

In Whose Interest: *Do National Nonprofit Advocacy Organizations Represent the Under-represented?*

By Cynthia M. Gibson, Ph.D.

Of particular interest is whether national nonprofit advocacy organizations (NNAOs) that were established to provide grassroots citizens with a “voice” in the policymaking process continue to represent them in that arena.

THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE DEBATE in recent years about whether nonprofit organizations should engage in advocacy to promote their interests and those of their constituents, but this discussion tends to focus primarily on the tactics that groups use for advocacy, rather than on what they are advocating and for whom. Of particular interest is whether national nonprofit advocacy organizations (NNAOs) that were established to provide grassroots citizens with a “voice” in the policy-making process continue to represent them in that arena.

During the past 30 years, a number of these groups, established largely with funding from foundations and wealthy donors, have become increasingly powerful in the policymaking process. Some believe this trend to be a positive force for democracy because it has opened up a process that had once been relatively closed to the average citizen, providing new forums for ideas and policies, and mobilizing a sagging electorate. But others maintain that these groups’ financial reliance on outside patrons such as foundations and wealthy individuals has transformed the organizations into “professionalized” entities with budgets in the millions of dollars, impressive rosters of paid staff, and a member-

ship base of well educated and upper-middle-class individuals who tend to care more about what Ronald Inglehart, Jeff Berry, and others call postmaterialist or “quality-of-life” issues, rather than materialist or basic economic concerns that are, arguably, more of interest to under-represented groups.

These characteristics, combined with the power NNAOs have acquired, have raised questions as to whether they remain interested in championing the concerns of grassroots citizens—especially poor and low-income people who are traditionally under-represented in the policy-making processes—or whether their advocacy agendas reflect the interests of the donor base that sustains them.

From 2001 to 2004, I conducted a study that attempted to answer these questions by surveying 836 national advocacy groups. The organizations were identified as those that operate at a national level; focus on public policy, legislative, cause-oriented activities and goals; have an open membership; and have a 501 (c)(3) status. The study did not delineate between liberal and conservative.

The survey asked about whether organizations considered themselves to be membership groups; their primary membership; the primary requirement to be a member; their primary constituency; funding sources; activities; those responsible for carrying out activities in the organization (staff, board, or members/constituents); whether they conducted annual

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surveys of their members/constituents; issue areas on which the organization focused; and their primary issue and advocacy foci.

Approximately 368 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 44 percent. Statistical tests using variables from IRS Form 990 data to determine whether there were differences between respondents and non-respondents indicated that there were no differences between the two groups.

The survey’s findings reveal an interesting picture.

First, the majority of these national advocacy groups view “contributing money” to be the primary requirement to be a member, bolstering assertions by John Judis, Theda Skocpol, and others that these groups have largely “checkbox membership” that value money more than direct participation in the organization’s activities.

Other findings revealed that the majority of funding for these organizations comes from foundation grants and major donors, rather than from membership dues or other such venues through which grassroots citizens might participate. Data also indicate a high level of “professionalization” in these institutions in

that they cede control of nearly every major organizational function to staff or administrators, rather than to constituents. Analysis of the activities in which NNAOs are primarily engaged revealed a penchant for more sophisticated “insider” strategies such as media campaigns, policy analysis, lobbying, and testifying, rather than on strategies that directly engage the larger public (e.g., grassroots organizing, petitioning, or canvassing)—another indicator that these organizations tend to be “top-down,” rather than inclusive of the under-represented.

One critically important finding of the research was that NNAOs make a distinction between “members” and “constituents”—a distinction that has not yet surfaced sufficiently in discussions about representation and/or mem-

bership in these organizations and deserves further exploration. Specifically, NNAOs’ membership tended to be educated professionals who make financial contributions to their organizations, while their constituents—or those whose interests or concerns they said they represented—tended to be members of under-represented groups such as poor or low-income people, people of color, children, etc.

Whether viewed as “members” or “constituents,” neither group has much say in what NNAOs do, given additional data indicating that 80 percent of NNAOs do not survey their members (or constituents) to find out who these individuals are or what their thoughts are about the activities or agendas the organizations should be undertaking. One might assume that these organizations do have sensing mechanisms to discern when they have run afoul of their (checkbox) members since that affects their financial stability, but where might the feedback mechanisms be to determine the organization’s alignment with constituency views? This raises a question that is native to the nonprofit sector: If money tends to come from one economic/social group to serve the interests of another economic/social group, how can there be assurance that those constituency interests are being adequately understood and represented?

Some might argue that this is a necessary evil, especially if NNAOs are still able to use their power to advocate for the interests of those they say are their constituents—members of under-represented groups. But do they?

To answer that question requires objective analyses about NNAOs’ agendas, specifically, whether and to what extent they reflect the concerns of under-represented constituencies. This study attempted to answer this question by asking organizations to select their top priorities from a comprehensive list of potential issue areas and then select one they considered to be their primary area of emphasis.¹ Data revealed that organizations with a materialist emphasis are less likely than postmaterialist organizations to have “money is a primary membership requirement” and to be staff driven. Although these results were inconclusive, the study revealed support for materialism as a rather strong construct (issues such as “economic



development/poor and low-income communities” “health care/access,” “hunger,” “jobs/employment,” “poverty,” and “welfare reform” all fell under the category in a factor analysis series). An analysis of “postmaterialism,” in contrast, “fell out” over approximately nine distinct factors: environment, reproductive rights, education, science, consumer protection, gun control, money/taxes, First Amendment, and nuclear disarmament/peace. This may suggest a shift in NNAOs’ emphasis from building larger movements around a cluster of related issues (those reflected in the materialist construct) to championing single issues with a postmaterialist focus. In short, NNAOs may have adopted the same kind of “niche marketing” strategy that those in the private sector use to secure resources and funds. ►



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This study raises serious questions regarding the legitimacy of the “representing the under-represented” argument for funding these groups. Answering those questions will require more sophisticated measures of NNAOs’ agendas and how they develop, rather than self-reports about their foci; more rigorous attempts to link those agendas with whom they regard as their members and constituents; and, most of all, assessments of how successful they have been in addressing policy issues of concern to those who depend on these organizations for their “voice” on those issues.

Endnote

1. Issues that could potentially be seen as both post-materialist and materialist were separated into two separate items. Reproductive health, for example, was separated into “access to services” (materialist) and “rights” (postmaterialist).

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