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Strategies of policy advocacy organizations

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Strategies of policy advocacy organizations

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.

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Strategies of Policy Advocacy Organizations

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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
  - Parallels previous debates on the efficacy of policy analyses (Shulock, 1999)

Why these questions should be answered

- Practical implications
  - Practical implications
  - Demands for accountability in advocacy. Advocates and their funders/sponsors 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

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)
  - Reorganize from original placements, due to differences in contexts

- 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

Example theoretical linkages between activities and outcomes
Inputs/Competencies

Activities

Proximal outcomes

Distal outcomes

Impacts

Sense of agency

People and relationships

Specialized knowledge and skills

Material resources

Coalition building

Engaging, mobilizing the public

Engaging decision makers

Information campaigning

Reform efforts

Defensive activities

Policy monitoring

Changes in public views

Changes in decision makers' views

Democracy building

Policy adoption

Implementation change

Changes for target population

Changes in services and systems

Public centered policy making

Doing a Q-sort

How do these statements fit my advocacy organization?

Q sort

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

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

Q-set and factor arrays

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Organizations loading onto factors

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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

Example theoretical linkages between inputs and activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Theoretical link</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of 'agency' in the political process</td>
<td>Empowerment theory</td>
<td>Coalition building; engaging and mobilizing the public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas of specialized knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People and relationships</td>
<td>Social capital theory</td>
<td>Coalition building; engaging and mobilizing the public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material resources</td>
<td>Resource mobilization theory</td>
<td>Coalition building; engaging and mobilizing the public.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Existing logic models

Strategic component 2: apply public pressure

Strategic component 3: influence decision makers

Strategic component 4: direct reform

Strategic component 5: change implementation