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What Do We Know?**

by

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Introduction

This paper seeks to outline what is known and what is unknown about nonprofit involvement in policy advocacy. To do so, the discussion falls into three parts. Part I explores what existing research seems to tell us about the current extent and prevailing trends in nonprofit involvement in policy advocacy.^{1,2} Part II examines what is known about the impact on nonprofit advocacy of some of the major factors that various theories have suggested affect the scale and character of nonprofit involvement in policy advocacy. The final section of the paper then summarizes the gaps in our knowledge on this important topic and the implications these hold for further research on nonprofit advocacy.

Scope and Extent

Overall Extent

Despite the importance regularly attached to the advocacy function of nonprofit organizations, knowledge about the extent and character of nonprofit engagement in advocacy activities is actually fairly sparse. More distressing still is the fact that what evidence does exist is highly inconsistent. Thus:

- A large-scale survey of some 3,400 nonprofit organizations conducted by Dr. Lester M. Salamon in the early 1980s found that fewer than 20 percent of responding organizations engaged in either “advocacy for particular client groups,” or “advocacy for political, legislative issues.” Moreover, only 16 percent reported expenditures on advocacy activities, and for half of these, the expenditures were 10 percent or less of the organization’s total expenditures;
- This finding was confirmed by a 2002 survey of 2,206 Indiana nonprofits, which found that only 27 percent of these organizations had engaged in some form of advocacy and that fewer still devoted significant staff or financial resources to it;

¹ In this document, the term “nonprofit” refers to “charitable” organizations entitled to tax exemption under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

² This paper was prepared as background to the development of a Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies Nonprofit Listening Post Project Sounding on nonprofit engagement in public policy.

- Data compiled from the IRS Form 990 reveal an even more depressing picture: only 1.2 to 1.7 percent of Form 990 filers reported lobbying expenditures between 1989 and 1998, and out of those that lobbied, the average devoted only 1.2 percent of total expenses to lobbying activities (Krehely, 2001). Among child-focused nonprofits, the proportion reporting any lobbying expenditures was even smaller (DeVita and Mosher-Williams, 2001).
- By contrast, the Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project (SNAP) survey conducted by Tufts University, OMB Watch, and Charity Lobbying in the Public Interest in 2000 found that 74 percent of the 1,738 nonprofits it surveyed reported they had “lobb[ie]d on behalf of or against a proposed bill or other policy pronouncement,” while 78 percent indicated that they had “encourage[ed] members to write, call, fax or email policymakers.”
- Similarly, a study of nonprofit involvement in policy advocacy by Jeffrey Berry found that “32 percent of all congressional testimony was offered by citizen advocacy groups even though these organizations constituted only 7 percent of the Washington advocacy universe” (Berry 2001, 3-4).³

Current Trends

If there is disagreement in the literature over the extent of nonprofit advocacy, there is also disagreement about recent trends, though here the evidentiary base of the conclusions is even more limited.

- One line of argument, supported by some focus group inquiries, points to a potential decline in nonprofit advocacy activity as a consequence of growing marketization of the sector (Alexander 1999, 460; Saidel 2002, 14). As a report on an Alliance for Children and Families focus group recently put it: “Commercialism is eroding the broader mission of the nonprofit sector, and nonprofits are in danger of losing the high ground of serving the public interest” (Alliance for Children and Families 2003, 5).
- On the other hand, some observers see an increase in nonprofit advocacy as a byproduct of the increased engagement of nonprofit organizations with public programs and public funding (Saidel, 2002).
- Another line of argument suggests that while advocacy may appear to be declining at the individual agency level, it may be expanding at the multi-agency level as organizations shift their advocacy activities to special coalition organizations.⁴ Perhaps reflecting this, the 2006 National Council of Nonprofit Associations’ membership survey found that at least two-thirds of its members currently sponsor trainings on public policy or advocacy.

³ Citizen advocacy groups, however, represent only a small subset of all nonprofit organizations.

⁴ Thus, for example, the Alliance for Children and Families focus group on nonprofit advocacy found that “...as policy decisions and funding cutbacks have ever-growing implications at the state, county and local level, nonprofits are increasingly coming together with other organizations, both public and private, usually to advocate around a specific issue that impacts their clients or their community.” (Alliance for Children and Families 2003, 10).

The Definitional Tangle

How can we make sense of these disparate findings?

One factor that seems to be complicating the assessment of the extent of nonprofit advocacy is the continuing confusion that exists over the meaning of this term. This confusion has been fed in important part by the legal restrictions that govern nonprofit involvement in the policy process.

The United States turns out to have some of the most confusing, and also some of the most restrictive, laws on nonprofit political and policy involvement. These laws differentiate three different types of policy engagement, each of which is subject to different legal restrictions. What is more, one of these types is further sub-divided into two sub-types, and these sub-types are treated differently in the law. In particular:

- The first type of advocacy activity identified in the law is *political campaign activity*, which is defined as support for particular candidates for political office. Nonprofits are forbidden to engage in political campaign activity at all and face potential loss of their tax exempt status if they do. Nonprofits are, however, permitted to engage in voter registration campaigns and other election-related activities, but only if they are not directed at supporting particular candidates.
- A second type of nonprofit policy involvement is *lobbying*, which is defined as attempting to influence the passage of *particular* pieces of legislation. Nonprofits are permitted to engage in “lobbying” as defined here, but only if the activities devoted to it remain an “insubstantial part” of an organization’s total resources or activities. What constitutes an “insubstantial part” of activities has long been unclear, however. In an effort to clear this up, Congress in 1976 passed legislation that gave nonprofits the option to operate under more specific guidelines for determining when their lobbying activity violated the “insubstantial part” threshold.⁵ In addition, this same law drew a distinction between “direct lobbying,” where the nonprofit itself presents its views on particular legislation; and “grassroots lobbying,” where the nonprofit mobilizes members of the public to take action on specific pieces of legislation. Organizations are barred from using more than 25 percent of their total lobbying expenditures on such “grassroots lobbying.”
- The third type of nonprofit policy involvement is other *advocacy*. Other advocacy in legal terms is thus any type of policy engagement other than political campaign activity and lobbying. Nonprofits are permitted to engage in these other advocacy activities without limit. In other words, so long as they are not supporting particular candidates for elected office or particular legislative enactments, nonprofits can engage in other forms of policy work without limit.

One of the dilemmas of research in this area is that nonprofit organizations are frequently unclear about these distinctions and may interpret questions about advocacy as really being

⁵ Nonprofits electing to come under the 1976 law are allowed to spend 20 percent of the first \$500,000 of their annual expenditures, and 15 percent of the next \$500,000 of their expenditures up to a maximum of \$1 million a year on *lobbying* – i.e., communication which a) is directed to a legislator or employee of a legislative body, b) refers to specific legislation, and c) expresses a view on that legislation.

questions about lobbying, and vice versa. This is particularly true when researchers consciously blur the distinction. For example, Tufts University Professor Jeffrey Berry uses the terms “advocacy” and “lobbying” interchangeably, arguing that these terms are synonymous to political scientists, who “consider anything a group does to try to influence government as ‘lobbying’” (Berry 2001, 2). This can substantially affect the responses that are elicited, however, and thereby skew research results.

To get around these terminological dilemmas, researchers have tried to avoid making use of the terms “advocacy” or “lobbying” altogether, replacing them with more descriptive phrases intended to describe their involvement in a range of activities in which they communicated or interacted with those in government. More specifically, the SNAP study mentioned above asked respondents about their involvement in nine different types of activities such as testifying at legislative or administrative hearings and encouraging members to write, call, fax, or e-mail policymakers. Similarly, the 2002 study of Indiana nonprofits asked organizations whether they “promote certain positions on policy issues or on issues related to the interests of certain groups.” While these studies steer away from the terms “advocacy” and “lobbying,” this does not solve the problem because it makes it difficult to be certain about what respondents had in mind when answering the questions—were nonprofits telling interviewers that they testified to encourage passage of particular laws (which is lobbying) or simply testified to bring issues to the attention of legislators without promoting a particular piece of legislation (which is advocacy)? The fact that the 2000 SNAP survey found that 61 percent of the respondents who reported no lobbying expenses on their Form 990s indicated on the survey that they do lobby is some indication that substantial confusion exists in the minds of respondents, complicating the task of interpreting survey questions that leave the issue too implicit. The fact that only about 5 percent of 990 filers have elected to come under the 1976 law⁶ adds credence to this view, suggesting that only a handful of nonprofits are sufficiently interested in policy advocacy to go to the trouble of exploring these distinctions by electing to be covered by this law. It may also help explain why nonprofits may have moved whatever lobbying activity they do to organizations that specialize in this function, further complicating the task of ferreting out their involvement in this activity.

Divergent Focus of Advocacy Activity

Closely related to this terminological dilemma is a second definitional matter that has to do with the distinction between advocating for one’s own organization and its funding and advocating (or lobbying) for underrepresented populations or the public at large. Both of these are considered forms of lobbying subject to federal lobbying restrictions, but when the two are blurred on surveys the results may be different from what they seem. Instead of seeing nonprofits as change agents in their communities, a finding of extensive nonprofit involvement in lobbying may really indicate that organizations are actively pursuing their organizational survival, which may be a quite different thing.

Loose Phrasing of Questions

Another factor that may be clouding pictures of the extent of advocacy activity is the varied phrasing of questions used by researchers in assessing this phenomenon. Part of this relates to

⁶ The 990, however, only captures data on nonprofits with revenues of at least \$25,000, and excludes many religious-related organizations.

the terminological issue noted above. But part also reflects inattention to the time period over which questions about advocacy are asked. The SNAP study in particular seems to have fallen into this trap by failing to specify a time period in its questions. As a result, it is not clear whether respondents have the same time period in mind when they answered the questions: some may be thinking about the past few months and others the past few years.

Changing Structure of Advocacy Activity

Finally, the disparate assessments of the extent to which organizations are engaged in lobbying and advocacy may really reflect merely a shift in the *structure* of lobbying and advocacy activity within the nonprofit sector. In particular, this function may be shifting from individual operating agencies to specialized lobbying or advocacy coalitions. Such coalitions can spare individual organizations the trouble of mastering the lobbying restrictions themselves and place this burden on specialized organizations that take on the lobbying or advocacy responsibilities for subgroups of organizations. This approach can also be more effective in the policy arena by multiplying the clout that any single organization can bring to the task. But it complicates the task of ferreting out the amount of advocacy and lobbying that occurs since the locus of the activity would shift from the separate organizations to the coalitions.

All of this underlines the need for great care in the framing of questions in this field and sensitivity to the restructuring and refocusing of advocacy and lobbying that may be under way.

Determinants of Advocacy Activity

If considerable confusion exists about the scope and extent of nonprofit involvement in policy advocacy, even more uncertainty exists about the determinants of such involvement. This poses a special challenge to efforts to encourage this critical facet of nonprofit activity. Among the factors that various studies have suggested might be at work are organizational size, reliance on government and foundation funds, organizational age, degree of professionalism, field, the legislative/IRS lobbying restrictions, organizational views toward government, board support, staff skills, and technology.

To make sense of the findings about the correlates or determinants of nonprofit policy advocacy, it is useful to group them around three basic theories or analytical perspectives (Salamon, 1995):

- **Resource Mobilization Theory.** This theory, which has its roots in the study of social movements, essentially argues that involvement in policy advocacy depends on the availability of financial and other tangible resources. This would lead us to expect that advocacy activity will be related to organizational size and to the availability of specialized staff devoted to the function.
- **Resource Dependency Theory.** An alternative body of theory suggests that it is not the amount, but the source, of resources that most powerfully affects nonprofit involvement in advocacy activity. One line of argument within this framework suggests that receipt of government funding inhibits nonprofit policy advocacy. Another stresses the diverting influence of reliance on the market. And yet a third points to the conservative influence of those with significant economic clout resulting from undue dependence on private charitable support.

- **Organization Theory.** This body of theory sees organizations as primarily concerned about their own growth and survival, especially as they age and mature, and as they take on a more professional mode of task accomplishment. In this view, organizational survival concerns over time drive out advocacy activity, except perhaps for advocacy related directly to organizational survival.

Viewed in the light of these three perspectives, existing research sheds some very useful light on the determinants of nonprofit policy engagement, but also highlights a number of uncertainties.

Resource Mobilization Factors

As noted above, *resource mobilization theory* suggests that nonprofits require resources to engage effectively in policy advocacy. This would suggest that larger organizations and those with the professional and technical resources that larger size permits are most likely to engage in advocacy work. The research conducted to date generally lends credence to this view, though with an important caveat.

- **Organizational size.** With regard to organizational size, the SNAP and Salamon studies found that organizations with greater budgets and staff sizes were significantly more likely than smaller groups to participate in public policy. While the Indiana study also found that larger nonprofits were more likely than small ones to engage in advocacy, it found mid-sized groups (defined as those with revenues between \$250,000 and \$1 million) the most likely to be involved. This suggests that as nonprofits amass more resources, they are more capable of advocating (as the resource mobilization theory suggests) but only up to a certain threshold, at which point the factors associated with the *organization theory perspective* kick in, discouraging active engagement in policy advocacy because of its controversial nature and its consequent potential interference with organizational survival.
- **Skills and technology.** As advocacy requires specific skills (e.g., understanding of the legislative process) and resources (e.g. sophisticated technologies), a more refined test of the resource mobilization theory would look at the relationship between these more specific types of resources and participation in advocacy. The studies that have examined this relationship have generally confirmed its importance. Thus, for example:
 - The Indiana study examined four tools it considered “particularly relevant to advocating organizations,” i.e., a website, e-mail, computer availability, and Internet access. The study found that organizations with these tools were significantly more likely than those without them to advocate. Thus, for example, 65 percent of nonprofits engaged in advocacy had e-mail, vs. only 42 percent of non-advocating organizations.
 - A study of “highly effective advocacy organizations” by Susan Rees linked these groups’ success in part to employing staff with government expertise (S. Rees, 2001).
 - An Alliance for Children and Families’ focus group of nonprofit children and family service agencies considered “effectively engaged” in advocacy linked their success to educating and engaging advocacy staff, dedicating at least one staff member to public policy work, and investing in training and information technologies. Barriers to

effective advocacy included: “lack of know-how,” “lack of needed technology,” and a “new cadre of workers lacking needed skills.”

- 64 percent of the SNAP respondents also identified staff (or volunteer) skills as a major barrier to advocacy. What is more, the SNAP study identified a correlation between advocacy engagement and the delegation of public policy responsibilities to a staff person or lobbyist rather than to the executive director or a board member. Organizations in a position to staff the advocacy function with specialized staff were far more likely to engage in advocacy.

Resource Dependency Factors

Resource dependency theories focus attention not on the amount of resources that organizations have available but on the sources of those resources as the critical determinant of organizational behavior. This perspective has given rise to a variety of perspectives on how various funding sources affect nonprofit advocacy involvement. Fortunately, a considerable amount of consensus has emerged regarding a number of these factors, though the evidence remains in need of further confirmation. In particular:

- **Reliance on government funding.** Perhaps one of the most pervasive preconceptions about nonprofit advocacy is that reliance on government funding discourages nonprofit advocacy activity. Underlying this preconception are two basic arguments that are consistent with resource dependency theories: first, that nonprofits funded by government would want to shy away from biting the hand that feeds them and therefore would steer clear of advocacy; and second, that organizations deeply involved in government programs would need to divert staff time and resources from advocacy to the more administrative functions required to obtain/expend government funds.

The available evidence on nonprofit policy advocacy has fairly consistently refuted this line of argument, however.

- In the first large-scale study of U.S. nonprofits carried out in the mid-1980s, Salamon found that as an organization’s share of government support increased, its advocacy activities increased as well.
- The SNAP study confirmed this basic finding in 2000. Although the SNAP research found that 77 percent of respondents receiving federal grants felt that government funding was a barrier to their participating in policy matters, organizations receiving government funds were actually significantly more likely to be involved in advocacy activities than those receiving no government dollars (95 percent vs. 77 percent, respectively).
- The 2002 Indiana study also found that organizations that depend primarily on government funding were significantly more likely to be involved in advocacy activities.
- More recently, University of Arizona Professor Mark Chaves used two data sets to examine the correlates of nonprofit involvement in eight different types of advocacy activities (e.g., distributing voter guides to members, organizing or participating in a demonstration or march to support or oppose a public issue or

policy, etc.). His basic conclusion was that the relationship between receipt of government support and involvement in these activities was either positive or null. In no case was it statistically significant in a negative direction.

- Researcher Kelly LeRoux similarly found that as nonprofit reliance on government funds increased, so did the likelihood that they engaged in promoting client voting and facilitating client contact with elected officials. As she explained, “Rather than discourage nonprofits’ roles as civic intermediaries, government funding appears to be a clear and consistent enabler of these functions” (LeRoux 2006, 419).

Part of the explanation for this rather consistent finding of a positive, not a negative, relationship between receipt of government support and nonprofit involvement in advocacy activity may lie in organizational self-preservation, as noted above. In other words, organizations may be advocating for increased spending on programs from which they benefit. But other factors are also likely at work. For example, the organizations involved in government programs have a commitment to the clientele served by these programs and therefore a commitment to avoid what Saidel has termed the “erosion of benefits for the individuals they serve” (Saidel 2002, 10). In addition, it is well to remember that government is not a monolith, particularly not in the U.S.: various agencies and bureaus have their own agendas. Far from penalizing nonprofits for advocating on behalf of their programs, program managers may welcome (and encourage) the support. Indeed, fiscal conservatives have come to oppose nonprofit policy advocacy on precisely these grounds—that it supports unholy alliances between particular government agencies and nonprofit providers in support of the expansion of the programs these agencies administer.

- **Reliance on philanthropy.** While the evidence on the relationship between government funding and nonprofit advocacy fairly consistently refutes the resource dependency theory, the findings with respect to charitable support are less conclusive. In particular:
 - Salamon’s survey found a positive correlation between advocacy and the share of organizational revenues from foundations, but a negative relationship with individual giving;
 - A State Legislative Leaders Foundation survey of 167 groups identified as advocates for children and families found that the most common reason for not engaging in legislative advocacy was foundation restrictions discouraging such advocacy;
 - The SNAP study found that respondents with higher proportions of revenues from foundations were more likely to view foundation revenue as a barrier to lobbying. But the SNAP study also found that organizations were more likely to become involved in policy matters as they secured greater funds from foundations.
- **Reliance on fees and charges.** Far less evidence is available regarding the impact of reliance on fee income on nonprofit advocacy activity. From the evidence at hand, however, it seems plausible that reliance on fee income discourages nonprofit advocacy involvement, if only because such involvement yields little in the way of fees for participating organizations and takes agency staff away from the complicated job of marketing agency services and products.

Organization Theory Factors

A third set of factors thought to influence nonprofit involvement in advocacy activities is associated with theories of organizational development. According to this line of theory, organizational maintenance and enhancement needs come to have the upper hand in organizational behavior as organizations mature and become professionalized, and that these needs drive out more radical—and more organizationally threatening—activities such as advocacy and community organizing. Potentially at least, strong boards can counter this tendency of staff, but this requires heroic board leadership and attention to organizational mission, something that is hard to sustain in the face of professional staff pressures.

The record of nonprofit policy advocacy lends considerable support to this line of thought, though the evidence is not fully convincing since studies have rarely been framed explicitly to test this concept.

- **Organizational age.** One simple way to test the organizational theory perspective is to examine the effect of agency age on propensity to advocate. *Organization theory* portrays nonprofits as organizations that, as they mature, increasingly prioritize activities that will enable them to grow and expand. According to this theory, then, as nonprofits age, they should be less likely to engage in advocacy activities, which could drain organizational resources and benefit those outside of the organization.

The two empirical studies (i.e., Indiana and Salamon) that examined this relationship did not, however, find a significant relationship between organizational age and advocacy involvement. Other factors are apparently involved.

- **Degree of professionalism.** One of those other factors could be the degree of professionalization that the organization has achieved. In his seminal study of the social work profession, historian Roy Lubove documents the way in which the professionalization of that occupation led its practitioners to seek professional definitions of task accomplishment that emphasized specialized professional skills and “treatment” models over community organization and advocacy action.

To test this relationship, Salamon (1995) computed the ratio of volunteer to paid staff in the 3,400 nonprofits he surveyed to measure the organizations’ degree of professionalism, and then compared this ratio to their engagement in advocacy activities. The result supported the organization theory view: i.e., a significantly higher proportion of agencies with a medium or high ratio of volunteer to paid staff engaged in advocacy than those with a low volunteer ratio.

- **Organizational field.** Another way to assess the impact of professionalization on advocacy involvement is to look at fields of nonprofit activity. Some fields, such as hospitals, education, and human services, have grown highly professionalized while others, such as community development, environment, and legal services retain more of a community organization/advocacy dimension. Interestingly, the empirical studies generally support this expectation. In particular:
 - Salamon’s study in the mid-1980s identified legal services/advocacy, multi-service, and housing groups as the most heavily engaged in advocacy. At the other end of the

spectrum, he found education/research (excluding higher education), health (excluding hospitals), and arts/culture organizations the least involved.

- The SNAP survey found that health (excluding hospitals), environmental, and social action groups reported the most involvement in public policy matters, while arts and recreation groups reported the least involvement. The other fields, including education and human services, fell in between.
- The Indiana study also found that health and environmental organizations were significantly more likely to engage in advocacy than groups from other fields (with 53 and 64 percents, respectively, indicating that they participate in advocacy). Mutual benefit,⁷ arts/culture, and education groups indicated that they were the least engaged (with only 3, 11, and 14 percents, respectively, indicating that they participate).
- **Legislative/IRS restrictions.** One way that agency professional staff can defend their neglect of the advocacy mission of their agencies is to point to the complex and confusing federal restrictions on nonprofit policy engagement and the risk that agencies would face if they violate these restrictions. Whatever the reason, case studies and focus groups certainly provide evidence that many nonprofits approach advocacy extremely cautiously or not at all because they exaggerate the potential legal challenges it poses.

The SNAP survey in particular provides strong evidence that significant numbers of nonprofits misunderstand the laws governing advocacy activities. For example:

- Only 72 percent knew that they could support/oppose federal legislation;
- Only 79 percent knew that they could support/oppose federal regulations;
- 50 percent thought that they could not lobby if part of their budget came from federal funds;
- 43 percent thought that they could not sponsor a candidate forum/debate;
- 68 percent of the respondents noted that “tax law” was a barrier to policy participation, and 51 percent noted that “advice from attorneys/accountants” was a barrier.

However, as the survey did not link these barriers to actual involvement in advocacy activities, it is impossible to conclude which actually curtailed nonprofit involvement. The SNAP analysis also did not determine whether there was an actual correlation between nonprofit misunderstanding and advocacy involvement. Clearly, this represents an important empirical gap.

- **Board support.** One force that can counter potential professional staff preoccupation with the growth and survival of organizational service functions and neglect of the nonprofit sector’s advocacy functions is an active and engaged board committed to

⁷ Mutual benefit organizations were not examined separately in the SNAP survey.

advocacy. The recent trend toward heavier business involvement in nonprofit boards may run counter to this, however.

Findings from a focus group of nonprofit children and family agencies considered “effectively engaged” in advocacy lends support to this view of the importance of board engagement in sustaining advocacy activity. In particular, focus group members identified the importance of having a) a strong board with a culture of support for advocacy, and b) a public policy committee, to a robust advocacy function. Also supporting this theory, SNAP research found that 55 percent of the respondents noted that “board or staff attitudes about involvement in the public policy process” were a barrier to their involvement in advocacy.

Interestingly, 94 percent of board members responding to an Alliance for Children and Families and United Neighborhood Centers of America survey noted that “mission-based advocacy is a proper function of their agencies.” If board support was all that was needed to foster advocacy, then this finding suggests that almost all of these children and family agencies would be significantly engaged. As the empirical studies demonstrate that engagement in advocacy is considerably lower, clearly other dynamics need to be present.

Additional findings from this survey and a similar one of these agencies’ CEOs/EDs may point to some of these other factors. For example:

- At only 66 percent of responding agencies do board job descriptions mention advocacy as one of the duties of the position;
- Only 56 percent of the agencies noted that they are “organized to engage its board in advocacy;”
- Only 46 percent of the boards have a policy committee;
- 34 percent of board members indicated that a barrier “to their personal involvement in mission-based advocacy” is time;
- 40 percent of board members noted that advocacy would “attract a greater commitment of [their] time,” if they were provided training, support, or greater direction from the agency.

Perhaps, then, to actually foster advocacy, board support needs to be augmented by a range of other conditions such as an active board policy committee, established procedures to mobilize members, and board training. Additional research should delve deeper into this topic to provide greater insights into the relationship between boards and advocacy.

- **Organizational views of government.** It seems likely that organizations with a positive view of government and their ability to influence its decisions would be more inclined to participate in the public policy process. SNAP findings help support this theory:

- 94 percent of respondents indicating that the government is “very interested” in their organization engaged in advocacy activities, vs. just 70 percent of those that indicated government is “not really” interested;
- As the number of government-initiated contacts with an organization increased, so too did its engagement in advocacy activities. This reinforces the earlier finding that government financial support, far from impeding advocacy involvement, actually stimulates it.

Overall

Taken together, the studies provide strong support for the resource mobilization theory, i.e., adequate resources—including funds, staff, skills/expertise, and technologies—are critical to nonprofits’ involvement in advocacy. Other factors correlated to increased involvement in advocacy include reliance on government funds and a positive view towards government. Finally, there is some support for the organization theory view that organizational maintenance and enhancement needs and staff preoccupation with professional norms may be constraining nonprofit engagement in advocacy and that IRS restrictions and changes in board orientation may be accentuating this trend, though the conclusions here are somewhat more tentative.

What are the Major Gaps in Knowledge?

As outlined above, there is not adequate empirical data on nonprofit involvement in advocacy activities. Further research on nonprofit advocacy clearly would provide useful information to the field. Given the potential confusion over terminology, it could also serve as a learning tool by highlighting important definitions (e.g., advocacy vs. lobbying) and rekindling interest in the topic within the field.

Current major gaps in the literature and research include the following:

- **True scale of advocacy activities.** As there have been few empirical studies conducted on advocacy, and those that have been done have not narrowed their focus to a specific time frame (e.g., the past year), they likely overestimate nonprofits’ involvement in advocacy.
- **Focus of advocacy activities.** Studies to date have generally lumped all types of advocacy efforts together—thus, advocating for one’s own organizational funding would be grouped together with advocating for underrepresented populations. This prevents us from understanding how nonprofits have adapted to commercialism and other recent trends.
- **Effects of key variables.** Because of the limits of the existing research (as highlighted above), our understanding of the effects of several key variables on advocacy is still incomplete. Most significantly, it is not clear whether there is a threshold beyond which additional resources begin to negatively affect advocacy activities, how a nonprofit’s degree of professionalism influences its involvement, which nonprofit fields are more likely to be engaged and why, whether the barriers (e.g., legislative/IRS restrictions)

identified by nonprofits have in actuality limited their involvement, and which board structures are most conducive to advocacy.

- **Comparative importance of the variables.** While research has pointed to numerous factors that impact nonprofit advocacy, we know little about the relative importance of each. Thus, how has the professionalization of nonprofit management affected nonprofit engagement in advocacy? What has the shift in composition of nonprofit boards toward greater business involvement meant for continued nonprofit engagement in advocacy? Has the commercialization of the nonprofit sector had the unintended consequence of further marginalizing the advocacy responsibilities of nonprofit organizations? Is the advocacy function of nonprofits increasingly focused on maintaining agency budgets rather than promoting the broader interest of agency personnel?
- **True impact of the motivators and barriers.** While studies have identified factors that nonprofits think motivate them to and prevent them from advocating, studies have not empirically tested the strength or true impact of these factors. In other words, do nonprofit perceptions/attitudes actually influence their advocacy activities?
- **Changes over time.** Studies to date generally have provided a snapshot in time. How have new challenges affecting the sector (e.g., demographic changes, growing for-profit competition, new forms of charitable support, changes in the composition of nonprofit boards, etc.) impacted advocacy activities? What is the future trajectory of advocacy?
- **Resources needed.** While organizations have identified barriers to advocacy, little is known about what they think would be most useful (e.g., training, etc.) to overcome them. Moreover, are nonprofits aware of currently available resources?
- **Changing structure of advocacy.** How significant are recent changes in the structure of nonprofit advocacy? Is the advocacy function really undergoing a process of restructuring, with increased reliance on specialized advocacy coalitions replacing extensive advocacy activity at the individual agency level? If so, what is the consequence of this shift for the effectiveness of nonprofit advocacy?

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