

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

THE STATE OF NONPROFIT AMERICA

LESTER M. SALAMON *editor*

Chapter 9 Highlights **CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND** **ADVOCACY**

Elizabeth T. Boris and Jeff Krehely

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CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND ADVOCACY *

Elizabeth T. Boris and Jeff Krehely

Nonprofit organizations are not only important service providers. They are also crucial vehicles for advocacy and civic participation. Indeed, the advocacy and civic engagement function is one of the most important that nonprofit organizations have historically performed.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the growing importance of money in American politics, nonprofit advocacy organizations have assumed even greater importance in recent years. Indeed, the influence of nonprofit advocacy organizations seems paradoxically to be growing in America, according to Elizabeth T. Boris and Jeff Krehely. That this is so is due to the growing sophistication of nonprofit advocacy organizations in a widening range of fields. These organizations have grown increasingly professional and capable in recent years, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of members through highly complex organizational structures, conducting expert research, and using sophisticated public relations techniques.

Boris and Krehely's analysis is part of the broader assessment of *The State of Nonprofit America* coordinated by Dr. Lester M. Salamon of the Johns Hopkins University and published by the Brookings Institution Press in collaboration with the Aspen Institute.

As Boris and Krehely note, nonprofit advocacy organizations take a variety of different forms and pursue a number of different approaches, from issue research through grass-roots mobilization to direct legislative lobbying.

Declining Civic Engagement. The ability of nonprofit organizations to engage in these various functions has been affected, however, by a number of developments. For one thing, a general deterioration seems to have occurred in American civic engagement, making it necessary for advocacy groups to work harder to maintain member interest.

Government Regulation. At the same time, government policy in America has not been particularly congenial to nonprofit advocacy. For example, charitable organizations (so-called 501-c-3s) are prohibited from engaging in electoral activities and cannot devote more than a limited amount of their revenues to directly influencing legislation. Charities have therefore had to form specialized lobbying organizations under a separate section of the Internal Revenue Code (501-c-4) to pursue their legislative goals in such areas as environmental protections, civil rights, or consumer rights.

What is more, government policy has become less congenial in recent years, necessitating advocacy by nonprofits just to keep their rights to advocate open and unfettered. Thus, for example, recent proposals have sought to prevent agencies that receive government grants from engaging in advocacy and to require agencies to secure permission from contributors before using the contributions for advocacy efforts.

Growing Business Competition. Another force affecting nonprofit advocacy is the growing strength and sophistication of business advocacy. Unlike nonprofit organizations, business lobbying is virtually unregulated. What is more, business interests have increasingly created front organizations that mimic nonprofit citizen groups. Boris and Krehely cite the example of the Workplace Health and Safety Council, which consists of business groups that oppose efforts to increase workplace safety regulation.

Nonprofit Responses. To cope with these challenges, nonprofit advocacy groups have had to become more sophisticated. They have thus created more complex organizational structures, found ways to take advantage of new technologies, invested in effective research, and increasingly turned to collaborations and coalitions, including some with business organizations.

While these innovations have been impressive, however, they are not without their drawbacks. Thus, for example, increasing use of communications technology threatens to cut nonprofit advocacy organizations off from direct one-on-one contact with their constituencies, thus potentially weakening their grassroots bases. In addition, the new approaches require increased resources, and not all interests or groups are able to afford the cost. Certain interests are therefore likely to be well-represented and organized while others are not. Indeed, the range of organizations engaging in lobbying appears to be very small.

Given the importance that nonprofit advocacy and civic engagement have for the strength of our democracy, more attention needs to be devoted to strengthening this facet of nonprofit operations. This will require more funding of advocacy on the part of foundations and citizens at large, better education of nonprofit leaders about the permissible range of advocacy activities that current law allows, and improved education of the public and policymakers about the importance of this facet of nonprofit operations.

* Adapted from “Civic Participation and Advocacy” by Elizabeth T. Boris and Jeff Krehely in Lester M. Salamon, editor. *The State of Nonprofit America*. Washington: The Brookings Institutions Press, 2002. Published in cooperation with the Aspen Institute.

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Chapter highlights are from “Civic Participation and Advocacy” by Elizabeth T. Boris and Jeff Krehely, a chapter in *The State of Nonprofit America*, edited by Lester M. Salamon and published by the Brookings Institution Press in collaboration with the Aspen Institute.

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