

NONPROFIT ADVOCACY: CONFRONTATION OR COLLABORATION?

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The Political Role of the Nonprofit Sector

- Nonprofits play a political role when they:
 - Speak on behalf of constituents
 - Advocate for or against changes in public policy or regulation
- Advocacy is often conceptualized as inherently conflictual
- This is not the case!
- Advocacy can be done in a partnership model, as part of a New Governance regime
- Essential feedback mechanism

Why emphasize the political role?

- Nonprofits are more than just service providers
 1. Historically, they have served an important expressive function
 2. They also represent those with less voice in the political system and have important ground level knowledge that can improve governance and public policy outcomes
- This role has sometimes become hidden as the sector has become more professionalized and the service role has taken precedence
- In the U.S. this has led to a growth in research on advocacy involvement and its contours

Definitions

- Advocacy is “any attempt to influence the decisions of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest” (Jenkins, 1987, p. 297)
- → Collective interest doesn't require radical change. Regulatory shifts and increased funding for certain problem areas count
- Targets: government agents, other elites, general public
- Tactics:
 - insider, outsider (no middle ground)
 - direct, indirect (doesn't capture tone)
 - conflictual, educational, collaborative (better way)

Reconceptualizing Advocacy

<u>Traditional View</u>	<u>What is happening on the ground</u>
Grassroots	Professionalized
Outsider	Insider
Conflictual	Collaborative
Independent	Ongoing relationships

Study #1: Los Angeles Survey of Human Service Nonprofits (N=641)

- 1) What factors (organizational and environmental) are associated with increased advocacy involvement?
 - Size, professionalization, collaboration, government funding
 - Government funding had a surprisingly large effect size
- 2) What advocacy tactics do human service nonprofits participate in most frequently?
 - Higher mean participation for collaborative and educational tactics
 - Work in coalitions 84%, Committees & commissions 47%
 - Demonstration or boycott 13%

Study #2: Homeless Service Nonprofits

- In-depth qualitative study of one field (n=42)
- Interviews with managers, participant observation
- High levels of government funding
- Advocacy involvement was almost universal (98%), but often redefined as “educating lawmakers”

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- Promote their organization with policy makers

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- Managerial time
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Those goals are associated with increased reliance on insider tactics:

- 1) Regular forms of cross-sector and intra-sector communication are defined as advocacy
- 2) In order to be perceived as a legitimate partner to government, confrontational methods are rejected
- 3) Strong desire to create reciprocal relationships with key policymakers and government administrators.

“We are all in this together”

- Transformed opportunity structure for human service nonprofits
- Partnering through service provision has led to partnering in policy making
- Not just cooptation
- Nonprofits do express unhappiness but in ways that are consonant with a long time relationship, not a one-time fight
- Because the goal is to form closer relationships with government policymakers, focusing on insider tactics and a partnership approach is seen as simply making sense

Implications

- Nonprofit advocacy looks less like confrontation and accusations than it does like sharing information, brokering resources, and building relationships
- The two sectors work together in increasingly close ways—not “the enemy”
- Nonprofits have important knowledge to share and should be seen as colleagues
- Result is improved policy and services
- Potential cost, however, if important social issues are not being discussed because concerns about funding dominate advocacy conversation