



How Rights Movements Can Build Coalitions Bridging Diverse Constituencies

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In the early 2000s, rights movements – for immigrants, labor, and lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender and queer people – operated separately and sometimes at odds with each other. For example, when over a dozen states passed constitutional bans on same-sex marriages between 2004 and 2008, campaigns against those bans rarely included immigrant rights organizations. When a rising wave of anti-immigrant rights legislation started in Arizona during this time, responses from labor and gay rights activists were muted or absent.

But things have changed in recent years. Since 2008, major alliances have formed among these rights movements at the national and state level. Alliances have won key advances at the local level, including the legalization of marriage equality in Washington state, and have helped thwart rights reversals. Alliances have also successfully opposed extremist politicians, as in the successful 2016 campaign to unseat Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Arizona.

How did the new movement alliances form, and what factors contributed to such coalition-building? Understanding the dynamics of coalition formation requires an examination of local movement dynamics. In 2014 and 2015 I conducted research in two states, Washington and Arizona. My research traces the evolution of coalition formation in each state through archival research, participant observations, and in-depth interviews with key actors, including organization leaders, advocates, community workers, and politicians. The results show that coalitions are furthered by shared opponents and political movement narratives. But such unity can be episodic and may reinforce divisions and undermine movement expansion. I identify movement and coalition-building strategies that can help contain some of these limiting effects.

Finding Unity in a Common Past and Opponents

Rights movements acting on behalf of immigrants, labor, and sexual and gender minorities constructed shared narratives that formed the backbone of movement coalitions. Constituents formed coalitions in each state by constructing narratives and building relationships around the idea that different individuals and groups could look to America's "civil rights" past and work together in the present against common opponents or enemies. This approach enables the building of new relationships across disparate communities that may last beyond episodic rights campaigns and contribute to movement expansion.

For example, people who "come out" as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer can work from a shared understanding of the past that involves considerable fear of community ostracism or "othering" by those who are not sexual or gender minorities. Advocates for queer undocumented immigrants developed understandings of shared civil rights narratives linking migrant and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and

queer rights organizations. They did this by holding events like Double Coming Out forums and by engaging in direct conversations with other minority community organizations and individuals. In these efforts, leaders emphasized similarities between “coming out” as a member of a sexual and/or gender minority group and “coming out of the shadows” as an undocumented immigrant – invoking similar fears of community isolation. By recognizing similarities of “coming out” experiences, people in different groups were able to form a shared understanding of the past that, in turn, helped them work together for future changes.

The Limits of Coalitions

Although coalitions formed through events like the Double Coming Out forums, my research interviews revealed various ways that these new alliances could be fragile and limited.

- Divisions occurred when a disproportionately large amount of funding went to mainstream organizations that claimed responsibility for successes at the expense of marginalized groups.
- At times, rights-based movements treated marginalized constituencies as mere token participants rather than full partners.
- Coalitions were sometimes superficial because the groups that composed them had different policy and issue preferences, with mainstream organizations primarily concerned with the achievement of rights wins while marginalized groups were concerned with uprooting institutionalized power in ways that mainstream groups felt were at odds with their interests.

In one interview, a queer migrant advocate contended that the “biggest problem” occurred as mainstream organizations “took advantage” of the sudden interest in his community during a rights campaign, tokenizing his constituents and swallowing all funding opportunities. In another, interview, a leader representing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people of color described bad experiences in the Washington marriage equality coalition. His group was treated as an add-on not essential to the coalition – which left lasting resentments after same-sex marriage was legalized.

Overcoming Divisions within Rights Movements

Fortunately, organization leaders and advocates were able to overcome these limits in some circumstances. Leaders with multiple minority identities functioned as translators who could interpret why coalitions were in the interests of both mainstream and marginalized constituencies. Others helpful steps included encouraging resource flows to marginalized groups and creating opportunities for multiply marginalized people to lead coalitions.

In some cases, rights campaigns were able to push back attacks on minority communities – for example, efforts to exclude particular marginal subgroups from state protective laws. Movements are often discussed as pushing for the interests of one community or population. But to form a powerful, expanding political movement, various marginalized and underprivileged communities must, form genuine alliances, bridging subgroups that hold some seemingly disparate or even conflicting interests. My research on coalitional efforts to link advocates for immigrants, laborers, and sexual and gender minorities reveals the paradoxical realities of rights-based movement building sheds light on what it takes to overcome inherent obstacles and tensions.

Read more in Erin Mayo-Adam, “Intersectional Coalitions: The Paradoxes of Rights-Based Movement

Building in LGBTQ and Immigrant Communities,” Law and Society Review 51, no. 1, (2017): 132-167

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