Interest Groups, Representation, and American Democracy

Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics. By Dara Strolovitch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 336p. $55.00 cloth, $20.00 paper.

Bryan D. Jones
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Using both a comprehensive survey and in-depth interviews, Dara Strolovitch thoroughly examines advocacy organizations, the way they represent their disadvantaged constituencies, and their effectiveness in doing so. Moreover, she presents a theory of effectiveness, rooted in the conception of intersectionality. Intersectionality—or what used to be called more colloquially "the double whammy"—is a term applied to multiple and overlapping disadvantages, such as the category "black and gay." As Strolovitch shows, this distinction is important in interest group representation, and is quite distinct from such seemingly similar workhorse concepts as "crosscutting cleavages."

The strengths of *Affirmative Advocacy* stem both from the author's willingness to break new conceptual ground in thinking about interest groups and from its powerful and systematic empiricism. The empirical base is a well-designed survey of a sample of 286 advocacy organizations and in-depth interviews with 40 leaders of those groups. Strolovitch then assesses the interests of the group majority and of both advantaged and disadvantaged subgroups in the organization with respect to a sample of issues that accessed the national policy agenda during the period of study (the late 1990s). She then is able to match the positions taken by the organizations (from the questionnaires) with the imputed interests of the subgroups. That allows strong conclusions about the extent to which advocacy groups represent the parts of their constituencies.

This book is anything but an exercise in moderation and humility. It is bold and assertive, and certainly the careful empiricism and analysis contained in the volume give the author the right and duty "to boldly go where no [wo]man has gone before." Its well-documented findings are both expected (groups represent advantaged subgroups better than disadvantaged ones) and unexpected (groups do not turn to the courts, but concentrate most energy on the legislative and executive branches of government). The result is to greatly inform what we know about interest representation of disadvantaged groups.

The book is a stellar contribution both to the study of representation of disadvantaged interests and to the study of the American interest group system, and I recommend it most highly. Yet in spite of its great strengths, I believe that it could have accomplished even more. Here, I have two sets of interlinked reservations, one procedural, the other substantive.

My procedural reservations center on the avowed advocacy stance taken. I have no objection in principle to this, but in practice it has the effect of limiting the book's impact on broader understandings of pluralist politics and interest representation. The author so wants to give advice to the disadvantaged that, in my opinion, she fails to exploit the potential contributions to broader theory. Even the title of the book reflects this "rush to advocacy." I find this a real shame because it is clearly one of the best studies we have of interest representation in the modern American politics literature. Moreover, eschewing generality may have the unfortunate effect of undermining the work's potential to address the marginalization of the study of marginal groups, even though the empiricism is as strong or stronger than the best of the existing interest group studies.

Strolovitch pushes the notion that representation of subgroup interests works imperfectly in the case of disadvantaged subgroups. She finds a tendency of the groups she studied to move toward the representation of broader issues, which disproportionately affects intersectionally disadvantaged groups. But the disproportionality goes deeper: They spend more time and energy representing issues of concern to advantaged subgroups than disadvantaged ones.

Strolovitch does not shrink from the attribution of interests to such groups, and I do not doubt that most of the time she is correct. Yet I remain somewhat uncomfortable with an analysis that hinges on the attribution of interests to subgroups by the analyst. I hasten to add that the

Bryan D. Jones is J. J. "Jake" Pickle Regents Chair in Congressional Studies, and professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin.

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questions she asked group leaders indicate that they are well aware of the underrepresentation of some subgroups in their organizations.

Forgoing the typical academic conclusion, Strolovitch's last chapter is a rendition of best practices for the advocacy organizations. These avoid blame, because most of the defects in representing intersectional subgroups stem from the very structure of the represented population, the configuration of coalitional partners, and the demands of other subgroups in the organization. And they do not shirk from agency, in the sense that most of the advice is directed at organizational leaders. Assigning responsibility but not blame, in the words of one former president, requires a deft touch, and Strolovitch achieves it in far better fashion than did Reagan.

Nevertheless, I found the conclusions wanting in regard to thinking more generally about how interest groups operate in the American political system. Given the boldness of the theory, the potential fruitfulness of the concept of intersectionality, and the empirical rigor and richness of the analysis, I find this a substantial defect.

Substantively, I found myself asking two questions over and over again as I read the book. The first, suggested to me by one of my students, Jerrod Patterson, is how these disadvantaged groups relate to the political party system. Given the issues analyzed, surely every group and subgroup studied here would be considerably better off with a Democratic administration (the author focuses on national politics) than a Republican one. Strolovitch asked questions on "political climate," several of which could have been used to address this quite fundamental issue (still could so far as I can tell).

Do group leaders face a trade-off between helping their preferred party achieve success and pursuing group interests? I assume that would push leaders strongly toward a more centrist stance. Are some subgroups relatively harmed by such action? Probably. In any case, this group–party dynamic remains unexplored here, and, for that matter, anywhere else in the modern interest group literature. Would they be better off if the group is successful in helping to achieve a Democratic administration than if they had stronger representation of their subgroup interest? I do not know.

This consideration cannot be limited to the interest–party nexus. It is a general issue for Strolovitch's approach. While applying a straight cost–benefit framework to interest representation might seem far-fetched, surely it makes sense to weigh how representative an issue is for a subgroup by the probability of success on the issue. If one resists this, then simply return to the old distinction between substantive and symbolic representation. The fact is that group leaders focus more on issues benefiting advantaged subgroups, but this does not mean that intersectional groups are therefore automatically underrepresented—if such a focus either helps the Democrats or is much more achievable than intersectional objectives. This actually would reinforce the author's conclusion that much of the lack of representation of disadvantaged groups is structural.

A second substantive issue is the claim that disadvantaged groups are simply different in kind from other groups. Strolovitch explicitly warns us that organizations advocating on behalf of marginalized groups differ from other kinds of interest groups in fundamental ways (p. 48). Yet I cannot help but wonder whether allegedly powerful groups face similar dynamics. I am not contesting the notion that these dynamics are more critical in disadvantaged groups, but that is not the issue that was joined. She argues that they are different because they claim to represent weak and marginalized groups. Lots of groups claim to do that, surely including conservative Christian groups and others on the supposedly privileged right side of the spectrum. In addition, I suspect that many groups may have evolved from representing the disadvantaged in a manner consistent with Strolovitch's claim but now might be viewed as representing the advantaged—the AARP comes to mind.

Perhaps more importantly, I wonder to what extent any group faces "Strolovitch dynamics." We could take an example about as far away from groups representing the disadvantaged as we can: perhaps an organization representing a single industry? Subgroups of firms have different interests. In the case of the electric power industry, companies relying more heavily on coal want any initial distribution of pollution permits in a carbon cap-and-trade system to be free, while those relying more heavily on natural gas or nuclear would rather see a stiff charge. Such divisions would surely push the industry peak association(s) that represent diverse business interests, such as the National Association of Manufacturers, toward universalization of issues. And surely enough, my perusal of the Website of the Electric Power Supply Association indicates that its positions focus on attacking governmental actions that might favor public power producers and pressing those that aid private producers.

I guess that in a perfect world this ought to lead to a Strolovitch-style study of such organizations. One cannot expect an author to do everything. Nevertheless, I have highlighted this issue to such an extent because I think it important to disentangle the parts of the dynamics discovered in the book that are properties of interest groups in general and those that are specific to the types of groups that Strolovitch studies. My bias here would be to explore the general before jumping to the claim of uniqueness. Again, that does not mean that such forces play equally in advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Nor do I know whether the term "intersectionality" could be fruitfully applied to such situations, but I suspect it could. For example, among energy producers, surely suppliers of renewable sources are multiply disadvantaged when compared to carbon-based producers.

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We have seen a long-term trend in political science toward the integration of studies of the socially and economically disadvantaged into the "mainstream" of the profession. In my mind, this trend has benefited the general profession enormously. In almost every respect, *Affirmative Advocacy* forwards that integration, without sacrificing advocacy on behalf of the disadvantaged. Yet I think even more could have been accomplished: This work is so strong that it could legitimately demand that the field adjust toward what studies of the disadvantaged are finding—not just empirically but theoretically as well.

Evelyn M. Simien

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Dara Z. Strolovitch's book offers a timely, unique, and important analysis, and is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship that expands the traditional scope of political science. By drawing on relevant literature outside of the discipline and adopting a new approach to the conduct of research within the field, Strolovitch invigorates the study of social movement actors and their advocacy organizations in the United States. First and foremost, she provides us with an exemplary model for conducting empirical research that emphasizes the interaction of such identity categories as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Second, she collects original quantitative and qualitative data using 1) a telephone survey conducted with officers and professional staff at 286 advocacy organizations, and 2) face-to-face interviews with officers and professional staff at 40 advocacy organizations. Such data allow for the first large-scale and in-depth examination of interest groups and advocacy organizations that claim to speak for women, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-income people. Third, her investigation of the extent to which these organizations attend to the particular challenges associated with advocating on behalf of multiply disadvantaged (or intersectionally marginalized) subgroups within their own historically disadvantaged constituencies has political relevance for coalition builders and practical implications for grassroots activists. For all these reasons, I expect this thought-provoking and powerful book to spark lively debate among social scientists in general and political scientists in particular.

Strolovitch delineates the complex ways in which advocacy organizations serve their advantaged subgroup members at the expense of their disadvantaged constituents. More specifically, she uncovers a consistent pattern of neglect whereby advocacy organizations exacerbate, rather than alleviate, inequities in representation when they pursue their policy agendas, target institutions, and build coalitions based on a strict hierarchy of interests. While some readers might wince at the fact that advocacy groups often prioritize the interests of their most advantaged subgroup members, others will call into question whether this practice undermines their legitimacy as advocacy organizations that claim to speak for the truly disadvantaged, especially when the most disadvantaged subgroup members who are uniquely situated at the intersection of more than one marginalized group are neglected by the very organizations that are best suited to serve their interests. By privileging an issue like affirmative action over welfare

Evelyn M. Simien is associate professor of political science and African American studies at the University of Connecticut.

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