

Research Statement

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Discrimination and Government Responsiveness

Governments shape not only the provision of public goods, but also whose needs are recognized, whose claims are treated as legitimate, and whose voices are translated into political action. My research examines how requests move, or fail to move, through political institutions, with particular attention to discrimination, marginalized communities, and the conditions under which governments become more responsive.

My dissertation develops a *transmission framework* for understanding local government responsiveness. Rather than treating responsiveness as a direct relationship between constituent preferences and policy outcomes, I conceptualize governance as a process in which community needs must be articulated, transmitted through political and administrative channels, evaluated by actors with discretion, and converted into institutional action. This framework emerged from qualitative interviews with local elected officials and governance actors in Australia and New Zealand, who repeatedly described the importance of organizational capacity, procedural knowledge, institutional intermediaries, and officials willing to carry community claims forward. These interviews also suggest that inequality can accumulate across stages: communities differ in their ability to articulate needs, institutional pathways are unevenly accessible, and political actors selectively amplify or disregard claims. The framework therefore shifts the question from simply whether government responds to how a need becomes politically actionable.

This approach is particularly useful for understanding responsiveness to refugees, immigrants, and other marginalized groups. These communities may face language barriers, limited familiarity with government procedures, weaker political networks, and skepticism about whether they count as legitimate constituents. I describe one mechanism as a *validity filter*: officials make judgments about both whether a request is legitimate and whether the person making it is a legitimate claimant. Discrimination can therefore shape whether a need is recognized and taken seriously before any formal response occurs.

The experimental components of my dissertation test mechanisms emerging from this framework. One field experiment uses city council meetings in which refugees and citizen advocates deliver public comments advocating for refugee assistance, allowing me to test whether perspective taking and advocate identity affect subsequent responsiveness. A related online audit experiment examines how bureaucratic gatekeepers respond to requests from individuals of different racial, ethnic, religious, and citizenship backgrounds, including differences in the quality as well as the presence of a response. My work also extends beyond government: a housing audit examines discrimination against refugees in rental markets, while a field experiment in Ghana and Nigeria studies whether requests for assistance receive different responses depending on shared tribal membership, language, or national origin.

Human Rights, Obligation, and Civic Engagement

A second strand of my research asks: *to whom do governments believe they owe a response?* Democratic institutions are generally organized around citizens and voters,

while human rights norms make broader claims about obligations regardless of citizenship. My qualitative research suggests substantial variation in how elected officials draw these boundaries. Some describe their constituency broadly, while others prioritize voters, citizens, ratepayers, or property owners. These competing understandings of representation help explain why formally universal institutions can nevertheless produce unequal responsiveness to otherwise similar needs. One dissertation project tests whether reminding officials of commitments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, and varying legal, moral, and humanitarian frames, alters responsiveness to refugee requests. In a separate online field experiment, I examine whether national alliances and shared historical experiences influence responsiveness to refugee-aid appeals. Together, these projects connect international norms and political identity to the everyday decisions through which actors determine who deserves assistance.

An increasingly important part of my agenda is civically engaged research developed with NGOs and nonprofit organizations. I am dedicated to continue building sustained partnerships that generate research questions (and collaboration opportunities) from problems organizations encounter in practice and that allow research to contribute directly to the communities involved. One collaboration with Ladies Let's Talk, a nonprofit serving immigrant women, examines whether conversation-based English instruction focused on navigating public institutions can increase participants' confidence using public goods and their willingness to engage civically. Using pre- and post-session surveys around modules on public safety, interactions with authority figures, and civic engagement, the project tests whether barriers to participation partly reflect linguistic and procedural costs rather than a lack of interest in or restricted access to civic life. It also extends my transmission framework by testing whether strengthening procedural knowledge and community-level capacity can reduce barriers to participation. I see this model of collaboration as a way to develop theoretically useful research from sustained relationships rather than approaching communities only as extraction sites for data.

Future Research Agenda

My future research builds from this agenda in three directions. First, I plan to extend my work comparatively, examining how local institutions, participatory structures, immigrant incorporation, and national human rights commitments shape responsiveness across democracies. My fieldwork in Australia and New Zealand provides a foundation for identifying which mechanisms travel across political systems. Second, I will continue to study institutional intermediaries such as advisory councils, liaison positions, and advocacy organizations to determine when they genuinely increase community access to decision-making and when they provide only symbolic participation. Third, I plan to examine the downstream effects of responsiveness itself on political trust, future participation, willingness to make future requests, and perceptions of belonging.

Across these projects, I use partnerships with civic organizations to understand how those mechanisms operate in practice, qualitative interviews to identify mechanisms, and field and survey experiments to test them. My broader goal is to explain how political systems transform human needs into institutional action, why that process systematically works better for some communities than others, and what can be done to make it more equitable.