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COALITION MAINTENANCE

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ABSTRACT

Organizations are building advocacy coalitions as a way of strengthening their survival skills. This article reports on a case study of the factors associated with maintaining an advocacy coalition. The survival of a coalition appears to depend on whether it can insure its member organizations of the payoffs from committing their resources for advocacy purposes.

Human service organizations are operating in a cost-cutting environment. The need to strengthen organizational survival skills is becoming apparent as more cut-back legislation, such as Gramm Rudman, is passed. Consequently, organizations are sharing perceptions, actively organizing, and building cohesive structures. They are building coalitions in order to strengthen their survival skills. Coalitions provide a mechanism through which very separate and diverse organizations can cooperate and work together around a common goal. Yet, each organization can maintain its own identity and autonomy.

Several definitions of coalitions have been suggested in the literature (see Gamson, 1961; Kelley, 1968; Groennings, Kelley and Leiserson, 1970; and Boissevain, 1974). Kelley's (1968, pp. 62-63) definition is probably the most useful in understanding the behavior of a coalition. He defines a coalition as a group of organizational actors who: 1) agree to pursue a common and

articulated goal; 2) pool their relevant resources in pursuit of this goal; 3) engage in conscious communication concerning the goal and the means of obtaining it; and 4) agree on the distribution of the payoff (benefits) received when obtaining the goal.

Studies of coalition behavior have primarily focused on such issues as the size of coalitions, when they occur, who coalesces, the payoffs each organization commands, and the time and processes of bargaining (see Caplow, 1956, 1968; Gamson, 1961, 1964; Riker, 1962; Chertkoff, 1966, 1967; Kelley, 1968; Adrian and Press, 1968; and Boisse-vain and Mitchell, 1973). Studies of the factors relevant to the termination of continuous coalitions, or alternatively, what perpetuates them are lacking in the literature.

In response to this lack of the literature on coalition maintenance, a case study was conducted in 1981 of the Community Congress of San Diego. The factors associated with maintaining this advocacy coalition were examined. This coalition was formed in 1970 and is one of the oldest successful, continuous coalitions. The key factors examined were whether the member organizations agreed on the domain and ideology of the coalition, the coordination of the coalition's activities, and the quality of the coalition's work.

In order to study coalition maintenance, one needs to establish the point at which a coalition moves from formation to maintenance. The author suggests that once the organizational actors coalesce around an issue(s), mobilize resources, establish a purpose for the coalition, and a leader, for all practical purposes the coalition has been formed. Thus, coalition maintenance is the process of supporting the life of the coalition, in order to keep it from declining and to sustain it against opposing forces.

It is assumed that organizations join a coalition with minimal levels of commitment. It is not until the organizational actors interact that they are able to assess the costs and the payoffs from being a member of the coalition. As a consequence, the process of forming a coalition may have little influence on what happens after the

organizations coalesce. It is assumed that once
coalitions are formed, they take on a life of their
own (Roberts-DeGennaro, 1985).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF COALITION

During the late 1960´s, a small group of
alternative human service organizations in San
Diego inititated a series of meetings. Discussions
focused on the ways in which these organizations
could pool their efforts toward improving their
power base through political advocacy. After more
than a year of such meetings, the group formed a
coalition, the Community Congress of San Diego, in
1970.

The organizations that created this coalition
initially performed all of its functions from
governance to typing. Later, the member organ-
izations decided to acquire funding and support the
coalition with an office and a small staff. Over
the past several years, staff size increased and
staff roles became more diverse. Yet, staff
functions were dependent on the leadership
directed from the member organizations.

The coalition was successful in its political
advocacy efforts. One successful advocacy effort
occurred in 1971 when the coalition mobilized
community pressure to have the United Way
establish a new Demonstration and Development
Fund for organizations outside the United Way´s
traditional membership. In 1974, the coalition and
a local minority federation provided the community
leadership to persuade the Board of Supervisors and
the City Council to allocate revenue sharing funds
for human services rather than buildings. In the
early 1980´s, the coalition developed an approach
to analyzing the effects of the proposed budgetary
reductions upon the community. The effects of the
proposed funding cutbacks on federal, state, and
local budgets were documented by the coalition
(Community Congress of San Diego, 1981a and b).
Local government officials utilized these analyzes
in their budget deliberations around the allocation
of funds for human services.

The services provided by this coalition compli-

mented its political advocacy efforts. In the early
1980's when this study was conducted, the major
types of services provided by the coalition were
(Community Congress of San Diego, 1981c, p. 5):
     1. Grantspersonship and fundraising
services including research, information and tech-
nical assistance;
     2. Publication of two ongoing publica-
tions;
     3. Education and training, including five
major projects focusing on the needs of trainers,
administrators, staff developers, and service
workers in community organizations, and of
managers in socially responsible businesses;
     4. Special projects in management, public
relations, non-profit law and community economic
development;
     5. Consortia funding coordination, inclu-
ding proposal writing, management and training for
a community anti-crime project involving different
member organizations; and
     6. Health insurance program for employ-
ees in the member organizations.

    In 1981, there were 42 member organizations
and about 125 individuals that comprised the
general membership of Community Congress. The
member organizations included senior self-help
programs, youth serving programs, women's center,
welfare rights group, gay social services, emer-
gency housing services, employment programs, legal
centers, community clinics, an environmental group,
an alternative school, a public interest research
group, a community arts center, socially responsible
business enterprises and other organizations.

    When an organization desired membership in the
coalition in 1981, it submitted a written statement
of its goals, objectives, and program activities to
the general membership. This statement included
the prospective member organization's reason for
desiring membership in the coalition. A designated
representative from the organization was expected
to attend a general membership meeting at which the
organization's application for membership was
presented. New members were approved by a
majority of the members in attendance at a general

membership meeting. If the organization was approved for membership, the organization was required to pay an annual membership fee (Community Congress of San Diego, 1978).

The primary leadership for decision-making and policy development was the coalition's board of directors. The directives of the board were primarily carried out by staff. In addition, the board and general membership provided manpower for important planning committees and task forces, which researched community problems, formulated position papers on program objectives, and created strategies to implement those objectives.

RATIONALE FOR STUDY

In the early 1980's, the member organizations and the Community Congress lost some government grants and received cutbacks in funding from the Community Services Administration. The consolidation of federal categorical programs into state block grants decreased other funding sources for the member organizations and the coalition. Consequently, the coalition was confronted with a challenge to survive, in order to maintain its efforts toward social action (Roberts, 1983).

Other human service organizations were also struggling to survive in this turbulent political and economic environment. In some cases, organizations started initiating mergers with organizations and building organized advocacy groups (Roberts-DeGennaro, 1986a). Because of the successful history and tenure of the Community Congress, it provided a case for studying the factors associated with maintaining a coalition. A case study of coalition maintenance could provide direction to groups forming coalitions or re-building existing coalitions.

Interest in the interaction between organizations and their environments has been evolving since the 1960's. Several issues, e.g., bureaucracy, organizational characteristics, technology, etc., were studied by sociologists conducting organizatinal research during the 1960's (see March and Simon, 1958; Udy, 1959; Pugh, et.al., 1963,

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1968, and 1969; Kahn, et.al., 1964). By the late 1960´s, researchers concerned with organizational behavior began to look outside the organization realizing that much of what goes on in an organization is directly or indirectly affected by outside influences of various sorts. Consequently, theories on the interactions between organizational units and their environment emerged (see Emery and Trist, 1965; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Thompson, 1967; Zald, 1970a and b; Hall and Clark, 1974; and Meyer, 1978).

The political-economy perspective has been one of the predominant approaches used in analyzing organizations and their environments (see Zald, 1970a and b; Wamsley and Zald, 1973a and b: Benson, et. al., 1973; Benson, 1975). An organization´s political-economy is perceived as having internal and external aspects. Analysis of the internal political-economy focuses on the interactions within an organization. Analysis of the external political-economy focuses on the interactions between the organization and its environment. The latter analysis of the external political-economy was conducted in the present study.

Wamsley and Zald (1973a, p. 64) suggest an external political-economy represents the distribution of sentiment and power resources among the member organizations in a coalition, i.e., oppposition to or support of the coalition, its goals and programs. The distribution of sentiment and power is a reflection of: 1) the dramaturgy or emotive element among the members; 2) the perceived expertise of the coalition; 3) the degree to which its impact is felt; 4) the breadth (number of groups and individuals affected or interested) of the coalition; 5) the intensity of the members´s interest in the coalition; 6) the power resources it can bring to bear in exerting influence; 7) its ability and willingness to use these resources; and 8) the skills of the members in maintaining or building a coalition.

Coalitions are continually seeking an adequate supply of money and authority from the environment to fulfill program requirements, maintain their domain, ensure their flow of resources, and extend

and defend their paradigm or way of doing things
(Yuchtman and Seashore, 1967). Organizations
join coalitions because they expect to maximize
their supply of money and authority through the
payoffs from the coalition's advocacy activities.
There are costs, however, to organizations from
being a member of a coalition. It is assumed that in
order for a coalition to survive, the payoffs to the
member organizations need to outweigh or at least
equal the costs for helping to maintain the
coalition.

METHODOLOGY

Using the political-economy perspective, four
dimensions were addressed in analyzing the factors
associated with coalition maintenance. Benson,
et. al. (1973) found that these dimensions critically
affected inter-organizational relationships. The
dimensions include:
1. Domain consensus. Is there agree-
   ment on the role and scope of the
   coalition?;
2. Ideological consensus. Is there
   agreement on the appropriate
   approaches to the tasks performed
   by the coalition?;
3. Work coordination. Is there agree-
   ment on the conduct of articulated
   activities and programs?; and
4. Evaluation. Is there agreement on
   the judgment of the quality of work
   of the coalition?
All of the 42 member organizations which had
negotiated a membership agreement with the coali-
tion during 1981 were selected as the study
population. The study also included 7 organiza-
tions that had negotiated an agreement with the
coalition during 1980, but did not renew the
agreement in 1981. These latter organizations
were included in order to determine if certain
conditions affected the non-renewal of membership
in the coalition.
The executive directors of the current and past
member organizations were the key informants.

These staff members were selected because they
were the official representatives that negotiated
the membership agreement with the coalition.

A mailed questionnaire with a mix of open and
closed-ended questions was administered to the key
informants during Fall 1981. Eighty-three percent
of the current member organizations and 72 percent
of the past member organizations voluntarily
responded by completing the questionnaire.

A scoring system was used to determine levels
of agreement/congruence on the responses to the
questionnaire among the member organizations of
the coalition (see Roberts-DeGennaro, 1986b).
Comparisons were made across member organizations
as to the levels of agreement on each of the four
dimensions. Descriptive characteristics of the
executive directors and the member organizations
were also analyzed.

FINDINGS

Thirty-five of the 42 current member organiza-
tions and 5 of the 7 past member organizations
participated in the study. A pattern emerged in
which all of the four dimensions varied together
with similar levels of agreement. This finding
suggests that an equilibrium framework existed
within the coalition. That is, the relationships
among the member organizations in the coalition
were suspected to consist of nonconflicting inter-
actions. This type of interchange may be a critical
factor in maintaining the coalition.

The services provided by the coalition were
ranked by the respondents in terms of their
importance. Agreement or disagreement on the
importance of these services was assumed to reflect
whether the organizations agreed on the role and
scope of the coalition's activities. The two most
important services or payoffs from maintaining the
coalition for the current member organizations were
the availability of a health insurance program and
information from the coalition's policy/legislative
analyzes. These analyzes were used by the coali-
tion in their advocacy efforts. They rated consor-
tia funding coordination as the least important

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service.

In contrast, the respondents in the past member organizations considered the health insurance program to be the least important service. They rated consortia funding coordination and the information from the coalition's policy/legislative analyzes as being the most important services. These findings suggest the past member organizations may not have renewed their membership in the coalition because of domain dissensus. That is, the past member organizations are suspected not to have renewed their membership, because of disagreements around the role and scope of the coalition. The past member organizations believed consortia funding coordination should have been the most important coalition service. Whereas, the current member organizations believed this was the least important service.

Over fifty percent (n=19) of the current member organizations indicated their organization became more powerful, as a result of being a member organization in the coalition. In contrast, all of the past member organizations indicated their organization did not become more powerful. Besides disagreeing on the importance of the services provided by the coalition, power was not perceived as a payoff for the past members to renew their membership in the coalition.

Probably the most surprising finding in the study was that about 60 percent of the current (n=21) and past (n=3) member organizations indicated there were no clear expectations of either their organization's or the coalition's role and responsibilities. In addition, about half of these organizations were "uncertain" whether their organization had negotiated a membership agreement with the coalition. Yet, according to the 1978 Bylaws of the Community Congress, a membership agreement was to be completed and signed by both the member organization and the coalition.

Eighty percent (n=28) of the current member organizations indicated they put a medium or low priority on being involved in the coalition's activities. In contrast, 80 percent (n=4) of the past member organizations indicated they had put a

low priority on being involved. The degree of involvement varied from participation on committees or task forces to telephone calls. The current member organizations stated the major reason for their interchange with the coalition was either to request information from the coalition or to provide information to the coalition. About 60 percent (n=21) of the current member organizations reported they had little or no involvement with the board or the committees/task forces of the coalition.

Even though the level of involvement appeared to be minimal, about 80 percent (n=28) of the current member organizations wanted to be informed, at least once a month, of the coalition's activities. About half of the current member organizations believed the coalition kept their organization "very well" informed on specific problems/issues affecting their organization. In contrast, over half of the past member organizations believed the coalition kept their organization "adequately" informed of problems/issues. These findings suggest there was ideological dissensus between the current and past member organizations on how well the membership was informed about political advocacy issues.

The current member organizations wanted to seek more funds from the private sector than the past member organizations. This finding suggests there was disagreement between the current and past member organizations regarding ideology, or the coalition's approach to one of its tasks, namely, its selection of sources to approach for funds.

Sixty percent (n=21) of the current member organizations indicated there were no disagreements or disputes within the coalition between member organizations. Likewise, 80 percent (n=4) of the past member organizations indicated there were no disagreements or disputes. The most common reason for disagreements, if they occurred, was conflict over values and strategies for achieving the coalition's goals. Based on these findings, it is suspected that some conflict does exist within the coalition, but it was not a major reason for the past member organizations to leave the coalition.

About 90 percent of the current (n=31) and past (n=4) member organizations agreed the coalition was a convening mechanism for coordinating the activities of the coalition. The coalition appears to provide an important function to the member organizations by linking the organizations to the community.

In coordinating the activities of the coalition, about a third of the current member organizations indicated they were involved with the coalition staff a few times a year; about a fourth of the current member organizations indicated they were involved with the coalition staff once a month; and another fourth of the current member organizations indicated they were involved with the coalition staff once a week. Therefore, the level of involvement of the member organizations in the coalition varied.

Seventy-five percent (n=26) of the current member organizations suggested the coalition provided an opportunity for their organization to become a leader in the community. In contrast, less than half (n=2) of the past member organizations believed the coalition provided this opportunity. The opportunity for leadership may be a payoff to the member organizations from maintaining the coalition.

The current and past member organizations were asked to rate the coalition's level of performance on several tasks. The task that received above average performance ratings by 75 percent (n=26) of the current and 60 percent (n=3) of the past member organizations was the coalition's ability to communicate information to the members about public budget hearings for political advocacy purposes. As mentioned previously, these organizations rated the policy/legislative analyzes as the second most important service provided by the coalition. The provision of this service, as well as the quality of the service, appear to be important payoffs to the members from maintaining the coalition.

About half (n=17) of the current member organizations also gave above average performance ratings to the coalition's ability to increase

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interagency cooperation, such as sharing informa-
tion or referrals between the member organizations.
In contast, all of the past member organizations
gave only average performance ratings to the
coalition's ability to increase interagency coop-
eration.

All of the past member organizations, as
compared to 30 percent (n=11) of the current
member organizations, indicated the performance
level of the task of developing strategies for fund-
raising by the coalition was only average. Since
consortia funding coordination was rated the most
important service by the past member organizations,
perhaps the performance level of this task was not
perceived as a payoff for renewing their membership
in the coalition.

DISCUSSION

Maintaining membership in a coalition for any
organization involves decision costs (Adrian and
Press, 1968). That is, an organization needs to
assess the costs to the organization for being a
member of the coalition. For example, there are
costs related to collecting information and com-
municating information to the coalition. The
payoffs to the organization in receiving information
from the coalition about problems/issues affecting
the organization must be at least equal to the costs
involved in collecting and communicating other
information to the coalition. Because information
costs are often high, what may be considered apathy
on the part of a member organization may represent
a rational calculation. The amount of the payoff
may be so small as to make it "uneconomic" to be
informed. In the present study, many of the past
member organizations indicated the coalition only
kept their organization adequately informed. It is
suspected that the frequency, as well as the
quality, of information from a coalition may be
significant factors in maintaining a member's
interest in the coalition.

Another cost to the member organization is the
pressure-of-time costs, since longitudinal factors
are associated with coalition maintenance.

Because of workload constraints, organizational actors only have a certain amount of time available to them for interagency participation. As in the present study, most of the current member organizations were giving a medium to low priority of their time to the coalition's activities. If an organization is expected to make a commitment of time to the coalition, for instance by being a member of a committee, the payoff in information or contacts gained from its involvement must be at least equal to the time costs.

It is suspected that a critical factor in maintaining a coalition is the need for a strong central leadership within a coalition. Frey (1974) found in his case histories of seven coalitions that a small inner circle of leaders managed the affairs of each coalition. Likewise, in the present study, only about a fourth of the member organizations appeared to be actively involved in the coalition's activities. Regardless of the size of the coalition, interactions within the coalition will tend to be dominated by a few organizational actors. Therefore, the coalition's work will probably be coordinated by a small group of the member organizations. These findings are consistent with an assumption in organizational theory that most organizations will commit a minimal amount of resources to inter-organizational collaboration.

Coalition management requires imagination, creativity, persuasiveness, and a sense of timing (Prigmore, 1974). Maintaining a coalition is a dynamic process that develops through the linkages between the member organizations and the coalition. It is a process that supports the life of a coalition, in order to keep it from declining and to sustain it against any opposing forces. As in the present study, the coalition provided a convening mechanism for the member organizations that is vital to the maintenance of a coalition.

In conclusion, consensus around a coalition's domain, ideology, coordination efforts, and task performance appears to be important in maintaining a coalition. The survival of a coalition may be dependent on whether it can convince its member organizations of the payoffs from committing

resources for advocacy purposes, especially in
times of cutbacks and shifts in funding priorities.

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