

Observing Civic Engagement

Studying Civil Society Organizations with Systematic Social Observation

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Civil Society Organizations

What are Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)?

CSOs are formal organizations whose participants voluntarily assemble to pursue common purposes. They are also known as voluntary associations, civic associations, or membership-based organizations. CSOs include hobby clubs, business associations, religious congregations, advocacy groups, and more.

Why should we care about CSOs?

Scholars and observers from Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1800s to Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol today have argued that citizen participation in CSOs is a crucial part of what makes American democracy work.

What do we know about CSOs?

Scholarship has shown that there are lots (and *lots*) of CSOs, that they do many different things in many different ways, that many people affiliate with them, and that some people actively participate in them. Some of those participants develop new or improved civic and political skills and interests—and then go on to participate more in politics and create new civic ventures in their communities.

What do we *not* know about CSOs?

We do not know *how much* participant experiences vary across CSOs. How often do participants interact with people different from themselves? How often do they talk about politics? How often do they start and end on time? How often do they make clear decisions—and plans to act on them? How often do they shout at one another or sing together or hug each other? How often do they meet in public spaces (like libraries), private spaces (like homes), or commercial spaces (like cafes)? Answers to these questions of *frequency* and *distribution* have eluded scholars for nearly 200 years.

Systematic Social Observation

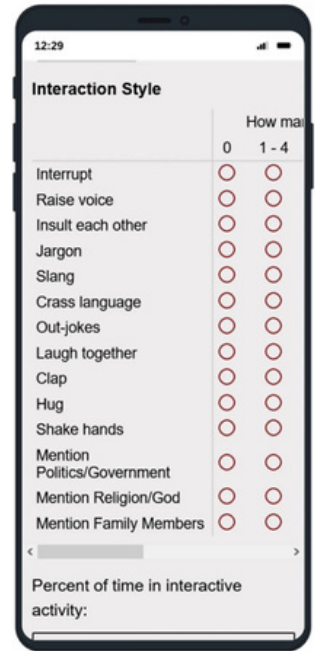
What is systematic social observation (SSO)?

SSO is a data collection technique that uses trained observers and standardized protocols and forms to collect detailed, comparable, quantitative data from many similar settings. It allows scholars to get more fine-grained detail on social and spatial dynamics than surveys, interviews, or documents can provide, while also examining more social settings than ethnography can reach. SSO has a long but sporadic history of use in social science. Developed originally in developmental psychology, it has been used in a variety of sociological field settings including studies of police-citizen interactions, the use of public parks and plazas, retail shopping behavior, and urban disorder.

A New Approach: SSO for CSOs

How does systematic social observation work in civil society organizations?

Over 14 years, we have developed an SSO approach to studying CSOs. We study convenings—meetings, events, and activities held by CSOs. Our trained observers attend convenings hosted by CSOs that participate in our studies. Observers arrive early and measure the convening space. They then sit apart from participants and watch the convening unfold. They tally and categorize the people, interactions, and activities they see as they happen. Data are entered on the fly into a survey form loaded on a tablet computer.



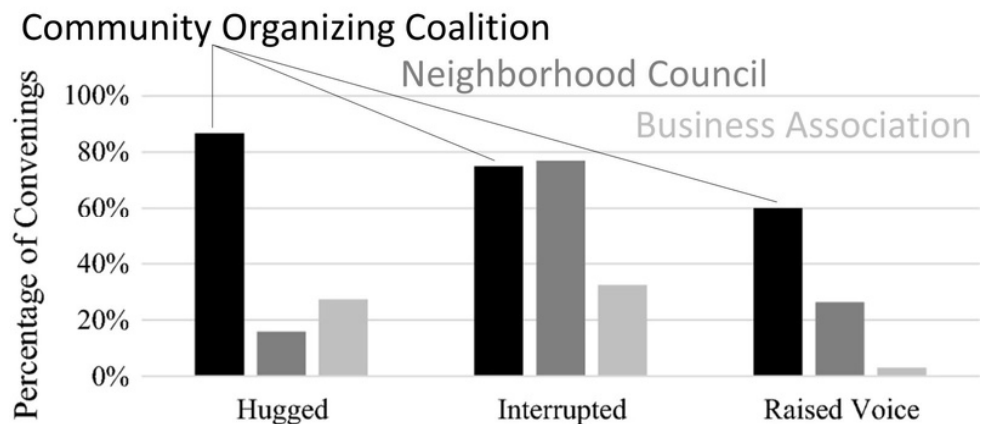
What can SSO for reveal about CSO convenings?

Our SSO tool includes more than 100 items that capture more than 700 variables. The primary thematic areas are:

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Convening Type | Formats & Spaces | Times & Participants | Procedures & Norms |
| Activities | Leaders | Decision Making | Social Boundaries |
| Planning & Strategizing | Organizing & Mobilizing | Public-Sphere Discussion | Interactions & Interaction Styles |

As an example, our second pilot study compared three large, community-improvement CSOs in Indianapolis, IN: a business association, a neighborhood council, and a community organizing coalition. By closely observing how participants interacted with each other at convenings, we could describe clear variation in the styles of interaction common in each CSO.

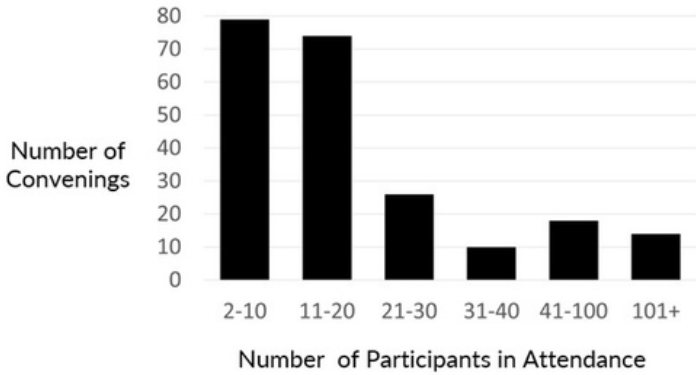
Participants in the business association were unlikely to raise their voices, interrupt each other, or hug. Neighborhood council members interrupted much more. Community organizing participants also interrupted, but they also hugged very often.



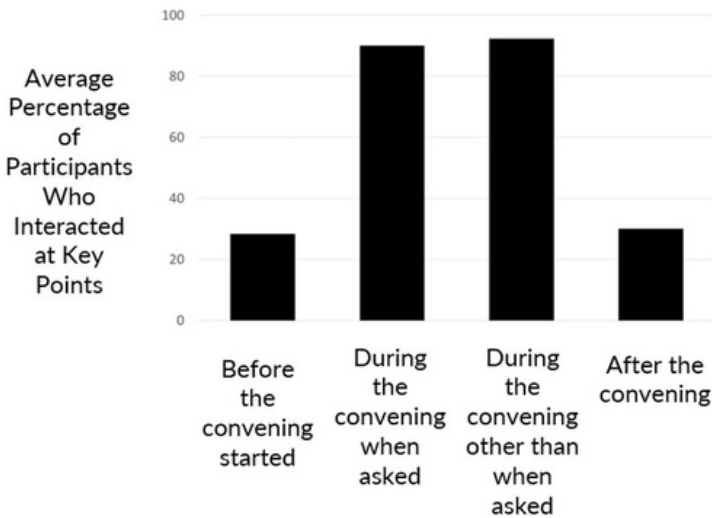
See Fulton, B.R. and Baggetta, M. (2022). "Observing Civic Engagement: Using Systematic Social Observation to Study Civil Society Organization Convenings." *Voluntas*. 33:1187-1195

CSOs in Bloomington, Indiana

With funding from AmeriCorps’s Office of Research and Evaluation, we are in the midst of a of a three-year study of CSOs in Bloomington, IN. As of mid-September 2024, we have sent more than 30 trained research assistants to more than 500 convenings held by 26 CSOs in the community. While data are still being collected, we have conducted initial analyses of convening attendance, participant interactions, and convening spaces and locations. The following are preliminary findings.

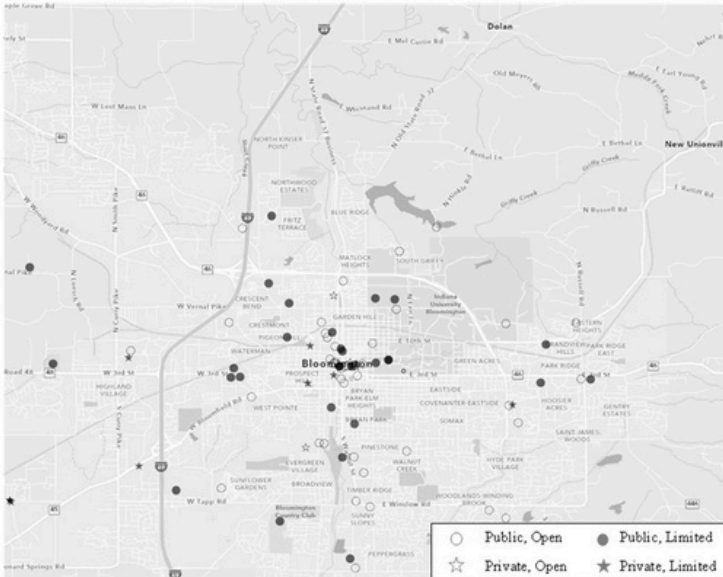


Most CSO convenings are very small—just 2-10 participants. A few, however, are quite large; the largest we observed had 232 participants. Mid-sized convenings where participants might be most likely to interact with people they do not already know are least common.



At the average convening about 90% of participants interact during the convening and about 30% interact before or after. While interaction is common both when conveners ask participants to interact and during unstructured moments when participants interact spontaneously, about 10% of participants do not interact—even when asked—and at a few convenings, *no one* interacts when asked.

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of 92 CSO Convening Spaces in Bloomington, IN



More than 80% of convening spaces are privately owned and operated, but a majority of those are open for anyone to enter. Less than 7% of convening spaces are in publicly-owned spaces with open access. Spaces are clustered downtown along primary transportation axes. Those located farther from the urban core appear more frequently in lower-wealth neighborhoods.

Learn More

We are regularly releasing new papers, reports, and other outputs from our projects. See our project website, oce.indiana.edu, for the latest.

Research Papers

2021. "[Systematic Social Observation in the Study of Civil Society Organizations.](#)"

Matthew Baggetta & David Bredenkamp. *Sociological Methods & Research*. 50(4):1994-1724.

2022. "[Observing Civic Engagement: Using Systematic Social Observation to Study Civil Society Organization Convenings.](#)" Brad R. Fulton & Matthew Baggetta. *Voluntas*. 33:1187-1195.

2022. "[Space and Interaction in Civil Society Organizations.](#)" Matthew Baggetta, Brad R. Fulton & Zoe Caplan. *Social Inclusion*. 10(3):307-318.

Videos and Podcasts

2023. "[Do Meeting Spaces Affect Social Interaction in Civil Society Organizations?](#)" *Let's Talk About*. Cogitatio Press.

2022. "[Systematic Social Observation of Civil Society.](#)" *Spark Talk*. McMaster University.

Use the Tools

Are you interested in conducting a similar study in your community? Do you think our SSO-for-CSOs tools might enhance a project you have in progress or in development? Would you like to directly collaborate with us on expansions of our projects?

Let us know! We are happy to share our tools, training materials, and expertise with anyone seeking to a better understanding of CSOs and civic engagement in all its forms.



Contact Us

To access the tools, discuss collaboration, or get more information about SSO and our research...

Visit our website:

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