

Power to the Partner

Collaboration, Representation, and Influence in American Lobbying

Maraam A. Dwidar

The Power of Partnership

On the evening of August 2, 2022, Ashley All, an organizer with Kansans for Constitutional Freedom (KCF), was nervous. Kansas had become the first state in the nation to vote on abortion rights through referendum, on the heels of the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. On the ballot was a constitutional amendment allowing Kansas lawmakers to ban abortion – the first of many efforts to restrict women’s reproductive rights in the post-*Dobbs* era. If passed, the amendment would open the door to a near or total ban on abortion in the state.

Republican lawmakers had led a campaign based on misdirection: they drafted confusing ballot language, refused to say what policies they would enact if the amendment were passed, and strategically scheduled the vote on a day with historically low turnout. Organizers for KCF, a bipartisan coalition of roughly 40 reproductive rights organizations and allied groups including Planned Parenthood, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Trust Women Foundation, and URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity, had worked for months to combat their effort. By election day, the coalition had spent over 6 million dollars – in a state won by Donald Trump by nearly 15 points in 2020 – and later that evening, triumphed in a landslide victory. All, a veteran political organizer, could scarcely believe it.

While the outcome of their work may have come as a shock, KCF’s tactics were

tried-and-true. Across local, state, and national organizing, coalition work is extremely common. In 2018, a coalition of environmental justice groups and oil industry associations formed to oppose changes to an Environmental Protection Agency regulation affecting the sale of gasoline with 15 percent ethanol (E15) – and successfully rescinded the rule. In 2020, a broad-based coalition of business groups, religious organizations, and Black Lives Matter activists successfully lobbied Mississippi state lawmakers for the removal of the confederate battle emblem from their state flag. And in 2023, a decades-long ban on awarding Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals was lifted by the U.S. Congress – the result of years of advocacy by a coalition of social and economic justice organizations led by the Vera Institute of Justice. This book is about what makes coalition work by these kinds of advocates succeed. To understand why some coalitions triumph and others fall short, I spent six years observing and recording the behavior of 2,000 coalitions advocating for social and economic justice in national politics. I measured their differences – in memberships, money, messaging, and goals – and compared those with successful outcomes to those without. In doing so, I tried to tease out the micro- and macro-level conditions surrounding organizations’ efforts to collectively shape public policy. Do coalitions succeed when they have deep pockets? When they have an opportunity, like the chance to capitalize on a moment or movement? Or maybe the ability to recruit just the right kinds of partners – with specialized skills and friends in high places?

All of these things matter. But most of all, what truly distinguishes successful coalitions is their ability to mobilize many different, cross-cutting interests in pursuit of a shared ideal. These organizations, keenly aware of their competitors and constraints, use coalition work to compensate for individual shortcomings and progressively build movements. They partner with longtime allies and former opponents, strategically invest their resources, and make careful compromises. Some of these partnerships are long-standing and formal, like Voces Verdes (founded in 2009), a

coalition of Latinx community organizations and businesses fighting for clean air, energy, and water policy. Others are more ad hoc and exist fleetingly, like the Coalition Against Religious Discrimination, which united a fluctuating set of organizations to promote religious rights and liberties a dozen times beginning in the late 1990s. Regardless of their form, these coalitions are always united by a single goal: to produce meaningful change. This book focuses on their efforts to shape political institutions and public policy in pursuit of social and economic justice.

In the coming pages, I tell a story about how social and economic justice organizations strategically respond to their communities' needs and their operational constraints with coalition work. Most of these advocates face day-to-day challenges: they have fewer members, smaller budgets, and more limited issue agendas than the private and professional groups of K Street. They are beholden to their patrons and paying members to keep the lights on and must respond to their preferences, even if they run counter to their own. So they turn to partnerships, old and new, to do the hard work of advocacy. In doing so, they face a natural tension. They worry about balancing their organizations' autonomy and interests with investments in coalition work. To survive in a competitive political environment, they have to protect their records and reputations as individual groups. But in a crowded arena, making friends is also vital. I argue that organizations consciously thread this needle. They strategically work in coalitions when the benefits of partnership outweigh the costs. By investing in these partnerships – especially those that unite many different interests – they advance more effective, and more equitable, advocacy. This book explains how.

Understanding Advocacy

Many historically marginalized communities in the United States struggle to gain political access, find the time to politically engage, or garner the attention of their ad-

vocates in government. These long-standing dynamics have substantial consequences for representation. Lawmakers, for example, have few incentives to take up the concerns of communities with low rates of political participation. More often than not, their work responds to the interests of wealthy Americans and big business – those that participate politically at high volumes – disenfranchising millions in the process. To keep it simple: American government privileges the interests of those with the most advantage.

Social and economic justice organizations – interest groups that seek to influence government policymaking on behalf of marginalized communities – try to mediate this disparity. Many of these groups have roots in protest movements that decry government shortcomings to social and political grievances, like those for women’s rights and civil rights in the early and mid-1900s. The National American Woman Suffrage Organization (NAWSO, founded in 1890), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, founded in 1909), and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC, founded in 1929), for example, all formed during critical moments in American history to mobilize their communities and lobby policymakers in support of suffrage and civil rights. Their efforts led to monumental policy changes, including the ratification of the 19th Amendment, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the overturning of the “separate but equal” doctrine.

Organizations like the NAWSO, NAACP, and LULAC share a common factor: they developed in response to moments of social reckoning and deepening needs for better representation of their communities. They remain one of the only sources of political representation for vulnerable groups in American society. They take many forms, such as citizen groups, labor unions, legal advocates, non-profit service providers, and think tanks. They engage in policy advocacy – lobbying – and serve their constituents at a grassroots level. They offer community services (like legal aid), share

educational resources (like voting guides), and politically empower their constituents (by encouraging them to make their voices heard – and helping them do so). They are key advocates for their constituents in public policymaking and service.

But they face an uphill battle. Despite their role as “compensatory representatives,” many organizational advocates for vulnerable communities have limitations. While their constituents’ needs are boundless, their time and resources are not. They must often balance different motivations, like a much-needed win, with the countervailing interests of different constituent groups. Some constituents have “easier” needs, or interests that align with dominant groups and shifting political winds. Other constituents require advocacy that noisily disrupts the status quo and fights against stigmatized policy images and frames. The outcome is a tale as old as time: their advocacy successes are fleeting and mainly promote the interests of more advantaged constituents, while neglecting those with intersecting disadvantage.

Compensating by Collaborating

Organizations consciously respond to these disparities and biases. They are aware of their many constraints and turn to specific tools to compensate for them. Collaborating – which I also refer to as coalition-building – is one of these tools, and the most common lobbying strategy in organizational politics. While effective, it is also complex, and organizations do not deploy it lightly. Information about potential partners, like their common interests, past successes, and reputation/stature, is paramount in the decision to work with others.

This intricate relationship has led to a small but growing body of research about coalitional advocacy. Scholars of organizational coalitions largely fall into two camps: the first set, arguing that coalitions are unlikely, since organized interests require autonomy to survive and coalition building presents inherent risks to autonomy ([Wilson](#)

1973; Berry 1977; Browne 1990), and the second, that coalitions are advantageous, because they allow groups to enhance their effectiveness in a crowded political environment (Salisbury 1990; Hojnacki 1997). Regardless, organizational coalitions *do* form – and often. Hula (1999), for example, reports that groups with policy-oriented goals regularly join coalitions in order to reduce expenditures, shape policy proposals, and define issue debates. Others do so to obtain insider information or to publicly demonstrate allyship (Hula 1999). The broader policy environment, of course, also plays a role. When opponents in a policy debate are strong, organizations derive greater benefits from lobbying in a coalition and are thus more likely to join one (Hojnacki 1997). Coalitions are most likely to break when differences in ideology, priorities, and lobbying style among partners collide (Staggenborg 1986; Levi and Murphy 2006).

Research findings on the outcomes of coalition building are more mixed. Heinz et al. (1993), Gray and Lowery (1998), Mahoney and Baumgartner (2004), and Haider-Markel (2006), for instance, find either no connection or an inverse relationship between coalition building and policy outcomes. McKay and Yackee (2007), Baumgartner et al. (2009a), Nelson and Yackee (2012), Phinney (2017), and Lorenz (2019), on the other hand, observe positive relationships between collaborative lobbying and policy influence, and note that certain characteristics – like coalition size and group consensus – can magnify the impact of coalition work.

I argue that coalition work provides unique and significant benefits to social and economic justice organizations. These groups are widely known to have limited resources relative to their mainstream counterparts. Only a small proportion – fewer than 30 percent – retain a legal staff. Only 25 percent employ lobbyists, and a mere 20 percent have political action committees (PACs) (Strolovitch 2007). In contrast, among mainstream interest groups, 50 percent retain a legal staff, 54 percent employ lobbyists, and 60 percent have PACs (Strolovitch 2007). These characteristics

and differences tell a story of limited tactical, social, and financial capacity among organizational advocates for vulnerable communities.

Despite its risks, working in coalitions allows organizations to expand their capacities while reducing costs. Policy advocacy is an expensive task, requiring copious time and expertise that can be hard to come by. Coalition work enhances the abilities of organizations to surpass this hurdle. By partnering with others, groups develop new social ties, gain access to policy experts and a wider array of information, and profit from greater political credibility by association. With these benefits in hand, developing effective policy recommendations becomes more feasible. Collaboration should thus be a highly attractive and effective advocacy tactic for social and economic justice groups.

Coalition work also offers a chance for social and economic justice groups to advocate more equitably. These groups seldom promote the interests of their most vulnerable, intersectionally-disadvantaged, constituents ([Strolovitch 2006](#); [Marchetti 2014](#); [English 2019, 2020](#)). The reason is simple: they rely on funds from patrons and paying members to do their work – and are thus beholden to their preferences. These actors, which often represent organizations’ most advantaged constituent groups, typically disapprove of intersectional advocacy, labeling it as “narrow” and “controversial” ([Staggenborg 1986](#); [Strolovitch 2006](#)).

Some of the oldest women’s organizations in the United States have recently come under fire for this dynamic. The [National Organization for Women](#) (NOW, founded in 1966), the [Feminist Majority Foundation](#) (FMF, founded in 1987), and the [American Association of University Women](#) (AAUW, founded in 1881) were the subject of exposés in *The Washington Post* and *The Daily Beast* in 2020 for their systemic promotion of white women’s political interests at the expense of those of women of

color.¹ Staffers of these organizations attributed this trend to their disapproving members and patrons, stating explicitly that “the folks [providing] funding [...] were less interested in women of color and more interested in more quote-unquote ‘neutral’ topics” (Kitchener 2020).

But these groups *do* want to pursue intersectional work. Many highlight intersectional advocacy as central to their goals, but note that it is difficult to go at alone. The nature of partnership, which involves many groups and smaller individual investments, offers a strategic and lower-profile solution. Thus, I argue that social and economic justice organizations strategically build coalitions in order to pursue this kind of advocacy. This deliberate choice makes clear to disapproving actors that intersectional advocacy is not occurring at the expense of broader organizational priorities – their utmost concern (Strolovitch 2006).

Collaborating helps organizations compensate. Whether they are compensating for limited resources, a lack of political credibility, or constrained advocacy agendas, coalition work is a valuable tool with substantial consequences. When social and economic justice organizations build coalitions, they carefully balance their organizational priorities and strategically promote more effective advocacy and more equitable policy ideas. Their successes mean that policy choices made by political institutions account for the interests of vulnerable communities – offering a glimmer of hope for democratic legitimacy.

Advocacy and the Fourth Branch

Most talk about lobbying is negative. It is no secret that special interest groups spend copious time and money courting lawmakers. Their PACs, meanwhile, ensure that allies in Congress keep their seats and thus, their office doors open to their causes.

¹<https://www.thelily.com/how-many-women-of-color-have-to-cry-top-feminist-organizations-are-plagued-by-racism-20-former-staffers-say/>

Who do they represent? Are they persuasive? Do they “buy” votes? Hundreds of research articles and dozens of books discuss these questions. This concern is so potent that everyday Americans recoil at the mention of special interest groups in Washington – 52%, in fact, view the work of lobbyists and interest groups to be a “very serious problem” in government.²

The positive contributions of these groups get little attention. While some lobbyists and groups do skirt legal boundaries, most interest groups peddle in honest advocacy. The information they provide – about voter preferences, district needs, and the outcomes of potential policies – is much-needed. As congressional capacity has declined, basic legislative functions like selecting policy priorities, debating the merits and pitfalls of policy provisions, and crafting the language of the law, are now the work of interest groups. But their work does not stop there – after policy ideas are enacted into law, the process of *implementing* these ideas begins. This work falls to an unassuming but sophisticated institution: the American federal bureaucracy – the “fourth branch” of government – responsible for 90% of U.S. law, and a main character of this book.

The reach of the American federal bureaucracy is wide – and growing (Warren 2018). As the major political parties have polarized, substantive lawmaking by the U.S. Congress has decreased and legislative language has grown increasingly vague (Lewallen 2020). The bulk of modern policymaking has thus steadily fallen to bureaucrats serving in federal agencies as they craft and promulgate rules implementing provisions of the law (Potter 2019). But bureaucrats do not do this work alone. They work with and are overseen by a variety of political principals and other actors, including the President, Members of Congress, and organized interest groups. These latter actors are a particularly vital source of power and information in agency policymaking (Truman 1951; Schattschneider 1960; Olson 1965; Berry 1989; Salisbury 1992;

²<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/how-americans-see-problems-of-trust/>

Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Gray and Lowery 1996; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner et al. 2009b). They are active players in this venue; the majority of all organizational advocacy targets a federal agency, and their work helps bureaucrats sway public opinion (Hrebenar 1997), raise awareness of policy issues facing agencies (Rourke 1984; Hrebenar 1997), resist political control (Carpenter 2002), secure budgets (Berry 1989), and even craft regulatory language (Haeder and Yackee 2015).

Most agency policymaking – and most organizational advocacy – takes place through a process called “notice-and-comment” rulemaking. This process derives from the policymaking authority of the Congress and the President, and is governed by the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 (APA). The APA stipulates that after bills are signed into law by the President, their component parts must be sent to the appropriate federal agencies to implement their content by writing rules that regulate their enforcement. This process begins with agencies drafting “proposed rules”. Once drafted, these proposed rules must be made public for specified “notice-and-comment” periods. During these periods, members of the public – including organized interest groups, private citizens, or political actors – may submit written public comments regarding the proposed rule. Interest groups dominate submissions made during this process, and their comments are considered an important source of expert information for federal agencies (Croley 1998; Golden 1998; West 2004; Kerwin et al. 2011). When these periods come to a close, agencies must review all comments and issue final rules. Upon issuance, these rules become legally binding.

The work of social and economic justice organizations is paramount in this process. Agency rulemaking is lengthy and tedious – and for good reason. Small errors or oversights can have profound downstream consequences when agency rules are implemented by street-level bureaucrats. Consider, for example, the work of the Anthropocene Alliance (A2, founded in 2017), a national coalition of non-profit organizations advocating on behalf of climate-changed communities – many of which

are home to low-income people and communities of color. In October 2021, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued a request for public comments with input on revising the National Flood Insurance Program’s (NFIP) floodplain management standards. In their comments, A2 leaders echoed a pervasive feeling among affected communities and climate activists: that FEMA’s outdated standards put communities in harm’s way and make it difficult to obtain insurance from flooding. These standards, ranging from the data sources used to evaluate the effects of NFIP regulations to a list of exceptions for home building on low-lying land, have long-lasting consequences. Agency efforts to re-write these standards – and advocacy efforts to inform this work – are extraordinarily consequential. Rulemaking is thus arguably the most important stage of American policymaking.

Study Design

Working out what differentiates coalitions that succeed from those that fall short is a difficult task. Researchers have struggled to study organizational coalitions. Unlike individual groups and lobbyists, which are required to submit tax documents and disclosure reports, most coalitions develop on an ad hoc basis without fixed or named memberships. This limited documentation means that most existing research on collaboration in advocacy focuses on a small set of groups or policy issues and works in unison with organizations through qualitative or survey methodology. But my goal in this book is to provide explanations that span all kinds of organizations and issues, so that activists and scholars can develop a *general* understanding of how to successfully build coalitions.

To do so, I took on a simple solution. When people work in teams, they take credit where credit is due – organizations are no different. They might issue a joint press release, send a series of tweets mentioning their partners, or co-sign a collaboratively

written public comment. Since this book centers on advocacy in regulatory policy-making, I developed the *Collaborative Advocacy Dataset*, an original dataset tracking coalitions through co-signature patterns on public comments submitted to federal agencies. This dataset – the culmination of six years of work – contains information on 15,000 organizations advocating on 2,400 rules issued by 150 agencies between 2000 and 2016. These data allowed me to track the activities of approximately 2,000 coalitions over a 17-year period.

To measure the two central concepts of this book – the *effectiveness* and *equitability* of advocacy, I turned to modern text analysis tools. Organizations often use the notice-and-comment process to pursue their advocacy, in large part by suggesting regulatory language. So, to measure the effectiveness of their work, I used plagiarism detection software to determine the extent to which each public comment’s language overlapped with that of its corresponding final rule. Then, to operationalize equitability, I developed a novel and hand-coded measure of the occurrence of intersectional advocacy. Together with the *Collaborative Advocacy Dataset*, these measures allow me to directly test my arguments: that coalition work promotes more effective, and more widely representative, policy advocacy.

Chapter Overview

Policy advocacy is expensive and arduous, particularly in the regulatory context. Because the arguments I make rest on collaboration as a means of compensation for social and economic justice organizations, it is important to begin with an overview of what we know about interest group behavior and the regulatory process. In the next chapter, I put the role of organized interests in a historical context to explain their prominence in our current governmental system. I describe the origins of social and economic justice interest groups in social movements for women’s rights and civil

rights in the early and mid-1900s, their unique role as “compensatory representatives” in American politics, and the barriers they face in political advocacy. I conclude with a discussion of how organizations strategically build coalitions to compensate for these barriers and how their targets – in this case, agency rulemaking – guide their use of coalition tactics. In describing the unique relationship between coalition tactics and targets, I trace the manner by which federal agencies develop, publicize, and finalize their rules and the entry points for organizational advocacy in this process.

Chapter 3 tackles the challenge of collecting data on organizational coalitions – an informal activity with little to no documentation. I describe the impact of this data problem on prior scholarship and introduce the innovative solution used in this book: the *Collaborative Advocacy Dataset*, an original dataset tracking coalitions through co-signature patterns on public comments and comprising information on over 15,000 organizations advocating on 2,400 rules issued by 150 agencies over a 17-year period (2000-2016). Using these data, I explore patterns of collaboration across organizational types, resource levels, and policy and agency characteristics.

Chapter 4 develops and tests the first portion of the book’s theoretical argument – that coalition work boosts the influence of social and economic justice groups lobbying federal agencies. I describe the expectations of regulatory advocacy and the incentives of agency bureaucrats to emphasize the unique capabilities of organizational partnership. I show that across advocacy efforts, social and economic justice groups bear greater influence over agency rulemaking when they collaborate. This analysis highlights the important role that a simple tactic – coalition-building – plays in elevating policy ideas and mediating representational disparities in rulemaking and lobbying.

Coalitions come in many forms. The most striking collaborations consist of “strange bedfellows” – for instance, social justice groups working with business groups,

or liberal and conservative organizations joining forces. These diverse collaborations are common and, when formed, attract attention. Chapter 5 examines common types of diverse coalitions and their influence over lobbying outcomes. I argue that coalitions with organizational, constituent, and resource diversity exert greater influence over the rulemaking process than those that are homogeneous. I show that diverse collaborations do, in fact, enjoy this privilege, but find evidence of a threshold effect – wherein the entry of diversity, rather than a greater degree of diversity, is most consequential for coalition influence. In contrast to the popular narrative of bureaucratic imperialism, this chapter offers evidence of a more legitimate and participatory policy process, where the interests of diverse – pluralistic – coalitions are favored.

The American lobbying environment is crowded, competitive, and costly. The wealthiest, most privileged, interests often reign supreme. Can strategic collaboration level the playing field? Chapter 6 tackles the next portion of the book’s theoretical argument – that collaboration lends greater benefits and outcomes to social and economic justice-oriented interest groups than their mainstream counterparts. By replicating the analyses of Chapters 4 and 5 using data on collaborative regulatory advocacy by mainstream interest groups, I show that coalition building does indeed uniquely benefit organizations representing historically marginalized communities.

Chapter 7 develops and tests the final portion of the book’s theoretical argument. I explain how, from an organizational perspective, collaboration is a complex but useful tactic for *intersectional* advocacy. Due to stringent resource limitations, social and economic justice organizations are often beholden to the preferences of their patrons and active members, many of whom represent the identities and promote the priorities of the groups’ most advantaged constituents. As such, their advocacy on behalf of their most vulnerable constituents – those with intersectional disadvantage – falls short. I argue that collaborative strategy allows these groups to advocate on behalf of issues concerning these constituents by conserving resources and avoiding

the ire of members and patrons through the “cover” provided by coalitions. Using the *Collaborative Advocacy Dataset* in conjunction with a novel, hand-coded measure of the occurrence of intersectional advocacy, I demonstrate that coalition work and financial resources moderate organizations’ pursuit of intersectional advocacy.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of my findings for the study and practice of advocacy-based representation in American policymaking. While efforts to promote the interests of marginalized communities do not often succeed, this book sketches a portrait of resolute and conscious organizational actors that strategically collaborate to compensate for barriers to representational equality. The evidence demonstrates that this tactic is, in fact, an effective tool for mediating representational bias in organizational agenda-setting and public policymaking. I conclude by prescribing a series of practices that organizational leaders and activists may apply to enhance their collaborative advocacy. Now, let’s get started.