



Book Review

Alan Abramson & Benjamin Soskis, *Standing Up for Nonprofits: Advocacy on Federal, Sector-wide Issues*. Cambridge Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration, 2024. Open access. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009401081>.

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Scholars now know quite a bit about the roles and activities of nonprofits that advocate for the public good. Much ink has been spilled praising, protecting, and exploring the degree to which nonprofits do this important work. What has gotten much less attention over the years is the degree to which the sector is an adequate advocate for itself, which is the topic of a much needed and carefully researched new book by Alan Abramson and Ben Soskis, entitled, *Standing Up For Nonprofits: Advocacy on Federal, Sector-wide Issues*.

The authorship team is ideal. Soskis is well-known for his historical work on philanthropy and nonprofits generally, and Abramson has been a leader in highlighting the policy roles of nonprofits for many years. Their deep expertise shines through in this book where they provide both a historical account and interview-based evidence on what nonprofits, especially national infrastructure nonprofits, are doing when it comes to sector-wide advocacy, and how that advocacy is perceived by policymakers. Part of the Cambridge Elements series, this is a relatively short text at about 65 pages but packed with information. It is divided into 15 snapshot style sections and, overall, serves not just as vital information on sectoral advocacy approaches and challenges, but also a history of regulation and policy that affects the sector. It is worth reading just for that.

The book begins by juxtaposing the economic importance of the sector with its wide popularity and presents a puzzle: While the sector has been able to win some policy victories on behalf of the sector, it has not been successful in defending itself on some other important ones. Abramson and Soskis want to know why this “important and generally popular sector has not done better in its public policy efforts.” (p.1). This book is an attempt to answer that question.

Examples of the type of advocacy they are talking about are the sectors’ attempts to protect tax incentives for charitable giving, limit restrictions on advocacy, and intervene in efforts to establish minimum payouts from DAFs. This is not *cause-related* advocacy – the topic of much of the existing nonprofit advocacy literature – but rather the sectors’ ability to advocate for itself and its own interests. These are issues that affect all nonprofits, albeit in different ways, and is typically done by

national nonprofit infrastructure organizations. They argue that this work is currently dominated by five groups – the Council on Foundations, Independent Sector, the National Council of Nonprofits, Philanthropy Roundtable, and United Philanthropy Forum – with additional work done by large national nonprofits (like the YMCA) and some long-standing coalitions.

After describing these organizations and the advocacy issues they are involved with – including a lot of helpful history and context – Abramson and Soskis delve into what kinds of resources and tactics these groups have brought to their work, and how effective they have been. Unfortunately, they show that most of the national nonprofit infrastructure organizations have only limited staff whose duties focus on advocacy and policy work. Further, they find most policymakers have a poor understanding of the sector, its size, economic impact, and degree of professionalization – they still see nonprofits as more of a niche interest, and the arena of do-gooders, not a vital part of the economy and the backbone of many communities.

That perception is important background for the books' conceptual contribution, which is in laying out a conflict about what people expect the nonprofit sector to be and do, which almost certainly affects how successful it can be in its advocacy. Specifically, Abramson and Soskis argue that while we expect nonprofits to promote the public good (e.g. an interest outside their own that benefits society at large), because they are subject to laws and markets like every other organization, they naturally have their own organizational interests. The book asserts that some advocates think of advocacy that supports the interest of the sector as still promoting the public good – as strengthening the sectors' ability to do that kind of work. Others see sectoral-based advocacy as basically the same thing as interest group behavior by any other kind of industry. Abramson and Soskis call this the tension between the “public good” and “trade association” models of advocacy.

This is important for advocacy because depending on whether nonprofits are wanting to be seen as promoting the public good or willing to be seen as an interest group affects the kinds of policies they will promote and tactics they are willing to use. Abramson and Soskis find that some people think the public good angle in their advocacy must be preserved because that is what keeps policymakers receptive. In other words, they worry that if nonprofits lose their special altruistic halo, policymakers won't listen to them. A similar argument in favor of the ‘public good’ approach is that trying to compete toe-to-toe with better resourced interest groups is likely futile so leaning into the moral high ground is a key advantage nonprofits shouldn't want to lose. As one respondent put it, they have to remain the “David” to other interest groups' “Goliath” – because that position is what keeps people believing in them. Others, however, think that policymakers don't really buy the ‘public good’ argument because nonprofits do sometimes act like interest groups. For example, fighting against an increased standard deduction in the hopes that more

people itemizing will increase charitable giving might be good for nonprofits but it's not great for working class Americans. These advocates believe that not being willing to acknowledge that nonprofits have needs and must look out for their business interests leads to nonprofits looking like hypocrites, sometimes underplaying their hand, and, ultimately, diminishing their power. This may point to an area for future research, namely looking at different advocacy campaigns and their framing of issues as either a special interest issue or a public interest issue and seeing what kind of framing is associated with what kind of success.

Another big challenge Abramson and Soskis identify for sector-wide advocacy is that support for the sector is big but “vague and insubstantial.” Maintaining a healthy nonprofit sector is nobody's pet issue and there are not the kinds of passionate and motivated voices that you see around other important policy issues, such as gun violence or child well-being (even though nonprofits work on those things). This is the essential crux of the dilemma they previously identified. Nonprofits truly do represent both the public interest (in terms of the issues they work on) but also have special interest needs (in the form of support for organizational well-being). Nonprofits need champions for the sector, but those are harder to come by than champions for cause-related advocacy. Partially as a result of all this, one of the books' most important findings is that many policymakers are only “weakly supportive” of the nonprofit sector, in regard to its sectoral needs.

The final section of the book is devoted to recommendations for enhancing sector wide advocacy. Some of these recommendations are drawn from conversations with advocates but others are drawn from the very helpful and interesting case studies the book presents. I learned a lot from their histories of what happened in the lead-up to the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA), widely seen as a loss for the nonprofit sector, and the (more successful) sector wide advocacy that was done in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the CARES Act. Based on the totality of their interviews and these case studies, they present a variety of recommendations that should be both helpful to practitioners and interesting from a research perspective. Some are evergreen, such as increased resources for advocacy. Others seem to have emerged more from their analysis, such as the need to better mobilize a grass-tops strategy where local leaders are mobilized to speak on behalf of the sector, highlighting the important local work that is threatened if the sector isn't supported properly. They would also like to see increased congressional knowledge about the value of the sector and encourage sector leaders to develop and vet “prefabricated” legislative asks – a suggestion that seems particularly important given how damaging not having that was in the TCJA fight and how useful it was in the CARES act.

In terms of where the book could have been improved, I would have appreciated the authors grounding their major conceptual contribution – the highlighting of the

tension between the public good and trade association models of advocacy – a bit more in the existing literature. This is a really important and thorny issue for the sector to grapple with, and although Abramson and Soskis do a remarkable job showing how this tension creates difficulties for sector wide advocacy, they stop short of detailing the longer history of the tension itself. Similarly, I wish they had returned to it at the end, so that the reader is better equipped to think about how their recommendations may be better supported by one model or another. This is a small issue, however, in the face of such a well-researched and thought-provoking book.

Overall, this slim volume leads us to ask many important questions – both of the sector and of the policy moment it finds itself in. Will the sector be able to resolve some of its internal differences and speak as one voice during the next four years – an issue that they show has hampered it in the past? Will coalitions become more sophisticated in their advocacy approaches? If Trump is to cut the safety net in the way he promises, how might the nonprofit sector work together to express the importance of government funding to community-based services? In a time when it is more important than ever to understand how policy advocacy can best be deployed to support both the causes that nonprofits champion – and the sector itself – this book is a welcome contribution to knowledge.