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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO
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 Boissevain 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 initiated 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 organizations 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 technical assistance;

2. Publication of two ongoing publications;

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, including proposal writing, management and training for a community anti-crime project involving different member organizations; and

6. Health insurance program for employees 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, emergency 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 organizational research during the 1960's (see March and Simon, 1958; Udy, 1959; Pugh, et.al., 1963,

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., opposition 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 agreement 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 agreement 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 coalition during 1981 were selected as the study population. The study also included 7 organizations 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 organizations 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 interactions. 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 coalition in their advocacy efforts. They rated consortia funding coordination as the least important

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

interagency cooperation, such as sharing information or referrals between the member organizations. In contrast, all of the past member organizations gave only average performance ratings to the coalition's ability to increase interagency cooperation.

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 communicating 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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