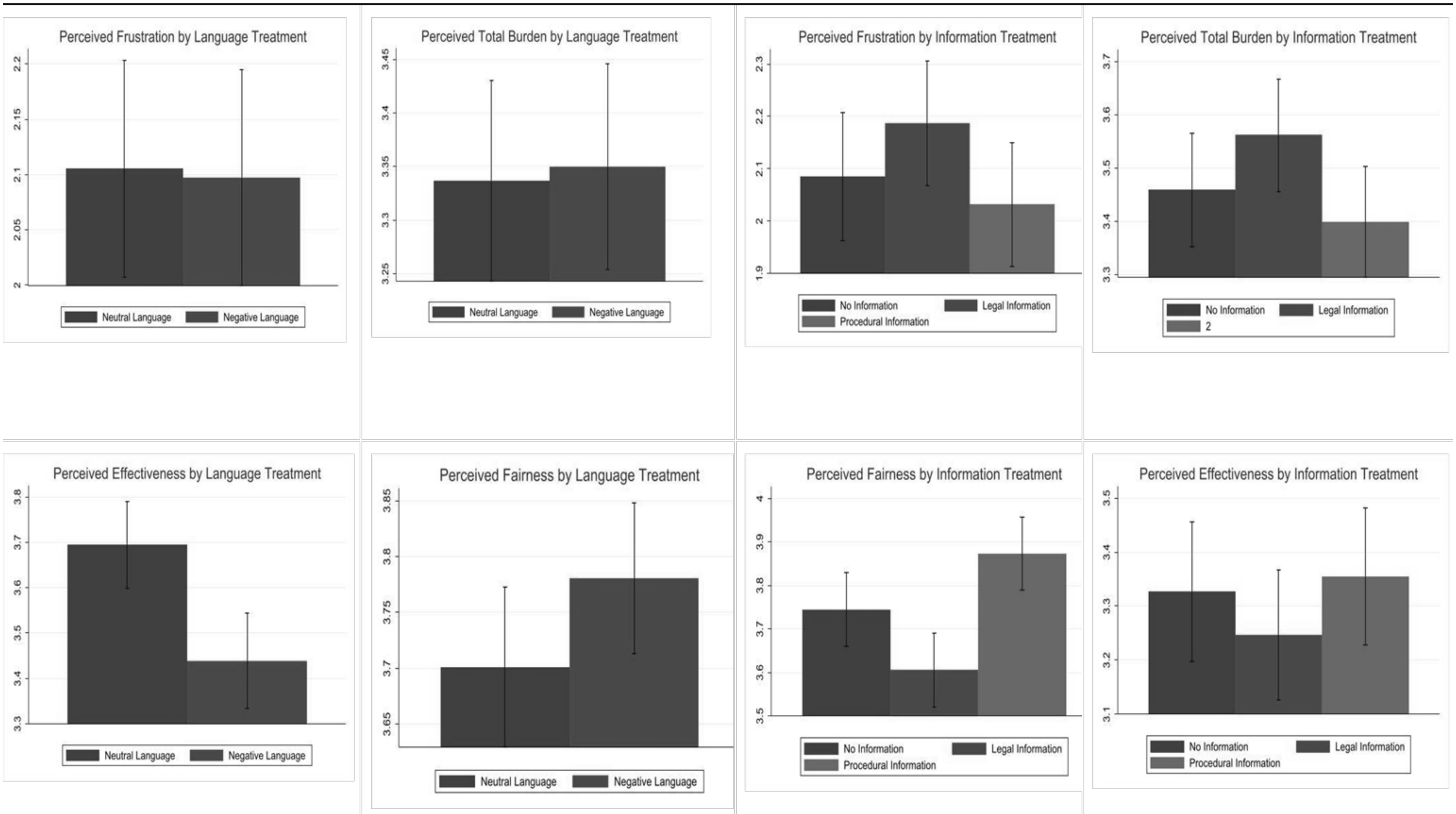

Table 7a. OLS Model of Treatment Effects, Cisgender Women

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
VARIABLES	Frustrated	Frustrated	Total Burden	Total Burden	Perceived Effectiveness	Perceived Effectiveness	Perceived Fairness	Perceived Fairness
Negative Language	0.246***	0.265*	0.082	-0.016	-0.347***	-0.512***	-0.002	-0.097
	(0.0876)	(0.148)	(0.087)	(0.147)	(0.093)	(0.157)	(0.059)	(0.100)
Legal Information	-0.0353	0.0477	0.105	0.001	0.093	-0.105	-0.0381	-0.146
	(0.108)	(0.153)	(0.107)	(0.153)	(0.115)	(0.163)	(0.073)	(0.104)
Procedural Information	-0.189*	-0.239	-0.029	-0.083	0.157	0.095	0.122*	0.081
	(0.106)	(0.152)	(0.105)	(0.152)	(0.113)	(0.162)	(0.0715)	(0.103)
Negative Lg X Legal Info		-0.164		0.205		0.392*		0.214
		(0.215)		(0.215)		(0.229)		(0.146)
Negative Lg X Procedural Info		0.0941		0.106		0.125		0.083
		(0.212)		(0.211)		(0.225)		(0.143)
Constant	1.745***	1.735***	3.295***	3.345***	3.695***	3.779***	3.917***	3.965***
	(0.086)	(0.105)	(0.086)	(0.105)	(0.092)	(0.112)	(0.058)	(0.071)
Observations	653	653	653	653	653	653	653	653
R-squared	0.017	0.019	0.004	0.005	0.023	0.028	0.008	0.011

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, *p<0.10

Table 7b. OLS Model of Treatment Effects, Transgender People

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
VARIABLES	Frustrated	Frustrated	Total Burden	Total Burden	Perceived Effectiveness	Perceived Effectiveness	Perceived Fairness	Perceived Fairness
Negative Language	0.019	0.327**	-0.043	0.126	-0.038	-0.194	0.093	-0.096
	(0.090)	(0.151)	(0.079)	(0.132)	(0.097)	(0.163)	(0.064)	(0.107)
Legal Information	0.0860	0.297*	0.139	0.232*	-0.108	-0.155	-0.138*	-0.233**
	(0.111)	(0.159)	(0.097)	(0.139)	(0.119)	(0.171)	(0.0783)	(0.112)
Procedural Information	-0.0471	0.230	-0.0280	0.146	0.045	-0.151	0.136*	-0.065
	(0.109)	(0.155)	(0.095)	(0.136)	(0.117)	(0.167)	(0.0768)	(0.110)
Negative Lg X Legal Info		-0.409*		-0.178		0.0894		0.183
		(0.221)		(0.193)		(0.238)		(0.156)
Negative Lg X Procedural Info		-0.541**		-0.339*		0.384		0.392**
		(0.217)		(0.190)		(0.233)		(0.153)
Constant	2.020***	1.860***	3.474***	3.386***	3.349***	3.430***	3.727***	3.825***
	(0.0891)	(0.109)	(0.077)	(0.0953)	(0.0956)	(0.117)	(0.063)	(0.077)
Observations	669	669	669	669	669	669	669	669
R-squared	0.002	0.012	0.005	0.010	0.003	0.007	0.021	0.030

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, *p<0.1

Tables 7a and 7b report estimates from ordinary least squares models on the effects of the negative language condition, legal information condition, and procedure information condition on perceptual outcomes for cisgender women and transgender people, respectively. They show the results for the effects of negative language and informational help with and without interaction terms.

First, columns 1 and 2 report the treatment effects estimates on how frustrated respondents would anticipate feeling after their vignette interaction. The coefficient of negative language is consistently positive and significant across models, meaning negative language is related to increasing frustration for both cisgender women and transgender respondents. Specifically, negative language increased frustration slightly, or about by 0.265 scale points for cisgender women and 0.327 scale points for transgender people. The coefficient for the presence of legal information indicates increased frustration in the absence of negative language for the sample of transgender people. Additionally, the interaction of negative language and information treatments are significantly negative for the sample of transgender people. Comparing the models, the treatment effect estimates for transgender people are consistently slightly larger in magnitude when compared to the estimates for cisgender women. These findings support hypothesis 1a on the effect of negative language on administrative burden and hypothesis 4a on the additional burdensome effect rooted in attributional ambiguity. They do not provide clear support for hypothesis 2 or 3, with legal information having no effect at best and worsening frustration at worst. However, the interaction terms seem to indicate identity-specific support for hypothesis 4b, that information can dampen the effects of negative language, but only for the transgender respondents.

Second, columns 3 and 4 report the treatment effect estimates on how difficult the overall legal name change process, or total burden, respondents would anticipate feeling after their vignette interaction. In asking respondents to consider the hypothetical interaction as a part of the longer set of steps involved in seeking a legal name change, all the negative language treatment effects and nearly all of the informational treatment effects are insignificant, with the exception of the effect of legal information under the neutral language condition once again worsening total burden for transgender respondents (β=0.232). Consistent with the results where burden is measured as frustration, these models indicate that the interaction of negative language and the procedure information treatments are significant for reducing perceived total burden for transgender respondents (β=-0.339). Comparing the models, the treatment effect estimates for transgender people are larger in magnitude when compared to the estimates for cisgender women. These findings would indicate nuanced support for hypothesis 1a on the effect of negative language on administrative burden. The effect of negative language is only observable when respondents are asked to consider the burden of interaction and not the total set of burdens in the process. These models also support the hypothesis 4 that there is an additional burdensome effect rooted in attributional ambiguity for the group anticipating stigma. Results do not provide support for hypothesis 2 that information provision with reduced administrative burden, measured as total burden. However, the interaction terms indicate partial support for hypothesis 4b, that information can dampen the effects of negative language on total burden, and again only for the transgender respondents.

Third, columns 5 and 6 report the treatment effect estimates on how effective respondents perceived the judge's question to be in facilitating the hypothetical legal name change hearing. The coefficient for negative language on judges perceived performance as effective is only significant for the cisgender women (β=-0.347; β=-0.512). This means that when judges use fraud-oriented language for maiden name reversions, women perceive them as less effective. The small coefficients on the effect of negative language for transgender respondents reflect that they may already have lower baseline expectations of judicial effectiveness, making them less reactive to negative judicial language alone. All interaction terms are insignificant, meaning that further explanation by law or procedure does not mitigate the negative impacts of judge language. Overall, the findings here offer partial support for hypothesis 1b on the effects of negative language and no support for hypotheses 2, 3, or 4 that information improves perceived performance either by itself or when interaction with negative language. This finding may additionally represent the limitation of this study to represent a real bureaucrat's behavior in place of a hypothetical vignette.

Finally, columns 7 and 8 report the treatment effect estimates on how fair respondents perceived the vignette interaction by gender identity group. The coefficients on negative language are consistently insignificantly related to fairness, suggesting that affective language differences may not substantially shape fairness perceptions. However, procedural information is positively associated with increased perceptions of fairness for both groups (β=0.122; β=0.136), indicating that when provided with procedural explanations, respondents perceive the process as fairer. For transgender respondents, legal information is again associated with lower perceived fairness (β=−0.138). When interaction terms are introduced, additional legal or procedural details do not meaningfully alter the impact of negative judicial language for women. Legal information remains negatively associated with fairness perceptions (β=−0.233), reinforcing the idea that legal justifications may make transgender respondents feel scrutinized rather than reassured. However, results for transgender respondents show a significant interaction effect between negative language and procedural information (β=0.392), indicating that when procedural explanations accompany negative language, transgender respondents perceive the process as fairer suggesting that process clarity can offset some negative impacts of judicial scrutiny. The findings here offer no support for hypothesis 1c on the effects of negative language, support for hypotheses 2 on informational help, and mixed support for hypothesis 3 that information improves perceived performance either by itself or when interacting with negative language.

Overall, the OLS regressions indicate that negative language significantly shapes administrative burden for all respondents and perceived fairness for cisgender women. To further understand how respondents make sense of neutral or negative language use by a judge, Table 8 presents example open-ended responses from individuals who have undergone the legal name change process, highlighting differences in how cisgender women and transgender respondents experienced their hearings. These qualitative responses provide external validity for the language manipulations in the survey experiment, illustrating what kinds of judicial language petitioners heard during their name change proceedings and illustrate the qualitative experience of attributional ambiguity.

Table 8. Example Qualitative Responses

	Cisgender Women	Transgender People
Examples of Fraud Check	“It was during the final day of divorce court. Like the scenario here, he asked me if I was changing my name for any fraudulent reasons.”	“The judge asked me to verify the personal information I submitted and what I wanted my new name to be, asked if I would be hurting anyone else with this, asked if I knew about any outstanding debts I had or any other reasons I had for people to be trying to collect money from me, and asked why I wanted to change my name. I said "this is the name I go by socially and I want to update my documents to match" and answered otherwise with yes sir/no sir in order not to give him any reason to object to me.”
Examples of Name Verification	“The name change issue was part of the divorce process. The name change was included as a part of the final hearing. The judge simply confirmed (based on my motion) that I desired to return to my maiden name.”	“The judge just stated my dead name[7] and my new name and asked the lawyer if he agreed that this was valid and for gender identity purposes. The judge then granted the name change. It was like less than 5 minutes.”

A key qualitative distinction between the two groups is the concern over demonstrating a “valid” reason for the name change, which emerges in the transgender respondents’ accounts but is absent from the cisgender women’s responses. Cisgender women described the process as a straightforward step where judges are merely confirming their reversion to a maiden name. Even for those who mentioned they were asked a question by the judge about fraudulent intent, none

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[7] "Dead name" is a colloquialism in the LGBTQ+ community with a double entendre. Merriam-Webster (2025) defines it as the birth name of a transgender person who has changed their name during transition. The term also references a historic phenomenon where unsupportive families or media do not use the LGBTQ+ individuals' chosen name after death, ignoring gender affirming first names or chosen last names from same sex partnerships, and using birth names on death announcements and grave markers (Wood et al., 2022; Koles, 2024).

of the respondents offer any interpretation or attached meaning to such a question. In contrast, transgender respondents' experiences suggest a greater degree of defensiveness, particularly when judges use language about needing to disprove fraudulent intent beyond its financial meaning and petitioners concerns to give no reasons to object. Differences by neutral and negative language experiences suggest that certain judicial language may inadvertently communicate an attitude of prejudice to transgender individuals, which otherwise is interpreted more neutrally or not at all for the divorcees.

Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this study is to understand how bureaucrat behavior, information on administrative processes, and citizen's identity-based reference points shape citizen perceptions of their bureaucratic encounters. I compare the perceptual responses of women and transgender people to a hypothetical vignette legal name change hearing interaction for maiden name reversion or gender affirming legal name change, varying bureaucrat language and information provision, because it is a setting with the exact same procedural elements, but the gender identity groups hold different average levels of anticipated stigmatized treatment. With courts being one of many public organizations relevant to citizen-state interaction research, the way judical behavior is perceived by the filer is salient to the public integrity of that institution. In states where judges are elected by popular vote and their community reputation matters, it is democratically ideal for citizens to perceive their interaction as accessible, fair, and effective. Having subject matter knowledge of how and why judges ask certain questions or behave in particular ways during hearings should improve citizen perceptions, yet prior research has not factored in the role of anticipated stigma in understanding citizens' perceptual reactions to their bureaucratic encounters.

My hypotheses aimed to extend understanding of the role of social identity in shaping citizens perceived administrative burden, fairness, and performance. Negative language tended to increase expected levels of frustration with larger effects for transgender people compared to cisgender women. However, informational help was not effective at reducing frustration or perceived effectiveness, and administrative burden measured as total burden was not sensitive to negative language or informational help. But, the interaction of negative language and information provision did help reduce the expected level of frustration and total burden, but only for the group anticipating stigma. Regarding perceived performance, negative language tended to reduce respondents perceived effectiveness, and only significantly so and with larger effect sizes for the cisgender women, or the group not anticipating stigma. Fairness perceptions were also not significantly lowered by negative language or improved by informational help. However, the interaction of the two improved perceived fairness for both groups.

All of this taken together suggests three takeaways. First, that bureaucrats' use of negative language is episodically burdensome for all, and additionally so for marginalized groups who anticipate poor treatment. These findings make an important theoretical contribution, as they demonstrate evidence of attributional ambiguity in administrative burdens. In other words, there is an additional administrative burden for citizens who are uncertain as to whether the implementation of certain compliance costs is rooted in prejudiced bureaucrat behavior. This finding is consistent with previous research on the distributive nature of administrative burden, especially with reference to social identities (Ray, Herd, and Moynihan, 2023).

Second, when groups who do not expect negative treatment are spoken to with negative language, their perceptions of the performance of bureaucrats shift to a larger degree than when the same language is directed at the marginalized group. This finding is particularly relevant to research on public integrity and concerns about declining confidence in government officials. This would suggest that bureaucrats do more harm to public perceptions of their effectiveness when they have negative interactions with those who do not expect it.

Third, information on administrative processes is not detectably meaningful to citizen perceptions on their own but is influential at improving fairness perception when it is used to explain why negative treatment was enacted. This finding echoes the theoretical underpinnings of how fairness perceptions are constructed and suggests that public management research on citizen-state interactions should remember to consider the effects of negative feedback in its uses of fairness. This effect on fairness, along with findings on administrative burden, implies that nonprofit specialization in vulnerable populations is an efficient choice for targeting information needs.

While this study contributes to understanding citizen perceptions of their interactions with the government, it should be considered within its scope. The outcomes here are limited to being understood in their perceived rather than actual form due to the use of a vignette experiment. The comparative case of name changes in maiden name reversions and gender-affirming name change is used for its substantive symmetry, but the sample of transgender respondents drawn cannot be verified as representative of the population nationally. The limited findings on the role of informational materials may also be the result of unobservable factors such as the reader's legal comprehension and ability to connect complex information on administrative procedures to hypothetical bureaucrat behavior. The spurious nature of complex informational nudges, for example, requiring comprehension of a law, may limit what it was possible to observe here. Future research interested in understanding the effects of “know your rights” materials would benefit from methodologies attuned to detecting learning or evaluating effective teaching in the nonprofit field. Finally, the findings on citizens' perceptions should be interpreted as their reactions immediately after the bureaucratic encounter, and additional time beyond the point of encounter may be subject to additional factors not considered here.

The current study focuses on courts and gender identity, and some relationships detected here may be generalizable to other settings involving local officials interacting with citizens and identity differences between groups that do and do not anticipate stigma. Future studies should examine whether these relationships are transferable to other institutional settings, especially those that are salient by social identity, such as race and policing or disability and social welfare administration. The questions explored here will likely continue to matter so long as bureaucrat behavior without sensitivity to social identity persists.

Appendix

“Please read the following carefully. Imagine that you are filing a petition for a legal name change order with the goal of (reverting to your maiden name as part of a divorce/having your name better reflect your gender identity).

As you prepare the paperwork necessary to file your case, you find a series of court-provided forms for filing a legal name change petition via your local circuit court’s website. The steps for a legal name change include

- completing the court-provided forms
- having them notarized
- submitting them to the court recorder
- scheduling and attending a hearing with a judge
- updating your name on your social security card, driver’s license, and other identification documents

After allocating some time to completing the paperwork, you successfully file your petition for a legal name change and schedule your hearing with the circuit court judge.

Treatment 1 (neutral/negative questioning)

In your court-ordered hearing the judge asks, “can you verify that you **are [are not]** changing your name to **represent the one you intend to commonly use [commit fraud or avoid felony charges under your current name]**?”

Treatment 2 (none, Legal Information, or Procedure Information)

As part of preparing for your hearing, you come across some online educational materials made available by a (**women’s rights/transgender rights**) nonprofit. They provide (**the state law/ an explanation of the law**), which says: [**Law Information Card/Procedure Information Card**]

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Chapter 3: “I’m not signing anything!”: Guardians, Consent, and Administrative Burden

Abstract

Previous scholarship on administrative burden has examined the indirect effects of personal relationships and nonprofits on individuals’ access to care programs and services. However, less is known about the experiences of people who are legally dependent on another person, and the direct effects of interpersonal dependency on administrative burden for both individuals. This study draws on a qualitative analysis of 25 families with transgender minors to develop understanding of a new citizen-side actor for the administrative burden framework: guardians who navigate administrative burdens by and for dependents. I argue that guardians can be characterized as having policy-based authority and act as obstructers or authorizers. By presenting narratives relative to the proposed typology, I inductively identify and describe how parents make sense of their child’s uptake of trans care through three categories of consent: strongly withheld, reluctantly acquiesced, and confidently authorized. My analysis suggests that cultural and social reference points connected to the parent’s social identity play a significant role in their sensemaking. By understanding the decision process of guardians, future research can help clarify when and how both legal guardians and dependent populations experience administrative burdens.

Introduction

"Reflecting on it now, the keeping the car in neutral strategy, I know my inaction caused a lot of harm... But as a parent, it all felt too fast. [Trans care] didn't feel lifesaving… I needed to know she wasn't going to blame me if she decides to be male again at 50," one mother shared, describing why she did not initially consent to trans care[8] options for her teen. For parents interviewed for this study, hesitation to consent to health care utilization for their transgender adolescents was a matter of uncertainty, not rejection. And while parents reported stress about making a wrong decision and wanting higher quality information, transgender adolescents shared the psychological toll of negotiating for parental consent or the time costs of waiting for age eighteen.

This dynamic reveals an under-theorized aspect of policy implementation and administrative burden, the dispersion of burdens between dependents and their guardians who enforce rules not as legislators or bureaucrats, but as parents of minors. Administrative burden is a policy implementation theory that has created new avenues for public administration scholars to understand the costs people face when interacting with policy requirements (Herd and Moynihan, 2018). Recent inquiry has focused the role of actors called third-party intermediaries, like personal relationships and nonprofit organizations (Tiggelaar and George, 2025; Wiley and Berry, 2018; Yu, 2023), in mitigating administrative burdens (Halling and Bækgaard, 2022). However, less attention has been paid to another kind of actors, the guardians whose consent and cooperation are required by virtue of policy settings that involve interpersonal dependency. If guardians are legally privileged with managing administrative burdens for dependents, then more research is needed to understand how burdens affecting dyads of guardians and dependents are

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[8] The social, psychological, and medical services that support transgender people

structured by policy design, experienced vicariously, and compounded with individual level attitudes and resources.

The decisions guardians make directly shape administrative burdens because they determine whether a dependent person can receive services. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of interviews with 25 families with transgender minors navigating trans care options, I argue that guardians obstruct or authorize depending on how they perceive their role, risks, and information. I identify the burdensome dynamics posed by mismatches between parent and adolescent child perceptions of information legitimacy and risk-aversion to stigma associated with care uptake. Parental choice in youth trans care options is an ideal empirical domain from which to describe the administrative burdens of guardship given the clear policy requirements for parental consent, deeply held beliefs on gender, and political controversy that heighten administrative burdens.

Analysis of narratives shows how administrative burdens are relationally constructed between dependents and caregivers. The analysis suggests that cultural and social reference points connected to the parent's social identity play a significant role in their sensemaking, bringing to light informal and nonprofit organized networks among the parents of transgender youth as a critical resource. By theorizing and inductively studying guardianship, this study aims to extend administrative burden theory to adequately factor in the effects of interpersonal dependency. These insights matter not only for understanding transgender youth, but also other dependent populations where access hinges on the authority of another person.

This paper begins with a review of literature on what determines degrees of administrative burden, raising the relevance of guardians. I then offer a typology that distinguishes guardians from other actors and sort the guardians by whether they obstruct or authorize participation, which is intended to be predictive of their effects on administrative burden. After describing the case of parental consent in youth trans care options, I explain my methods for interview data collection and qualitative analysis. I present findings on the logics of how parents determined their degree of consent, and conclude with implications for administrative burden, nonprofit-led peer interventions, and understanding citizen-state relations.

Distinguishing Citizen-Side Actors in Administrative Burden

From the vantage point of policy users, it is necessary to unpack the nature and role of the people and organizations who shape their experiences of administrative burdens (Barnes, 2021; Nisar, 2018). Administrative burdens are the costs individuals bear when interacting with policy requirements, typically categorized as learning, compliance, and psychological costs (Moynihan et al., 2015). Learning costs represent individual literacy of policy requirements, compliance costs represent individual conformity to required criteria, and psychological costs represent the degree of mental load imposed by the administrative process (Moynihan, 2022). These three cost types can take shape across two phases, eligibility and redemption (Barnes, 2021). Once a person is designated as eligible for the program or service of interest, there may be additional burdens associated with benefit redemption such as learning about limitations on the portability of benefits (Barnes, 2020), complying with discretionary service provider requirements (Heflin et al., 2023), or experiencing the stigma of being a beneficiary of a service (Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2022, 2024). The minutiae of individual experiences of administrative burden tend to reflect pre-existing causes and consequences of inequalities in society (Heinrich, 2016).

Administrative burdens are both the direct consequence of the political processes that determine policy users' experiences (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2021) and the indirect consequence of the actions of relevant intermediaries (Tiggelaar and George, 2025). Legislators and front-line employees can be understood as institutional decisionmakers that policy users must satisfy to gain benefits or services. Given that administrative burdens are traceable to the written law or rule backing an administrative process, empirical research has studied how the political preferences of legislators and the discretionary behaviors of front-line agents shape administrative burden (Baekgaard et al., 2021). These studies demonstrate that administrative burden is more than just a logistical matter, create policy feedback effects about who is deserving of bureaucratized help (Bell et al., 2024). However, the nature of administrative burden cannot be fully understood without factoring in the indirect role of third-party intermediaries (Wiley and Berry, 2018; Yu, 2023). Third-party intermediaries have been under-studied in the administrative burden literature, in part because they complicate the empirical staging of administrative burden as a two party, citizen-state interaction problem (Tiggelaar and George, 2025).

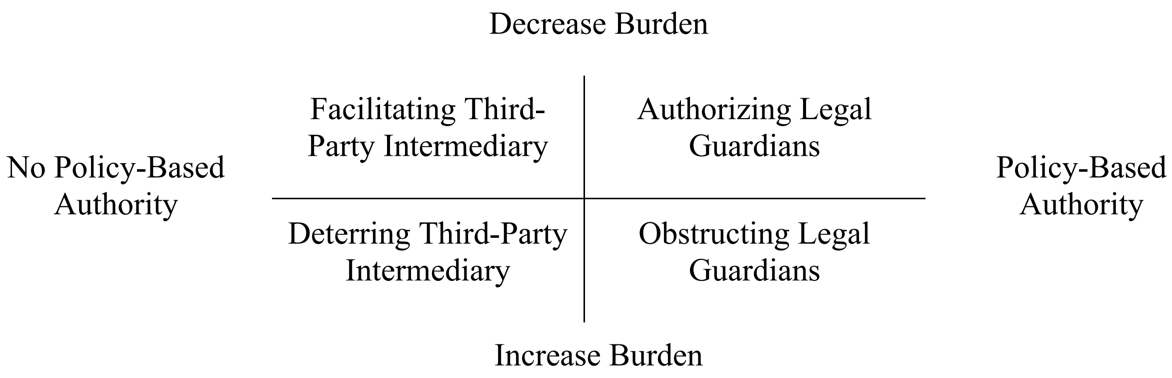
Recent research has referred to actors other than the individual policy user and institutional decision makers as third-party intermediaries. The term “third party” has been used to describe family members without legal authority (Nisar, 2018), private sector actors (Barnes, 2021; Barnes and Henly, 2018), nonprofit organizations (Tiggelaar and George, 2025; Wiley and Berry, 2018; Yu, 2023), or any other actor that indirectly mediates benefit receipt. These individuals or organizations are not designated any direct authority over the administrative process by policy but do shape administrative burdens indirectly. The studies naming third-party intermediaries describe their role in shaping how individuals navigate the rules and government interactions, either increasing or decreasing administrative burdens. Example cases where third-party actors increase burdens include when family members impose eligibility-phase costs by withholding identity documents to deter participation (Nisar, 2018), or cashiers impose redemption-phase costs for SNAP users (Barnes, 2021). Conversely, nonprofit organizations like those helping survivors of domestic violence (Wiley and Berry, 2018) can reduce policy users' experiences of administrative burden. In addition to third party actors not being directly included in policy design, they tend to reside in the nonprofit sector, private sector, or personal networks and make their impact through the citizen side of the citizen-state interaction (Salamon, 1989).

While most citizen-side actors shaping a policy user's experience of administrative burden fall within this definition of third-party intermediaries, there are important exceptions for legal guardians of dependents (Teaster, 2003). Policies that impact vulnerable citizens who are legally constructed as unable to make decisions for themselves have formal provisions that require stewardship by an appointed decision maker. These actors can be categorized as legal guardians, and often include decision makers such as parents, spouses, school teachers, court-appointed executors, or any other person with a legal right to control the fate or estate of a dependent person. While administrative burden traditionally focuses on the friction between the individual who will receive a benefit and those implementing policies, in certain contexts, service access is triangulated through a legal guardian. The effects of guardians on administrative burden are direct because of their legal right to control decision processes and their potential to conflict or align with the priorities of institutional decisionmakers. Examples include parents who determine their child’s vaccination use, guardians ad-litem who represent vulnerable individuals in court, conservators who control financial decisions for incapacitated individuals, husbands who must consent to their wives’ access to birth control in certain countries, and many social policy programs for vulnerable individuals. Legal guardianship becomes complicated when dependents can challenge the dependency in light of their own decision-making capacities or the rights comparatively granted to similarly situated dependents across different nations (Shalowitz et al., 2006).

Legal guardians, despite being on the citizen side of the citizen-state interaction boundary, are just like state side actors because they have direct control over administrative burdens. The unique nature of interpersonal dependency suggests additional dispersion of administrative burden between a dependent individual and their legal guardian. The dispersion of the administrative burden will depend on the level of goal overlap between the guardian and the dependent. In burden-increasing instances, dependent individuals may not be able to know about services (learning costs) or demonstrate eligibility for services (compliance costs) they would otherwise consent to and benefit from. Likewise, they may be given misinformation and face additional psychological costs like fear of conflict with the guardian or reduced autonomy as a consequence of interpersonal dependency. Conversely, guardians may create conditions that reduce administrative burden. They might share in or completely take on the frictions of navigating policy requirements and create an appearance of low administrative burden for the dependent in an otherwise complex policy system. Whether the guardian lean towards authorizing or obstructing access, when guardians are required administrative burden is not solely imposed by the state.

Legal guardians share behavioral traits with third-party intermediaries who shape administrative burden. However, they are distinct in that they have direct control because of policy design and legal rights. In Figure 1, I offer a typology of citizen-side agents who shape administrative burden that includes both third-party intermediaries and interpersonal gatekeepers. These actors can be differentiated on two dimensions: policy-based authority and their directional intentions for shaping administrative burden. Policy-based authority indicates whether or not the agent has formal authority to control the dependent individual's service access. The directional intentions for increasing or decreasing administrative burdens are specific to the mission of the third-party intermediary.

Figure 1. Typology of Citizen-Side Agents Who Shape Administrative Burden



When applying the typology, consider, for instance, the case of parents who shape learning costs in childhood vaccination participation. Parents are key gatekeepers with rights to either authorize or obstruct their children's access to vaccinations (Wilkinson and McBride, 2021). The public health departments and childhood vaccine advocates aiming to encourage vaccination would qualify as facilitating third-party intermediaries. But, despite their efforts to clarify vaccine misinformation and their association with mainstream scientific authority, doctors (the front-line employee) and other facilitating third-party agents cannot change the course prescribed by the parent. Similarly, anti-vaccine advocates or alternative medical providers who disregard best practices would qualify as deterring third-party intermediaries. By spreading messages counter to those issued by public health authorities, they can deter vaccine uptake. Their opposing campaign will require planting the seeds of doubt such that parents obstruct their children from participating in regularly scheduled vaccinations.

The behavior of these agents has immediate effects on the dependent citizens' experience of administrative burdens, and on their long-term health outcomes. Given the consequential nature of citizen-side agents, this analysis develops the nature of guardians, seeks to identify how and why they interpret their role, and suggests the transferability of the typology and the qualitative categories to other policy cases. In doing this, I speak to how administrative burdens are directly shaped by legal guardians.

Current Study

While past public management research has identified how institutional decisionmakers and third-party intermediaries shape the administrative burdens of service access, less work has described how legal guardians shape administrative burdens. Specifically, there is limited work empirically assessing how people who are legally or practically responsible for a dependent navigate imposing administrative burdens to service access on their dependents. This study explores this issue by analyzing interviews conducted with 25 families with transgender minors to reveal how parents shape their child's access to trans care options. My analysis sorts the guardians' decision logic from the interview data along the vertical axis of the proposed typology from obstructing to authorizing access. I inductively name how parents arrive at their final decisions to consent or not with three qualitative categories. They are strongly withheld consent, reluctantly acquiesced consent, and confidently authorized consent. From there, I discuss how reference points connected to the parent's social identity play a significant role in their sensemaking and make the case for the transferability of findings.

Policy Case: Parental Consent for Youth Trans Care Access

Governing bodies from health regulators to local legislators have determined the degrees of administrative burden associated with trans care access. Gender-affirming care is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as including, “any single or combination of a number of social, psychological, behavioral or medical (including hormonal treatment or surgery) interventions designed to support and affirm an individual’s gender identity,” (World Health Organization, 2025). Gender-affirming interventions are used by all gender groups and are called transgender care or trans care when utilized by individuals whose gender identity conflicts with their biological sex. From a technical perspective, trans care options like socially or legally adopting a new name or undertaking medical interventions are subject to policies that ensure such choices are made deliberately and are medically necessary (Kirkland et al., 2021; Padula et al., 2016). For example, the paperwork involved in communicating a name change to a school or the requirements to live socially as one’s gender before being eligible for surgical interventions verify a person’s commitment to those changes. They also protect institutions like schools and hospitals from liability.

When trans care options are considered by and for minors, they require parental consent. This is visible in policy, with examples including how state-level legal name change statutes or healthcare regulations written by the World Professional Association on Transgender Health (WPATH) all maintain provisions for parental consent. The presence of parental consent requirements are also visible in management practice, and examples include schools that require parent signatures to call a student something other than a birth name or hairstylists and barbers who seek parental consent for certain haircuts. From a legal perspective, parental rights are the decision power to direct the upbringing of children and make choices on matters like education, medical treatment, and religion (Huntington and Scott, 2021). Thus, even if a minor meets the medical standards for gender incongruence[9] or verifiably experiences the mental health condition gender dysphoria,[10] trans care options will not be provided without parental consent. Appropriate care plans vary according to developmental markers and are based on the severity and type of gender incongruence or gender dysphoria, and both the patients' and parents' (for minors) willingness and ability to navigate the social frictions and medical eligibility processes for transition. Reversals on commitments to pursue trans medical care are rare[11] because of the high social costs and administrative burdens to initially access care (Turban et al., 2021). But when they do happen, some commonly reported reasons for stopping hormonal treatments include "feeling nonbinary" (Irwig, 2022), and reasons for stopping social measures like cross-sex name, pronoun use, and beauty habits include that the perceived costs of being transgender in society were too high (Turban et al., 2021).

Recent demographic shifts in LGBTQ identity have motivated state legislators to create additional administrative burdens to trans care (Barbee et al., 2021). In 2019, the US Centers for Disease Control estimated that about 0.6% of adults and youth in the US reported identifying as transgender (Herman et al., 2022). The distribution of transgender people is skewed towards younger individuals, with roughly 2% of all Generation Z openly identifying with the label transgender (Jones, 2022). Often called the transgender tipping point, younger transgender people are also more willing to adopt non-gender-normative identities and to publicly share their

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[9] Gender incongruence is a sexual health condition where a person experiences marked and persistent incongruence between gender identity and the assigned sex (Robles et al., 2022). Current diagnosis standards state it cannot be applied prior to the onset of puberty.

[10] Gender dysphoria is the psychological distress that may result from a mismatch between one's natal sex and the gendered personhood attached to that sex (Dhejne et al., 2016).

[11] Additional, previously known sources from NIH are no longer available.

identities than older generations of more gender-normative transgender adults (Lagos, 2022). In political environments where such change is viewed unfavorably, legislators have responded to LGBTQ demographic shifts (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2017). This response has involved doubling down on the legal lever of parental consent as a means to ban inclusion of LGBTQ content in classrooms (Davis, 2023; Barbeauld, 2014), regulate uses of chosen names in schools without parental consent (Politt et al,, 2021), and impose penalties on teachers, health providers, and even beauty workers (Steadman, 2024) for participating in social and medical trans care options for adolescents. Public opinion on such legislation is mixed, with some groups celebrating the affirmation of parental rights to restrict youth exposure to non-heterosexual and non-cisgender persons. Others are critics, questioning the establishment of socially conservative moral values through blanket bans and protesting the additional burdens to supportive choices (Goldberg, 2023).

States with such legislative infrastructure pose a series of implications for navigating administrative burdens based on parent preferences. For parents with clear commitments to obstructing trans care interventions, new legislation lowers burdens and provides policy-based authority both to ensure medical treatment is not an option and to control their children's access to information on LGBTQ+ identity and trans care options. For parents with intentions to authorize trans care interventions, new legislation heightens the learning, compliance, and psychological costs of identifying, accessing, and respectfully receiving trans care. For those parents who feel uncertainty about what to do for a trans child, political controversy further muddles knowing when and how to exercise parental rights to either share in building or breaking administrative burdens in the complex system of trans care access.

Methods

The reported findings are from an ethnographic study of families with transgender minors in one US state with a clear Republican majority. 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.[12] The interview data collected represent the stories of 25 different families composed of the voices of 42 total people, including 31 parents and 11 youth between the ages of 16 and 19. Of the parents interviewed, 21 are mothers, 10 are fathers, and one is a nonbinary-identified parent. Of the youth interviewed, three were either estranged from their biological parents or their parents would not participate. Among the remaining 8 family units with late adolescent research participants, 5 families were interviewed as parent-child pairs and 3 families were interviewed separately. No minors were interviewed without parental consent. Factoring in the ages of youth who were not interviewed, the average trans child age across the families was 14.

I recruited participants by embedding myself in the social networks of the parents of transgender youth in the state. Initial connections were made by attending public events and community meetings on LGBTQ+ issues. I also circulated a business card with my study information and asked parents to refer me to their peer parents or adolescent age youth at the conclusion of interviews. Among the 31 parents interviewed, six are also leaders of four different community nonprofit organizations across the state that offer peer programs for the parents of transgender youth. These parents were especially instrumental in introducing me to new families. After obtaining informed consent or assent, I conducted interviews in locations most preferred by

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[12] No new state-level policy changes or laws on transgender issues passed during the study window.

the participant. Most interviews were conducted in-person at participant's homes, coffee shops, church meeting rooms, or public library meeting rooms, and the rest virtually. Families were offered a $50 cash incentive[13] via gift card for study participation. Interviews ranged from one to two hours, and the time spent with rural participants included up to six hours with one family. I assigned aliases to each participant to protect their identities. Table 1 displays their quantifiable characteristics.

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristics

Parent Participants (n=31)	Number (%)
Average Age	49
Mothers	21/31 (68%)
Non-White	4/31 (13%)
Graduate Degree	15/31 (48%)
Youth Participants (n=11)	
Average Age	18
Non-White	1/11 (9%)
Plans to/Attend College	8/11 (72%)
Families (n=25)	
Average Trans Child Age	14
Rural County	6/25 (24%)

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[13] Funded by the American Political Science Association Volcker Award

Interview Protocol

Interviews were semi-structured and began with questions about perceptions of the local community's attitude on transgender people and the minors' journeys towards recognizing transgender identity. Topics ranged from how family and friends reacted to the transgender minor, support and sources of information sought, management of ambiguous grief,[14] emotional labor in the parent-child relationship, the state-level political environment, health needs and decisions on permitting trans care, and interactions with schools, courts, and health care providers. In particular, I asked parent respondents to discuss how they perceived their child's trans care needs, to explain why they chose to permit or deny the legal adoption of new names and the utilization of hormone replacement therapy, and to describe any interactions with teachers, judges, and medical providers. For youth respondents, I asked them to discuss how they communicated with their parents and providers and demonstrated confidence in their transgender identity across the multiple interaction types. Sample questions are available in the 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 pragmatist paradigm to qualitative analysis that dually emphasizes inquiry processes that contribute to theory building and process-oriented knowledge relevant to program evaluation (Hall, 2013; Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020; Morgan, 2014). The analysis of data itself combined both deductive and inductive coding

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[14] In the context of transgender identity, ambiguous grief involves the parent mourning the loss of the gender-based relationality they may have used to construct their original connection to their child (Norwood, 2013). This is salient when the parent and child are either the same or opposite sexes.

practices (Saldaña, 2021). The deductive analysis involved applying codes based on the administrative burdens framework, while the inductive analysis involved following the saturation of concepts that emerged as shared experiences across interviewees (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Creswell and Creswell, 2013).

Analysis began with reading the full interviews from each family unit and writing a short summary of each family member's perspective. In my first round of coding, I closely read the transcripts, sorted narratives by their commonly shared topics, and coded those responses by their burden valence towards allowed or disallowed trans care access. I then re-reviewed the data with attention towards emerging themes, making note of thematic similarities in narratives with opposing outcomes (Proudfoot, 2023) and triangulating the perspectives between the parent(s) and the child when possible (Carter et al., 2014). For example, I sorted narratives about interactions with primary care physicians and healthcare participation requirements into a meta code and then sub-coded those data for perceived learning, compliance, and psychological costs. I then created codes about emerging themes in healthcare interactions such as satisfaction with communication with the doctor, perceptions of safety, perceptions of the child's maturity and readiness to take steps in transition, the influence of others in the family's network, and the intervening role of deeply held beliefs and values. I also coded rationales for decisions made by the parent and made note of reported shifts across time. In order to strengthen the quality of the analysis and remove interviewer framing bias, I conducted member checking with select participants to confirm my articulation of the shared experiences (Birt et al., 2016).

Findings

The participants in this study overwhelmingly characterized the process of navigating parental consent in trans care as one marked by struggles with searches for information (learning costs) and with stigma (psychological costs). However, there are notable divisions in what that meant across family units. Emphasizing parental consent to age appropriate, gender-affirming HRT in the analysis presented here, I group the 25 family units into three distinct categories of consent based on if the guardian was committed to obstructing access, switches from obstructing to authorizing, or always committed to authorizing access.

The first category is "strongly withheld consent". These are narratives belong squarely in the obstructing legal guardians quadrants of the typology of citizen-side actors, represented by five families where the parent and child actively conflicted over trans care access. The second category is "reluctantly acquiesced consent". These narratives represent parents who started as obstructors who crossed over to authorization. In these cases, parents did not provide consent at first but eventually at least one parent acquiesced for reasons such as the child's increased maturity, partially improved confidence in health information, or worsening youth suicidality. This theme is present among sixteen of the families and does not necessarily end with the parent(s) having full confidence in their decision. Of those families, five parents shared privately managing their fears, while the rest reported direct interaction with the child about continued hesitancy. The third category of narratives include four families where the parent either plans to provide consent (child is pre-puberty) or has provided consent to the WPATH standard of care schedule and claims to show only active support to their child. Most parents (n=27) in the reluctantly acquiesced consent and confidently authorized consent categories discussed the stigma of being perceived a "permissive parent" by society and receiving criticisms for "allowing [child name] to be transgender" or consenting to use of trans care options.

Strongly Withheld Consent

The interviewees represented in the withheld access category include a married mother, a heterosexual married couple, and three age 18 transgender individuals. The youth experiences focus on the time costs and mental health effects of waiting for eligibility and hassling their guardians to take on the learning costs of program participation to no avail. Nearly all the youth in the sample reported prompting their parents to learn more information about trans health care (n=9 of 11). However, this did not entail successfully nudging parental consent for some. For the youth narratives in the withheld access category, all shared stories of trying and failing to negotiate their identity and health care access with their parent(s). For example, Luna, whose conflict with her parents ended with estrangement, shared her entrepreneurial efforts to connect with her family. She was able to have her parents attend a doctor's appointment with a transgender medicine specialist. However, even after what she described as a "long" appointment where her mom asked "tons of questions" her parents' opposition did not shift. She explained that her mom is a real estate agent with enough time to be an avid consumer of misinformation and who is "very big into Facebook conspiracy theory groups and QAnon content" that opposes transgender people. She was not surprised that her attempt to change her mom's mind failed. Ultimately, she obtained HRT prescriptions shortly after her 18th birthday, and shared that she hopes to move to a blue state and become a bartender.

> "My parents took me to the clinic to try to say, look, we support you, but [you're] not going to do any of that. The doctor gave no pressure pushing them towards my healthcare. They explained how gender dysphoria is persistent and how medication helps. It ended when they gave a referral to [a support group for parents] but there was no follow up beyond that. My mom was like, 'I'm not signing anything! I'm not doing anything!' to the doctors."

While consuming misinformation is one possible logic behind withholding consent, a more common point of parental hesitation across the three categories was concern about transgender identity being a cultural fad (n=8) given demographic shifts towards increasing transgender visibility and representation. And, for Skyler, this was the root of withheld trans care access. Skyler explained that he first tried to share with his parents that he was experiencing gender dysphoria at age 14. His parents agreed to send him to therapy shortly after this conversation but have not shifted their view on the legitimacy of gender incongruence. Even with the help of his therapist, he could not progress the conversation due to parental perceptions that gender dysphoria is a trend. He explained that his father is a retired military veteran and, given the household culture, the conversation ended there. Skyler is currently enrolled in trade school, following his dad's dream career for him, and plans to pursue trans health care once graduated and working.

> "I came out when I was in my freshman year of high school. And I have come out to my parents multiple times, but they, um, they don't believe me. That I am like trans and stuff like that, which I am still trying to fight them about that. But I'm just like, at this point I feel like I've sort of given up on trying to argue with them."

Among the narratives of those with guardians who obstructed access to care, the guardians can be characterized as following their pre-existing values and beliefs by blocking participation. Efforts by youth to present an alternative view may involve costs to the parents but does not represent an administrative burden with no reversal on a healthcare participation decision.

This study is limited in its representation of parent voices who currently remain committed to not consenting to trans care for their child. Some of the youth who enjoyed parental support shared stories of friends whose parents would "point the finger" at legislation banning youth HRT access in the state or who "are not willing to do all the driving" necessary to go to see a transgender medicine specialist. The two parent voices in the study sample who were overtly willing to share their reasons for currently withholding trans care access were parents of youth who had gender-fluid identities. In both cases, the parents expressed sentiments that pursuing HRT felt unnecessary. For instance, one parent said that their child would "need to stop switching around so much and make up their mind," before they would be willing to support such a step. More vivid descriptions of logics for being opposed to permitting trans care access were shared by parents who eventually did permit it.

Reluctantly Acquiesced to Authorize Consent

Twenty seven interviewees are represented in the acquiescing to authorize access category. For each of these families, their stories begin with the parent wanting to withhold consent to trans care but then coming to a juncture that pulls them towards permitting it. In all cases, there was an outstanding sense of reluctance by the parent to having made the decisions to permit trans care access. Mental health concerns or concerns about whether the adolescent was mature enough to agree to the consequences of the decision were common turning points. For example, Diana, the mother of a 16-year-old transgender boy shared that even though WPATH technically permits youth to begin HRT at 14, she wanted to see her son mature and find more confidence. She also shared that her husband was quicker to feel ready to permit trans care use, and through leaning on him and a trusted doctor for support she was able to also provide her support.

> "I had a lot of questions about what physical changes were permanent. We loved our endocrinologist. She was great. And I'm most upset about this legislation[15] because we've lost her. Because I kept going back to, you know, when I was 16. So I was comparing [son's name] to myself. I had a very different idea of the person I wanted to be compared to when I was. You know, 40 or 30 right even like, if you could compare like 16 to 26 to 36 to 46, if you change as a person. So I just needed a little bit more time for

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[15] Referring to a legislative ban on adolescent hormone replacement therapy

> [son's name] to get a little bit older. But then I saw that [son's name] was very certain, and this is what he wanted to do. So. I am supportive. I also saw more maturity. I saw [son's name] mature, more in other areas as far as being responsible. You know, school and you know, just developing into an older, more mature person. And as for who can make those decisions, 14-year-olds should not decide anything major. And, I do see he's much happier now."

However, not all parents were persuaded by their interactions with healthcare providers, by their child demonstrating maturity at a certain age, or able to reach a threshold where learning and psychological costs subsided. Rather, most parents in this category reported ongoing stress about making the wrong decision and wanting higher quality information even after consenting. For example, Elena, the mother from this chapter's opening story, shared her concerns that she was "not sure this is real" and that "kids change their minds". In her process of ensuring that her daughter was committed to her trans identity, shifts in the daughter's mental health prompted her to change course on not permitting trans care.

> "My caution was the only thing worse than getting it wrong is getting it wrong the other way. We wanted to make sure she meant it. And, in that time, I saw she lost heart, patience, and trust. The inaction caused a lot of harm. Once that hurt showed itself, I knew neutrality on my part was not cutting it. The zen space for me caused her harm. She needed help. She tanked emotionally. Her art and her demeanor became dark. There was self harm and ideation. If she was going to walk through life as a female, she needed my help. But, as a parent, depending on where you are sitting, this feels like a choice. It doesn't feel life saving. It's not cancer. But, everyone [at the doctors office] was affirming and it was standard of care. There was no space to ask if this is the right path."

In addition to shared concerns about the validity of their children's trans identity, points of dissatisfaction shared by a third of the parents in this category were that transgender medicine doctors "just believe the kid", could not show them "hard proof", and do not provide wrap around support to struggling parents. For these families, a visit with a transgender medicine specialist did not adequately ease fundamental concerns that their children will "face a harder path to walk." During parental interviews, I asked additional probing questions about what questions felt unanswered or what information they hoped future scientific research could offer them about making a clearer decision on whether to offer parental consent to youth trans care. The parents consistently reported spending significant time learning about trans health and the conversation would turn towards parent responsibility to prevent regretted decisions and broader fears of inclusion in society. For example, continuing to focus on Elena, she recalled that when she attended law school she had gay classmates and, in her life, has seen progress for integrating gay people that she has not seen for trans people. Even for Jasper, a father in this study who has a transgender brother who transitioned over 20 years ago, stress over permitting HRT use was salient. He explained that despite wanting to be completely supportive, he could not shake the concern that consenting to his son’s use of HRT was the wrong choice.

> “I feel complicated about saying this out loud, but was it just so much in the culture that it just seemed to him like the right thing to do? He's surrounded by it in his online life. I want to be clear that I don't think he's being poisoned. But is this really him? Is this [care access] helpful to him? I don't feel like we had an opportunity to raise those concerns [with the doctor] and be counseled outside of [son’s name] presence. We did get clear [health] information, but we're all trying to figure this out culturally right now and how to support kids in this. I told him directly, I'm concerned about whether this might be a decision that you feel later, like wasn't the right decision. That you’ll regret, I guess. And, he was like, I feel so sure about this. I do have enough personal experience to know that, you know, you can live your life in different ways. And you can transition and be happy. I know people who are trans. And if this is something that he feels like wasn't the right decision, he will be okay ... And I’m telling myself that but I still don't totally feel that way. I’m 80% there. There’s still a more general sense of wanting to protect your kid from potentially making decisions that they might regret. And I’m aware that when I'm imagining some sort of regret, it might still be in the sense of a binary.”

Finally, some parents in this category were both fearful of their child regretting utilizing trans health care and quietly holding out hope that their children would detransition to bring back “the person I lost,” because of the difficulties of, “letting go of the future I imagined, and making space for the child I have.” Ultimately, the administrative decision to permit trans care is less psychologically costly for those parents who have processed their ambiguous grief. Of the families in this study, (n=4) lead nonprofit programs targeted at the parents of transgender youth and (n=2) have facilitated community discussions at their churches to help others and themselves develop acceptance. Additionally, (n=15) parents reported participating at least once in such a group. For example, one mom explained she was able to get past her grief relatively quickly because of her own identities and social circles, and that was her motive for "creating a space" to do that for other parents.

> "None of us wanna share our grief with our kids. None of us who are supportive parents wanna share our grief with our kids. Right. Because that's a big burden to put on your kid. So, us creating a space where you can have those feelings and voice them and work through them is an important part of the process of acceptance, I think. Um, and, and validating those feelings and moving on from them is an important part of being wholly in and fully accepted. I mean, I didn't have anybody really other than [my husband] to sort of help me through that stuff. And I'm a pretty resilient person, because I'm a musician and an artist. I have known the LGBTQ community and had adult friendships with people who are trans and things like that. I had all of those sorts of things to resource in my own experience. So, it was a very short grieving period for me. I really just had to realize, wait, my person, this person is still the same person. They have all the same likes, they have all the same similarities with me. Their gender has nothing to do with that. It's a social construct anyway. Right. But I was particularly able to do that because of my experiences and not everyone has that benefit."

Confidently Authorized Consent

In the study sample, (n=4) of the families could be clearly characterized as confidently authorizing trans care access and vicariously shouldering administrative burden for their children. This is apparent in the ways they described the process of consulting a transgender medicine specialist to ask for information as onerous. Their stories of pursuing healthcare for their child involved pointing out the "long drives" to appointments, perceiving "the 50 page packet I had to fill out" as burdensome, and making efforts to become established patients before the age of eligibility to receive timely HRT prescriptions. This contrasts strongly with parents who felt their visits with providers were “not careful enough” or who characterized providers as failing to answer all of their questions and concerns. In my efforts to question parents to better understand what shaped their high level of support, one mother responded emphatically, “can you even imagine a severely depressed four-year-old?” before diving into a list of what she characterized as “happy memories” of everything she has done to support her now 15-year-old transgender daughter. It is worth noting that all the parents (n=6) in this category heavily emphasized their identity as a parent and status as either teleworkers or working jobs with flexible hours that allowed them additional quality time with their children.

The parents in this group also expressed flexibility with the uncertainty around the future of their child’s gender identity. For instance, Juliet shared with me the challenges of searching for and establishing care with a clinic out of state under the recent gender affirming care ban. She was more than willing to take on the learning and compliance costs of finding care within a drivable distance and showed confidence in being comfortable with whatever outcome would play out for her nonbinary child.

> “They just started puberty last year, and the more their body starts changing the more distressed they get. You better believe we are willing to drive so they are not in severe emotional pain. And they might not transition. I just want to buy them some time to decide. I don’t know where this journey’s going to end. They might decide, actually you know, I’m okay with my body doing its thing and I’ll do my thing. But they are so young, but they are way ahead of the puberty curve for their age. So even if they aren’t, this would be appropriate based on their bone density and [other developmental markers] at their age.”

These types of narratives also demonstrate that when caregivers and dependents are navigating care processes together, they will share similar perceptions on the nature of administrative burdens. For example, Mira shared a story about going through the process of traveling to see a transgender medicine specialist at a major hospital and receiving a referral for her son's care to be monitored by a local endocrinologist. However, in the referral and appointment making process, the appointment makers did not double check that her son was at the age of eligibility, resulting in them showing up for an appointment and being told to come back nine months later. Together, they "were both in tears" and shared sensemaking of the time cost and psychological cost of waiting for eligibility.

> "He was just turning 13, and they're like [based on his early puberty and developmental markers], he's good to start testosterone. We got referred to that endocrinologist and she's like, I am absolutely under no circumstances starting you on testosterone until you're 14. So then that was like a setback for him. 'cause he was like, oh my God, they're saying that I'm ready. I'm totally ready. And now I have to wait almost another full year. It was like nine months at that time. Like, we were both in tears at the endocrinologist's office when she's like absolutely not. Like the WPATH advises not till age of 14, which I respect that, but for the gender clinic team to be like, you're ready, and then make that appointment for us [without double checking his age]... I wish they wouldn't have got his hopes up."

It is also worth noting that within each category of caregivers' behaviors inductively named here (strongly withheld, reluctantly acquiesced, or confidently authorized), the social identities and cultural beliefs of caregivers showed common trends. This was apparent both in their own words and in the words of their dependents. In the setting of trans health care, parents who withheld consent emphasized association with typically socially conservative values, media, and professions. Parents who reluctantly gave consent tended to be graduate degree holders who expressed concerns about the quality of evidence on trans care, their child's inclusion in economic opportunities, and broader social belonging. And parents who confidently consented tended to emphasize their identity as a parent and the variety of their support for their children. While such correlations cannot be confidently drawn from a sample of 31 parents, this suggests that future research may be able to draw on cultural and social identity theories to predict the preferences of guardians, relevant to how doctors and other front-line agents may choose to communicate and use their discretion when dependents are involved.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to make the dynamics of legal guardianship visible to the administrative burden framework and demonstrate how dependency relationships distribute burdens among guardians and dependents. I distinguish guardians from other citizen-side actors and typify the valence of their support and its predicted effect on administrative burden. Drawing on qualitative analysis of interviews with families with transgender minors navigating the decision to engage in youth trans care options, I inductively name three categories of guardians' choices: strongly withheld consent, reluctantly acquiesced consent, and confidently authorized consent. The categories speak to how administrative burden is experienced for those who are squarely committed to obstructing access, switch from obstructing to reluctantly authorizing, or committed to authorizing access.

My analysis of data describes the experiences of families at different points along this behavioral spectrum. First, for caregivers who withhold their consent to care access based on information that supports not participating in care options, their dependents report frustration and resignation in trying to educate or introduce ideas that conflict their caregivers' beliefs. Taking efforts to introduce learning costs for some dependents proved futile and resulted in having to bear time costs of waiting until no longer being under a caregiver's control. This finding is consistent with literature on how policy design and information cues have a lesser effect on those with stronger pre-existing values. Second, caregivers who report reluctant acquiescence to consenting to care options face heightened psychological costs. These caregivers share that their worries about making the wrong decision on behalf of their dependent cannot be easily soothed.

And they report dissatisfaction with their interactions with learning from the front-line agents who provide care options, setting them up to be assigned complicity and blame if the caregivers' worries come true. Third, for caregivers who report confidence and alignment with participating in the care programs their dependents also want to participate in, the administrative burden looks conceptually as if the dependent was an autonomous actor. The usual nature of learning, psychological, and compliance costs offered by the administrative burden framework is shared, and at times learning and compliance costs may disproportionately be falling on the caregiver to manage.

To further solidify these inductive findings, I list and apply them to the case presented here and the parallel situations of childhood vaccination in Table 2. The first and second columns list the qualitative category for the guardian's decision logic and how administrative burdens are dispersed where the dependent would have chosen to uptake the care option. The additional columns explain how the predicted effects of the guardian and dependent's alignment are experienced by each party. The first case column summarizes the findings presented here in the case of youth trans care access. The second case column transfers the same pattern to the case of childhood vaccination. Finally, the last column lists the descriptions of the administrative burden costs endured by guardians and dependents in a generalist form. These categories are intended to be transferable to other contexts marked by the administrative burdens of interpersonal dependency, especially the health care decisions for minors and older individuals (Jackson et al., 2008).

Table 2. Caregiver Decision Logics and Administrative Burden

Caregiver Consent Decision Logics	Administrative Burden Alignment on Consent	Case 1: Youth Trans Care	Case 2: Childhood Vaccinations	General Costs Endured
Strongly Withheld	↑ Learning and Psychological Costs for Dependent	● Finding trans health information other than the view of parents, possible mental health consequences of no medical treatment	● Finding vaccine information other than the view of parents, possible physical health consequences of no vaccinations	● Finding information other than the view of parents, possible wellbeing consequences
	No Learning and Psychological Costs for Caregiver	● Parent implements personal beliefs on gender identity	● Parent implements personal beliefs on vaccine safety	● Caregiver implements personal beliefs
Reluctantly Acquiesced	↑ Learning and Psychological Costs for Dependent	● Negotiate perceptions of eligibility and benefit differences with parent, stress of self-advocacy	● Negotiate perceptions of eligibility and benefit differences with parent, stress of self-advocacy	● Negotiate perceptions of eligibility differences with parent, stress of self-advocacy
	↑ Learning and Psychological Costs for Caregiver	● Parent incorporates alternative information to personal beliefs, outstanding worries of uptaking trans care hard to resolve	● Parent incorporates alternative information to personal beliefs, outstanding worries of negative vaccine effects hard to resolve	● Parent incorporates alternative information to personal beliefs, outstanding worries hard to resolve
Confidently Authorized	= or ↓ Learning and Psychological Costs for Dependent	● Co-navigate or lean on caregiver for health information, trust in caregiver and expectations of relief from healthcare utilization	● Co-navigate or lean on caregiver for health information, trust in caregiver and expectations of relief from healthcare utilization	● Co-navigate or lean on caregiver for information, trust in caregiver and expectations of relief from participation
	= or ↑ Learning and Psychological Costs for Caregiver	● Parent shoulders shared goals of trans health care, expects benefits	● Parent shoulders shared goals of following vaccine schedule, expects benefits	● Parent shoulders shared goals, expects benefits

This study also raises the relevance of both informally and nonprofit-organized peer support efforts in shaping caregivers' psychological costs. Parents in 15 of the 25 families reported participating in or leading a peer support group. While this may be the biased consequence of the snowball sampling method, it suggests that such organizations have relevant social network influence. Future research could examine when and how such group participation produces successful peer effects, and test if their community presence is consequential to both administrative burdens and long-term health outcomes. Peer-based settings provide normative value and are an ideal setting in which to process the psychological costs of uncertainty with community validation.

More broadly, this study contributes to literature on administrative burden by showing that learning, compliance, and psychological costs are qualitatively distinct in relationships of legal dependency. These findings build on previous work that emphasizes the role of third-party intermediaries by distinguishing citizen-side actors with policy-based authority. When individuals must rely on another person to permit their service access, administrative burdens can be heightened in the interlock of policy design and caregiver preferences, especially since their influence is often both familial and less subject to sanctions or regulations. This study deepens understanding of how burdens are distributed and implies how guardianship can be leveraged as policymaking by other means.

Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your child's journey and when you first became aware of their gender identity?
2. How do you typically communicate with them about these experiences?
3. What sources of information did you look for to navigate your role as the parent?
4. What concerns did you have about standards of care as they would apply to your situation?
5. Can you describe who is in your support system, both within and outside the family?
6. What kind of support have you received from medical professionals?
7. Have you sought support or resources from nonprofits or community organizations? If so, when and how?
8. What advice would you give to other parents in a similar situation?
9. How can others best support you and your child during this time?
10. What are your goals or future hopes for your child?

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Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

Indiana University, O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs *Bloomington, Indiana*

Ph.D. in Public Affairs August 2020 - July 2025

- Fields: Public Management, Nonprofit Management
- Committee: Amanda Rutherford (Chair), Beth Gazley, Jill Nicholson-Crotty, Allison Schnable, and Leonor Camarena
- Dissertation: *Cross-Sector Dynamics of Administrative Burden*

The Ohio State University, John Glenn College of Public Affairs *Columbus, Ohio*

Master of Public Administration August 2018 - May 2020

Graduate Minor in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

University of Virginia, College of Arts and Sciences *Charlottesville, Virginia*

Bachelor of Arts in Cognitive Science August 2014 - May 2018

Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy

PEER REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

Beaton, E. E., Raadschelders, J. C., Wilson, G. D., Khurana, S., & Rodriguez Leach, N. (2024). The Yoke of Objectivity in Public Administration (and Beyond). *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, *7*(3), 89-100.

Lee, E., Lewis-Liu, T., Khurana, S., & Lu, M. (2024). A systematic review of the link between public service motivation and ethical outcomes. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, *46*(3), 236-263.

MANUSCRIPTS UNDER REVIEW

Khurana, S. "Frustrated with the State: Attributional Ambiguity, Nonprofit "Know Your Rights Initiatives", and Administrative Burden"

Li, D. Wright, J. Khurana, S. "From the Streets to Spreadsheets: Protest, Nonprofit Advocacy, Elections, and Police Reform"

Rutherford, A. Khurana, S. "Hanging in the Balance: Assessing Goal Prioritization Among Street-Level Bureaucrats"

MANUSCRIPTS IN PREPARATION

Jensen, C. Khurana, S. "Stigma, Masculinity, and Asking for Help with Administrative Burdens"

Khurana, S. Beaton, E. “Listening to Organizational Voice and Silence in Response to Sexual Harassment”

Khurana, S. Mee, E. Wu, J. “Collaborator Choice and Performance: Comparing Collaborative Outcomes for School Safety”

Khurana, S. “The Allyship Effect: Nongovernmental Help with Administrative Burden"

Khurana, S. “‘I’m not signing anything!’ How guardian decision processes shape administrative burden”

Khurana, S. “Nudging Dissatisfaction: Strategic Communication of Decision Making”

Mee, E. Khurana, S. “Administrative Apprehension: Digital Sexual Misconduct Reporting on University Campuses”

PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS

Carley, S. Konisky, D. Silva, J. Khurana, S. Freel, N., (2022). The Transition to Electric Vehicles from the Perspective of Auto Workers and Communities. *The Roosevelt Project Industrial Heartland Electric Vehicle Transition Case Study Working Paper Series.*

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Ethical Citizen-State Interactions, Public and Nonprofit Performance Management, Administrative Burden, Voice in Organizations, Mixed Methods & Epistemic Pluralism

RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS

- **Allison Schnable** May 2024 - August 2024
- **Kosali Simon** August 2022 - December 2022
- **Amanda Rutherford** August 2021 - May 2022
- **Jennifer Silva** August 2020 - May 2022
- **Brad Fulton** August 2020 - May 2021
- **Megan LePere-Schloop** August 2018 - May 2020

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- SPEA-V326 Communication for Public & Nonprofit Organizations - Instructor of Record (Spring 2023, Fall 2023, Spring 2024, Fall 2024, Spring 2025)

INVITED GUEST LECTURES

- "Nonprofit Organizational Change" Guest Lecture for SPEA-N 525 Nonprofit Management and Leadership - Prof. Beth Gazley (Spring 2024)
- "Building High-Quality Relationships in the Nonprofit Workplace" Guest Lecture for SPEA-N 362 Nonprofit Management and Leadership - Prof. Beth Gazley (Fall 2022)

PROFESSIONAL AWARDS & GRANTS

- Best Conference Paper, IU OPSA Conference (March 2025)
- ARNOVA Lester M. Salamon Memorial Award for Promising PhD Proposal in Nonprofit and Voluntary Action Research (November 2024)
- AOM Public and Nonprofit Division Doctoral Consortium Fellowship (May 2024)
- ARNOVA Dissertation Fellowship (November 2023)
- APSA Paul A. Volcker Endowment for Public Service Research and Education, Junior Scholar Research Grant (August 2023)
- PMRA Kenneth Meier Conference Travel Award (May 2023)

INSTITUTIONAL AWARDS

- Graduate Student Teaching Award, IU O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs (April 2024)
- ICPSR Tuition Fellowship, IU O'Neill School of Public
- Best MPA Capstone Award, OSU John Glenn College of Public Affairs (May 2020)
- Community Service Award, OSU John Glenn College of Public Affairs (May 2020)
- Sesquicentennial Scholarship, The Ohio State University (June 2019)
- John A. Herring Award, Serpentine Alumni Society at UVA (Nov 2018)
- 100% MPA Tuition Coverage Plus 2-Year Graduate Research Assistantship, OSU John Glenn College of Public Affairs (May 2018)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- Public Management Research Association (PMRA)
- Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA)
- Midwestern Political Science Association (MPSA)
- American Political Science Association (APSA)
- Academy of Management (AOM)