



## The Social Characteristics, Outlooks, and Pivotal Activities of Nonprofit Advocacy Leaders

**Dyana P. Mason**, University of Oregon

Nonprofit advocacy organizations are central players in American civic life and politics and their leaders have an important political impact at local, state and national levels. Participants in these advocacy organizations are centrally motivated by values or principled beliefs. Operating outside of government, nonprofit advocacy groups provide vital bridges between many citizens and policymakers. They advocate for policies in the name of the public interest, and many voters rely on these organizations to represent their concerns to elected officials on issues large and small, ranging from local development activities to environmental causes and international efforts to promote human rights.

Central as these groups are to public life, they are not well understood – especially not their leaders. Who are the paid and volunteer leaders of these nonprofit advocacy organizations, and how do they navigate and fit into organizational and political environments? Key leaders include volunteers who have been selected by the organizational boards of directors to serve as presidents, chairs or spokespersons; and they also include paid executive directors or chief executives. Whether paid or not, all nonprofit advocacy leaders tend to contribute significant amounts of time, and sometimes their own money, to advance organizational missions.

In a pioneering study, I conducted a survey of 259 nonprofit advocacy leaders in California between October 2013 and March 2014. Responses came from fifteen percent of the 501(c)(4) organizations contacted by mail, email, and phone; and I was able to use publicly available statistics to ascertain that the responding groups were similar to the makeup of all such organizations in the state. The California Association of Nonprofits and the state's League of Women Voters participated in my study, and I also conducted in-depth individual interviews with nine nonprofit executives or board chairs. My findings cast light on who nonprofit advocacy leaders are and what they do.

### Nonprofit Advocacy Leaders

According to the results of my study, nonprofit advocacy group leaders in California:

- Included 45% part-time volunteers and 33% paid executives and staff members.
- Have been with their organizations for considerable amounts of time – working there an average of twelve years, including an average of six years in their current positions.
- Are highly educated –with slightly over a fifth reporting Bachelor's degrees and 44% holding graduate or professional degrees.
- Mostly lead groups that are small with limited resources.

Beyond pinning down leader characteristics, findings from both the executive interviews and empirical data generated from my statewide survey suggest that nonprofit leaders have wide discretion to make strategic as well as tactical decisions for their advocacy organizations – and enjoy great leeway in how to arrive at such decisions. Even in small organizations, these leaders can have an outsized impact both within and beyond their organizations. Indeed, I found that these leaders wield considerably more autonomy and discretion than perspectives stressing the centrality of nonprofit board oversight would suggest.

### Surprising Findings about Political Positioning

Although press and other accounts often portray nonprofit advocacy organizations as outside the political mainstream, I found that California nonprofit advocacy group leaders tend to be much more politically moderate than state legislators. Far from pressuring policymakers to support policies that are politically

extreme or serve only narrow interests, California's nonprofit leaders tend to position their advocacy between the two polarized parties of the state legislature. Most of them operate to the right of most Democrats and to the left of most Republicans. According to my findings, the politicians are the more extreme actors, while nonprofit advocacy leaders align closely with middle-of-the road or moderate politicians – in short, with those legislators who wield significant influence in deciding what does and does not pass each chamber of the California Assembly. The moderate representatives courted by nonprofit advocates also tend to be pivotal in helping to override vetoes from governors that can block legislative action.

Interestingly, in my interviews and survey nonprofit executives often do not describe their organizations as engaging in political activities or pushing for partisan policies – even though most of their organizations engage in advocacy tactics. Only 40% of my respondents reported that their organizations are engaged in political or policy issues, yet a majority of the 60% who demurred on this topic said their organization had used at least one advocacy tactic – such as testifying before legislative committees, holding press conferences, or sitting on legislative panels.

## **Leadership Outlooks and Organizational Choices**

The ideological preferences and individual characteristics of nonprofit leaders are clearly related to organizational operations and political stands.

- Relatively conservative executives were less likely to lead organizations that engage in advocacy about political or policy issues.
- The political ideology of top leaders is related to whether or not they hire lobbyists or have policy committees as part of the decision-making structures of their nonprofit organizations.
- Comparatively conservative leaders are more likely to empower volunteers to make decisions on the advocacy tactics their organizations use.

Although my study is just a first step, it offers a systematic research look at the central role played by nonprofit leaders in shaping the politically relevant activities of a vital set of American civic organizations. Even when they lead small groups with minimal resources, these men and women can have real clout in politics and policymaking.

**Read more in Dyana Mason, "Strategy and Ideology in Nonprofit Advocacy Organizations," PhD Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2014.**