



Shifting sands that threaten policy advocacy for vulnerable children and youth: A case study



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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in the institutional and political environment, including the rise of a neoliberal logic that favors private solutions to social problems and increasing political partisanship, have created new challenges for statewide legislative advocacy. Yet, there is a lacuna in the study of the sector's response to new and contradictory environmental pressures. Using the lens of institutional and resource dependence theories on organizations, this qualitative case study targets this gap by examining how a nonprofit statewide legislative advocacy organization for vulnerable children has responded to shifting political and institutional conditions that have transpired since its founding in the early 1990s. It examines 1) how the organization has made sense of these emerging challenges and demands, 2) how these shifts have reshaped its advocacy practices, and 3) how they have influenced the viability of the organization. Adaptive responses of the organization included a shift in emphasis from direct legislative advocacy to advocacy directed at the implementation of policy and grassroots advocacy. Implications for the future of statewide legislative advocacy for vulnerable children are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Children in the U.S. are exceptionally vulnerable to multiple forms of disadvantage. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the overall child poverty rate stands at 21.6%, while the poverty rate is 38.2% for Black children and 32.3% for Hispanic children (Macartney, 2011). In 2010, an astonishing 44% of all U.S. children lived in families with incomes below twice the federal poverty line—the amount of income that many scholars agree most families need to make ends meet (Addy & Wight, 2012). In comparison, less than 10% of children are poor in the Netherlands and Switzerland, and between 10% and 15% of children are poor in Germany and the United Kingdom (Gornick & Jäntti, 2012). Child poverty is associated with higher risk of infant mortality (Heisler, 2012) and poorer cognitive, emotional, social, and health outcomes (e.g., Duncan & Magnuson, 2013).

The high level of child disadvantage in the U.S. can be partially explained by the relatively weak redistributive effects of its welfare state institutions (Bradbury & Jäntti, 1999; Chen & Corak, 2008; Gornick & Jäntti, 2012; Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003). Policies that encourage and enable parental employment, such as paid parental leave, child care, and sick leave, are limited in the U.S. and, when compared to policies in other countries, U.S. income transfers are less effective in reducing childhood poverty (Gornick & Jäntti, 2012; Palley 2012). These

inadequacies make the U.S. an outlier in child disadvantage among developed countries.

The weak policy response to child disadvantage in the U.S. suggests the need for advocacy as a mechanism for putting the issue of child poverty on the legislative agenda. Nonprofit advocacy organizations have historically played a pivotal role in the advancement of social rights for children, women, and poor people (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). As social policy making and implementation continue to devolve to the state level, statewide legislative advocacy organizations, defined as organizations that engage in advocacy that targets change in state laws (Ezell, 2001, p. 74), are increasingly central to the legislative process. Yet, little is known about the political and organizational challenges that nonprofit statewide legislative advocacy organizations for children encounter, their strategic responses to them, and the consequences of these challenges for the efficacy of their advocacy efforts. In this paper we argue that the political and resource environments have shifted in ways that challenge the very viability of these organizations and reshape their practices.

We support this argument with an ethnographic field study of a nonprofit statewide legislative advocacy organization for vulnerable children. The mission of the organization includes working to strengthen public policies and budget decisions at the state level in the best interest of vulnerable children. The organization also stays informed on federal policy developments that influence the state so that it can provide strategic support for a congressional delegation that represents it on Capitol Hill.

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We start by situating the organization in a broader context that has threatened its capacity to survive and fulfill its mission. Contextual factors include a cultural climate that favors government retrenchment and its replacement with local and private solutions to social problems, the advent of term limits for politicians, increased political partisanship, and the adoption of new public management practices by foundations, the key funders of the organization – especially the imposition of measurable standards of performance and the use of explicit output measures in grant giving. Next, we explore the reaction of the organization to this shifting environmental terrain. We believe that, as a case study on how such organizations respond, adapt, and survive in the changing environment, the analysis uncovers dynamics that may illuminate how advocacy groups, in general, face such challenges, with implications for the future of statewide advocacy for vulnerable children.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we introduce an orienting theoretical perspective which combines insights from the institutional and resource dependence theories on organizations. This lens directs attention to the interaction between shifting institutional rules and expectations, the organizational stakeholders through which these pressures are channeled, and the interpretations and responses of organizations that attempt to adhere to them. We then review literature on new institutional and resource pressures faced by statewide legislative advocacy organizations. We outline the methods and present the empirical case. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the study for nonprofit statewide legislative advocacy for vulnerable children.

2. Theoretical perspective and literature

2.1. Theoretical perspective

Our inquiry is informed by a combined institutional/resource dependence perspective. Institutional theory views organizations as partially determined by the organizational field, defined as a network of actors that “partakes in common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field” (Scott, 1995: 56). To survive and obtain resources organizations need to understand and adhere to the institutional rules, meanings, and values that govern the field (Baum & Oliver, 1991, 1992; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995; Tucker, Baum, & Singh, 1992). When rules change, organizations must change with them or risk threats to their survival. Resource dependence theory complements the institutional perspective by directing attention to the role of political struggles and negotiations among stakeholders inside and outside of organizations in shaping organizational structures and practices (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Stakeholders that control vital resources have the greatest influence over organizations, because if their demands are not met they may withdraw their resources, compromising organizational viability.

Melding the institutional and resource dependence perspectives sensitizes us to the institutional demands and expectations channeled by important stakeholders in the two broad fields in which nonprofit statewide organizations operate. First, to advance their policy agenda, legislative advocacy organizations must engage effectively with the targets of their advocacy in the field of legislative politics, which include legislators, staff members, and constituents. Second, for legislative advocacy organizations, foundation grant making provides significant financial support and legitimacy while subjecting recipients to funder demands and institutional expectations.

2.2. New institutional and resource pressures

2.2.1. A rising neoliberal logic

The dominance of a neoliberal ideology since the 1980s, with its emphasis on devolution, privatizations and individual responsibility (Kamat, 2004; Taylor-Gooby, 2004), has weakened and delegitimized

social policies that protect the social rights of vulnerable populations (Evans and Shields 2000; Harvey, 2005). The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 (95 Stat. 357), for example, curtailed the access of poor women and children to government income benefits by narrowing eligibility for the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. The Act also promoted state experimentation with various welfare-to-work options, and ultimately led to the passage of welfare reform in 1996 which made welfare benefits more tenuous by tying them to work requirements (Prasad 2006: 45; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). By undermining citizens' rights to public assistance, the neoliberal policy environment creates new challenges for the non-profit sector's historical mission to advocate and mobilize for the social rights of vulnerable citizens, defined by T. H. Marshall (1964, 72) as “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society.”

2.2.2. Changing political field

Scholarship points to several changes in the political field that may have affected the capacity of advocacy organizations to influence the legislative process. Political polarization and partisanship have intensified in recent decades (Carson, Crespin, Finocchiaro, & Rhode, 2007; Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006) which has made it increasingly difficult to work across the aisles and build consensus on legislative issues (Sarbaugh-Thompson et al., 2006). Gerrymandering has played a role in creating more polarized legislatures and has reduced incentives for bipartisanship (Grainger, 2010; Jacobson, 2004). Further, an increasing number of states have adopted term limits for state legislators (Cain & Levin, 1999), which research has shown influences advocacy efforts by causing legislators to focus more on their own personal ideological frames or on issues with statewide implications and to pay less attention to their constituents and district issues (Carey, Niemi, & Powell, 2000; Cary, Niemi, & Powell, 1998; Cary, Niemi, Powell, & Moncrief, 2006; Wright, 2007). There is also evidence that term limits reduce the likelihood that legislators will develop expertise in particular policy areas. As a result, they are less likely to rely on one another for information and advice, increasing the relative influence of administrative agencies and legislative research staff (Kousser, 2005; Moncrief & Thompson, 2001; Sarbaugh-Thompson et al., 2006). While these changes are well-documented, we know much less about how they are interpreted and responded to by statewide legislative advocacy organizations.

2.2.3. Changing resource field

Foundations, a central source of financial support for nonprofit statewide advocacy organizations (Covington, 2001; Froelich, 1999) have transformed their traditional grant making practices. Incorporating the neoliberal logic in their grant allocations, they tend to emphasize place-based strategies to effect social change (see, e.g., Brown, 2012; Brown, Chaskin, Hamilton, & Richman, 2003; Fiester, 2011). These strategies often entail long-term, comprehensive commitments to specific communities or neighborhoods through activities such as “...community-building efforts, community-focused economic development, comprehensive strategies, social and health service programs and reforms, and many other community-oriented strategies” (Brown et al., 2003: 6). This general trend toward place-based grant-making is discordant with the overall purpose of state-level advocacy organizations, which is to promote federal or statewide policy solutions aimed at extending or protecting children's social rights.

In addition, statewide legislative advocacy organizations have had to make sense of and responded to foundations' adoption of the logic and repertoire of new public management (NPM). NPM encourages the use of corporate management strategies in the public and nonprofit sectors such as holding organizations to measurable standards of performance, using explicit outcome measures, and promoting competition (Hood, 1995). Under pressure by policymakers to demonstrate their

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