Questions:

1. Your study investigates the impact that diversity of voluntary associations has on local organizing capacity after a natural disaster. You established that variety in skills and resources derived from diversity of voluntary associations is a significant driver in allowing local populations to engage in social entrepreneurship after a catastrophe occurs. In what ways could future research help us to understand how such diversity can be created, such that local populations can be more prepared when a natural disaster occurs?

I can see a few directions for future work. The first would be around finding out the collective features of communities that generates this variety. An extant literature has argued that ‘old school’ forms of voluntary association such as participation in fraternal and hobbyist associations are becoming gradually defunct due to nonparticipation from newer generations, while newer project-based forms of association are emerging in their place. My hunch is that one of the sources of associational diversity that we get to observe represents points in time where communities are between these demographic- and taste-driven transitions, so new forms are emerging while older forms are still around. Of course I haven’t tested this, but I think a fruitful area of further research would be to test the above and other hypotheses around the demographic and cultural processes that generates associational variety.

The second would be around finding out how bridging happens between these voluntary associations. My impression is that most such associations are pretty self-selected in interests and socioeconomic status. But perhaps there are some kinds such as parent-teacher associations or local soccer leagues that provide better bridging ties between other associations, compared to, say, fraternal associations and service clubs... of course you might find something entirely different, but a comparative study would be an excellent opportunity to tease apart the ties that bridge diversity more than geographic proximity alone. There would also be a practical implication—that local government and emergency management agencies ought to pre-emptively engage such organizations as nerve-centers of informal coordination in disaster planning efforts (which instead typically tends to be centralized rather than distributed, and relies on ties to big federated human service organizations rather than local ones).
2. While this study has established that diversity of voluntary associations matters, do you feel there is an opportunity to examine the formation of a social entrepreneurial organization in response to crises in order to enhance our understanding of specifically how members from different voluntary associations combine to form joint organizations?

Indeed that would be a nice study. Many of these influences at founding emerge through informal contact, often from people who are doing it to help out without expecting their names to be emblazoned on plaques for every local civic organization they have contributed their talents and resources to. So I think a qualitative study—that could bring out the nuances into how this loose coalition of friends, family and random helpful strangers end up being the unnoticed cogs in the complex process of founding a social-entrepreneurial group—would be very interesting.

The dimension of crises might add an additional layer of salience to such a study. One concern that you might encounter however is that disasters and mass-emergencies while being crucibles of action, are in a way, too powerful, in that they might trigger other processes and make comparative case studies more challenging. From a practical standpoint I think one way to approach this would be to embrace the complexity and be open to treating your study as a theory-building exercise if you find your chosen case-comparisons are confounded by too many other (often interesting!) variables.

A different kind of study to discover such nuance, such as of unobserved interactions and behaviors, would be to do a widespread "pre" survey (such as of networks, attitudes, and engagement) in a range of places and then find out how communities that are at some point in the future hit by disaster (natural, or man-made) react in terms of using the civic-organizing infrastructure to respond to such crises. There’s some literature that has explored these questions in the last couple of decades (I cite them in the paper). But a lot of modern trends such as the interconnectedness of supply chains, the emergence of virtual communities, the blurring of boundaries between natural and man-made disasters etc.—all offer important questions in this domain, and with some creative energy it should make for many interesting studies that are relevant to scholars across a wide spectrum.

Contd...
3. Your methods exhibit exceptional rigor. Specifically, you utilize 16 different models to address as many factors as possible that may be alternative explanations for your results. Would you please speak to the development of a rigorous methodological approach? What steps did you take to ensure that you controlled for as many variables as possible?

Thank you for the kind words. That’s flattering. I think that in practical terms, there are no “best” methods, only methods that are more appropriate for the empirical context being studied. What constitutes an appropriate methodology depends a lot on the data and the questions being asked of that data... At the operational level I tend to think of four kinds of variation – first is the key relationship I’m interested in, second is the set of control variables that are potentially interesting either as interacting variables or just sanity checks for the overall study, the third is confounding unobserved variation that I don’t care about and would prefer to partial out in the models (such as in this case persistent effects of place or average effects of year), and the fourth is unobserved variation that I can’t partial out. I think for an empirical study the goal is to move more things from the latter categories to the earlier categories as far as feasible.

At the margins, there is also a certain level of subjectivity (characteristic of particular research areas) to consider when thinking about what things one must control for in an empirical study—and the best way to find out what you’re missing is to present the paper at several places, or even have informal chats and email exchanges around it. After all, scholarly research (even a single authored paper) is a collective enterprise not only in terms of “standing on the shoulders of giants” but also as a continual conversation between competing theories, mechanisms, and methodologies. So I’ve found it quite useful to discuss my work both informally and in seminars, where a fresh perspective (occasionally even from people who haven’t read the paper carefully!) might end up illuminating certain confounding variables or mechanisms one hadn’t thought of before. From then on it’s about working on them to the best of your ability given the empirical setting.

4. What challenges did you face as you were developing this project? What enabled you to address these challenges?

One challenge—a perpetual one for many scholars—was of course the existential(-ish?) crisis: I loved the project but I kept asking myself why I was studying this topic while I could be studying something more approachable and relatable such as music, food, and culture. In the end what carried me through was the realization that I really (personally) wanted to know the empirical answers to theoretical questions posed in the paper, regardless of its
popularity as a topic of study. It sounds kinda panglossian perhaps, but when it’s a single-authored project the very ability to entirely steer your own project (and pursue your own choice of rabbit-holes) can be often disorienting and time-consuming! By that I don’t mean to say you’re all alone. In this case, I also got some excellent feedback, critiques, and encouragement from active researchers and practitioners (click for list) – all of which were helpful in steering the project into its current state (not only this paper but a couple of others in progress).

5. Could you share some of your personal insights on how to develop yourself as a writer, and how to produce publication-quality writing? Further, what challenges do you face as a writer, and how do you overcome them?

I think I already started answering this, haha. Kudos to you as interviewers for thinking of questions that flow seamlessly into the next.

Developing as a writer... hmm. Reading other published work (across a range of relevant outlets and interest areas) is probably the most useful. Other than that I guess writing and rewriting is the way to go. I usually write pretty bad first drafts, but it’s almost essential to write that ill-formed first draft. First, because it exposes flaws in one’s thinking which aren’t readily apparent inside your head, you know. Secondly, the eventual goal is to create a coherent gestalt that emerges through the intro->theory->data->methods->results->discussion: and it’s hard to fully see what that is before you write that first draft. Of course this is all from the perspective of being pretty early in my career, so take it with a grain of salt! But, as a junior scholar I have found rewriting itself to be quite rewarding: every rewrite helps peel away some of the coarse links and fuzzy concepts till you finally encounter a solid theoretical and conceptual space, and teasing it apart empirically is very exciting.

Other than that the biggest challenge for me is finding enough time! One thing I’ve been trying to do is setting aside projects that are un-promising or uninteresting to me into the “will-rejuvenate-in-the-indefinite-future” folder. I think this is one of those obvious solutions that is very hard to actually put into practice. Reasons can be many—possibly displeasing coauthors, uncertainty about one’s quantity of output, a general sense of losing a bunch of time and effort that was sunk into those papers, and so on.

Anyway, thank you Mike and Nick for your excellent questions, and all the best in your research endeavors!