



Can Advocacy Groups Speak for the Most Disadvantaged?

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In American democracy, national advocacy organizations provide vital representation to women, racial minorities, and low-income people. U.S. political parties and elected legislators have often ignored such constituencies, and even when parties and elected officeholders do respond, advocacy groups provide much-needed extra voice and leverage.

Long before most women could vote, for example, the National American Woman Suffrage Association mounted protests and lobbied legislators. Similarly, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People spoke up for African Americans in the South, who were disenfranchised and denied basic civil rights until the 1960s. In recent decades, the United States has seen an explosion of advocacy associations speaking up for women, racial minorities, and low-income people. Advocacy groups have pursued lawsuits and pushed for new legislation and regulations to end legal racial and sex-based discrimination and create new resources and opportunities for the previously excluded.

But advocacy groups have also been criticized for focusing mostly on the needs of the relatively advantaged members of their constituencies. Feminism has been dismissed by some as a movement of and for affluent white women, for example, and civil rights organizations are sometimes said to focus too much on “middle-class” issues. Even organizations championing economic justice can be seen as falling short when they overlook or downplay the multiple disadvantages suffered by low-income women or people of color.

Research on Who is Represented – And How

To determine how fully today’s American advocacy groups represent all parts of their constituencies, I conducted a survey of almost 300 organizations and in-depth interviews with the officers of forty of them. I looked very closely at whether and how groups speak for the needs of multiply disadvantaged constituents. Low-income women, for example, may suffer due to limited economic resources, and may simultaneously experience gender discrimination. Arguably, they need extra leverage in the political process. But do they fall between the cracks in the world of advocacy groups? That could happen if feminist groups focus on the needs of more economically well-off women, while groups pushing policies to help low-income people fail to address the different sources and effects of poverty for men and women. A similar kind of advocacy failure could affect women of color, if feminist groups consider mainly white women and civil rights organizations overlook issues affecting women.

My research reveals that advocacy organizations do, in fact, often prioritize the interests of relatively advantaged constituents, while giving short-shrift to disadvantaged subgroups. Women’s organizations, for example, are more active on affirmative action in higher education than they are on issues of welfare reform that impact low-income women. But at the same time, I find that many advocacy groups work to remedy

possible biases through what I call affirmative advocacy – a set of principles and practices that aim to overcome and correct for the usual underrepresentation of the needs of very marginal and multiply disadvantaged people in American society.

Front and Center for the More Advantaged

Advocacy organizations, I find, are considerably less active overall, and proceed in substantially different ways, when it comes to issues affecting multiply marginalized subgroups in their constituencies.

- Advocacy organizations tend to place public priority on issues (such as access to elite professional positions) that concern their most advantaged constituents, even if such issues reach fewer constituents. In contrast, issues affecting the multiply disadvantaged (such as low wages and incomes that hurt many women) are given less attention, even if the ranks of these less advantaged constituents are much larger.
- Advocacy groups only rarely use legal approaches, but they are substantially more likely to use lawyers, file amicus briefs, and take cases to court on behalf of advantaged subgroups.
- Coalitions are ideally suited to deal with issues that affect disadvantaged subgroups that overlap multiple advocacy groups' constituencies. For instance, feminist and civil rights groups can work together to advocate for minority women. Nevertheless, advocacy groups devote lower levels of energy to such coalitional efforts than they do to coalitions working for their more advantaged constituents.

Affirmative Advocacy as a Partial Corrective

Although advocacy organizations can fall short, many take deliberate steps to represent multiply disadvantaged constituents. Organizations practicing affirmative advocacy:

- use special decision rules to make sure issues affecting disadvantaged subgroups are brought to the fore on their agendas;
- forge strong ties to state and local advocacy groups that are more closely in touch with disadvantaged constituencies;
- make sure that staff and boards include leaders from multiply marginalized subgroups;
- educate more advantaged constituents to see the ways in which their interests are tied to those of the less advantaged – and push back against discriminatory public attitudes.

In sum, America's contemporary advocacy groups do often speak most loudly and effectively for the relatively advantaged members of historically underrepresented groups. But such biases are not intentional – and they are not universal. Advocacy leaders often know they need to do better, and they have developed special practices to help them speak effectively for the most marginal.

Read more in Dara Z. Strolovitch, *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).