

## ANTECEDENTS TO NONPROFIT ADVOCACY: WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT – GOVERNANCE OR ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE?

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**N**onprofit advocacy is a common reality in today's policy arena, but there is limited research on the antecedents to nonprofit advocacy activities. This study examines the impacts of two crucial facets of nonprofit organizations on advocacy: processes of governance, such as board activity; and organizational structure, such as staff and budget size, age, and membership. The study incorporates a nationwide survey of state nonprofit associations that are registered with the National Council of Nonprofits, interviews with leaders in these organizations, and a case study of an association influential in the policy arena. The authors explore nonprofit governance and organizational structure individually and in tandem by asking: Which is more important to nonprofit advocacy, governance or organizational structure?

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years the number of nonprofit organizations in the United States has more than doubled, and citizens have developed a dependence on the nonprofit sector to provide public goods and services

(Hall, 1992; Salamon, 2002; Berry & Arons, 2003). With this increasing responsibility, many nonprofit organizations have taken on the role of advocate for the public's welfare. Indeed, according to LeRoux (2009, p. 504), "Private nonprofit organizations represent a substantial group of third-party agents that deliver public services." As a result, nonprofit organizations have established an influential position in the implementation and formulation of public policies at the national, state, and local levels (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007).

With the fast-paced growth of the nonprofit sector, scholars have become increasingly interested in nonprofit organizations' use of advocacy to influence agenda setting and the policy process (Berry, 2007). Previous literature on nonprofit advocacy has largely explored external motivation, such as the political environment, and internal mission as factors that influence the nature in which nonprofit organizations advocate. Fewer studies have examined the impacts of nonprofit organizations' institutional characteristics and resources on their advocacy activities (Hale, 2004). This study delves into this line of research by exploring the relationships between organizational structure, governance, and the nature of advocacy activities of nonprofit organizations. The study examines governance processes and organizational structure individually and in tandem as antecedents that influence the nature in which nonprofit organizations choose to advocate on a policy issue. To explore this topic, the authors interviewed and surveyed

individuals working in state nonprofit associations that are members of the National Council of Nonprofits.

The study is organized into several sections. The early sections define state nonprofit associations, advocacy, governance, and organizational structure within a nonprofit context. Next, the methodology and tools for gathering data are explained, including a case study of one prominently influential state nonprofit association,<sup>1</sup> a nationwide survey of state nonprofit associations, and follow-up interviews of individuals working in the associations. The results discuss the findings based on the case study, survey analysis, and follow-up interviews. Finally, the conclusions provide interpretive insight for the importance of this research to nonprofit organizations that are active in policy advocacy.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: Is there a relationship between processes of governance, organizational structure, and nature of advocacy activities? More specifically, how does governance impact the nature in which an organization chooses to advocate? How does organizational structure impact the nature in which nonprofit organizations advocate? Finally, which is more important to nonprofit advocacy, governance or organizational structure? The overall goal of this research is to present a perspective on nonprofit advocacy activity that can serve as a canvas within which nonprofit governance and organizational structure can be framed.

### STATE NONPROFIT ASSOCIATIONS

This research explores state nonprofit associations that are members of the National Council of Nonprofits. The

National Council of Nonprofits “seeks to expand the capacity of state-based and regional associations of nonprofits and grantmakers via public initiatives and the promotion of a cohesive vision that emphasizes the importance of nonprofits and philanthropy” (Abramson & McCarthy, 2002, p. 336). The National Council of Nonprofits’ membership consists of state nonprofit associations that provide advocacy and member assistance functions on sector-wide issues that are pertinent to the regions where the state nonprofit associations are located. The National Council of Nonprofits represents its members, state nonprofit associations, on national and state levels (National Council of Nonprofits, 2011) while the state nonprofit associations represent their nonprofit members on a state or local level (National Council of Nonprofits, 2011a).

State nonprofit associations are umbrella organizations with memberships primarily consisting of 501(c)(3) organizations (Young, 2001). The associations act as a means for collective action and a vehicle to shape the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit umbrella organizations represent the nonprofit sector as a whole by providing advocacy and fostering relationships between the nonprofit community and policymaking, promoting research on the nonprofit sector, providing and improving technical assistance of nonprofit organizations, and providing education and training services to leaders and workers in the nonprofit sector (Abramson & McCarthy 2002; Phillips, 2006). According to Phillips (2006, p. 5), “The distinctive value of infrastructure [umbrella] organizations is their ability to communicate among a broad diversity of community actors, and to bridge the set of actors.”

Abramson and McCarthy (2002) remark that as the nonprofit sector in the United States has grown, the strength and importance of nonprofit umbrella organizations has grown as well. However, there has been little systematic analysis of these organizations and few data sources or previous studies from which to draw information. This study fills this gap in the literature by exploring state nonprofit associations from an organizational perspective as it applies to the broader context of nonprofit advocacy.

The National Council of Nonprofits (2011, sec. 4) writes that state nonprofit associations are formed to advance the role of nonprofit organizations to “help them engage in critical policy issues affecting the sector, manage and lead more effectively, collaborate and exchange solutions, and achieve greater impact in their communities.” At the time of this study, the National Council of Nonprofits’ membership included 40 active state nonprofit associations in the United States with a collective membership of over 20,000 nonprofit organizations.

State nonprofit associations are of particular interest to scholars studying advocacy strategies of nonprofit organizations in that, unlike the majority of nonprofit organizations, policy advocacy is a primary goal stated in the missions of most associations. Because state nonprofit associations are active in the policy arena, they provide a representative sample of nonprofit organizations engaged in advocacy activities.

### NONPROFIT ADVOCACY DEFINED

When referring to nonprofit advocacy, it is important to note the interpretation of this

concept as used in this study. The nonprofit literature offers many definitions of advocacy. Boris and Krehely (2002, p. 299) note that “advocacy is a vital, traditional role of nonprofit organizations.” According to Ferris (1998, p. 145), “Policy advocacy nonprofits aim to influence the outcomes of the public policymaking process by shaping the policy agenda, offering and analyzing policy options, and monitoring the implementation of adopted policies.” Advocacy has also been defined by Reid (2000) and Fox (2001) as influencing public opinion, defending the interests of entire groups of excluded or disenfranchised people, and encompassing efforts to defend against abuses of public power.

Reid (2000) argues that advocacy strategies are intended to impact agenda setting, policy design, implementation, monitoring, and feedback. Berry and Arons (2003) suggest nonprofit organizations choose to advocate for a number of reasons: they utilize the political system to pursue or protect important social programs that will benefit society, or they may be motivated to defeat a policy that will have negative impacts on the nonprofit sector. In another study, Child and Grønbjerg (2007, p. 259) note nonprofit organizations advocate when “changes in tax rates modify incentives for charitable contributions, or when regulations require nonprofits to disclose financial information or refrain from certain types of financial or political activities.” Or finally, Nicholson-Crotty (2007) concludes nonprofit organizations may advocate due to their close political ties to a legislator working on a specific issue on the policy agenda that is of interest to the nonprofit sector. Taking these definitions and interpretations into account, this study defines advocacy as influencing public opinion and policymakers

through grassroots and direct efforts with the goal of shaping the policy agenda.

### PROCESSES OF GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE DEFINED

In a broad sense, “a governance infrastructure is the collection of technologies and systems, people, policies, practices, and relationships that interact to support governing activities” (Johnston, 2010, p. s122). Governance often represents a flat, networked, multi-sector governing arrangement (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O’Leary, 2005). In the nonprofit sector, however, a more intraorganizational focus of governance is often employed; one that focuses on boards and the policies resultant of their decision making—a process approach. This approach focuses on the decision-making apparatuses, groups, and actors that are realities for nonprofit organizations. Herman (2009) notes that “both U.S. law and widely accepted norms about nonprofits hold that boards of directors are ultimately responsible for the organizations they oversee” (p. 387). According to Laughlin and Andringa (2007, p. 1), “there are almost two million nonprofit organizations in the United States, all of which have boards and most of which have someone functioning as the CEO.” Indeed, in many cases, governance within a nonprofit organization is regarded as the board-and-chief executive officer relationship. Governance used in this study’s nonprofit association setting includes the organization’s political decision-making procedures most often established and administered by a board and staff.

The study also applies Stone’s (1996) interpretation of nonprofit governance in

which she explores the roles of the board of directors and executive directors in developing interorganizational and external advocacy efforts on behalf of social service agencies. In her study based on a review of documents spanning over 40 years, she concludes that the board of directors, the executive director, and associate director have consistently been involved with external advocacy efforts of the organization over time. Similar to Stone, the current study explores the processes in which state nonprofit associations determine whether or not to advocate for a policy issue.

This research will identify specifically the processes of governance of the board of directors and other leadership positions within state nonprofit associations in their efforts to engage in advocacy activities. The official and unofficial interactions between nonprofit boards and their chief executive officers and staff frame processes of governance. The authors assert that these processes of governance are at the heart of decision making within nonprofit organizations, and the policies and procedures resulting from this process directly impact how and when a nonprofit organization will advocate for a policy issue. Research on governance and advocacy is a critically important facet of nonprofit studies, yet there is a dearth of literature on this topic.

Contrasted with processes of governance, organizational structure represents a more tangible—if not more quantifiable—facet of nonprofit existence. There have been a limited number of studies that focus directly on the impacts of specific organizational characteristics of nonprofit organizations on advocacy activity, and many of these studies are dated. For example, in a study by Rees

(1999), representatives from the twelve most influential nonprofit organizations in the policy arena as rated by Congressional members and White House staff were asked to report on their organizational characteristics including budget, staff, and membership size. Rees then asked respondents to report on the tactics the organizations employ for public policy and advocacy communications. Rees concludes that staff size, budget, and membership did not have an impact on the types of advocacy strategies the organizations employed, but these factors did have an impact on how often the tactics were employed.

A second study by McNutt and Boland (1999) surveyed 54 state affiliates of a national social work professional association to determine the types of electronic advocacy techniques employed by the organizations in their efforts to influence state-level policy agendas. Participants were asked to report on their organizational characteristics including the number of paid staff, percentage of time that staff spent working on policy change, and electronic advocacy techniques employed by the organization. Contrary to Rees (1999), McNutt and Boland (1999) found that staff size and budget do impact the types of advocacy strategies employed by the organization.

In a more recent study of advocacy activities of nonprofit human services agencies in the Washington, D.C. area, Donaldson (2007) examines the correlation between organizational factors such as budget and staff size, age of the organization, and leadership as they relate to advocacy behavior. Through her survey and follow-up interviews, Donaldson concludes these organizational factors do influence the

tactics chosen when engaging in advocacy activities.

This research applies the methods and characteristics presented in the aforementioned studies for exploring the impacts of organizational structure on advocacy activities of state nonprofit associations. Conceptually, if processes of governance represent a democratic will of the organization (or board) manifest in policy, organizational structure represents tangible “realities” or characteristics of the organization. Both of these factors are studied here, in tandem, combining diverse literatures and incorporating a somewhat novel approach in the context of state nonprofit associations’ advocacy activities.

Of course, governance decision-making processes and organizational structure are interconnected in a myriad of ways (Stone, 1996). The interconnectedness of the will of an organization through governance and its characteristics described via organizational structure are another crucial reason to study these concepts in tandem. As Donaldson (2007, p. 156) notes, “organizational models that support advocacy include a budget line item for advocacy, a dedicated staff person to coordinate advocacy functions, and agency leadership, embodied in the Executive Director and Board members, who support the advocacy functions of the agency,” thus emphasizing elements of both organizational structure and processes of governance.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for this survey was collected by distributing 138 surveys to nonprofit leaders and staff members of the 40 state nonprofit associations that were members of the

National Council of Nonprofits in 2009. The survey was sent via email and hard copy to the director/chief executive officer/president (titles vary by association) of each state nonprofit association and to other staff members working on advocacy activities. Surveys were distributed to an average of three individuals per state nonprofit association. The majority of state nonprofit associations include a paid staff of 32 individuals or less with some state nonprofit associations employing one staff member. Therefore, a limited number of individuals at each association work on advocacy activities, which limits the sample size.

The data for this survey focuses on one particular element of advocacy: that of nonprofit lobbying. Lobbying activities are a facet of greater advocacy activities, and these activities are restricted in 501(c)(3) organizations.<sup>2</sup> The survey's emphasis on lobbying activities has advantages for this study. Lobbying activities are distinctly categorized into direct and grassroots tactics rather than the broader and more nebulous concept of advocacy, which makes participation in this activity easier to measure and analyze, and thus provides a more coherent "slice" of advocacy. Direct and grassroots lobbying tactics specifically aim to influence public policy, whether directly or indirectly. Direct tactics include activities designed to persuade policymakers (e.g. legislators, staff members of legislators, governors) on a policy issue, while grassroots tactics include activities designed to persuade the general public on a policy issue.

The survey asked participants to report on the frequency of use and perceived effectiveness of lobbying tactics employed by their

association from 2008-2009. Participants rated the frequency of use of 48 lobbying tactics<sup>3</sup> on a scale of zero to four with 0= Never, 1= Relatively infrequent, 2= Sometimes, but not often, 3= Often, but not ongoing, 4= Ongoing. Participants then rated their perceived effectiveness of each tactic (tactics not used were omitted from this part of the survey) on a scale of one to four with 1= Low effectiveness, 2= Moderate effectiveness, 3= High effectiveness, 4= Very high effectiveness. The survey did not offer an option of 0= Not effective based on the assumption that use of the tactic indicated some perception of effectiveness. Participants were also asked to report on their individual associations' organizational characteristics, including year founded, number of nonprofit members, total number of staff and volunteers, annual expense budgets, number of staff and volunteers that work on lobbying, percent of overall budget spent on lobbying-related activities, and percent of overall time spent on lobbying activities.

Of the 138 surveys administered to individuals working on advocacy activities in the state nonprofit associations, 47 surveys were returned with a 34 percent response rate. Respondents and nonrespondents of the survey do not differ significantly. Thus, the authors conclude the results can be generalized across the 40 state nonprofit associations. More importantly, the 47 individuals who returned surveys represent 27 (68 percent) of the 40 associations that were members of the National Council of Nonprofits at the time of this study. Follow-up interviews were also conducted to gain a more in-depth understanding of state nonprofit associations' use of lobbying tactics, organizational structures, and processes of governance of the associations. Thirteen

interviews were conducted representing eleven state nonprofit associations.

It is important to note the unit of analysis for this study is the organization, not the individual. Therefore, survey responses from states with more than one respondent were averaged to have one response per state in the data set. This approach is consistent with previous research using surveys to explore organizational levels. Survey responses within associations were very similar, thus the authors feel this approach is appropriate for the analysis. It must also be noted that one respondent's survey was thrown out due to the respondent's error. Therefore, data analyzed from the surveys are based on 26 associations, not 27.

A case study was also conducted on one state nonprofit association that is perceived by its employees and the National Council of Nonprofits as highly successful in its use of advocacy and lobbying tactics to influence policy agendas. The association ranks as one of the largest state nonprofit associations in terms of paid staff and nonprofit membership. As indicated previously, the identity of the association in the case study will not be revealed in order to honor requests for anonymity.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION PROCESSES OF GOVERNANCE AND ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES**

Regardless of the differences in staff size, each state nonprofit association caters to the traditional nonprofit governance structure with a board of directors developing and approving the policies by which the organization runs with a director/chief executive officer/president implementing and evaluating those policies. Many of the boards of directors have committees,

including the executive committee or policy committee, that provide decision-making processes on particular issues of the association. In some cases, the associations are large enough to have a chief financial officer or department directors. Others consist of a small board of directors with no committees; a director/chief executive officer/president and in some cases no other staff members. While the associations are similar in the nature of their purpose, it is interesting, then, to explore how the processes of governance determine whether or not the association will employ advocacy activities on a policy issue. The following discussion explores the question of how the processes of governance of state nonprofit associations impact the nature in which an organization chooses to advocate.

The process of deciding on policy actions was discussed at length during the case study interviews. The case study reveals a strong and thorough governance process between the board of directors and president of this particular organization to decide whether to advocate for a policy issue. When a policy issue arises, the president, manager of public policy, and other pertinent staff members meet to discuss the relevance of the issue to the association's mission, goals, and membership. If the staff determines that the policy issue is relevant to the association, the manager of public policy presents information on the policy issue to the chair of the public policy committee, a committee of the board of directors. The public policy committee of the association consists of the president, manager of public policy, a contract lobbyist, and members of the community that have been asked to serve on the committee due to their individual expertise on issues affecting the nonprofit sector. The

association ensures a level of statewide representation and services of the individuals serving on the committee.

At the public policy committee meeting, the chair presents the policy issue to the committee, and the manager of public policy presents a recommendation of the position that the association may want to take on the issue. This recommendation is open for discussion. The public policy committee generally addresses three to five policy issues per meeting. When deciding whether to take action on a policy issue and what advocacy strategies to employ, the committee takes the following issues into consideration:

1. Whether the issue is relevant to the association's mission
2. Understanding which party has control over certain chambers in the legislature and how this will impact the policy issue
3. Understanding which legislators have influence or expertise over the issue.
4. Whether the association can remain nonpartisan in its support of the issue
5. Whether the association can work on the policy issue with legislators of both parties

If the public policy committee decides to take action on a policy issue in the form of advocacy activities, recommendations for these actions are taken to the full board of directors. If the public policy committee decides not to take action on a policy issue, the committee may discuss the issue again at a future meeting. In some cases, legislation may be in its premature stages when the public policy committee first addresses a policy issue. Therefore, the committee will readdress an issue as legislation changes and progresses over time.

The full board of directors is responsible for asking the following questions of the public policy committees' recommended actions on a policy issue:

1. Is the policy related to a group in favor of, or opposing, the association's mission?
2. Does the association want to be aligned with the policy?
3. Will alignment reflect negatively on the association?
4. Will members agree or not agree with the alignment?
5. Does the policy agenda align with the association's mission? As one member of the board of directors notes, "The mission is used as a compass" in deciding whether to approve the public policy committee's recommendation.

In some cases, the board of directors is unable to meet to discuss a recommendation of the public policy committee. If this is the case, the manager of public policy will email the board of directors asking for their approval or objection within 48 hours to the committee's recommendation on a policy issue. In cases of emergency, the public policy committee will take action on a policy issue without the complete board of directors' approval, although this is rare. In this case, the executive committee of the board of directors is informed of the public policy committee's plan of action. The executive committee will vote on the issue over email or telephone and will inform the public policy committee of its decision. While a decision has been made regarding the policy issue, the executive committee will bring the issue to the attention of the full board of directors at the next meeting so that the full board can vote on the issue. According to the chair of the board of directors, the full board often agrees with the

executive committee's decision on the policy issue.

In other cases, a policy issue may be in an early stage of development with the state legislature, yet it has to be addressed in the board of directors' meeting due to the fact that the board of directors only meets once every other month. In this case, the board of directors may approve action on a piece of legislation that is still in the very early stages of development in the legislature. As one board member notes, "It's a bit dicey because the board of directors has to decide whether to endorse the bill, have a neutral stance, or oppose the bill based on little information." Members of the board of directors then revisit the legislation at each board of directors' meeting to update the board on any changes to the bill and to vote again on whether they continue to approve or disapprove of the actions recommended by the public policy committee. The chair of the board of directors explains, "Since legislative bills change frequently, it's important for the board of directors to stay updated on how the bills have changed and whether [the association] should continue to support those bills."

If the board of directors approves action on a policy issue recommended by the public policy committee, the president, manager of public policy, and contract lobbyist will start the process of implementing grassroots and/or direct advocacy tactics. The manager of public policy typically initiates grassroots tactics such as emailing the association's membership or developing and scheduling town hall meetings. The manager of public policy may ask other staff at the association to assist him in creating logistics for certain events such as trainings or rallies. The contract lobbyist typically implements direct

advocacy tactics such as one-on-one meetings and networking with legislators. The contract lobbyist for the association explains, "Out of the 100 legislators here, it's my job to know how they [each legislator] feel [about policy issues]." The contract lobbyist also educates stakeholder groups in the business and nonprofit communities that may be impacted by the policy issue the association is advocating for or against. The contract lobbyist provides emails with information to these groups or provides information to other advocates who work with nonprofit organizations.

The follow-up interviews reveal that many of the state nonprofit associations utilize public policy committees to decide whether or not to act on a policy issue, and a number of the associations hire contract lobbyists. The associations depend on contract lobbyists for their expertise on the policy process and their abilities to network with legislators.

Finally, the follow-up interviews reveal one other element of governance that impacts the nature of advocacy activities of state nonprofit associations; that is the involvement of the director/chief executive officer/president in policy-related activities. State nonprofit associations with higher involvement of the director/chief executive officer/president report more frequent use of advocacy tactics and a higher emphasis in policy activity in general. One respondent in particular notes their current executive director "is a visionary founder, and someone who from the beginning believed in the role of nonprofits engaging in policy, so it's always been a part of what the association does." Associations with less involvement from the director/chief executive officer/president tend to have a

smaller emphasis on policy and advocacy activities.

In answering the question of how processes of governance impact the nature in which an organization chooses to advocate, it is clear from the information presented above that state nonprofit associations benefit from having strong leadership and governance processes in place to lead them through the difficult task of decision making. A streamlined process for deciding whether to take action on a policy issue is essential for nonprofit organizations intending to make a high impact on the policy agenda. Without these processes in place, nonprofit organizations will be less likely to act on policy issues in their communities, and thus may lose credibility as an important and influential player in the policy process.

### ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES

We now turn to the second question which examines whether the organizational structure of a state nonprofit association impacts the nature in which the organization advocates. The findings for this question are based primarily on an analysis of the survey and follow-up interviews.

In the survey, respondents were asked to report on characteristics of their

association's organizational structure including: year founded (age); number of nonprofit members; number of full-time, part-time, and volunteer staff and consultants; annual expense budgets, number of full-time, part-time, and volunteer staff and consultants who work on policy activities; percent of overall budget spent on advocacy-related activities; and percent of overall time spent on advocacy-related activities.

Results from the survey illustrate that state nonprofit associations' organizational structures vary significantly in terms of budget size, staff size, number of volunteers, whether they employ consultants, and whether they allocate funding and staff time towards advocacy activities. Table 1 details the characteristics of the 26 state nonprofit associations' organizational structures as reported by survey respondents. The states are organized from highest to lowest in terms of overall average use of advocacy strategies during the period of 2008-2009. As indicated in the table, the states with the largest annual expense budgets, number of full-time staff, and number of nonprofit members tend to engage in advocacy activities more frequently than states with smaller annual expense budgets, number of full-time staff, and number of nonprofit members.

State Nonprofit Association (SNA)	Year Founded	Nonprofit Members	Annual Expense Budget	Overall Staff	Mean of Overall Use of Advocacy Tactics	Staff Working on Advocacy Tactics	Hired Consultants	Volunteers Working on Advocacy Activities	% of Budget Spent on Advocacy Activities	% of Time on Advocacy Activities
SNA 1	1990	1,200	> \$1 million	41	3.07	2.5	1	30	≤25%	26-50%
SNA 2	1992	1,700	> \$1 million	23	2.86	3	0	0	≤25%	26-50%
SNA 3	1987	1,925	> \$1 million	25.5	2.29	9.5	0	0	26-50%	26-50%
SNA 4	1997	1,200	> \$1 million	25	2.1	2	1	0	≤25%	26-50%
SNA 5	1990	1,575	> \$1 million	17	2	1	1	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 6	1978	1,100	> \$1 million	22	1.92	3	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 7	1986	1,300	> \$1 million	10	1.92	1.5	1	3	≤25%	≤25%
SNA8	1987	725	\$500,001-\$1 million	4.5	1.87	1.5	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 9	1994	800	\$100,001-\$500,000	7.5	1.82	1.5	0	2	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 10	1977	515	> \$1 million	9.5	1.71	4	3	0	≤25%	26-50%
SNA 11	1992	500	\$100,001-\$500,000	6	1.6	1	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 12	1994	660	\$500,001-\$1 million	7.5	1.51	2	0	10	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 13	1992	1,730	> \$1 million	6	1.47	3	4	3	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 14	2001	550	\$100,001-\$500,000	4.5	1.43	1	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 15	1976	225	> \$1 million	8.5	1.39	3	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 16	1990	515	\$100,001-\$500,000	2.5	1.38	0.5	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 17	1984	1,800	\$500,001-\$1 million	8	1.33	2	1	0	51-75%	51-75%
SNA 18	1927	1,257	> \$1 million	23.5	1.21	0.5	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 19	1985	500	\$500,001-\$1 million	6.5	1.16	0.5	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 20	2006	270	\$100,001-\$500,000	4.5	1.14	0.5	1	10	≤25%	26-50%
SNA 21	2007	415	\$100,001-\$500,000	2	1.12	0	0	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 22	2003	225	\$100,001-\$500,000	-	1.04	1	2	15	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 23	1981	360	\$500,001-\$1 million	9.5	0.96	0	0	40	≤25%	26-50%
SNA 24	1997	145	< \$100,000	1	0.78	0.5	0	12	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 25	2007	165	\$100,001-\$500,000	2.5	0.73	0	1	0	≤25%	≤25%
SNA 26	2004	165	\$100,001-\$500,000	2.5	0.6	1	0	10	≤25%	26-50%

**Table 1: Advocacy Activity and Organizational Characteristics of State Nonprofit Organizations**

Scale of Frequency of Use: 4=Ongoing; 3=Often, but not ongoing; 2=Sometimes, but not often; 1=Infrequently; 0=Never

On further investigation of the relationships between these variables and the ten most frequently used tactics, chi-square analysis reveals a significant relationship between overall annual expense budget and frequency of joining coalitions, one of the tactics listed on the survey. Table 2 shows that state nonprofit associations with annual expense budgets greater than \$500,000 are more likely to join coalitions as an advocacy tactic than state nonprofit associations with budgets less than or equal to \$500,000. A likely explanation for this relationship is that participation in coalitions may require specific funding allocated towards the coalition’s advocacy activities. Therefore, state nonprofit associations with larger annual expense budgets may be more likely to join coalitions.

Variable	Frequency of Joining Coalitions		X <sup>2</sup>	P*
	High Use	Low Use		
	(n= 15)	(n=11)		
Budget Size			3.93	.047
>\$500,000	77%	27%		
≤\$500,000	23%	73%		
*p<.05				

**Table 2: Chi-square Analysis of Relationship between Budget Size and Frequency of Joining Coalitions**

Similarly, chi-square analysis reveals a relationship between state nonprofit associations’ annual expense budget size and having personal meetings with legislators. As table 3 illustrates, state nonprofit associations with budgets larger than \$500,000 are more likely to engage in

meetings with legislators when advocating for a policy issue than state nonprofit associations with budgets equal to or less than \$500,000. The results could indicate that state nonprofit associations with larger budgets are often larger organizations in general, and therefore may be more well known in the community and thus have easier access to legislators.

Variable	Meeting with Legislators		X <sup>2</sup>	P*
	High Use	Low Use		
	(n= 15)	(n=11)		
Budget Size			6.00	.014
>\$500,000	67%	18%		
≤\$500,000	33%	82%		
*p<.05				

**Table 3: Chi-square Analysis of Relationship between Budget Size and Frequency of Meeting with Legislators**

A relationship is also revealed between overall size of staff and use of email to contact staff members of legislators. Table 4 illustrates that state nonprofit associations with larger staff sizes are more likely to email staff members of legislators as a frequent method of advocacy. State nonprofit associations with smaller staff sizes are less likely to email staff members of legislators. This result could be a reflection of the resources available to coordinate and write emails where associations with larger staffs will have more time to dedicate to this activity.

Variable	Emailing Staff Members of Legislators		X <sup>2</sup>	P*
	High Use	Low Use		
	(n= 12)	(n=14)		
Staff Size			6.00	.014
Staff > 13	83%	36%		
Staff < 13	17%	64%		
*p<.05				

**Table 4: Chi-square Analysis of Relationship between Staff Size and Frequency of Emailing Staff Members of Legislators**

Chi-square analysis on the relationship between age of the organization and frequency of use of advocacy strategies revealed no statistical significance. However, as illustrated by the mean of overall frequency of use in table 1, there appears to be a trend that younger state nonprofit associations participate in advocacy activities with less frequency than older state nonprofit associations. The associations with the lowest mean of overall use of advocacy strategies tend to have been established in the last ten years. In contrast, state nonprofit associations with a high mean of overall use of advocacy strategies tend to have been established in the last 20 to 30 years.

One finding to note is the relationship between the size of an associations' membership and overall use of advocacy tactics of an association. As indicated in table 5, state nonprofit associations with larger memberships engage in advocacy activities more frequently than state nonprofit associations with smaller memberships. This relationship could indicate that state nonprofit associations with larger memberships have a higher

obligation to participate in advocacy activities, or conversely that nonprofit organizations are more likely to join state nonprofit associations with higher participation in advocacy activities.

Variable	Use of Advocacy Strategies		X <sup>2</sup>	P*
	High Use	Low Use		
	(n= 13)	(n=13)		
Membership			1.25	.000
Large	85%	15%		
Small	15%	85%		
*p<.05				

**Table 5: Chi-square Analysis of Relationship between Nonprofit Membership and Frequency of Use of Advocacy Strategies**

The second finding to note is the relationship between annual expense budget and frequency of use of advocacy strategies. Table 6 illustrates that state nonprofit associations with budgets larger than \$500,000 are more likely to use advocacy strategies than state nonprofit associations with budgets equal to or less than \$500,000. This result seems logical in that state nonprofit associations with larger annual expense budgets will have more resources for engaging in advocacy activities.

Variable	Use of Advocacy Strategies		X <sup>2</sup>	P*
	High Use (n= 15)	Low Use (n=11)		
Budget Size			7.72	.005
>\$500,000	73%	18%		
≤\$500,000	27%	82%		

**Table 6: Chi-square Analysis of Relationship between Budget Size and Frequency of Use of Advocacy Strategies**

Follow-up interviews offer additional insight on the relationship between organizational structure and the nature of advocacy activities. Respondents of the follow-up interviews explain that organizational structure does have an impact on the nature of advocacy activities employed by state nonprofit associations, but the more notable and unexpected factor impacting the nature of these activities is the mission of each association. Interviews illustrate that each state nonprofit association is dedicated to advancing policy issues of the nonprofit sector, but the level of commitment to this endeavor varies among associations. For example, one respondent notes her association has a low level of commitment to advocacy activities since the association is newly formed and has minimal resources. In contrast, an association that has existed for over 30 years greatly emphasizes the association’s role in its mission to advance nonprofit organizations in the policy arena and therefore dedicates more staff, time, and funding towards these activities. Furthermore, state nonprofit associations with a heavier emphasis on policy advocacy in their missions tend to employ a blend of grassroots and direct advocacy strategies,

whereas state nonprofit associations with a low emphasis on policy advocacy tend to employ grassroots advocacy strategies more frequently than direct advocacy strategies.

One final factor to consider is whether an association’s membership is highly representative of the overall number of nonprofit organizations in that particular state, and whether this factor impacts the association’s likelihood to advocate. Table 7 illustrates state nonprofit associations’ memberships compared to the total number of nonprofit organizations in each state. When comparing overall representation to the mean of overall use of advocacy strategies per state, there is little indication that membership representation of total nonprofit organizations in the state has any impact on how likely the state nonprofit association is to engage in advocacy activities. For example, the state with the highest number of nonprofit members (1,800) and total nonprofit organizations (N=156,937), with a 1.1 percent representation of membership to the total nonprofit organizations in the state, has a mean of 1.33 for overall use of advocacy strategies. In comparison, to the state with the highest mean of overall use of advocacy strategies (mean of 3.07) which has a total of 1,200 nonprofit members, 48,351 total nonprofit organizations in the state, and a 2.5 percent membership representation of total nonprofit organizations in the state. This result indicates that the number of nonprofit members, the total number of nonprofit organizations in the state, and the membership representation of the state’s total number of nonprofit organizations does not impact the frequency with which state nonprofit associations engage in advocacy activities.

States	Mean of Overall Use of Advocacy Strategies*	Nonprofit Members	Total Nonprofit Organizations in the State**	Membership Representation of Total NPO's in the State
SNA 1	3.07	1,200	48,351	2.5%
SNA 2	2.86	1,700	19,786	8.6%
SNA 3	2.29	1,925	33,083	5.8%
SNA 4	2.10	1,200	19,397	6.2%
SNA 5	2.00	1,575	42,185	3.7%
SNA 6	1.92	1,100	66,477	1.7%
SNA 7	1.92	1,300	27,985	4.6%
SNA8	1.87	725	21,489	3.4%
SNA 9	1.82	800	66,335	1.2%
SNA 10	1.71	515	20,138	2.6%
SNA 11	1.60	500	12,284	4.1%
SNA 12	1.51	660	9,205	7.2%
SNA 13	1.47	1,730	31,647	5.5%
SNA 14	1.43	550	9,730	5.7%
SNA 15	1.39	225	36,818	0.6%
SNA 16	1.38	515	8,712	5.9%
SNA 17	1.33	1,800	156,937	1.1%
SNA 18	1.21	1,257	98,566	1.3%
SNA 19	1.16	500	7,841	6.4%
SNA 20	1.14	270	7,465	3.6%
SNA 21	1.12	415	21,944	1.9%
SNA 22	1.04	225	12,991	1.7%
SNA 23	.96	360	19,171	1.9%
SNA 24	.78	145	5,834	2.5%
SNA 25	.73	165	34,186	0.5%
SNA 26	.60	165	7,510	2.2%

**Table 7: Membership Representation of Total Nonprofit Organizations Per State**

\*Scale of Frequency of Use: 4=Ongoing; 3=Often, but not ongoing; 2=Sometimes but not often; 1= Infrequently; 0= Never  
 Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics (2008). *Number of registered nonprofit organizations by state*. Retrieved from [nccsdataweb.urban.org/PubApps/reports.php?rid=2](http://nccsdataweb.urban.org/PubApps/reports.php?rid=2)

In summary, the survey and follow-up interviews reveal that organizational structure does impact the nature of advocacy activities of state nonprofit associations, but only to a certain extent. Budget and staff size appear to have the largest impact on the nature of advocacy activities of state nonprofit associations, followed by age and nonprofit membership. Two additional findings were also evident: first, the emphasis of policy activity in an association's mission can greatly determine the level of involvement of that organization in advocacy activities, and second, the association's membership representation of total nonprofit organizations in the state appears to have no impact on an association's level of participation in advocacy activities.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the authors explored the relationship between governance and organizational structure to determine their importance to the nature of advocacy activities of state nonprofit associations. From the case study and follow-up interviews, it is clear that leadership and mission drive the level of involvement each association has with advocacy activities. The board of directors and its committees provide an overarching and authoritative level of decision-making expertise on whether to act on a policy issue, while staff including positions of the director/chief executive officer/president and manager of public policy provide both internal knowledge of the organization's capacity to engage in advocacy while also making an initial judgment as to whether these activities are appropriate as related to the organization's mission and membership. Aside from assessing whether the

association should engage in advocacy activities on a policy issue, the board of directors ultimately approves or rejects the recommendations of the director/chief executive officer/president on the level of resources such as budget and staff that will be provided for advocacy activities by the association. The board of directors can hold substantial authority in nonprofit organizations, as noted in the case study above. While many of the antecedents leading to these decisions may be subjective, the authority to make the decision to advocate falls empirically within the purview of the board. Thus, it is clear that processes of governance and organizational structure both impact the nature of advocacy activities of state nonprofit associations.

The aforementioned exploration thus raises the question: Which factor is more important to a nonprofit organization debating whether to engage in advocacy activities: the organization's processes of governance or its organizational characteristics? This study argues that in order for a nonprofit organization to succeed at influencing the policy agenda, both elements are of equal importance and should be considered heavily by nonprofit leaders wishing to participate in advocacy activities. Nonprofit leaders with a desire to engage in advocacy will be well served to find an executive officer willing and able to work alongside the board of directors in an effort to provide resources towards their advocacy efforts. Furthermore, a nonprofit organization's budget size, staff size, and mission must be understood as the underlying drivers of advocacy. Are the budget and staff resources available to engage effectively in advocacy activity? Is the mission designed to serve a public good while also providing

enough substance for the Board of Directors' advocacy decisions?

While there is much room to explore these questions further, this study offers a fundamental exploration of the relationships between processes of governance, organizational structure, and the nature of advocacy activities of state nonprofit associations. Many studies research nonprofit advocacy by primarily focusing on nonprofit governance (Brown, 2007; Enjolras, 2009; Stone, 1996) or organizational factors (Rees, 1999; McNutt & Boland, 1999; Donaldson, 2007), or even the effects of governance factors such as board characteristics on organizational performance (Gazley, Chang, & Bingham, 2010), but governance and organizational concepts are rarely discussed in tandem as they relate to nonprofit advocacy. Much of the value in this examination involves fusing and comparing literatures that are rarely combined. This study offers greater insight into how and why nonprofit organizations advocate.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Requests for anonymity have been honored throughout this paper. State nonprofit associations will not be referred to by name. Instead, the associations have been assigned generic identities as illustrated in the tables.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on lobbying restrictions of 501(c)(3) organizations, see Hopkins (1992) or Avner (2002).

<sup>3</sup> The survey instrument was created specifically for this research study. The survey utilized questions from previously administered surveys related to advocacy, lobbying, and the policy process including McNutt and Boland's (1999) survey of social work associations' use of electronic advocacy strategies, Berry and Arons' (2003) survey of a random sample of nonprofit organizations on the impacts of tax law on political participation, and Wilson's (1981) survey of interest groups' use of advocacy strategies in the federal policy arena.

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