

The Future of Policy Advocacy NGOs

By Gerald Warburg

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the civic life of the United States has grown substantially since the 1960s (Frank Batten School of Leadership & Public Policy, 2016). NGO engagement in shaping public policies while providing targeted social services promises to expand in the future as well. NGOs will be challenged, however, by the decline of voter confidence and growing suspicion of the ability of government to deliver sound policies. Support for a host of institutions western democracies created in the wake of World War II is diminishing. From Wall Street to Main Street, from Congress to the Catholic Church, from the White House to the mainstream media, institutions that once enjoyed the confidence of the majority of U.S. citizens have been under assault. To fill the void and to advance the agenda of diverse interest groups, NGOs have expanded their ranks and their reach (Urban Institute, U.S. Department of State).

NGOs in American History

The phenomenon of civic associations impacting U.S. policy is by no means a new one. Going back to the original Boston Tea Party and the Sons of Liberty, American citizens have shown an unusual propensity to form advocacy organizations. Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison used their pens in 1787 to lobby for ratification of the U.S. Constitution, hastily producing the *Federalist Papers*. A half century later, Alexis de Tocqueville observed how readily Americans engaged each other and formed civic associations to advance common interests. From the abolitionists to the Woman's Temperance League, Americans have organized at the grassroots to press for government action since our nation's inception. In 1912, loyalists of President Taft created the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to combat reformers led by his predecessor Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party. The model of civic organizations further expanded in the post-World War II era, especially with the civil rights movement and efforts to advance environmental protection.

Many of the new policy advocacy organizations that emerged in the 1960s came to be known as "public interest groups." Citizen-led groups and social service delivery organizations backed diverse causes, as well as special interests. They were not uniformly 'progressive' in their focus. Groups eager to require a balanced federal budget, to protect the rights of the unborn, and to expand the reading of Second Amendment rights of gun owners also adopted the NGO model to advance their agendas. So did the 21st century Tea Party. In the wake of Donald Trump's election as president, a number of progressive groups moved in similar fashion to challenge the policies of the new administration. Grassroots action and legal challenges to executive orders on immigration and environmental protection were initially led not by Democrats in Congress, but by NGO leaders from such groups as the American Civil Liberties Union and Indivisible, who enjoyed a sharp increase in membership donations.

Defining NGOs

How, precisely, does one define an NGO? NGOs are extraordinary in that they are defined by what they are *not*. In the U.S., they are literally organizations that are not run by the government, yet are involved in shaping government policy or providing public services. This essay embraces a broad definition, focusing on the public advocacy efforts of local, state, and national interest groups engaged in policymaking. The National Rifle Association is a trade association, but it relies heavily on grassroots member support and lobbies effectively for public policy changes through membership engagement. Therefore, it should also be studied as an NGO. Similar points can be made about groups as diverse as the American Civil Liberties

Union and the Sierra Club. Each exists for the express purpose of shaping public policy and representing the public policy interests of supporters.

Literature on NGO best practices has yet to be fully developed (Crutchfield et. al., Jossey-Bass et. al., Worth). Central questions should be explored for insights, including queries such as: *What makes some NGOs far more effective than others? How do some NGOs develop sustainable models while others have a half-life measured in months, not decades? What is the secret to sound management of NGO teams? How do mature organizations avoid the perils of “mission creep” or “founder’s syndrome?” Can NGOs develop profit-generating revenue streams without compromising their goals?*

Some universities place NGO research and management training in departments of politics, schools of law or Master of Business (MBA) programs. Others carve out a niche in professional schools offering graduate students a Master of Public Policy (MPP) or Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree. Public policy schools—the most natural home for the study of NGOs—have been slow to pivot from their original focus. Founded in the post-World War II era of rapid federal government growth culminating in the Great Society programs of the Johnson Administration, the curriculum that many MPP and MPA programs use is often focused on training analysts to staff government bureaucracies. Professional training programs for NGO leaders are still rare, despite the fact that a substantial portion of those who earn MPP and MPA degrees head to jobs in this sector (NASPAA, 2016).

21st Century NGOs

The rise of anti-government sentiment and populist grassroots movements challenging the establishment of both major U.S. political parties makes this paradigm dated. Shaping public policy is no longer a monopoly of government officials. Today, public policy is increasingly shaped by interest groups, by citizen activists from both the political left and right who pack legislators’ town hall meetings and drive public-private coalitions to advance both corporate and consumer interests. Federal dominance of policy-setting powers has also yielded more space to experimentation by the fifty diverse state governments, which act as what Justice Brandeis in an earlier era called the “laboratories of democracy.” Thus states can provide ever more space in which NGOs can have an impact.

NGOs today are increasingly viewed as an alternative means to for the *vox populi*, the voice of the people to be heard. Yet, in much of the recent U.S. public discourse, NGOs are subject to caricature. Many are portrayed as poorly managed, inadequately financed groups of passionate cause activists and litigious critics of government policy working on the political fringes. These portraits are misleading. They obscure the important role both conservative and liberal NGOs play in U. S. policymaking, as well as the growing sophistication of NGOs as they gain resources and micro-targeting capabilities, the ability to target individual supporters and potential supporters.

During the 1980s, when Reagan Administration officials sought to limit social services provided by the government safety net, more NGOs began to combine policy advocacy with service delivery. As NGO ranks matured through the Bush-Clinton-Bush presidencies, NGO leaders created—or were offered—seats at the table where policy is made. Indeed, some local and state governments and courts have increasingly stipulated a role in the decision-making process for NGOs.

This trend was checked by the Great Recession which followed the 2008 crash of the U.S. housing market and plummeting stock valuations. Discretionary funding from many U.S. NGO contributors dropped. At the same time, the expanding ranks of international NGOs was challenged by dictators from Vladimir Putin’s Russia to Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China. Authoritarian regimes from Zimbabwe to Venezuela

have come to view NGO leaders who press for an independent media or voting rights as threats to one party control. Egypt has imprisoned democracy activists from the U.S.-backed National Democratic Institute. Leaders of journalists' organizations have been murdered in Moscow and Putin's political opponents have been jailed. Chinese authorities have repeatedly arrested environmental activists from organizations as modest as local parent-teacher groups. A development especially ominous for NGOs has been the appearance of similar versions of anti-NGO legislation advanced by different regimes. Soon after such measures are adopted by one puppet legislature, similar moves are embraced by dictatorships in others. Some authoritarian regimes seek to co-opt citizen movements by creating their own NGOs to parrot government lines. Putin has even gone so far as to have his Duma back a taxpayer-financed office building to house regime-approved NGOs at the new government center being built in Moscow.

Obama, Trump and NGOs as Change Agents

The role NGOs will play in the future is certain to be vigorously contested. Citizen movements in this country have proved to be powerful forces for change during the first two decades of the 21st century. For example, Barack Obama and Donald Trump have remarkably different character traits and governance agendas. Their election as political novices running against the establishment of their party, however, gives them much in common. Similarities begin with the fact that they both astonished odds-makers and defeated Hillary Clinton, one from the left and one from the right. Both outsider campaigns found support from scattered citizen groups, including members of Moveon.org and the Tea Party. Both candidates ran as change agents, determined to shatter the political status quo. Both campaigns initially operated as a third force propelled by citizens who felt strongly that the U.S. government was headed in the wrong direction.

Twice in this new century these revolts succeeded. Citizen groups overcame their own party hierarchy, then defeated the incumbent party's seasoned insider candidate. Both campaigns invited greater grassroots activism and increased the power of citizen-led organizations to impact policy.

Consider the success of NGOs in altering the national policy agenda. The Tea Party, citizen groups such as Moveon.org opposing expansion of U.S. military missions in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, NGOs addressing challenges related to women's rights, gay marriage, gun policy, climate change, immigration, and marijuana law reforms have each won victories during the last decade. Citizens in other countries have also challenged their governments' policies using NGOs. From the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom to the rise of environmental activism in China, their impact suggests the future may see greater power for NGOs in some nations, even as NGOs in others face repression from authoritarian regimes.

One of the most striking characteristics of our turbulent democracy is that governance in the United States is not the exclusive province of politicians and bureaucrats. It never has been. Even in the flawed founding of the United States—which offered voting powers only to a select group of white males—there was provision made for the right of citizens to petition for the redress of grievances. A central theme of the creators of American democracy was the insistence on shaping a government that was open to challenge from citizen groups.

Power was dispersed by design. The rights of free association and a free press were protected. Madison regretted the rise of factions in his essay *Federalist 10*. However, the Constitution sought to ensure the contest of ideas would occur on a relatively level playing field.

Today, the role of citizen groups, trade associations, and service organizations operating as independent policy forces is embedded in our national political system. With deep divisions apparent in the current electorate over the proper role of government, the role of NGOs will change as the appeal of grassroots

populist forces of both the left and right grows. The many pressures on government institutions indicate that the status quo will be dramatically altered. Direct popular input will expand its impact on governance. The Hamiltonian vision of a select group of privileged “wise men” controlling government, an elite similar to that of Plato’s Republic, has been shattered.

Analyzing how the role of NGOs will evolve begins with study of the best practices. Last fall, two dozen MPP students at the University of Virginia’s Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy undertook a semester-long inquiry into what those NGOs who succeed most often have adopted as governance models. Review of the academic literature and interviews of top CEO leaders yields some clear takeaways. Following is a list of top ten skills some of the more effective NGOs engaged in advocacy in the U.S. currently employ:

1. Mission Discipline to Focus on Core Competencies

The most successful NGOs exercise the discipline to resist mission creep. They focus on those core competencies that anchor their contributions within a specific niche of policy debate and service delivery. They build and renew support for this mission with employees and donors.

2. Strategic Planning and Research

The best NGOs have an institutional capacity to look both backwards and into the future. They adopt lessons learned from previous campaigns, learning key precedents and adapting them to changed circumstances. They conduct targeted research on their role in the policy advocacy process. They cement relations with board leaders and engage members and staff in a thorough and transparent strategic planning process.

3. Internal, External and Crisis Communications

New media platforms have had a profound impact on recent American elections as well as the legislative process. NGO members have often been ahead of their (often older and less technologically adept) leadership. The ability of NGOs to mobilize voters and impact even opaque elements of the legislative process has grown. However, many NGOs suffer from weak internal communications. Their leadership can be unprepared when a ‘good’ organization pursuing ‘noble’ causes faces press scrutiny. Effective advance crisis planning, as well as the ability to engage both internal and external audiences in a timely fashion, can prove essential elements for success.

4. Board Relations and Succession Planning

NGOs benefit from agile leaders. Leaders who have freedom of action, yet who are fully accountable to an engaged board of directors, improve prospects for sustainable success. Leaders with solid intelligence on board factions and their concerns are less likely to be blindsided by internal disputes. Good NGOs leaders avoid the dangers of “founder’s syndrome,” the debilitating notion that one individual alone is essential to the past, present, and future of the enterprise.

5. Development Benchmarks and Membership Ties

Mission-driven organizations require coordinated fundraising efforts. Ideological passion is no substitute for professional development programs with clear measures for progress. In sustainable organizations, ties to members are renewed through effective two-way communication, even as advocacy efforts and service delivery evolve.

6. Charismatic Leadership and Performance Metrics

NGOs often include activists not enamored of hierarchical management structures. Flat organizations emphasize the value of individual contributions. Volunteers and grassroots members can be force multipliers. However, no amount of cause-driven passion can long overcome management that lacks accountability or fails to adapt to changed circumstances. A critical element of success is often the adoption of clear metrics for measuring progress.

7. Human Resources and Legal Guidance

NGO leaders—especially in immature start-up organizations—can be afflicted by the illusion that unity in pursuing a cause can overcome a failure to adopt sound legal practices. Organizations that succeed over the long term combine the passion of issue-driven policy advocates with professional employee management. Lobbying laws are complex. They change often. Protection of the NGO enterprise requires solid human resources, tax, and accounting professionals. These individuals can prove especially important when niche organizations branch out to develop new revenue models as social entrepreneurs.

8. Coalition Building and Stakeholder Input

Civic activists are often driven by righteousness and moral clarity. However, the most effective NGOs demonstrate the value of knowing stakeholders and developing new allies. Creative bridge building can prove the key to winning and developing a sustainable model.

9. Shaping Organizational Culture

Effective NGO leaders are sensitive to the particular bureaucratic culture under which their organization thrives. Even closely linked advocacy groups and service organizations can have remarkably different ways of engaging external publics and internal teams. Leadership of effective NGOs often requires a keen sensitivity to structural weaknesses which can inhibit performance.

10. Recruiting Talented Team Members

NGOs leverage the passion of citizen activists and association members to advance public policy goals, goals often neglected by government. However, no amount of issue-driven advocacy can ensure success if the most important element of the enterprise is overlooked: the people who work there. Effective NGOs resemble a sound baseball team roster; the best deploy different players for roles where management believes they can excel. Recruitment and retention of skilled individuals in NGOs embodies the wisdom scholar Robert Bruner has offered a generation of MBA students, his updating of an Aristotelean dictum on character, the notion that “talent is destiny” (Bruner, 2016).

Effective NGO leaders grasp and apply each of these lessons. Yet, much can go wrong in the area of motivation. Our research uncovered multiple examples where even the most well-intentioned NGO leaders were tempted to go astray and were subsequently beset by predictable dangers, from mission creep to founder’s syndrome to a failure to adopt best management practices. The organizations—and the causes they seek to advance—invariably suffer when a lack of discipline becomes apparent.

Conclusion: The Search for a “Secret Sauce”

The experience of interviewing leaders of top NGOs and studying academic literature on best practices reveals an unrelenting search for a “secret sauce,” that ingredient that can bring out the best in an NGO. This search will continue as the field of endeavor expands. In our chaotic democracy, NGOs are likely to evolve

in fascinating ways. Niche players who set out originally to provide a specific local service may grow to undertake more broad issue advocacy. Some NGOs will conclude it is essential to seek a national, or even a *transnational*, impact.

Those NGO leaders involved in lobbying on behalf of a specific cause may increasingly choose to deliver some direct public services. The well-financed interests of stockholder-focused trade associations will continue to work through commercial and consumer groups to press their agendas. New modalities for financing NGOs are being developed, and social entrepreneurship models may secure exponentially greater resources to apply on behalf of an NGO's mission. Some NGO supporters may embrace profit generation as key to sustaining service delivery and expanding policy impact.

The future of NGOs in the U.S. is promising. NGOs are similar to democracy; both contain the seeds for their own reinvention. If our French visitor Monsieur de Tocqueville returned to the United States to prepare a bicentennial review of his *Democracy in America*, much would surprise him. One can only imagine that what many contemporaries consider to be our most unusual political phenomena—whether a president making foreign policy by tweet, or a flash crowd summoned by social media to a White House protest—would *not* surprise Tocqueville. Both are manifestations of democracy in action. They feature citizens who form cause-driven associations and communicate their passions directly to government officials, or those who govern trying to stay close to the voters. It is safe to conclude, therefore, that while NGOs will continue to evolve in the United States, they will retain what has been their central mission since our nation's founding—citizen engagement in the democratic process of shaping public policy.

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References

1. The author wishes to acknowledge valuable contributions from University Professor and former Dean of UVa's Darden School of Business Robert Bruner and Batten School Professor Kirsten Gelsdorf, as well as graduate assistants Lauren Russell, Sumedha Deshmukh, Alexander Nance, Kelly Kaler, Danielle Childress and Alexandra Hanway. The concepts developed in this essay also benefitted from the analysis of two dozen Batten School MPP students who animated the Fall 2016 UVa seminar PPOL 5350, Best Practices for NGO Leaders. Participants interviewed more than a dozen leaders of top NGOs, from Michael Needham of Heritage Action to Billy Shore of Share Our Strength/No Kid Hungry, from Ken Wollack of the National Democratic Institute to Gabe Metcalf and Jennifer Warburg of SPUR, a national thought leader on urban policy based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

2. "From 2003 to 2013, the number of nonprofit organizations registered with the IRS rose from 1.38 million to 1.41 million...These organizations comprise a diverse range of nonprofits, including art, health, education, and advocacy nonprofits; labor unions; and business and professional associations." Urban Institute, [*The Nonprofit Sector in Brief: Public Charities, Giving, and Volunteering*](#) (October 29, 2015) See also: US State Department, [*Fact Sheet on Non-Governmental Organizations in the United States*](#) (January 20, 2017) "Approximately 1.5 million NGOs operate in the United States. These NGOs undertake a wide array of activities, including political advocacy on issues such as foreign policy, elections, the environment, healthcare, women's rights, economic development, and many other issues."

3. The three texts that provided the most comprehensive foundation for this inquiry include Crutchfield, L. R., & Grant, H. M. (2008). *Forces for good: The six practices of high-impact nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Oster, S. M. (1995). *Strategic management for nonprofit organizations: Theory and cases*. New York: Oxford University Press; and Worth, M. J. (2017). *Nonprofit management: Principles and practice, 4th edition*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications. The seminal essay exploring the growth of NGOs working on transnational issues remains Jessica Tuchman Mathews' "Power Shift," *Foreign Affairs* #76 (1997). The best analyses of the changing management approaches to leading NGOs in the U.S. can be found in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. For a thoughtful bibliographic essay on NGO best practices, see Chad Vickers' chapter in the Batten School's 2017 compilation of case studies, [Best Practices for NGO Leaders](#).

4. "Of the 8,632 AY 2013-2014 graduates from 194 programs, 36 percent were employed within 6 months of graduation across all levels of government, 20 percent in the nonprofit sector, 15 percent in the private sector, and another 3 percent were seeking further education." NASPAA, [*2014-2015 Data Report*](#) (October 18, 2016).

5. Presentation of University Professor and former Dean of the Darden School of Business Robert Bruner, at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, October 19, 2016