Civic Engagement and Voluntary Associations: Reconsidering the Role of the Governance Structures of Advocacy Groups

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Despite the ubiquity of politically oriented voluntary associations, many scholars are unimpressed with the opportunities available for civic participation within the interest group sector. I argue that the dismissal of interest groups as insignificant contributors to civic life has been hasty. We lack data regarding the avenues available to group members to participate in ways other than check writing. Analyzing the political infrastructure of the National Organization for Women (NOW), I show that understanding the internal structure and political dynamics of advocacy groups can contribute to the debate about whether and how member-based political groups impact citizens’ political engagement. Specifically, the governance structure of such groups reveals the extent to which members are, or could be, significant partners in decision-making processes. Finally, I note the contributions associations such as NOW make to the civic education of citizens as well as to the provision of “free spaces” for the exchange of ideas among them. *Polity* (2005) **37**, 315–334. doi:10.1057/polgrave.polity.2300016

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Introduction

Despite the ubiquity of politically oriented voluntary associations, observers of trends in civic engagement remain unimpressed by the opportunities for civic participation available to members of such groups. Scholars have argued, for example, that check-writing is now the dominant form of member participation within such groups. This activity hardly seems to satisfy the requirements of authentic civic engagement, which “implies meaningful connections among citizens and among citizens, issues, institutions and the political system. It implies voice and agency, a feeling of power and effectiveness, with real opportunities to have a say. It implies active participation, with real opportunities to make a difference.” In one study Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman and Henry E. Brady have found financial contributions are less satisfying to citizens who participate this way than other, more integrative forms of political activity. In general, conventional wisdom posits that voluntary associations fail to enhance the development of what Harry Boyte calls the public’s “civic muscle.”

The claim that interest groups play no part in strengthening political engagement is contradicted by numerous studies that document powerful connections between associational membership and political engagement.


The dissonance between these findings, on the one hand, and the research questioning the robustness of groups' connection to their members, on the other hand, may be resolved, at least in part, by closer attention to the "micropolitics" of such groups. Some associations provide more opportunities for participation or for the acquisition of civic skills than others. These variations, I argue, are related to the way organizations are internally structured. Yet, analyses of the relationship between interest groups and civic engagement typically reveal little about the political infrastructures of groups, despite the fact that this infrastructure—or what I call a "governance structure"—is precisely what defines the relationship between members and groups.

This study illustrates the applicability of an approach that emphasizes groups' internal political systems by specifying how the governance structure of one organization, the National Organization for Women (NOW), reveals its relationship with its members. By governance structure I mean an organization's guiding principles and the internal rules concerning its elections, policymaking and finances. The central question is the extent to which NOW's internal political structure permits its members to participate in substantial ways. Founded in 1966 and claiming over 250,000 contributing members and over 500 chapters, NOW is one of the most prominent interest groups in the United States; it is also the largest feminist organization. NOW's political significance and longevity suggest that it is an appropriate and worthwhile case for any analysis of civic engagement in America.

NOW is also an interesting case for this inquiry because, as Anne N. Costain noted, it has transformed itself over time from a social movement group to an interest group. Today, the organization is a fixture within the interest group sector; like its counterparts, it has focused increasingly on more mainstream forms of political action such as the financing of political campaigns. Is the National Organization for Women, which earlier in its history emphasized grassroots mobilization and action, now as deficient as other groups seem to be in providing meaningful opportunities for participation?

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Bringing the Internal Politics of Groups “Back In”
to Research on Civic Engagement

An examination of the internal politics of voluntary associations is a vital, if neglected, means to understand their contribution (or lack thereof) to citizens' civic engagement. In 1995, Robert Putnam argued that citizen’s participation in the broader social and civic life of communities has diminished significantly over the past three decades. His observations engendered a vigorous debate among political scientists; scores of new studies examining this phenomenon and its implications for the health of American democracy followed. For example, interest in the decline of social and civic participation inspired major multi-year seminars that took place at Harvard University (the Saguaro Seminar), the Urban Institute’s Research Initiative on Nonprofit Advocacy (The Advocacy Seminar) and the World Bank. Strikingly, however, few of the reports and other documents generated by these gatherings analyzed how the internal workings of interest groups might affect civic participation. Thus, as Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards argue, the current discourse and research on civic engagement derogates the role of political groups altogether.

Although overlooked in contemporary analyses, attention to the political history and development not only of the voluntary sector as a whole, but of voluntary associations themselves, facilitates our ability to weigh their overall contributions as “mediating institutions.” Boyte argues that mediating institutions provide settings in which people have significant ownership and space for experiment and self-organization, connect people’s everyday lives to larger public arenas... where people learned the political skills of dealing with different sorts of people—negotiation, bargaining, political discussion, the messy ambiguity of much of public life through which people felt some measure of power in public affairs.

Without assessments of the organizations’ own political systems, however, it is a perplexing task at best to determine whether voluntary associations perform

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these mediating functions. Yet, our grasp of internal political machinery and dynamics of political groups remains thin. Christopher Bosso notes, for example, "students of interest groups have spent little time understanding the practical concerns that dominate discussion within advocacy organization themselves over the long haul."

Exceptions to this rule illustrate how fruitful such modes of inquiry can be: Jane Mansbridge's analysis of the ratification campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), for example, showed how a policy that appeared to enjoy widespread support from the public and from social movement groups could, nevertheless, fail. Mansbridge argues that this failure can be understood, in part, as a result of the strategic constraints imposed upon the organization at the forefront of the campaign, the National Organization for Women, by its own membership. Students of social movements have historically focused more consistently on intraorganizational issues than analysts of interest group behavior. However, political scientists are slowly beginning to return to examinations of the internal politics of groups, including the ways in which members may influence their organization's structure, agenda and strategic choices.

13. As Terry Moe has noted, this approach was more common several decades ago: a few of the groundbreaking examinations of the internal politics of political groups include the analyses of political parties by Robert Michels and Moishe Ostrogorski and of unions by Seymour Martin Lipset, M.A. Trow and J.S. Coleman. These authors debated the extent to which political organizations enhanced democratic representation, especially given the tendency for elites to control processes and outcomes in such groups. Terry M. Moe, *The Organization of Interests: Incentives and the Internal Dynamics of Political Interest Groups* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

14. Bosso, "Rethinking the Concept of Membership."


Governance Structures and Membership Participation in the National Organization for Women

Information gleaned from field research, document analysis and interviews form the basis of this case study. The documents examined spanned more than three decades of NOW’s history and included nearly complete sets of national meeting minutes, annual conference reports, national newsletters and national budgets.19

I attended six of NOW’s national membership conferences and one regional conference as a participant observer between 1992 and 2003 and examined transcripts of previous conference plenary sessions. These conferences provided an excellent window into NOW’s internal politics; they are the locus of debates among members, and between members and leaders regarding the group’s official policies, priorities, goals and tactics. In addition, I analyzed almost 30 years’ worth of official conference guides issued to members at every annual meeting. These detailed guides allowed me to examine the kinds of events leaders planned for such gatherings. It was possible to determine, for example, whether conferences were intended to function as social or “cheerleading” events or whether they included meaningful opportunities for debate and for the teaching or exercise of civic skills.

To clarify NOW’s internal political dynamics and processes, open-ended as well as structured in-person interviews were also conducted with a stratified sample of 20 respondents. The sample included NOW leaders (including Patricia Ireland and Kim Gandy, the most recent presidents of the organization), founders of the organization, long-time activists and leaders from a variety of geographic regions, and “young feminists” who are relatively new to the organization.

It is important to note that this analysis does not, for the most part, speak to how many members actually participate regularly in any particular way. Instead, the focus is on the potential for members to become involved in ways that might


19. All primary documents, unless noted otherwise, are archived at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe, National Organization for Women Collection.
fundamentally impact the organization's leadership and its agenda. Clearly, not all members will be equally involved at all times or in all ways within an organization. Rather, what is important is whether, when an issue becomes salient to members, avenues exist within the group for those members to exercise their influence, organize other members and communicate their concerns to leaders.

Of course, an analysis of a single organization can provide only case-specific answers to the larger question engaged by this paper, which is whether and to what extent membership-based voluntary associations contribute to the political engagement of citizens. Nevertheless, I argue that this case strongly indicates the value of more comprehensive studies of the governance structures of political associations. The political infrastructure of such groups reveals the extent to which its members are, or could be, significant partners in organizational decision-making. The greater the potential influence of group members on the formation of policy and priorities, the more likely they are to become actively involved in the group. I argue that in this situation, the group's leadership will also more accurately grasp and execute its members' preferences. In turn, leaders may then more legitimately claim to speak for group members when they lobby legislators.

The discussion that follows fleshes out the components of NOW's governance structure. First, the formation of NOW's guiding principles and how those principles laid the path for its future relationship with its members is described. The study then appraises the other building blocks of the group's governance structure: its election process, its policymaking procedures and its financial structure. Finally, I consider whether and how these principles and procedures present NOW members with appreciable means of exerting their influence within their group.

The guiding principles of NOW can be best understood as a collection of ideas that became embedded in the language, strategies and expectations of members and leaders during NOW's formative period (1966–1971). Expressed most formally in the organization's Statement of Purpose, Bill of Rights and bylaws, these principles, which can also be described as the group's collective belief system, shaped its structure, goals, and tactical choices over time.

Members who were not also national leaders shaped the National Organization for Women in important ways even during the organization's early years.

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Ironically, at the organization's inception, NOW leaders did not envision a membership-based organization at all. Pressure from NOW members and local leaders soon transformed their views on this issue. The development of the more radical "women's liberation" wing of the women's rights movement after 1967 significantly influenced the development of NOW's belief system, largely a result of the influence of members who belonged to both NOW and other women's liberation groups. NOW members and local leaders helped fold into NOW's guiding principles many of the precepts of the women's liberation movement. Despite the resistance of some NOW leaders including Betty Friedan, for example, in 1971 the organization moved to adopt policies originally propounded by women's liberation groups, such as the commitment to the rights of lesbian women. NOW's members and leaders thus participated in a dynamic "framing process" that spanned the years 1966 and 1971. The transformation of the group's guiding principles during this period is the result of what Douglas McAdam describes as "the conscious, strategic efforts of movement groups to fashion meaningful accounts of themselves and the issues at hand in order to motivate and legitimate their efforts." 

This framing process culminated in the adoption of a set of principles that committed the organization, its leaders and members to:

- remain on the "vanguard" of the women's rights movement;
- maintain the support and vitality of the organization's grassroots base;
- maintain a focus on a broad range of issues and tactics;
- remain politically independent of parties and the government; and
- focus on action rather than research or educational activities.

From 1971 onward, the significance of these principles to both leaders and members is apparent in NOW's organizational meetings, its correspondence,
board meeting minutes, and newsletters and conference transcripts. The impact of NOW's guiding principles is most clearly manifested during debates over strategy choice and change. Between 1970 and 1982, for example, NOW leaders refrained from fully committing the organization's resources to a new strategy (the direct participation in electoral politics) despite their conviction that this activity held great promise as a route to ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).26 Leaders were constrained by the protests of NOW members who resisted the adoption of the strategy, arguing that involvement in the electoral arena threatened to subvert NOW's guiding principles. At the organization's annual conferences, NOW members voiced the concern that participating in mainstream political activity is dangerous because it is elite-focused and divorced from the grassroots-based mobilization and activism to which NOW is committed. In their view, participation in electoral politics threatened to "co-opt" the group by undermining the organization's commitment to more radical change and to feminist mobilization.

The ERAs demise in 1982 provided NOW leaders such as Eleanor Smeal with a political opportunity within their own organization to argue more forcefully and more convincingly that NOW must pursue power in the electoral arena. Nevertheless, members continued to press NOW leaders for assurance that the organization was not abandoning its principles.27 Leaders responded by increasing funding to facilitate communication between leaders and chapters (intended to alleviate members' concerns that involvement in mainstream politics would distance NOW leaders from rank-and-file members) and by increasing funding for consciousness raising activities (addressing fears that NOW might repudiate its commitment to the continued mobilization of feminist activists). The fact that NOW's political action committee (NOW/PAC) still endorses only those candidates approved by the state and local organizations is a more recent example of NOW's attention to its grassroots members.

The foregoing description of the establishment of NOW's guiding principles elaborates one aspect of the organization's governance. For example, this overview revealed the pivotal role played by NOW members in the early development of the organization. Overcoming reluctance from national leaders, rank-and-file NOW members and local NOW leaders participated in shaping the course of the organization by helping to frame its guiding principles. Second, not only did NOW's organizational principles express a commitment to grassroots, membership-based mobilization, but also that these principles remain central tenets of the organization. NOW members continue to apprehend and maintain a commitment to the constituent elements of NOW's guiding values. These precepts

27. Barakso, "Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism," ch. 3.
also resound in the decisions NOW leaders make. NOW’s guiding principles provide a framework for the group that validates member participation and provides opportunities for members to act as autonomous agents.

**Elections, Policymaking and Financial Processes**

The second major component of NOW’s governance structure is composed of its procedures for electing leaders, its policymaking and financial structure. In this section, I demonstrate how NOW’s institutional procedures incorporate the group’s guiding principles, helping in turn to sustain them.

*Elections*

Elections, of course, are about choosing leaders. In the case of the National Organization for Women, members choose leaders from among their ranks. One enduring legacy left to NOW courtesy of the women’s liberation movement involves a set of beliefs about the role of leaders in organizations. An abiding suspicion of leaders, an abhorrence of elitism and a wariness of the “establishment” are still among the most commonly expressed concerns among NOW members. During the heyday of the women’s liberation movement, these tenaciously held ideas proved quite destructive to the vitality of many feminist organizations. While less emphatically applied today, such values nevertheless continue to influence NOW’s election processes.

For example, while in most other large voluntary associations a board of directors nominates and elects its executive officers, in NOW its members are charged with this responsibility. Every 4 years at its annual conference, members elect a slate of executive officers (a president, vice president-executive, vice president-action and vice president-membership), and a board of directors. Officers draw a salary and they may run for re-election for a maximum of two consecutive terms. NOW’s bylaws state that “all national officers shall have been members of NOW for at least 4 years immediately prior to election and shall have served at least 1 year as a chapter or state officer or National member,” a provision that helps establish candidates’ loyalty to and understanding of the group. Elections are competitive and often elicit vigorous campaigning among candidates and the membership.

Approximately 34 members are elected to NOW’s board of directors for a maximum of two consecutive 2-year terms. These elections are held within each of the organization’s nine regions at their separate annual meetings. To increase

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diversity and minimize the appearance of elitism, bylaws state that persons of
color must fill a minimum number of seats on the board. The board meets three
to five times a year. Its members are unsalaried, although the expenses they
accrue are reimbursed.

NOW election campaign rhetoric is frequently peppered with commentary
that hearkens to the early years of the modern women's movement. NOW
members consistently inveigh against perceived elitist tendencies among its
leadership. At NOW's 1993 annual conference, for example, members circulated a
petition that proposed to enjoin NOW executive officers from earning salaries
higher than any staff member, including staff organizers and receptionists. Efia
Nwangaza, a presidential candidate at this conference, also decried the fact that
the previous leaders pursued "... an elitist, classist, racist approach to issues." As
evidence, journalist Thomas Edsall reported that Nwangaza pointed to Patricia
Ireland's salary ($110,000) and events including "the Lebutante Ball that was $125
per person (and) the Women of Power luncheon, which was $100." She argued
"there was nothing for women who are of average income to make meaningful
contact with this organization." 29

Yet, NOW's local, state, regional and national elections (which are held at
every level of the organization) provide regular and frequent avenues through
which rank-and-file members may attain positions of influence themselves. In
fact, the sheer number of elections held throughout the organization indicates
that opportunities to attain leadership positions are not limited to a select group.
Board turnover, for example, is considerable. The frequency of elections within
NOW and its network of hundreds of chapters work in favor of motivated rank-
and-file members who wish to "make meaningful contact" with the national level
of the organization. For example, since most chapters depend on a relatively
small core of activists (regardless of their total membership), even a relatively
new member may in short order become a chapter delegate to NOW's annual
convention, a chapter officer, a state president, and then proceed to win election
as a region's delegate to the national board. NOW's leadership structure is thus
quite permeable. Finally, frequent campaigns and elections provide public,
subsidized forums for NOW members to express their dissent, to discharge
leaders, and to present alternatives to the membership. In spite of these
opportunities, a NOW member who continues to feel stymied within her local
chapter may often form a new one.

A member's income should not represent an insurmountable barrier to
participation in NOW's electoral process. Sliding scale membership and

29. Thomas B. Edsall, "Ireland Wins Bitter Battle for NOW Post; Challenger Alleged Racism and
Elitism," Washington Post, 4 July 1993. See also the statements of opposing slates in "Teams Come
conference fees ensure that no individual is barred from participating in elections (or in policymaking for that matter) for financial reasons. Attending conferences is nevertheless an expensive activity. I encountered many NOW members employed in the nonprofit sector for whom a stay in a Miami Beach hotel for several nights represented a substantial financial sacrifice. Activists customarily pool resources by packing hotel rooms and by traveling and sharing meals together. In addition, some chapters raise funds to subsidize a portion of the travel expenses of their delegates.

Policymaking

NOW members may express their preferences with respect to national policies at yearly national conferences that are held "for the purpose of transacting the business of the organization." This conference constitutes "the supreme governing body of NOW." Here members elect national leaders, participate in issue and strategy training workshops, develop and vote on policy resolutions, and attend special interest caucuses meetings. At conference plenary sessions, in addition to speechmaking and the customary organizational cheerleading, policy resolutions are introduced, discussed and voted upon by members.

Kim Gandy (NOW's current president) has called NOW's policymaking procedures "excruciatingly democratic." 30 Delegates attend issue hearings at which any member may offer proposals to change NOW policy positions, its organizational priorities, or its structure. After deliberation, hearing attendees vote on the proposals. Resolutions surviving this process may then be considered and voted upon by all delegates in a plenary session. It is also possible (and commonplace) to petition for the opportunity to present a resolution for a vote by the body; such a petition must receive a specified minimum number of signatures, which normally comprises between 100 and 200 conference attendees. During the final plenary session of the conference, delegates to the convention (chosen by their local chapters) may amend the resolutions before they are voted upon. 31 Many non-controversial resolutions are approved by unanimous consent. Nevertheless, due to time constraints, conference attendees ultimately consider only approximately half of the remaining resolutions. Those not addressed at the session are generally remanded to the national board for disposition.

NOW leaders, including the four officers and the national board, enjoy some discretion in shaping the activities of the national organization and its agenda

(though much less with respect to the priorities of local and state organizations). Empowered to make decisions for NOW between annual conferences, national leaders are free to initiate projects, for example, so long as these initiatives are in accordance with NOW’s Statement of Purpose and bylaws. In addition, only the board may allocate funds among projects.

Nevertheless, for significant alterations in policy, NOW’s officers and its board members solicit approval from members before proceeding. For example, national leaders conceived of and initiated two major projects in the 1990s, “Elect Women for a Change” and “Victory 2000.” Nevertheless, members clearly had the opportunity to reject these initiatives at several levels of the policymaking process.

Annual national level conferences (in addition to state and regional conferences) facilitate the ability of disgruntled members (individually or as factions) to mobilize other members, to express their grievances and to propose remedies to national leaders and the members at large. NOW leaders, on the other hand, benefit from and employ techniques to maintain their preferred policies and to dampen, although not necessarily extinguish, minor insurrections. Events at NOW’s 2000 conference illustrate the balance of power between national leaders and members. Members of a local Florida chapter criticized NOW’s national officers for their lack of attention to the decline in the number of members and chapters for allowing the organization to drift away from its main goals. When this contingent attempted to bring their concerns before the attendees of the 2000 national conference (using a variety of authorized and unauthorized means), national leaders and their supporters effectively mobilized to rebut these activists’ claims and to prevent their resolutions from proceeding to the convention floor. Nevertheless, by availing themselves of NOW’s petition process, the faction successfully obtained enough signatures to allow two of their resolutions to be presented to conference delegates for a vote.

An institutional rule concerning the management of the final list of proposed conference resolutions provides national NOW leaders with an advantageous perquisite, however. They appoint a Resolutions Committee, whose task is to determine and publish the order in which delegates will consider the proposals. Whether resolutions rank highly on the list or not is material because they are normally considered in the order decided upon by the Resolutions Committee. While several resolutions are frequently dispatched by unanimous consent, the vast majority requires deliberation. Unfortunately, for those whose policy proposals are situated at the bottom of the agenda, conference delegates rarely have the opportunity to vote on all resolutions up for consideration; time simply runs out. Those resolutions are generally remanded to the national board for a final judgment. Cognizant of these facts, I asked one long-standing member of NOW and a member of the Resolutions Committee that year to explain the
Committee's procedure for constructing the order of resolutions. She informed me that they were listed randomly. However, the next morning, the protesting factions' resolutions ranked at the bottom of the official resolutions list, keeping company with a proposal asking the body to vote in favor of women's right to roam "top-free."

Although the factioned Floridians ultimately lost their battle to hear their resolution debated on the floor of the conference's plenary session, these members accrued other benefits from their campaign. Although clearly newly fledged activists, they participated energetically and competently in the organization's political infrastructure. The contingent employed parliamentary procedures throughout the plenary session in an effort to move their resolution closer to the top of the list. When this tactic failed, they invoked other maneuvers designed to expedite the proceedings, hoping that the time saved would benefit their own cause. They gleaned these strategies and the others they used throughout the conference from more experienced NOW activists and leaders in their state and region.

Even when they encounter resistance from national leaders, rank-and-file members can exert demonstrable influence on the organization. The process favors activists who exhibit persistence, who are willing and able to mobilize others, and who are adept enough to form strategic alliances. In 1995, for example, another faction complained that NOW lacked focus and demanded that the organization design a long-term strategic plan. Their proposal failed, but as a concession, a former board member suggested to national leaders that they devote an upcoming national conference to the reconsideration of the organization's Statement of Purpose. The board initially demurred but ultimately capitulated, largely due to this member's persistence and her ability to mobilize members to support her.

Finally, members play vital roles in NOW's policy process not only by proposing, debating and casting votes but also in their implementation. For example, policy resolutions passed at the national conference are referred to committees (which are chaired by national appointees) that are charged with carrying out the mandate. However, if a committee chair fails to contact the other committee members, to organize meetings or delegate tasks, or if committee members shirk their duties, the resolution cannot be implemented. Even those resolutions passed by "the supreme governing body of NOW" are stillborn without significant contributions from ordinary activists.

Finances

The financial structure of voluntary associations is one indication of how dependent the national level of an organization is on its subunits. Greater
dependence on membership renewals (as opposed to, say, corporate donations or outside grants) will theoretically increase the national level’s attention to member interests and needs. On the other hand, the extent to which national levels of associations subsidize local levels is also revealing, especially when the degree to which such support may be utilized by subunits for their own purposes is considered.

NOW’s financial system underscores the centrality of members to its financial well-being. Abjuring contributions that might compromise its independence from governmental or other entities (as directed by its guiding principles), NOW relies heavily on membership dues and donations. Approximately two-thirds of its income is derived from membership dues.32 In addition, as is true for other voluntary associations, due to the cost of direct mail, membership renewals yield more funds than new memberships. These facts help explain why dips in the membership rolls are serious considerations for national leaders, heightening incentives for NOW officers to accommodate current members’ preferences when possible and use other techniques to pacify or subdue their dissatisfaction when it is not.

Members are not only central as income generators but also play a role in distributing those funds in several ways. NOW’s governance structure does not assume that the organization’s members will be passive check writers. Members elected to the board vote on NOW’s budget allocations, for example. In addition, national financial support underwrites the state levels of the organization which in turn provide valuable networking, communication and mobilizing capabilities for their chapters. All levels also benefit from the national office’s provision of a variety of training workshops.

Finally, the national level of NOW rebates a share of its revenue to its subunits, comprising almost 14% of its total income in 2000.33 The national office retains for itself less than half of each membership fee ($35). The rest is distributed to local, state and regional entities.34 The reallocation of funds to subunits supports such activities as the production and distribution of newsletters whose content is independent of national control; they also improve chapters’ ability to pursue projects that local members consider priorities. Local chapters are accorded a substantial level of autonomy and deference from the national level in NOW’s electoral and policymaking processes; they also enjoy a share of autonomy in the way the organization’s finances are structured.

33. The following discussion is drawn largely from Barakso, Governing NOW, ch. 8.
34. Barakso, “Mobilizing and Sustaining Grassroots Activism,” 231.
Discussion

NOW’s governance structure confirms that in at least one prominent national interest group, members are not limited to acting as “organizational wallpaper.” They are provided substantial opportunities to influence the group’s agenda, structure and policy positions.35 One component of NOW’s political infrastructure, its institutional rules, offers a broad selection of activities in which group members may partake. The other component of the group’s governance structure, its guiding principles, reinforces the central role of members in NOW.

NOW’s political system facilitates both members’ participation in the organization and in politics more generally in at least two critical ways. First, the organization directly imparts civic skills to members. Second, NOW coordinates and subsidizes “face-to-face” encounters that may foster both the development of social capital and a public sphere characterized by deliberative decision-making.

Civic Skills and Civic Education

Civic skills are “the participatory or ‘democratic’-type activities which [organizations] give their members the opportunity to perform, and which are supposed to increase the likelihood of these same members participating in the political process.”36 As I have shown, NOW members frequently rotate into leadership positions at all levels of the organization. More seasoned members mentor new members. In addition, the creation and distribution of other kinds of information relevant to political life are ubiquitous at all levels of NOW. Both leaders and members develop and attend the many workshops and training sessions held at local, state, regional and national conferences. These include presentations on specific policy issues that a member, chapter or national officer is particularly concerned about or on tactics she would like to employ. NOW offers consciousness-raising workshops, training on how to recruit and maintain members, on organizing political campaigns, and on managing chapter finances.

35. Bosso argues that members may function only as “organizational wallpaper” in environmental groups today, Bosso, “Rethinking the Concept of Membership,” 13.

36. Although Ayala refers here to “nonpolitical organizations” such as the religious institutions described in Verba, Schlozman and Brady’s *Voice and Equality*, there is no good theoretical reason to assume that this statement does not apply to the skills transmitted through politically oriented voluntary associations. Louis J. Ayala, “Trained for Democracy: The Differing Effects of Voluntary and Involuntary Organizations on Political Participation,” *Political Research Quarterly* 53 (March 2002): 99–115. For more on the transference of civic skills and civic education through organizations see, for example, Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Roberta S. Sigel, *Political Learning in Adulthood* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Robert Putnam, Presidential Address to American Political Science Association, MA, 29 August 2002.
Additionally, every level of the organization produces its own newsletters, advertises the political events they decide to sponsor, and communicates and strategizes with activists independently of the national office. The transmission of skills and of information flows from members to its leaders and vice versa.

Verba, Schlozman and Brady suggest these skills are transferable to other venues; such activities may encourage members to become more widely active in national politics.\textsuperscript{37} In many ways NOW is a “school of democracy.” Both leaders and rank-and-file members impart and utilize various political skills, that may be deployed not only in other interest groups but also in formal political institutions, from local school boards to legislatures. NOW members learn about the (strategic) use of parliamentary procedure, attain an understanding of the legislative process (including not only lobbying tactics but also the process of policy formation and implementation) at all governmental levels, and gain exposure to the mechanics of local, state and national electoral campaigns.

\textit{Sponsoring Democratic Deliberation}

Pamela Paxton notes that the quality of citizen participation, rather than the sheer number of political acts, should concern scholars interested in the relationship between civic engagement and democracy.\textsuperscript{38} One means of gauging citizen engagement is by considering how frequently group members encounter opportunities to engage in extended dialogue with each other. Scholars have argued in fact that a significant fraction of citizen participation must be comprised of such discussions which, ideally, transpire in open forums that grant participants significant freedom of expression. Sara Evans and Harry Boyte term these “free spaces,” while Jürgen Habermas envisions a “public sphere” which is “a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action.”\textsuperscript{39}

Those advocating on behalf of a more deliberative politics contend that institutions that encourage face-to-face interactions and free exchanges among citizens engender a more equitable and democratic polity.\textsuperscript{40} Mansbridge claims, for


\textsuperscript{38} Paxton, “Social Capital and Democracy,” 255.


example, that such deliberation can induce citizens to become committed to common goals and interests.\textsuperscript{41} For Benjamin Barber, such citizen-to-citizen forms of public communication are valuable because they are more egalitarian than other forms of political discourse.\textsuperscript{42}

The governance structure of NOW offers members both regular opportunities and the “free space” necessary to debate, discuss, disagree, and arrive at a consensus with other members. NOW members are regularly exposed to new ways of thinking about their own lives, their communities and nation.\textsuperscript{43} I argue that NOW members may also join, initiate and direct meaningful discussions about policies and problems that concern them. They have considerable power to operate independently from national leaders, including the freedom to dissent publicly from them. The democratic deliberations that transpire within NOW take place at the micro-level of the polity; however, those conversations and debates encourage members/citizens to adopt less self-interested points of view of the macro-political sphere. Finally, NOW frequently organizes the “bridging” activities that Putnam argues enhance civic engagement by organizing summits aimed at non-members.\textsuperscript{44} Sponsoring a total of six of these gatherings between 1991 and 1999, NOW organized Young Feminist Summits in 1991, 1995 and 1997, a Women of Color and Allies Summit in 1998, an ERA Summit in 1995 and a Lesbian Rights Summit in 1999.

At the same time, as is true in any large voluntary organization, most NOW members devote limited time and attention to the organization. A significant proportion limits their activity to writing checks to the organization. Rather than dismiss these individuals, a more accurate characterization is that this group constitutes a cohort of “latent” members: individuals who could be “activated,” but who are not currently involved in a group in substantial ways.\textsuperscript{45} One reason these members are important is because salient issues and/or instability in the political order have the potential to activate their political participation. Interest groups such as NOW offer multiple channels to convert effectively latent members into knowledgeable and competent participants in civic life. An


\textsuperscript{42} Benjamin Barber, A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 85.


\textsuperscript{44} Putnam distinguishes between “bridging” social capital that reaches across sociopolitical cleavages and the perhaps less beneficial “bonding” social capital that is characterized by close-knit, insular ties. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival, 22.

\textsuperscript{45} Schier, By Invitation Only.
example of this is NOW’s incorporation of thousands of new activists during the campaign to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment between 1972 and 1982. The organization’s structure, networks and information production dramatically lowers the costs of information and of participation for all members—latent and active alike. When a personal or political condition makes their activism salient, latent members benefit from the organization’s infrastructure.  

The high level of representation of members in NOW and the frequent occasions for public discussion, it may be argued, is undermined by a white, middle-class focus and agenda. Newer feminist organizations have claimed that NOW and other women’s groups fail to take into account the concerns of women from diverse ethnic groups, of young women and of poor women. The vast majority of voluntary associations can, and have been, similarly criticized for failing to attract a diverse membership. The NAACP has been criticized for failing to recognize the leadership of women in its ranks and for failing to mount a concerted effort on behalf of poor women with respect to welfare reform, for example. 

Women of color are represented at the highest levels of NOW leadership, holding executive office (currently, executive vice president and vice president for action) and positions on the national board. Its bylaws call for a minimum number of board seats in each region to be reserved for racial and ethnic minority representation and NOW also requires chapters to implement affirmative action plans. The organization subsidizes major gatherings of women of color, young women, lesbians, and poor women and actively seeks coalition with other groups representing these women. It also maintains a nominal membership fee for those with low or no income. Although these initiatives have not fully integrated the organization, they do attest to the organization’s consistent and ongoing attempts to open and maintain connections across real and socially constructed boundaries.

Another caveat is that NOW may be an atypical political group. Yet other research suggests that it is not alone in fostering civic engagement. Large national organizations such as the Sierra Club, for example, also encourage and provide public spaces for deliberation and for opportunities for the development of transferable civic skills. Even the AARP which now lacks any institutionalized method by which members can influence the national level’s priorities (save by

their exit), finds itself “running scared” at the possibility that its members might abandon them.\(^{49}\) In addition, the AARP relies upon on the participation of thousands of volunteers each day for the maintenance of their programs. Finally, in a recent study I found significant variation in the scope and quality of opportunities for meaningful participation in six large national interest groups including Amnesty International and the NAACP; analyses of their political infrastructures show that these associations cannot easily be characterized as ones whose members are limited to participating via financial contributions.\(^{50}\)

Much, then, remains to be discovered about the internal political organization of voluntary associations. In the absence of further and more comprehensive investigations, we cannot determine with any precision the strength of democratic and representative processes within interest groups. This strength affects the overall quality of citizens' representation within policymaking arenas. This is an especially critical matter since interest groups constitute such a vital link between citizens and their local, state and national government.

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50. Barakso, "Membership Influence."