Negotiating Infrastructural Citizenship Beyond the State: Philanthropy, Non-Profit Organizations, and the Flint Water Crisis

Melissa Heil
Illinois State University, mkheil@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpgeo

Recommended Citation
https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpgeo/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Geography, Geology, and the Environment at ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications-- Geography, Geology, and the Environment by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact ISUReD@ilstu.edu.
Negotiating infrastructural citizenship beyond the state: philanthropy, non-profit organizations, and the Flint Water Crisis

Melissa Heil

To cite this article: Melissa Heil (02 Oct 2023): Negotiating infrastructural citizenship beyond the state: philanthropy, non-profit organizations, and the Flint Water Crisis, Urban Geography, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2023.2259689

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2023.2259689
Negotiating infrastructural citizenship beyond the state: philanthropy, non-profit organizations, and the Flint Water Crisis

Melissa Heil

Department of Geography, Geology, and the Environment, Illinois State University, USA

ABSTRACT
The urban infrastructure literature has explored how infrastructure is tied to the politics of citizenship: states’ use of infrastructure to include/exclude populations and marginalized populations’ use of infrastructure to claim fuller citizenship. Often, this literature focuses on the relationship between governments and city dwellers, neglecting the role of other actors, like NGOs and philanthropic organizations, that influence infrastructural citizenship. A hallmark of neoliberalism in the Global North has been the transfer of responsibilities from the state to the non-profit sector, increasing these organizations’ power to shape urban citizenship. This paper examines how non-profit organizations participate in the politics of infrastructural citizenship by analyzing their role in providing emergency water infrastructure following the Flint Water Crisis. This process has been contradictory: the actions of these organizations have served as a lifeline in the face of state-enacted infrastructural violence, but also incorporate new inequalities into the infrastructural citizenship of Flint residents.

Introduction

Faith-based organizations in this city have spent the past four years doing the work the State has refused to do. (A Flint pastor at a June 2019 community meeting)

Urban studies scholars have recently chronicled many social dynamics of infrastructure: the social, economic, and political forces shaping infrastructural access (Phinney, 2022; Sultana, 2020); the labor of people to make cities habitable in the absence of physical infrastructure (Simone, 2004; Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022; Wilson, 2021); infrastructures of social reproduction like hospitals, schools, and social service agencies (Strauss, 2020), and “social infrastructures” (Latham & Layton, 2022) that support cooperation and trust among city dwellers (DeVerteuil, Kiener, et al., 2020). This paper’s focus is the relationship between infrastructure and citizenship, relations examined in...
Lemanski’s (2020) concept of “infrastructural citizenship” and Anand’s (2017) concept of “hydraulic citizenship.” These concepts position infrastructure as a mediating force in extending citizenship, or full political rights and participation, to urban residents. Infrastructure, in this literature, is understood as a mediator of state-citizen relations; government provision of infrastructure can legitimate residents’ claims to the city. Likewise, by seeking out, maintaining, and developing infrastructures, city dwellers participate in an ongoing process of establishing citizenship in relationship to government institutions.

This article seeks to expand infrastructural citizenship studies by examining citizenship negotiations that take place beyond the state, in particular with the non-profit sector. In the opening quote of this article, a Flint, Michigan pastor references the work of faith-based organizations, accompanied by a constellation of other non-profit sector institutions, to provide Flint residents with safe water after the city’s drinking water was contaminated with lead and other toxins in 2014. In response to the water contamination, these organizations created an emergency water infrastructure that distributed bottled water and filters. How does such involvement of the non-profit sector in infrastructural provisioning reconfigure negotiations over infrastructural citizenship? What constraints and new possibilities emerge as these non-state, non-market institutions facilitate infrastructural access, mediated through the discursive construction of citizenship? By examining these questions, this work not only contributes to infrastructural citizenship studies, it also advances studies of voluntary sector geographies, responding to DeVerteuil, Power, et al. (2020) call for geographers to examine how voluntary sector “employees, volunteers and service recipients influence and are influenced by the construction of citizenship.”

Staeheli et al. (2012) have illustrated that ordinary experiences of citizenship in everyday life are influenced by multiple institutions (not just the state) that have varying notions of who is included in community membership. Non-profit organizations, which in the United States often administer the social rights of citizenship (the socially integrating material resources like social services to which citizens are entitled (Lake & Newman, 2002)), are an example of such institutions. Their presence in cities – centers of power, organizing, and resource provisioning – complicate analyses of citizenship (Brown, 1997; Fyfe & Milligan, 2003b; Lake & Newman, 2002; Trudeau, 2012).

Non-profit organizations may mediate citizenship claims differently than states, guided by different discourses of belonging, including city residents not accepted by the state or vice-versa (Trudeau, 2012). Philanthropic foundations influence the framing of social problems, shaping material policy responses (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2007; Rodriguez, 2007), and provide financial resources for community-based social change initiatives in cities (Block & Reynolds, 2021; Gilmore, 2007). Some scholars view the non-profit sector as hubs for new urban commons in which material resources, like infrastructures, might be organized around principles other than capital accumulation (Kruzynski, 2020). Non-profit organizations have also been viewed as centers of citizen empowerment, places where residents can politically participate in the remaking of their cities (Brown, 1997; Cahuas, 2019; Cloke et al., 2007; Herrera, 2022). These dynamics make non-profit sector institutions potentially active players in contestations over infrastructural citizenship.

This paper examines how the non-profit sector’s construction of citizenship shapes infrastructural access in the case of the Flint Water Crisis. The water crisis, whose
history is detailed later in the article, was an act of infrastructural violence, enacted by the state and rooted in systems of structural racism (Clark, 2018; Pauli, 2019; Ranganathan, 2016). Throughout this paper, the term non-profit sector is used to describe a wide range of institutions involved in emergency water provisioning in Flint: philanthropic foundations, grassroots organizations, faith-based organizations, and social service agencies. As the article proceeds, I am attentive to the differences in power and resources among these organizations. The case study is based on 16 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2019 with non-profit, philanthropic, and resident leaders in Flint. Interviews, which lasted between 30 min and two hours, were transcribed and coded for discussions of citizenship (understood as relating to discourses of belonging, resource accessibility, and participation/empowerment, see conceptual framework below). Interviewees’ names and organizations have been anonymized in this paper. Analyzing these interviews, I find that non-profit institutions’ constructions of citizenship facilitated the provision of material and epistemic resources that have supported the day-to-day survival of Flint’s city dwellers in the face of a hostile state, albeit in partial and at times exclusionary ways.

It should be noted that most of the literature on the relationship between citizenship and infrastructure has been theorized in relation to the political processes of Global South cities like Cape Town (Lemanski, 2020), Mumbai (Anand, 2017), and Dhaka (Sultana, 2020). Engaging this literature in an examination of an American rustbelt city is an exercise in “posing Third World questions of the First World” (Ranganathan & Balazs, 2015) to advance urban theory across the North–South divide. As this paper intervenes in the literature on infrastructural citizenship, I seek not to universalize the insights of the Flint case, recognizing that my findings are rooted in the particularities of place (Lawhon et al., 2016) (a city structured by decades of racialized economic disinvestment where the non-profit sector has long filled the gaps of the weak American welfare state). Rather, my aim in placing Flint into conversation with dissimilar cities across the North–South divide (Mcfarlane, 2010) is to generate theoretical reflection on the non-profit sector’s roles in constructing citizenship and shaping infrastructure access.

Conceptualizing citizenship, infrastructure, and the non-profit sector

Citizenship can be understood as substantive, lived experiences, not just a legal status, wherein people are able to act as full members of a political community. Such substantive citizenship is “practiced, performed, and lived” in the ordinary experiences of everyday life (Staeheli et al., 2012). The ordinary experiences of citizenship, such as participating in political processes or accessing the social rights of citizenship, are not solely based on legal protocols. Staeheli et al. (2012) write:

More than a legal attribute, however, [citizenship] is also experienced as people move through their daily lives and as opportunities afforded by citizenship are opened and forestalled for particular individuals at particular moments.

Staeheli et al. (2012) describe ordinary experiences of citizenship as being fused with the “normative orders” of group membership of numerous institutions encountered in daily life like schools, social service agencies, and neighborhood groups. Each of these
normative orders is shaped by a discourse of belonging that “constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion” (Antonsich, 2010). Ordinary citizenship is constructed across multiple scales (not just the legal scale of the nation-state), and therefore daily life experiences of interdependence, mutuality, and attachment at the local, urban scale can shape these normative orders, influencing who is seen as a member of a political community and can access its rights and resources. As such, many city dwellers may experience citizenship in partial or piecemeal ways as they navigate multiple institutions with differing notions of who belongs and how they should therefore be treated (Staeheli et al., 2012).

This conceptualization of citizenship as an unstable category that is constantly being performed, remade, and contested has been taken up in infrastructural studies, with infrastructure understood as a mediating tool of political belonging. Lemanski (2020) argues that infrastructures reveal the construction of political belonging as “infrastructure functions as the embodiment of citizenship for both citizens and the state.” In defining hydraulic citizenship, Anand (2017) emphasizes the mutability of the construction of citizenship in relation to infrastructure, describing it as an “incremental, intermittent, and reversible process.” If citizenship is understood as constantly being produced, then the provision of infrastructure is a key site of its negotiation as incorporation into state infrastructural systems is a form of citizenship recognition (Anand, 2017). Conversely, states may justify infrastructural exclusion by constructing certain populations as outside of political belonging (see case study examples in Lemanski, 2019; Méndez-Barrientos et al., 2022; Peša, 2019; Von Schnitzler, 2018; Wafer, 2019).

When the infrastructurally excluded demand or enact incorporation into infrastructural systems, they claim belonging in the political community (see, for example, McFarlane, 2019; Peša, 2019; Sultana, 2020). Securing recognition in the realm of infrastructure can lead to gaining access to other citizenship benefits, like more secure claims to urban space for those living in informal settlements (Alvarado, 2022; Anand, 2017; Ranganathan, 2014). In these negotiations over political belonging, there is no universal infrastructural citizen. Rather, the production of infrastructural citizenship is marked by differential inclusion, evident in the dissimilar embodied infrastructural experiences of people at different intersections of gender, race, caste, religion, and caste (Sultana, 2020).

The infrastructural citizenship literature has focused predominately on the dyadic relationship of state and citizens, despite several case studies in this literature describing the active involvement of non-state civil society actors in infrastructural planning and/or advocacy (McFarlane, 2019; Méndez-Barrientos et al., 2022; Sultana, 2020). The role of these organizations in shaping infrastructural citizenship has not been closely interrogated, missing the opportunity to interrogate “citizenship’s hidden spaces” (Staeheli et al., 2012) beyond the state that shape political and material inclusion in daily life. A well-established literature has chronicled the participation of the non-profit sector in governance where it influences conditions of citizenship. For example, development NGOs have been repeatedly recognized as governance actors (McIlwaine, 1998; Pieck, 2015). In many Global South contexts, NGOs operate as mediators between states and citizens, representing and advocating for systemically marginalized communities in the policy implementation processes that move the formal rights of citizenship (like access to public services) from abstraction to material reality in everyday life (Von Lieres & Piper, 2014).
Scholarship has also documented the involvement of the non-profit sector in governance in American cities like Flint (Hamlin & Oberle, 2023; Reckhow et al., 2019; Thomson, 2021a). In the Anglo-American context, a hallmark of neoliberalism has been the rise of the “shadow state,” a parastate apparatus of voluntary sector organizations which have been contracted by government to administer programs that provide the social rights of citizenship, such as affordable housing or social services (Fyfe & Milligan, 2003a; Wolch, 1990). In this case study, the relationship between non-profit organizations and the state does not follow the shadow state model; many non-profit organizations in Flint developed water infrastructures independently, not as state contractors. As such, the non-profit sector’s role in governance in Flint is better characterized by what Nickel and Eikenberry (2007) describe as the “voluntary state” which refers to governments abandoning their “traditional responsibility of providing for the pre-conditions of human flourishing,” leaving the nonprofit sector to possibly intervene in its place “depending on whether the option of action is appealing to donors.” In the voluntary state, Eikenberry and Mirabella (2018) write, “philanthropists and philanthropic groups can become ‘mini governments’ that can, through their individual funding decisions, make public policy on their own, without input from other citizens or elected representatives.” In Flint, the state did not just abandon its public welfare responsibilities; it actively harmed city dwellers, leaving the non-profit sector to determine whether and how to intervene.

Non-profit scholarship has identified that these organizations are sites where political belonging is constructed and negotiated. They can reinforce neoliberal discourses of good citizenship (entrepreneurial individualism without reliance on the state) (Gordon, 2013; Hackworth, 2012; Mitchell, 2001; Trudeau, 2012), but also resist them (Cahuas, 2019; Cloke et al., 2007; DeVerteuil, Power, et al., 2020; Guhlincozzi, 2021; Trudeau, 2012). Alongside their own institutional ideas, non-profit organizations are often compelled to adopt the citizenship ideals of their funders. Organizations receiving funding from the state may be constrained by state mandates to serve only certain populations (i.e. those with legal citizenship status) or require the performance of certain acts of citizenship (i.e. participation in job training classes) in order to receive services. Similarly, the philanthropic sector is highly influential in defining the scope and nature of social problems, and alongside them, notions of citizenship and belonging (Eikenberry & Mirabella, 2018; Kumbamu, 2020; Rodriguez, 2007).

The growing reliance on the non-profit sector to fulfill tasks previously carried out by government agencies has raised debates on whether such a transition grants citizens more opportunities to participate in the political processes shaping their communities, effectively empowering citizens. Local non-profit organizations may be more responsive to community members, in contrast to centralized state bureaucracies. Such bureaucracies have been accused of reducing state-citizen relations to clientelism: a relationship in which the state claims “expertise and control over information and resources” and places “citizens in positions of dependency and need” (Brown, 1997). Wolch (1990) raised the concern that the shadow state would effectively de-politicize the voluntary sector since organizations would likely curb their political advocacy in order to obtain state funding, preventing such organizations from being an empowering avenue for citizenship. Such constraints have indeed been identified in subsequent studies of the shadow state that detail a transfer of the disempowering elements of government
bureaucracy (e.g. rigid protocols) into non-profit sector organizations (Brown, 1997; Fyfe & Milligan, 2003b; Gilmore, 2007; Mitchell, 2001). Yet many studies find that alongside such structural constraints, non-profit organizations nevertheless provide opportunities for citizens to identify, organize around, and act upon their political ideals (Baker & McGuirk, 2019; Brown, 1997; Fyfe & Milligan, 2003b). For example, participation in these organizations (as volunteers, employees) is one way people perform citizenship, understanding their work as part of an effort to create political change (Brown, 1997; Cahuas, 2019; Cloke et al., 2007; Fyfe & Milligan, 2003b).

Research has also found that the non-profit sector affects the distribution of citizenship’s material benefits. Studying the rise of shadow state institutions in the community development sector, Lake and Newman (2002) hypothesized that, “if non-profit organizations are assuming functions of the state but access to the shadow state is unevenly distributed, the result may be selective disenfranchisement or differential citizenship.” Their research found that the spatial unevenness of non-profit organizations (serving only certain geographic catchments) and programs targeting only select demographics (such as senior citizens) prevents certain populations from enjoying the full benefits of citizenship. Fyfe and Milligan (2003a) similarly identified such uneven development as a hallmark of the turn to the voluntary sector under neoliberalism. Reliance on the non-profit sector to administer the material rights of citizenship produces a pattern of patchwork citizenship across the urban landscape. Just as Sultana (2020) identifies that there is no universal infrastructural citizen, there is no universal citizen in the shadow state. Location and social identity shape access to the benefits of citizenship. Given that the non-profit sector serves as a center of governance distributing the benefits of citizenship in socio-spatially uneven ways, it is essential to account for its influence in analyses of infrastructural citizenship. The rest of this paper examines the influence of this sector in the context of the Flint Water Crisis.

**Context: infrastructural violence in Flint**

The beginning of the Flint Water Crisis is typically dated to 25 April 2014, when the city’s water source was switched from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Flint River, although the structural antecedents of the crisis begin much earlier. Following the switch, Flint began treating its water at a local facility without taking adequate corrosion control measures. As a result, the city’s pipes corroded, releasing lead, biological contaminants like legionella, and other toxins into the water entering residents’ homes (Clark, 2018; Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016; Masten et al., 2016; Pauli, 2019). The presence of these toxins in the water had severe health implications for Flint residents, including potential harm to cognitive development, rashes, hair loss, and other conditions. The presence of legionella in the water led to the deaths of at least twelve people from Legionnaires Disease (although some estimate the death toll to be higher, see Childress, 2019). Beyond the immediate health effects of the toxins, living with the water crisis has also been damaging to mental health (Cuthbertson et al., 2016) and has forced major changes to everyday practices of cooking, cleaning, and personal hygiene (Radonic & Jacob, 2021).

Flint activists often assert that the city’s people were poisoned by policy (Pauli, 2019). In the subsequent paragraphs, I will outline several of the policy and structural causes of the Flint Water Crisis illustrating the importance of the construction of citizenship in the crisis’ antecedents. The racial construction of citizenship in the United States is crucial to
understanding this incident of infrastructural violence (Rodgers & O’Neill, 2012). Flint, as a majority-Black city, has been deeply shaped by the denial of full citizenship to Black Americans under a legal system based on racial liberalism (Mills, 2008; Ranganathan, 2016). Mills (2008) writes:

> Liberalism, I suggest, has historically been predominantly a racial liberalism, in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized. And the [social] contract, correspondingly, has really been a racial one, an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit non-white noncontractors for white benefit…

Whiteness has historically been a prerequisite for full membership into the political community of the United States, granting access to benefits such as property rights (and with them the ability to accrue wealth through land ownership) (Mills, 2008). Flint has been impoverished by the compounded, disinvesting effects of Black Americans’ exclusion from the full benefits of citizenship (e.g., disinvestment produced through structural racism in housing policy) (Highsmith, 2015; Ranganathan, 2016). As non-white populations have gained access to the legal status of citizenship (although not necessarily citizenship’s full benefits in everyday life), a “color-blind” mode of liberalism has emerged. This “color-blind” liberalism integrates an assumption of equality of opportunity into law despite the material effects of racism in individual lives and particular geographies. Mills (2008) writes:

> Originally, whites saw their systemic advantage as differential but fair, justified by their superiority. Now in a “color-blind” phase of the contract of racial liberalism, they do not see it as differential at all, the long history and ongoing reality of exploitative nonwhite-to-white transfer being obfuscated and occluded by individualist categories and by a sense of property rights in which white entitlement is the norm.

Occluding the history of exclusion from citizenship, laws in the new “colorblind” liberal contract can continue to produce racialized exclusion from the full benefits of citizenship.

Such ahistorical, colorblind liberal assumptions form the basis of Michigan’s emergency management laws. These laws establish a system of anti-democratic austerity rule in which governor-appointed officials replace locally elected officials as an indebted city’s decision-making authority. Emergency managers are empowered to restructure the city government’s operations in order to restore “fiscal health” (Local Government and School District Fiscal Accountability Act, 2011). The emergency management laws disregard historical and ongoing racialized disinvestment in Michigan, assuming equal opportunities for good fiscal governance among all local governments. Emergency management has primarily been used in majority-Black communities in Michigan, separating people from the full benefits of citizenship by halting local democracy (Lee et al., 2016). Flint was placed under emergency management twice: from 2002 to 2004 and then from 2011 to 2015.

Both academics (Nickels, 2019; Pauli, 2019) and activists (groups like the Flint Democracy Defense League and Flint Rising) view Flint’s poisoning as a crisis of democracy. Unelected emergency managers made decisions that placed Flint residents at risk: approving the switch of the drinking water source, approving the omission of corrosion control in the water treatment process, and delaying restoration of Detroit water despite growing water quality concerns (Pauli, 2019). Unlike locally elected officials who face
reelection, emergency managers were accountable only to Michigan’s state government and had little incentive to act upon city residents’ concerns.

Austerity rule in Flint was accompanied by a hollowing out of the local state: between 2000 and 2016, the number of employees in city government shrunk by over 50%, shuttering many government programs (Reckhow et al., 2019). The non-profit sector has been relied upon to meet residents’ needs as local government shrinks. Several philanthropic foundations operate in Flint. Founded in 1926, the CS Mott Foundation is the city’s largest philanthropic foundation. Its wealth came from one of General Motors’ (formerly based in Flint) largest shareholders (Highsmith, 2015). Smaller philanthropic foundations include the Community Foundation for Greater Flint, the Ruth Mott Foundation, the Hagerman Foundation, the Crimm Fitness Foundation, and the McLaren Flint Foundation. In recent years, funding from these organizations has been used to ensure the availability of municipal services that in other contexts would rely on state monies (Reckhow et al., 2019). For example, in 2015, foundations gave twice as much in funding for community economic development projects in Flint as the city received in funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for community economic development (Thomson, 2021b).

As the Flint Water Crisis unfolded, the transfer of public welfare responsibilities from government to the non-profit sector entered new territory. The non-profit sector played a central role in both (1) assessing water quality and (2) creating an improvised, emergency water infrastructure. Flint’s water was switched in April 2014. Soon after, residents began to raise water quality concerns, noting irritation of their skin and hair. By summer 2014, a coalition of church leaders, Concerned Pastors for Social Action, began to advocate for filters and clean water in response to the concerns being raised by congregation members (Carrera & Key, 2021). In the subsequent months, residents agitated and organized around water quality concerns, using faith-based organizations as an organizing space. In 2015, Concerned Pastors for Social Action and other grassroots organizations, like the Flint Democracy Defense League, organized water quality testing in collaboration with Dr. Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech. This coalition collected hundreds of water samples from city residents, many of which would show unsafe levels of lead (Carrera & Key, 2021; Downey & Reckhow, 2018). In September 2015, additional scientific evidence of lead contaminants in Flint’s water supply was made public by pediatrician, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha. Genesee County (where Flint is located) subsequently declared a public health emergency. The State of Michigan (for whom the city’s emergency managers worked) contested the evidence of contamination, but eventually declared a state of emergency in January 2016 (Pauli, 2019).

In Fall 2015, before the State of Michigan recognized the crisis, Flint’s philanthropic, non-profit, and faith-based organizations began orchestrating an emergency response: organizing national donations, purchasing water and filtration equipment, and getting bottled water into schools (Carrera & Key, 2021; Downey & Reckhow, 2018). Non-profit organizations continued operating these emergency infrastructures even as the State of Michigan began providing emergency aid and kept their infrastructures in place long after the State of Michigan ended its bottled water distribution programs in 2018 (Flint Cares, 2020). The following case study examines the nonprofit sector’s role in shaping conditions of urban citizenship as it created new water infrastructures.
It should be noted that struggles over infrastructural citizenship in Flint have been multifaceted. They include legal actions, protests, and citizen-led science, chronicled elsewhere (Carrera & Key, 2021; Hanna-Attisha, 2019; Pauli, 2019; Radonic & Jacob, 2021). My intention in this article is not to provide an overview of all such dynamics in the context of the water crisis. Rather, I seek to examine the role of the non-profit sector in these negotiations, illuminating these organizations as important players in the network of relations that shape urban belonging through infrastructure.

**Infrastructural citizenship beyond the state**

This case study examines three aspects of non-profit sector influence on conditions of infrastructural citizenship. First, I analyze citizen formation and claims-making processes in Flint’s “voluntary state” (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2007). Second, I examine how the non-profit sector’s emergency infrastructure created conditions of differential citizenship (Lake & Newman, 2002) wherein different populations had unequal access to the substantive benefits of voluntary state citizenship. Finally, I analyze how the non-profit sector’s investment in new, long-term infrastructures (e.g. reverse osmosis systems, water testing labs) transforms state-citizen relations, reducing reliance on the state (distrusted by many Flint residents) to arbitrate water quality matters. These examples illustrate how the non-profit sector’s construction of citizenship shapes infrastructural access.

**Constructing citizenship and claiming benefits**

Flint’s philanthropic foundations have funded many aspects of the water crisis recovery response. In Fall 2015, they made grants and collected private donations to create the initial emergency response infrastructure, predating the government response. In subsequent years, they supported additional recovery efforts. For example, the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, and the United Way of Genesee County have all made multi-million dollar contributions to the recovery effort, purchasing water filters, bottled water, bus passes for residents to travel to distribution centers, hygiene products like baby wipes and hand sanitizer as well as funding crisis-related health and educational programs (Community Foundation of Greater Flint, 2023; Mott Foundation, 2021; United Way of Genesee County, 2018).

Flint’s water contamination pushed grant-making into the new territory of safe water provisioning, which had previously been the responsibility of the state. The new investments raised questions for philanthropic organizations about which aspects of the water crisis recovery they should fund. One philanthropic representative shared:

> We could not fund everything. For instance, we believe that replacing lead pipes must be the government’s responsibility … philanthropy cannot and should not be expected to replace public funding streams … The most important function of government is to protect the safety and well-being of its citizens. This includes a responsibility for public infrastructure.

Despite believing that the responsibility to provide for infrastructure and public safety ultimately lies with the state, philanthropic foundations made considerable investments to support public health.
The decision of philanthropic foundations to ensure Flint residents had access to safe drinking water drew upon discourses of citizenship. Flint residents were constructed as a part of a community of belonging that had special claim to the foundations’ resources. In their missions and operations, the foundations leading the water crisis response position Flint as a prioritized geography because of their long-standing ties to the city. Foundations frame their connections to Flint in terms of long-standing civic engagement, building on the community-mindedness of their founders. For example, while the C.S. Mott Foundation makes grants globally, Flint receives special attention as the organization’s “hometown.” On its website, the foundation underscores its commitment to Flint residents, stating that, “for more than 95 years, Mott has helped people and organizations work together to support and strengthen the community we call home” (Mott Foundation, 2023).

The response to the water crisis drew on the perception of Flint residents as belonging to the philanthropic organizations’ community. One philanthropic representative described their decision to intervene as a “no brainer.” In their words, “we couldn’t sit on the sidelines while the children of Flint were being harmed.” Flint’s children are highly visible in donors’ descriptions of the Flint community. The innocence of children for their circumstances is often drawn upon in non-profit sector narratives, generating what Manzo (2008) describes as “innocence-based solidarity.” The decision to intervene in Flint drew on feelings of obligation to innocent, harmed children living in a location with longstanding foundation ties.

Alongside the clear humanitarian need for intervention, a lack of clean water would also jeopardize foundation programs in education, social services, and urban redevelopment. As described by another philanthropic worker:

[This] is outside of our scope of traditional investment. However, you kind of got to engage, because we knew that pretty much everything else that we were going to do was going to be affected by this underlying issue.

Recognizing both the humanitarian need and how integral water is to these organizations’ pre-existing initiatives for Flint, foundations used their resources to help ensure that residents had safe drinking water.

Philanthropic foundations’ discursive construction of Flint residents as citizens of their communities contributed to material investments in residents’ wellbeing – a crucial lifeline in the face of a hostile state. However, political participation and citizen influence over how foundation resources are used are limited in the voluntary state. Foundations lack democratic processes, leaving city dwellers with few opportunities to influence how a foundation’s resources are used in their community (Dowie, 2002). In the context of Flint, access to the benefits of voluntary state citizenship was not automatic. Material support for Flint residents was only provided after experts confirmed water quality problems, even though residents had been raising concerns for over a year (Carrera & Key, 2021). Philanthropic actors, aware of the water quality concerns being raised in the city, used expert scientific knowledges to guide their decision-making on the matter. One philanthropic worker described this reliance on scientific expertise from the state, which later proved inaccurate:

I would go to a quarterly public meeting. Many residents would come who were angry about the water, but at the same time, all of the experts that were hired by the emergency manager said in front of us that the water is fine … that the problem was that these 25 people here
have interior plumbing issues in their own residences. It’s not a system problem. So, we’re being systematically lied to, or at best, only told a small amount of information that was truthful. When [Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha’s] data made it clear that the water was bad, we started buying water and filters.

Once competing expert scientific knowledge from pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha’s study of lead levels in Flint children was available, the philanthropic sector rapidly intervened. Another philanthropic worker emphasized that this focus on expert knowledge and lack of responsiveness to community member concerns delayed Flint residents’ access to clean water, stating:

The important thing to remember is that people were complaining about the water for over a year before anybody did anything … . The reason that everybody got activated was because of Marc Edwards and Mona Hanna-Attisha, when they stepped in. The question is, in a small community with so many complaints for so long, why did it take the foundations all that time? Because nobody wanted to believe community residents. The mayor was saying everything was fine. The foundations were not going to counter that … It could have all happened a lot earlier if there was a more respectful relationship between the poorest community residents and the power structure.

The timeline for foundation involvement in the water crisis response stands in contrast to faith-based and grassroots organizations. Foundation giving began approximately 18 months after Flint switched from Detroit water to the Flint River. Faith-based and grassroots organizations began responding after only a few months, driven by resident concerns, lending material resources (like meeting space) and political influence to the effort to restore safe water. To gain access to the material resources of foundations (which could support much larger-scale interventions), resident concerns based on lived experience were not sufficient. Expert knowledges were needed.

Examining the foundation response illustrates how non-profits’ discursive constructions of citizenship may serve as a basis for these organizations to meet the material infrastructural needs of those excluded by the state. However, removed from democratic oversight by the public, this example also illustrates that it is necessary to attend to the processes by which city dwellers gain access to the material infrastructural benefits of the voluntary state.

**Differential citizenship**

In the Global North, neoliberal policy has often prompted a transfer of state responsibilities for providing the social rights of citizenship to the non-profit sector, resulting in patterns of uneven or differential citizenship as these organizations prioritize resource access for certain neighborhoods and identities (Fyfe & Milligan, 2003a; Lake & Newman, 2002). When Flint’s non-profit sector implemented its emergency water infrastructure, led by a coalition of social service and philanthropic organizations dubbed “Flint Cares,” these water resources were more accessible to some populations than others. Barriers to access were multiple, including the difficulty of moving heavy cases of bottled water for those who lacked an automobile and long wait times at the distribution sites.

Alongside the logistical barriers to access, information about the emergency response was not initially translated for non-English speakers. As a result, the infrastructure was not accessible to many in the Spanish-speaking and Deaf communities in Flint (Flint is
home to the Michigan School for the Deaf). Shared one neighborhood organization leader involved in the Flint Cares response:

With the Hispanic community, there’s a language barrier … and people struggle to find out the information they need … We’re still having problems with the hearing-impaired population and the Michigan School for the Deaf. If someone puts out some information on the water crisis on TV, they can’t hear it. What needs to happen is to make sure there’s someone there to sign. They shouldn’t have to wait to get that information. They should be able to get that information with the hearing at the same time.

News of the water crisis did not reach many in the Deaf community until February 2016, four months after the rest of the city received the results of Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha’s research.

The Flint Cares response was meant for all city residents, but non-profit organizers initially imagined the citizens of this new infrastructure as hearing and English-speaking. Translated and interpreted materials were only developed later in the emergency response. Agencies that worked closely with Deaf and Spanish-speaking residents were not originally included in the Flint Cares planning process. One non-profit leader acknowledged, “at first, the Deaf community was completely left out of everything.” Another shared that in the urgency of the initial response, Flint Cares organizers had not been sufficiently attentive to reaching out to marginalized populations, stating:

We didn’t reach out very well to those groups, because everybody was trying to move in this extremely emergent, and really intense crisis. We didn’t spend a whole lot of time, saying, this group traditionally has been excluded from things. And how do we include them in this effort? Since then, we’ve done a lot more work on incorporating those marginalized populations, asking who has the trust of those groups? How can we work with those groups to get information to the people that need it?

In this instance, as the non-profit sector developed infrastructure, marginalized communities were initially excluded from the decision-making processes guiding the distribution of material water resources. As a result, conditions of differential citizenship were produced. This illustrates that while the non-profit sector may expand infrastructural access in contexts where states fail to act, they may also simultaneously produce forms of infrastructural exclusion shaped by (1) their conceptions of the citizenry and (2) which populations can participate in guiding their efforts.

**Infrastructural control and empowered citizenship**

Many in Flint’s non-profit sector are focused on how the city lives with the experience of the water crisis for decades to come. Contending with people’s mistrust of government water infrastructures is one such long-term aspect of the recovery (Morckel & Terzano, 2019). This mistrust is embedded into the rhythms of daily lives, which one community leader predicated are likely to stay with residents for years to come:

[Flint children] have practically grown up using bottled water. They grew up watching mom make spaghetti using bottled water instead of water from the tap. It’s different for them, and that may be a lifetime … That kid is probably never going to turn a tap on to rinse vegetables. It’s just different … I question it myself, even. At home, I use the filtered water
for my toothbrush. But then when I go out of town, there’s no filter, there’s no bottled water available. So, I brush my teeth with a dry toothbrush and toothpaste. There’s a kind of constant vigilance you feel like you have to keep up with.

The government recovery response from the State of Michigan has focused on the technical infrastructural repairs (such as filtration and service line replacement) needed to improve water quality. These technical solutions do not repair the broken trust between citizens and a government that previously provided misleading information about the presence of water contaminants. In the absence of trust, some Flint residents are likely not to use this repaired infrastructure to meet their daily water needs.

Observers of non-profit organizations have debated whether the sector can disrupt clientelist state-citizen relations wherein the state dominates citizens with control over resources and information (Brown, 1997; Cahuas, 2019; Cloke et al., 2007; Fyfe & Milligan, 2003b). Such clientelism exists in the State of Michigan’s recovery response: the state controls the water infrastructure and arbitrates its quality, expecting residents to abide by its expertise. Recognizing residents’ ongoing mistrust of the water quality, several Flint non-profit organizations have developed their own long-term water infrastructures, such as reverse osmosis systems and water testing facilities (discussed below). These alternatives produce a city with multiple water infrastructures, backed by different social relations, disrupting the clientelist relationship between state and citizen. Within this multiplicity of infrastructures, there are more opportunities for residents to utilize a drinking water source they trust.

Several faith-based and community-based organizations now operate reverse osmosis filtration systems from which residents can collect water for household use. Reverse osmosis performs an extensive filtration process on city water which can remove more contaminants than the tap filters used in residents’ homes. Reverse osmosis systems are viewed by non-profit leaders as a long-term, more sustainable (in terms of labor and environmental impact) replacement for bottled water distribution. Explaining this need, one grassroots organization leader shared:

Bottled water distributions are not glamorous. They’re not fun to do. They cost a lot of money. But if the need is still there, we’re going to continue doing them … And people in the city are not going to drink out of their taps until they have 100% proof that it’s clean … Our approach to helping is probably going to continue to change. We’re in the process of getting rid of single-use plastic water bottles to be better for the environment. I think our plan right now is to find a thing like the Water Box [a reverse osmosis system]. It would be easier for us, probably easier for the residents, and better for the environment.

Several churches, community centers, and social service agencies in Flint now maintain reverse osmosis systems that were donated by celebrities (Jaden Smith has donated several) and water filtration companies. By operating these alternative water infrastructures, non-profits create opportunities for people to procure water from sources they may find more trustworthy than the state for years to come.

Another alternative water infrastructure is the Flint Water Lab, a water quality testing lab based in the non-profit Flint Development Center, where youth are trained to perform water quality testing. The lab is the first of its kind in the United States, receiving significant initial funding from the Mott Foundation, several other local and national foundations, and corporate donors. This water lab offers an opportunity for residents
to have their water quality tested by a local institution that does not have ties to the state. Independent water testing has been a strategy many residents use to determine whether they will use the water coming through their taps. One block club leader shared that she would have her water tested, “two or three times, maybe by two or three different companies” before trusting the water quality.

A representative from a philanthropic organization funding the Flint Water Lab explained that addressing residents’ trust in their water was the impetus for funding the initiative:

We’ve provided funding to train and work with local teens who collect residential water samples and show residents how to properly use filters. Having Flint teens test drinking water for other Flint residents will slowly help to rebuild the trust in water quality that has been shattered in this community.

Community members involved with the project expressed that they see it as empowering for Flint’s youth in a way that may translate to other dimensions of political participation. One community member commented:

Getting kids engaged helps them understand what they can really be in the future: whether it’s politics, or people power, citizen science, or whatever it is that helps them see that they have the power to make change…

These kinds of experiences speak to what Brown (1997) and Fyfe and Milligan (2003b) refer to as empowered citizenship in which participation in the non-profit sector advances people’s political participation in their communities.

The Flint Water Lab places the epistemic tools of science (the language which both the state and philanthropy used to recognize infrastructural failures in Flint), into the community, giving residents more tools to hold government accountable. Pauli (2019) has described the denial of water quality problems in the early stages of the crisis as an example of epistemic injustice (harm related to people’s capacity as knowers) (Fricker, 2007) in which Flint residents’ testimonies about the water quality were not respected as legitimate interpretations of reality. In contrast, scientific knowledges have gained greater recognition from the state, philanthropy, and the media (Carrera & Key, 2021). The investment in the Flint Water Lab deepens local community access to the epistemic tools that have proven necessary to seek relief from the infrastructural violence the city has experienced.

Non-profits’ provision of long-term, alternative water infrastructures enables Flint residents to circumvent reliance on a state that has already caused them harm. These interventions are marked by many of the structural limitations of the voluntary state described earlier in the paper: a lack of democratic oversight and the possibility of corporate, foundation, and celebrity donors imposing their priorities onto Flint residents. But philanthropic investments into these long-term alternative infrastructures also alter the power dynamics between citizen and state. Residents are not resigned to trusting state water quality assurances. They can pursue alternative water sources at community non-profits and obtain independent water quality testing. These new infrastructures produce a more empowered reworking of the relations between citizens and the state, where citizens have a more robust network of tools to monitor and shape the state’s actions. These examples illustrate the need to be attentive both to the power relations governing the non-profit sector as well as the transformed relations its work produces (Block & Reynolds, 2021; Gilmore, 2007).
Discussion and conclusion

This paper has argued that studies of infrastructural citizenship need to expand the networks of relationality considered in their analyses, moving beyond the dyad of state-citizen relations. In particular, in contexts where non-profits shape infrastructural access, there is a need to incorporate the sector into analyses of infrastructural citizenship, attending to the ways these organizations operate differently than states. This case, through analysis of the Flint Water Crisis, has illustrated how the non-profit sector’s provisioning of infrastructure intervenes in the discursive, material, and participatory aspects of citizenship: constructing citizenship on the basis of community belonging, producing conditions of differential citizenship, while also supporting avenues of empowered citizenship.

The presence of the non-profit sector as a set of institutions with governance-like influence outside of the state is crucial for understanding the nuances of infrastructural citizenship in post-crisis Flint. These organizations construct citizenship in ways that can both expand and constrain infrastructural access. Non-profit organizations’ investment in emergency water infrastructure expanded access to water for many Flint residents, but their conceptualization of the Flint community meant water resources were less accessible for some populations. At the same time, rights to participation for citizens of the voluntary state are often much more limited, with philanthropic foundations having little formal oversight from the community members they serve, complicating the process of claiming benefits from these organizations. Even amid these concerning dynamics, it is important to recognize that non-profit sector organizations have also produced infrastructures that can (1) sustain urban residents in the face of experiences of infrastructural violence and (2) aid in holding the state accountable for its responsibility to provide safe water. The non-profit sector has been a venue for city residents to produce water infrastructures they trust, constructing the city in new ways to enable lives to be lived alongside residents’ transformed relationships to water.

Several aspects of the relationship between the non-profit sector, citizenship, and infrastructure in Flint, such as the deep distrust of state infrastructures and the centrality of scientific epistemic resources to political participation, are particular to experiences of state-created environmental injustice and may not apply to other contexts. Other aspects of this case, though, raise questions that could be interrogated in a wide variety of contexts where non-profit organizations are involved in infrastructural provisioning. Who have these organizations constructed as their imagined citizenry? By what processes do city dwellers gain access to these organizations’ resources? Do these organizations create conditions of differential citizenship as they provide infrastructure and for whom? As these organizations provide infrastructure, how do social relations between states and citizens transform? These questions, to which the Flint case draws our attention, are not new; for decades, geographers studying the non-profit sector’s influence in housing, social services, education, and healthcare have examined these issues (DeVerteuil, Power, et al., 2020; Gilmore, 2007; Wolch, 1990). As geography’s infrastructural turn interrogates the social relations mediated by infrastructure, these long-standing questions should be engaged.

Attentiveness to the specific power relations of the non-profit sector complements several literatures in the infrastructural turn. For instance, scholarship of the post-
networked city (Coutard & Rutherford, 2015) and splintered urbanism (Graham & Marvin, 2001) have identified that the modern infrastructural ideal of the twentieth century (of a city comprehensively networked by state-provided infrastructure) has been replaced by fractured infrastructural provisioning. This literature has probed many sociotechnical processes of infrastructural provisioning that occur outside the state: autoconstruction (Caldeira, 2017), people as infrastructure (Simone, 2004), and market-based approaches (Graham & Marvin, 2001). Attentiveness to the power dynamics of the non-profit sector in infrastructural provisioning can provide a more complete picture of how fragmented, non-networked urban infrastructural systems are produced. Likewise, this attentiveness to the power dynamics of the non-profit sector is important for studies of “social infrastructure” which extend the scope of infrastructural studies to also include the infrastructures of urban sociality (Latham & Layton, 2022). As this literature examines the infrastructures that “make life in cities liveable and worthwhile” (Latham & Layton, 2022), the non-profit sector is often present (DeVerteuil, Kiener, et al., 2020), operating as an infrastructure of social reproduction and as a gathering place for social encounter and political organizing (such as the political and infrastructural organizing efforts of faith-based organizations described in this case). Attending to the specificities of the non-profit sector can aid in explicating the production of social infrastructures and the differential ways city dwellers may be included in them.

Finally, this case documents an expansion of the non-profit sector into new areas of American urban life. The non-profit sector’s work in US cities has been documented in the realms of urban policy (Hackworth, 2012), urban redevelopment projects (Hamlin & Oberle, 2023; Herrera, 2022), and, in this case, urban infrastructures. The non-profit sector’s intervention into Flint’s water infrastructure is not unique. Since Flint’s water crisis, the United States has seen additional large-scale water infrastructure breakdowns in Jackson, Mississippi and Newark, New Jersey. The non-profit sector has facilitated people’s water access in these cities as well (Community Foundation for Mississippi, 2022; Newark Water Coalition, 2022). In contexts like these, cities where the precarious infrastructural arrangements of the racial state (Phinney, 2022; Ponder & Omstedt, 2019) have left communities to organize their own survival infrastructures, a fuller mapping of urban citizenship must account for the complex institutional relations (beyond just state and citizen) involved in infrastructural provisioning.

Note

1. Such donations are fraught with contradictions. Smith’s donations are enabled by a bottled water company in his control, relying on the commodification of water which produces water insecurity in other contexts.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the interview participants for sharing their insights and to this article’s anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
ORCID

Melissa Heil  http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2479-9366

References


---

20. M. HEIL