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Strategies of policy advocacy organizations

Sheldon Gen
San Francisco State University

Amy Conley Wright
University of Wollongong, acwright@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Public advocacy in policy making is a hallmark of democracy, and the academic literature is replete with its benefits. Normatively, it is prescribed to legitimize the processes of policy making, and enhance public commitment for policy choices. Descriptively, a growing body of empirical research concludes that it produces better policy outcomes, such as wider distributions of benefits and a more responsive government. While these benefits are impressive, they accrue to society and ignore the fact that advocates often engage policy processes to advance their own preferences. What is missing from the academic literature are the advocates' expected outcomes of their own advocacy efforts. A simplistic view claims that they expect favorable policy changes. However, if this were the sole measure of success for advocacy efforts, then most could only be called failures. In a pluralistic society, few get exactly what they want in policies, especially in controversial issues that attract deep engagement by many competing groups. Additionally, even when advocates get their preferred policy, attribution of that outcome to their own advocacy efforts is difficult, if not impossible, to establish. Finally, policy change can take decades for some issues, much longer than advocacy organizations' programmatic cycles. In practice, there are ranges of expected outcomes for advocacy efforts, of which favorable policy change is just one. However, while the practice of advocacy has advanced, its theoretical and empirical groundings have not. This research significantly fills this gap by addressing two related questions about advocacy: 1) what do policy advocates do to try to affect public policy, and 2) what are their expected outcomes for their efforts? First, we constructed a hypothesized logic model of policy advocacy based upon an extensive review of professional and academic literature in the areas of advocacy and policy studies. The synthesis of these literatures produced five hypothesized strategies of policy advocacy: enhancing civic engagement, building public pressure, lobbying decision makers, direct reform, and changing implementation. For each strategy, categories of activities were linked to specific expected outcomes. Next, we conducted interviews with managers in a purposive sample of nonprofit advocacy organizations spanning varied policy issues including environment, public health, civil rights, youth, and arts. These qualitative data were complemented with Q-sorts to test five hypothesized strategies taken by organizations. Together, the empirical evidence are compared with the theoretically developed hypotheses. Our findings have both practical and academic significance. Practically, demand for accountability has grown, so policy advocates need to show measurable results of their efforts. Short of favorable policy change, other benchmarks of advocacy efforts must be identified. Establishing acceptable metrics of advocacy is key to organizations' sustaining their performance through the long processes of policy change. Academically, theories of policy processes may predict the links between types of advocacy activities and specific effects. This research broadens the applicability of existing theories, and guides future research in policy advocacy.

Keywords

Disciplines

Publication Details

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Strategies of Policy Advocacy Organizations

Sheldon Gen
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Amy Conley Wright
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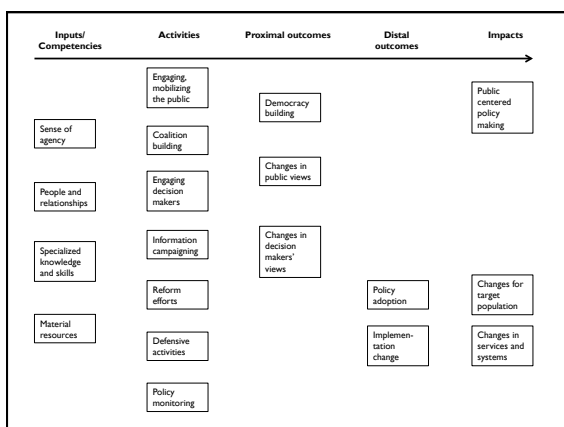## Questions in the practice of advocacy

- Are there distinct strategies that policy advocacy organizations employ to affect change?
  - Activities are easily recognized, but strategies linking activities to specific outcomes?
  - Theoretically underdeveloped

- What are their measures of success?
  - Favorable policy change cannot be the sole measure of success
    - In a win-or-lose paradigm, many/most policy advocacy efforts would be losers
    - The "arc of change" can span decades (Sabatier, 1999), order of magnitudes longer than advocacy organizations' programmatic cycles
    - Attribution is difficult, if not impossible, to establish.
    - Parallels previous debates on the efficacy of policy analyses (Shulock, 1999)
  - So, what are the proximal measures of success?

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Why these questions should be answered

- Practical implications
  - Demands for accountability in advocacy. Advocates and their funders/supporters need measurable results of their efforts (DeVita et al., 2004)
  - Guide/advise future practice of advocacy

- Theoretical implications
  - Lack of descriptive theoretical links between advocacy activities and policy outcomes. That is, what can reasonably be expected from advocacy activities?
  - Guide future research agenda in policy advocacy
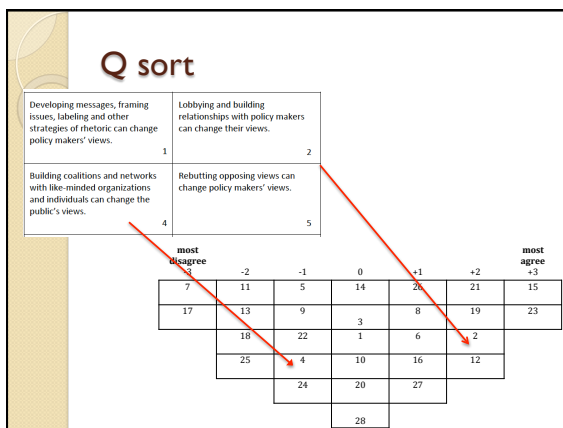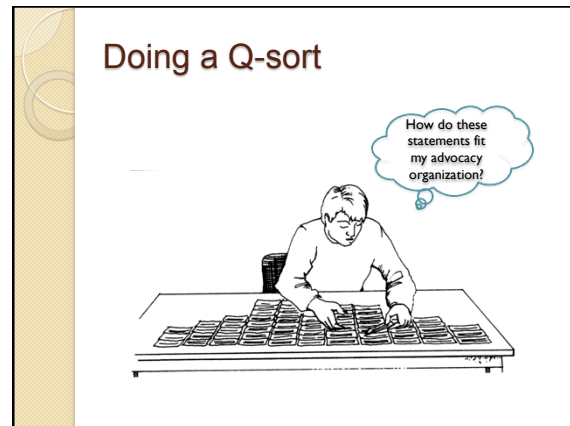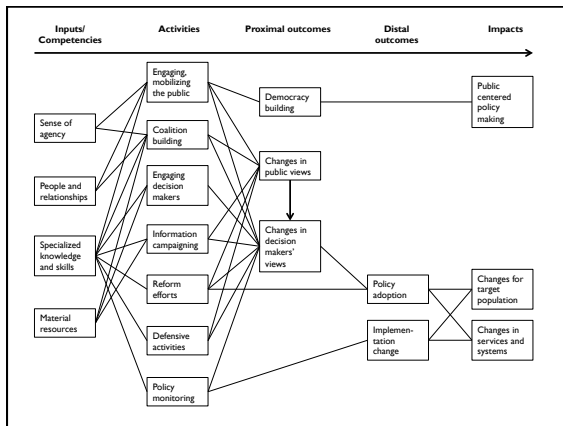
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Methods

- Synthesis of logic model for organizational policy advocacy
  - Review of existing logic models
  - Identifying major elements in inputs, activities, and outcomes (proximal, distal, and impact)
  - Recategorize from original placements, due to differences in contexts

- Application of policy literature to establish theoretical links between inputs, activities, and outcomes

- Q-methodology to identify strategies employed
  - Stratified purposive sample of 17 policy advocacy organizations (NTEE codes -01) in San Francisco
  - In depth interviews about their policy advocacy practices, followed by Q-sort exercise

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Inputs/Competencies	Activities	Proximal outcomes	Distal outcomes	Impacts
Sense of agency	Engaging, mobilizing the public	Democracy building		Public centered policy making
People and relationships	Coalition building	Changes in public views		
Specialized knowledge and skills	Engaging decision makers	Changes in decision makers' views		
Material resources	Information campaigning		Policy adoption	Changes for target population
	Reform efforts		Implementation change	Changes in services and systems
	Defensive activities			
	Policy monitoring			

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Example theoretical linkages between activities and outcomes

Activities	Theoretical link	Outcomes and impacts
Coalition building; engaging and mobilizing the public; information campaigning	Advocacy coalition framework; interest group studies	Changes in public views; Changes in decision makers' views; Policy adoption
Engaging decision makers	Institutionalism; Elite theory	Changes in decision makers' views; Policy adoption
Information creation: research and analysis	Rational decision making	Changes in public views; Changes in decision makers' views; Policy adoption
Information campaigning: media work	Media studies	Changes in public views; Changes in decision makers' views; Sets policy agenda; Raises political will to act; Shortens time frame for action
Defensive activities	Public dialectic; Policy-oriented learning	Changes in public views; Changes in decision makers' views
Policy monitoring	Bottom-up implementation theories	Changes in bureaucrats' actions
Policy monitoring	Evaluation theory	Setting the policy agenda
Information campaigning; Engaging and mobilizing the public; Engaging decision makers	Multiple streams theory	Setting the policy agenda; Policy adoption
Engaging and mobilizing the public	Public participation	Democracy building; People-centered policy making

Doing a Q-sort

How do these statements fit my advocacy organization?

Q sort

Developing messages, framing issues, labeling and other strategies of rhetoric can change policy makers' views. 1	Lobbying and building relationships with policy makers can change their views. 2
Building coalitions and networks with like-minded organizations and individuals can change the public's views. 4	Rebutting opposing views can change policy makers' views. 5

most disagree -3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	most agree +3
7	11	5	14	26	21	15
17	13	9	3	8	19	23
	18	22	1	6	2	
	25	4	10	16	12	
		24	20	27		
			28			

Sample

Purposive sample of policy advocacy organizations drawn from the Guidestar database:

- IRS Code for "Alliance/Advocacy Organization," NTEE codes '01'
- City: San Francisco
- N=73, n=17

Organizations loading onto factors

```
Factor Matrix with an X Indicating a Defining Sort

            Loadings

QSORT        1         2         3         4         5         6

1         0.6808X    0.0943    0.3777    0.0411    0.1970   -0.0993
2         0.2186   -0.0971   -0.1230    0.6786X    0.1793   -0.0994
3        -0.1890   -0.2194   -0.0961   -0.7265X    0.0148    0.3096
4         0.6126X    0.3965    0.2052    0.1172    0.1439    0.0923
5         0.0402    0.2932    0.6050X   -0.1614   -0.3004    0.0012
6         0.0152    0.1533    0.1701    0.5411X   -0.1110    0.2892
7        -0.2081   -0.0148   -0.7821X    0.0479   -0.0971    0.1239
8         0.1510    0.7627X   -0.1520    0.1946   -0.0314   -0.0127
9        -0.0825   -0.0060    0.1382    0.1317   -0.5395X    0.1316
10        0.1966   -0.0787    0.8245X    0.3243    0.0250   -0.0661
11       -0.1516   -0.0241   -0.1303   -0.0765   -0.0549    0.5936X
12        0.5224   -0.1061    0.1714    0.0964    0.3912   -0.1773
13       -0.0850    0.7174X    0.1479   -0.2693    0.1015    0.1060
14        0.1440    0.7090X    0.1192    0.2585    0.1305   -0.1642
15        0.0799    0.4122    0.3329    0.1855    0.5325X    0.2159
16        0.8669X    0.0553    0.0013    0.2903   -0.0264   -0.2102
17        0.3245    0.3314    0.0823    0.3885    0.6565X    0.0669

% expl.var.   13        13        13        11         8         4
```

No confounding sorts, and one insignificant sort. Factors 1 through 5 each have 3 unique sorts loading onto them.

Q-set and factor arrays

No.	Statement	Factor:	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Developing messages, framing issues, labeling and other strategies of rhetoric can change policy makers' views		0	1	-2	2	3	3
2	Lobbying and building relationships with policy makers can change their views		2	2	1	1	1	1
3	Monitoring and evaluating existing policy can change how it is implemented		0	-2	1	0	-1	2
4	Building coalitions and networks with like-minded organizations and individuals can change the public's views		-1	-1	2	0	-1	0
5	Rebutting opposing views can change policy makers' views		-3	-2	-3	-1	-1	1
6	Using the media to disseminate information can change policy makers' views		1	1	0	2	3	-1
7	Monitoring and evaluating existing policy can set the policy agenda		0	-1	-2	0	-2	0
8	Policies can change social and physical conditions		2	3	3	0	0	-2
9	Using the media to disseminate information can change the public's views		1	-1	2	2	1	-2
10	Building coalitions and networks with like-minded organizations and individuals can change policy makers' views		-1	0	1	-1	2	-1
11	Policy advocacy in general builds legitimacy in a democracy		-2	2	2	1	-2	-2
12	Policy advocacy in general makes policy making more people-centered		-3	0	-1	-3	-2	3
13	Pilot programs and demonstration projects can lead to policy change		2	0	0	-2	0	0
14	Public mobilizations (e.g., protests, letter writing campaigns, rallies) can set the policy agenda		0	-2	3	-3	0	1
15	Research and analyses can change policy makers' views		0	1	-2	-1	0	2
16	Using the media to disseminate information can hasten policy change		0	1	0	3	2	-3
17	Litigation can change policy		-1	-3	-1	3	-3	-1
18	Rebutting opposing views can change the public's views		-2	-3	-1	-2	-2	1
19	Changes in the public's views can change policy makers' views		3	0	0	1	-1	-2
20	Developing messages, framing issues, labeling and other strategies of rhetoric can change the public's views		1	0	1	1	1	2
21	Public mobilizations (e.g., protests, letter writing campaigns, voter registration) can build democracy		-1	-1	2	0	0	0
22	Changes in policy makers' views can change policies		3	2	0	1	2	0
23	Research and analyses can change the public's views		0	0	-3	-2	0	-1
24	Policy advocacy in general produces more effective policies		-2	3	-1	0	1	-3

Variance = 2.833 St. Dev. = 1.683

Factor 1: Pragmatists, focused on getting the policy win

- Focus is on favorable policy change, not broader goals of democratic legitimacy, representativeness, or policy effectiveness
- Engages broad range of activities to gain favorable policy change, targeting the public, policy makers, and direct reform efforts:
  ◦ Influencing public's views to influence policy makers' views, to change policy
  ◦ Direct lobbying and relationship building with policy makers to influence their views
  ◦ Pilot programs and demonstration projects to influence policy change

Factor 2: Optimists, focused on positive societal impact

- Focus is on positive impacts on society, beyond specific policy preferences. They seek…
  ◦ … improved social and physical conditions in society
  ◦ … more legitimate democracy, advocating for the less vocal (arts, environment)
  ◦ … more effective policies
- Keeping with a focus on the positive, they do not favor adversarial or manipulative activities in advocacy (such as litigation, negative campaigning, or message spinning), but instead favor building relations and understanding. They'll work *with* policy makers, rather than fight them, to improve social conditions.

Factor 3: Populists, focused on grassroots campaigning and public empowerment

- Very clear preference for advocacy activities that engage the public, and against those that engage policy makers directly
  ◦ Mobilize the public to set the policy agenda, and to enhance democratic representation
  ◦ Build coalitions and networks to shape public view
  ◦ Using the media to disseminate information to the public
  ◦ Directly influencing policy makers' and bureaucrats' views (e.g., through messaging, research, debate, lobbying, policy monitoring) is not their strategy. Instead, the public will lead with ideas.

Factor 4: Advocates, from case to policy

- These organizations often serve individual clients on issues having policy implications. Thus, their case advocacy leads them to policy advocacy.
- Their preferred activities are litigation in their case advocacy, and media attention to educate the public on their case dilemmas that warrant policy reform.

Factor 5: Institutionalists, focused on decision makers

- Their path to favorable policy change is focused on influencing the views of policy makers and opinion leaders. Many activities are employed to get there:
  ◦ Messaging, framing, labeling, and other tools of rhetoric
  ◦ Media to disseminate information
  ◦ Building coalitions to influence policy makers

Tentative Factor 6: Educators, focused on changing perceptions toward their constituency

- Aims to educate both the public and policy makers about their constituency, with goal of shaping policy that accounts for their interests
- Many advocacy activities used, including
  ◦ Messaging, framing, labeling
  ◦ Research and analysis
  ◦ Debate opposing views

Unobserved, but hypothesized, strategic components

- ☑ Enhancing democracy
- ☑ Applying public pressure
- ☑ Influencing decision makers
- ☑ Direct reform
- ❑ **Changing implementation**

Next steps

- Develop and employ and performance measures for these strategies
- Estimate distributions of these strategies among policy advocacy organizations (national survey)
- Explore correlations of these strategies with organizational characteristics

Existing logic models

- Center for Community Health and Evaluation. N.D. *Measuring the Impact of Advocacy and Policy Efforts: Case Study Example.* **Center for Community Health and Evaluation**.

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Example theoretical linkages between inputs and activities

Inputs	Theoretical link	Activities
Sense of 'agency' in the political process	Empowerment theory	Coalition building; Engaging and mobilizing the public
Areas of specialized knowledge and skills	Competency	All
People and relationships	Social capital theory	Coalition building; Engaging and mobilizing the public
Material resources	Resource mobilization theory	Coalition building; Engaging decision makers; Information campaigning

Strategic component 2: apply public pressure

Strategic component 3: influence decision makers

Strategic component 4: direct reform

Strategic component 5: change implementation