

# Consider the Context: How State Policy Environments Shape Interest Group Advocacy

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## Abstract

How are the disadvantaged represented in politics? Using an original survey of 204 advocacy groups in fourteen U.S. states, this research considers how state legislative and lobbying conditions shape interest groups' representation of disadvantaged identities. Analysis shows that several aspects of state legislative environments affect the diversity of groups' policy agendas, whereas aggregate measures of lobbying context have surprisingly little effect. These findings have important implications for scholars' and practitioners' understanding of the factors motivating advocacy on behalf of the disadvantaged and the broader role that interest organizations play in politics.

## Keywords

interest groups, state government, intersectionality, political representation

Although democratic by design, in practice, the U.S. political system does not equally reflect the preferences and participation of all its citizens. Recently, racial, gender, and class-based political discrepancies have garnered increasing amounts of attention from media and the general public. Public concern over the role of corporations in the electoral process, economic disparities in policy making, and the persistent underrepresentation of racial minorities and women in political office have caused many to question: whose voices are being heard in the policy process and how can we make this process more accessible to citizens? Advocacy groups working on behalf of people typically underrepresented in politics (e.g., women, racial minorities, and the poor) present one potential solution to identity-based biases in politics. Indeed, after a sustained public opinion and media campaign from the Human Rights Campaign (<http://www.hrc.org/>) and

other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) advocacy groups, the Supreme Court's June 2015 decision legalizing gay marriage demonstrated the power that identity-based advocacy can have on agenda-setting, public opinion, and policy change. However, one may wonder: how did LGBT groups come to prioritize gay marriage over other important issues (e.g., antidiscrimination in employment and housing for transgender people)? How does this affect the political representation of transgendered individuals? Could inequality be

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reproduced in the very organizations working to make the political process more equitable? In order to better understand advocacy and the policy outcomes that may come as a result, one must consider the factors that shape attention to the needs and preferences of the disadvantaged.

The goal of this research is to understand what motivates (or prevents) attention to issues affecting marginalized groups. Of particular interest is advocacy groups' representation of what are termed "intersectional issues"; that is, issues that bring together multiple identities (e.g., race/class/gender) that can produce disadvantage in society and politics. For example, child care for low-income families is particularly important for poor, working mothers who typically make less money than their male counterparts and shoulder more of the costs (in terms of both time and money) for child rearing due to gendered divisions of labor. This single issue, child care for low-income families, addresses simultaneously class and gender-based disparities in labor and pay and accounts for the intersection of class and gender in the lives of low-income women. In addition, given that "women of color are more disadvantaged in the labor market, receive less child support, and more frequently depend on sub-poverty-level assistance" (Kaplan 1995, 9), the issue of child care for low-income families also addresses race-based inequalities. More generally, intersectional issues reflect the experiences of people who operate on the margins of society and politics. Understanding patterns of attention to these types of issues will inform scholars, advocates, and the general public about who is being represented in the political process and ways to diversify the voices being heard.

Given resource constraints, advocacy organizations are particularly sensitive to the environment in which they work and are strategic about the venues and topics they choose to engage (Holyoke, Brown, and Henig 2012). Since policy change is the goal of many advocacy groups, the political conditions that have been shown to affect policy outcomes (e.g., party control, legislative ideology, and the presence and activity of interest groups) should also

shape advocates' decisions about where and when to focus on particular issues. To understand what drives attention to intersectional issues, one needs variation in the policy agendas of advocacy groups *and* the political conditions that shape advocates' decision making. Both of these concepts are measured through an original survey of over 200 state-level advocacy organizations that captures differences in attention to intersectional issues across interest groups and political contexts. Several aspects of states' political environments (specifically, their legislative and lobbying contexts) matter to advocacy groups with some factors encouraging, and others preventing, groups' representation of intersectional issues. Prior to discussing these findings, the concept of intersectionality, the importance of context in shaping groups' policy agendas, and the data used in this study are explained in more depth.

## Background

### *Intersectional Advocacy*

Critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw is often credited with the coining of the term "intersectionality" to describe the unique experiences of black women who are marginalized along lines of both race and gender. In her work on violence against women of color, Crenshaw (1991) notes the erasure of these women from feminist and antiracist activism:

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling . . . . Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both. (pp. 1242–1244)

Another illustration of intersectional experience is that of women of color within the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. These women, whose experiences were

grounded at the intersection of two types of identity-based discrimination, found themselves without a voice in either the Civil Rights Movement (which focused primarily on race and emphasized black men as leaders of the movement) or the women's movement (which primarily reflected the experiences of upper-middle-class white women). The framework of intersectionality examines how different biological, social, and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality interact on multiple levels and contribute to systemic inequality. This framework recognizes that these identities, though discrete, do not exist in parallel to one another. Rather, they come together, intersect, and overlap to shape the totality of a person's viewpoints, concerns, and experiences.

The invisibility or erasure of intersectional experiences in activism is not unique to the movements described above. Advocacy organizations frequently claim to represent broad constituencies that contain intersecting identities within their boundaries (e.g., among the broad constituency of "women" class and gender intersect for low-income women while sexuality and gender intersect for lesbians; Young 2000; Cohen 1999; Kurtz 2002). Unfortunately, these intersections of experience are frequently ignored, as activists and scholars often focus on how inequality *generally* matters in society and politics, rather than what types of inequality matter, and in what circumstances (Dill 1983; Marchetti 2014). Also, group supporters with relatively more education, time, and money have the best ability to communicate their concerns to group leaders, and as a result, advocacy agendas often reflect the preferences of these more advantaged supporters to the detriment of constituents with fewer resources (Miller 2008; Berry et al. 2006). These differences in attention are significant in that advocacy groups' favoring of more privileged supporters can shift broader policy agendas toward the interests of people who are more advantaged in the political process to begin with and away from those people who experience intersections of disadvantage (Strolovitch 2007).

Though intersectional advocacy can be challenging for organizations, there are

circumstances in which it does occur. For instance, women's rights groups engage identities of both gender and class when they prioritize shelter and economic security for low-income survivors of domestic violence. Similarly, as more was learned about HIV/AIDS, advocates recognized how intersections of race, class, and gender shape the probability of transmission and quality of treatment for the disease (Auerbach 2009; Berger 2004). As a result, some groups began focusing on women's empowerment and economic independence as part of their HIV/AIDS advocacy. Advocacy that accounts for intersectionality is most likely to occur within organizations that focus generally on issues of marginalization and identity. As Strolovitch (2007, 48) points out, these types of organizations "... derive their legitimacy from their claims to represent weak and marginalized groups rather than by channeling or augmenting the power and influence of already powerful groups." By claiming to work on behalf of broad, disadvantaged groups (e.g., the National Organization for Women works for "equality for all women"), advocacy organizations imply the representation of *all* members of these marginalized groups, which include people facing intersections of disadvantage (Strolovitch 2007; Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995).

As such, this study focuses exclusively on "identity-based" organizations, as these are the types of groups most likely to engage intersectional issues. Specifically, this research considers how women's rights, racial minority rights, LGBT rights, socioeconomic justice, and disability rights groups represent intersectional issues. In order to understand what drives organizations' attention to intersectional issues, one must consider how political context shapes agenda-setting in identity-based advocacy groups. Although much attention has been paid to how political context matters in interest group formation, behavior, and influence, scholars continue to lack an understanding of how these factors shape advocacy on intersectional issues in particular. Learning more about this type of advocacy will provide academics and practitioners with strategies to increase

diversity in policy making and also contributes to a broader literature on interest groups' role(s) in the political process.

### *Why Contextual Variation Matters*

Much of the research on interest group influence and agenda-setting focuses on the national level, which provides crucial information about organizational behavior, but under conditions that remain largely static. Hojnacki et al.'s (2012) review of the interest group subfield reveals that the majority of studies focus on cross sections of national organizations, while Gray and Lowery (2002) demonstrate a general lack of dialogue between national- and state-level interest group scholarship. Although research has shown how contextual factors like degrees of partisanship surrounding issues (Baumgartner et al. 2009), party competition (Gray and Lowery 1996b), ideology, legislative professionalism, and the presence or absence of other organizations (Holyoke 2009; Weldon 2011) ultimately affect organizational behavior, none of these studies focused on how context shapes attention to intersectional issues. Also, unless looking over time, studies using a cross section of groups at the national level will lack variation in contextual factors that could facilitate or prevent intersectional advocacy.

Why does it matter if measures of political context do not vary in studies at the national level? For one, we cannot discern the effects of political factors that vary widely across regions (e.g., ideology of Republican legislators) if we only examine a cross section of groups at the national level. How can we be sure that the influence of a Republican-controlled legislature remains the same across the United States? Given that the ideology of state-level political parties varies greatly by location and state political culture (Shor and McCarty 2011), the effect of Republican political dominance may differ across locations. In addition, since previous research has shown that government attention to particular issues can drive the presence and activity of advocacy organizations (Baumgartner and Leech 2001),

the landscape of organizations in one state (or level of government) at a single point in time provides an incomplete picture of how organizational context shapes agenda-setting across groups. To capture variation in key variables at the national level, this study examines how differences in political context affect organizational behavior across states. By examining the state level, one can analyze the effects of differences in party control, public opinion, citizen and legislative ideology, and numbers and types of organizations on advocacy behavior with cross-sectional data. With these ideas in mind, the construction of an organization's policy agenda can be portrayed as a function of two major sets of forces: (1) The lobbying context (e.g., the strength, diversity, and size of the interest group community) of the state in which the organization works and (2) the legislative context (e.g., party competition, ideological climate, and legislative professionalism) of the state in which the organization works.

### *Lobbying Context*

Given previous research demonstrating the positive relationship between state population and interest group proliferation (Lowery and Gray 2001; Gray and Lowery 1996b; Hunter, Wilson, and Brunk 1991), state size likely shapes organizational agenda-setting through the intermediary effects of resource competition and group population density. In states with large populations of citizens and interest groups, organizations face higher levels of competition for legislators' time and may streamline their agendas as a way of maximizing opportunities for success. That is, diversity in lobbying environments could negatively affect the diversity of issue agendas as groups focus on mainstream or coalitional issues in order to appeal to the greatest number of potential supporters (Minkoff 1997; Staggenborg 1995). Alternatively, more diverse group populations might facilitate alliances and collaboration among advocacy groups (Heaney 2004; Hojnacki 1997) or encourage individual organizations to focus on niche issues that may be intersectional in nature (Browne 1990; Gray

and Lowery 1996a). In their energy-stability-area model, Gray and Lowery (1996b) consider both population density and the size/strength of the state's economy, arguing that states with robust economies will be able to support larger numbers of organizations. In later research, Gray et al. (2004) find that the likelihood of one voice dominating the policy process is lower in states with a large number of organizations. Thus, the size of a state's interest group community combined with the state's broader economic health may affect diversity in organizations' policy agendas. In addition, the presence and activity of oppositional groups has been shown to affect organizations' lobbying strategy (Holyoke 2003) and may similarly shape groups' agenda-setting behavior. By shaping interest groups' competition with one another and potential for survival, several aspects of state lobbying context should be considered in studies of behavior and agenda-setting across groups.

### *Legislative Context*

In addition to the lobbying context, state legislative context (e.g., ideology, party control, and length of time in session) undeniably affects agenda-setting in advocacy organizations; after all, many of these groups exist (in part) to represent various interests before government (Nownes and Freeman 1998). The classical "iron triangle" relationship between legislators, agencies, and interest groups is inherently symbiotic, as interest groups provide information to legislators about specific policies and legislators can then implement into law interest group preferences. In this scenario, organizations must be conscious of the legislative atmosphere in which they're working and strategically craft their advocacy agendas to avoid wasting time and effort on unattainable policy goals. Thus, potential for legislative support and success are prominent factors considered by advocates when setting their issue priorities and lobbying tactics (Heberlig 2005; Victor 2007; Meyer and Staggenborg 2012). In supportive legislative environments, groups may take advantage of political opportunities by focusing on controversial policy issues that

would be unlikely to move forward in less supportive conditions. In these cases, organizations may prioritize intersectional issues when they recognize legislators as allies likely to be supportive of their policy initiatives. However, even if an issue is unlikely to receive legislative support, the organization may still prioritize it in an effort to demonstrate symbolic commitment to a cause or a group may recognize the futility of its efforts on a particular issue and take up more "winnable" issues or moderate policy goals as a result of legislative atmosphere (Meyer and Imig 1993; Minkoff 1997; Dill 1983). Although attention has been paid to how legislative context affects organizations' lobbying strategies in the form of tactics and connections with individual legislators (Hojnacki and Kimball 1998, 1999; Berry 1997), the question of how these factors shape organizations' attention to intersectional issues remains less clear.

### **Data and Analysis**

This research examines how context shapes interest groups' policy agendas via a survey of identity-based advocacy organizations across fourteen states in the United States during the 2010–2011 state legislative sessions. The survey provides information about the internal workings of organizations, which can be compared to aspects of states' legislative and lobbying contexts that may affect organizational agenda-setting. It also measures organizations' attention to intersectional issues, which serves as the two main dependent variables in subsequent analyses. The following sections describe briefly the data collection process for the survey of organizations and measures of legislative and lobbying contexts. Detailed information about the sample selection of states, organizations, and survey questionnaire can be found in the Supplemental Appendix.

As mentioned previously, all of the groups included in the study focus on one of five types of disadvantaged identity: race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. The universe of each organization type for each state was targeted

for the survey, and a combination of state lobby registrations and key word searches on the non-profit database GuideStar provided an initial contact list of approximately 700 groups across the fourteen states. The survey was subsequently executed in multiple waves: during the first wave, the executive or policy director of each organization was contacted by phone to recruit participation in the study and confirm their contact information. In the second wave, an e-mail survey was sent to all organizations that agreed to participate or could not be reached during the initial recruitment round, while the third wave included follow-up phone calls to nonresponsive organizations and surveys were delivered over the phone. This multiwave/multimethod approach produced completed surveys from 204 organizations with a response rate of approximately 29 percent, which is in keeping with typical response rates for surveys of interest groups (Marchetti 2015).

Respondents were asked to provide information about their organizations' policy agendas, specifically, to list up to five issues the organization had worked on over the past year. Intersectionality in groups' policy agendas was coded according to whether each issue listed would affect the organization's primary constituency in general or a subset of marginalized individuals within this primary group. This coding scheme provided the two main measures of intersectional representation used as dependent variables in empirical analysis: the proportion of organizations' agendas that are devoted to intersectional issues and the number of intersectional issues on organizations' agendas (ranging from zero to five).

### *Lobbying and Legislative Context Data<sup>1</sup>*

Several outside sources provided data on states' lobbying and legislative contexts. Information about states' lobbying contexts were obtained from research by Virginia Gray, David Lowery, Jeffrey Harden, and John Cluverius (Gray et al. 2013), which includes a complete census of organizations registered to lobby in the American states in 2007. These data measured several traits of the state lobbying environment that

previous studies have shown to be important determinants of interest group behavior: *Total groups* (total number of groups registered to lobby in a given state for year 2007),<sup>2</sup> *Difference in private/advocacy group proportions*: the difference between the proportion of private sector groups (manufacturing, transportation, banking, business services, health, law, construction, natural resources, small business, and communication), and the proportion of advocacy groups (fair tax policy, civil rights, good government, women's groups, military, tax, welfare rights, religion, and environment)<sup>3</sup> in a state in 2007, and *Klarner legislative competition*: a Klarner index<sup>4</sup> of legislative party competition. Census data provide measures of each state's per capita gross state product (*Per capita GSP*) and a measure from Gray et al. (2013) *Percentage change in GSP* demonstrates the proportional change in states' per capita GSP from 1997 to 2007 (the period of time covered by their study). In order to test the effects of legislative context on advocacy, the following measures are also included: demographic information about the legislators in a state (*African American legislators* a proportional measure of African American legislators in a state in 2009<sup>5</sup> compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures and *Women legislators* a proportional measure of women in state legislatures for the year 2011 compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University), *House and Senate ideology* an average of 2011 House and Senate ideology measures created by Boris Shor (2014), *Legislative professionalism* a Squire (2012) measure<sup>6</sup> of legislative professionalism, and *Party control* a binary version of a Klarner measure<sup>7</sup> of state party control with values of one indicating complete Democratic control of the legislature and governor's office, and zero indicating some form of divided government with Republican control of portions of the legislature and/or governor's office.

Some aspects of organizations' interactions with their supporters are controlled for via measures developed from the survey of organizations. Specifically, the models include

measures of the extent to which organizational members are involved in decision making and leadership positions within the organization (*Member involvement*), how often organizations include their members in lobby days at the state capitol (*Member lobby*), how often organizational leaders meet with their members to discuss policy priorities (*Member meeting*), how frequently organizational leaders meet with members of the state legislature (*Legislator meeting*), and the number of *Paid staff* employed by the organization, which serves as a proxy measure for organizational resources. Each of these variables accounts for how factors that are internal to organizations may have competing, or larger, effects on agenda-setting behavior. Finally, the models include binary control variables indicating the type of organization (e.g., women's rights and racial minority rights) with LGBT rights groups serving as the excluded (i.e., comparison) category for analysis.

### *Effects of State Legislative and Lobbying Context*

Table 1 presents the results of models testing the relationship between variables measuring state legislative and lobbying context and two measures of intersectional advocacy. More specifically, Table 1 contains information about the change in the number of intersectional issues and the proportion of intersectional issues on groups' agendas as a factor of state legislative and lobbying contexts. The models were estimated using multilevel Poisson and multilevel ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions, respectively,<sup>8</sup> and the coefficients for Model 1 have been expressed as incident rate ratios for ease of interpretation.

In terms of lobbying context, the size of the interest group population in a given state, measured by *Total groups*, negatively affects both the number and proportion of intersectional issues on advocacy groups' agendas. More specifically, for every additional group registered to lobby in a given state, there is a one percent decrease in the number of intersectional issues on groups' agendas (an incident rate ratio of

0.99) and a 0.01 decrease in the proportion of organizations' agendas focused on intersectional issues. To interpret this effect in a more substantively meaningful way, one might say that for every additional 100 organizations in a given state, the number of intersectional issues on groups' agendas decreases by one and the proportion of groups' agendas focusing on intersectional issues decreases by one percentage point. This negative result suggests that dense interest group systems, with increased crowding and competition, could ultimately decrease the representation of intersectional issues by identity-based organizations. That is, organizational density produces higher levels of competition for scarce resources such as funding and legislators' time and attention, which could force organizations to streamline their policy agendas in order to survive. When the number of organizations in a system increases, identity-based advocacy groups adjust their policy agendas accordingly, diverting their attention away from intersectional issues and possibly focusing on more mainstream or generally appealing topics.

However, total groups is the only aspect of lobbying context that significantly affects organizations' policy agendas, and none of the other measures reach acceptable levels of statistical significance in either model. This marked lack of effect is worth noting and suggests that whatever variation in lobbying context that could potentially affect organizational behavior is eclipsed by legislative conditions or the internal context of organizations. In this case, intersectional advocacy is not based on the fiscal health of the state or on the overwhelming presence of private/business groups. Although the size of the interest group population significantly affects attention to intersectional issues, the substantive size of this effect is relatively small. These largely null results may be due to the fact that these measures of state lobbying context are aggregate in nature and do not account for the direct effects of like-minded or oppositional groups on organizational agenda-setting. It may be that the "true" effect of lobbying context is better measured through studies examining directly the collaborative (or adversarial)

**Table 1.** Effect of State Legislative and Lobbying Context.

Variable	Number of Intersectional Issues on Agenda (Model 1)	Proportion of Agenda that Is Intersectional (Model 2)
<b>Legislative context</b>		
House and Senate ideology	0.99 (.00)	0.00 (.05)
African American legislators	1.01 (.02)	0.06 (.37)
Female legislators	1.04** (.02)	0.62* (.34)
Party control	0.98 (.33)	-0.92 (6.7)
Legislative professionalism	1.05*** (.02)	0.87** (.36)
<b>Lobbying context</b>		
Total groups	0.99** (.00)	-0.01* (.00)
Percentage change in GSP	1.18 (0.76)	-0.00 (0.13)
Per capita GSP	0.99 (.00)	-0.00 (.00)
Klarner legislative competition	1.03 (1.2)	1.90 (24.7)
Difference in private/advocacy group proportions	1.00 (.02)	0.17 (.39)
<b>Internal context</b>		
Paid staff	1.00** (.00)	0.02** (.01)
Member involvement	1.23 (.35)	5.37 (6.34)
Member meeting	1.11 (.09)	0.40 (1.8)
Member lobby	1.04 (.14)	0.13 (2.5)
Legislator meeting	0.86* (.08)	-4.02** (2.0)
<b>Group type controls</b>		
Women's rights group	1.95*** (.46)	13.72*** (5.1)
Economic justice group	1.36 (.35)	2.50 (5.2)
Racial minority rights group	2.05*** (.55)	11.06* (6.0)
Disability rights group	0.90 (.27)	-3.13 (5.6)
Constant	—	26.18 (45.7)
	R <sup>2</sup>	.18
	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.09

Note:  $N = 204$  across both models. Model 1 is a mixed-effects Poisson regression with coefficients expressed as incident rate ratios. Model 2 is a mixed-effects ordinary least squares regression with untransformed coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. Missing values for internal context (i.e., group level) data were imputed using multiple imputation by chained equations in Stata 13. All models were run via the *mi* command package in Stata 13. More information about this process can be found in the Supplemental Appendix.

\*\*\*Significance at  $p < .01$ .

\*\*Significance at  $p < .05$ .

\*Significance at  $p < .10$ .

relationships among organizations (Hojnacki 1998; Holyoke 2003, 2009).

Two aspects of state legislative context significantly affect both measures of intersectional advocacy: the measure of legislative professionalism and the percentage of women in the state legislature. Beginning with the latter result, a one percentage point increase in the proportion of *Women legislators* produces a four percent increase in the number and a 0.62 increase in the proportion of intersectional issues on organizations' policy agendas. Putting this result in terms of the states

included in the study, a 16 percentage point increase in women's representation, exactly the difference between the proportions of women in Washington's (32 percent) and Tennessee's (16 percent) state legislatures, would increase the proportion of intersectional issues on groups' agendas by approximately 10 percentage points. Similarly, increasing women's representation by 25 percentage points, which is equivalent to the difference between the proportion of women legislators in Colorado (41 percent) and Tennessee (16 percent), would cause organizations to place one



additional intersectional issue on their policy agendas.

This finding lends support to the idea that female legislators may act as allies for advocacy groups working on behalf of marginalized constituents. Indeed, previous research shows that women legislators are more likely than their male counterparts to be active on the sorts of “compassion” issues (e.g., poverty, health care, and women’s rights) included on many of these groups’ agendas (Reingold 2008; Swers 2002) and are also more likely to meet with lobbyists (Thomas and Welch 1991), a fact that does not go unnoticed by advocacy groups. Importantly, female legislators are generally supportive of social welfare policies (Poggione 2004) and, regardless of party, are more likely to support issues related to women’s health (Tolbert and Steuernagel 2001; Swers 1998) and children and families. Issues related to social welfare, health care, child and family care, and women’s health encompass many intersecting identities including race, class, and gender, and recent research by Reingold and Smith (2012) demonstrates the importance of intersectionality when considering female legislators’ contributions to policy making. The finding that higher levels of women’s representation increase advocacy groups’ attention to intersectional issues is in keeping with previous research demonstrating that women legislators do, in fact, make a difference.

In addition to the gender composition of the state legislature, legislative professionalism increases attention to intersectional issues. The measure of *Legislative professionalism* ranges from a low of 4.9 to a high of 60.6 with lower values indicating less professionalism and higher values indicating more. In the case of the number of intersectional issues, an incident rate ratio of 1.05 can be interpreted as each unit increase in *Legislative professionalism* corresponds to a five percent increase in the number of intersectional issues on a group’s agenda. Model 2 demonstrates a similar (albeit slightly smaller) positive effect on intersectional advocacy: a unit increase in *Legislative professionalism* produces a 0.87, or slightly less than one percentage point, increase in the

proportional measure of intersectional advocacy. A 20 point increase in *Legislative professionalism*, roughly the difference between Wisconsin (24) and Pennsylvania (47), increases the proportion of intersectional issues on group’s agendas by slightly over 17 percentage points. A similarly sized increase in *Legislative professionalism* would increase the number of intersectional issues on groups’ agendas by one.

The positive effect of *Legislative professionalism* is intriguing and may be due to a number of factors. First, professionalized legislatures provide the benefit of larger legislative staffs and longer session terms, both of which might increase elected officials’ capacity to devote attention to relatively complex, intersectional issues. Also, advocates may have better access to legislators or their staff under these conditions and may be able to prioritize a range of issues as a result. If legislators and several staff members are in session nearly year round, advocates have ample opportunities to discuss with them a variety of policy concerns. In this case, advocates are not pressed for time and may feel comfortable discussing with legislators both main priorities and issues on the periphery of their policy agendas. If intersectional issues are more likely to be peripheral to groups’ main policy goals, increased access to legislators and their staff in professionalized legislative settings could ultimately enhance attention to these topics. Indeed, recent research on the relationship between interest group systems and legislative professionalism demonstrates that professionalized legislatures are able to accommodate a diverse array of policy positions, thereby encouraging group formation and political interaction (Kattleman 2015). Given that longer legislative sessions provide more time for lobbying, organizations may choose to employ a full-time advocate who could devote time and resources toward expanding these groups’ policy agendas. Thus, the number of staff employed by an organization might also positively affect their attention to intersectional issues.

The proxy measure of organizational resources, *Paid staff*, has a positive, statistically significant effect on organizations’

intersectional advocacy. Because the substantive effect of adding one additional person to an organization's staff is small, it is more effective to interpret this result in terms of the addition of multiple paid employees. For every 25 additional staff members, organizations will increase the number of intersectional issues on their agendas by two percent and the proportion of their policy agenda focusing on intersectional issues will increase by 0.05 or half of a percentage point. Although this result is statistically significant across both models, the effect in practice of adding one additional staff member is basically zero. This small substantive result may be primarily driven by the large variation on this measure, which ranges from a low of 0 to a high of over 2,000, and on average, advocacy groups in the sample employ approximately 45 staff members. Although this positive result suggests some connection between organizational resources and intersectional advocacy, the effect is so minute as to render this finding generally inconclusive.

After controlling for several additional aspects of "internal" context that might shape groups' policy agendas, group leaders' meetings with legislators are the only thing to significantly affect attention to intersectional issues. This corroborates the findings above, namely, that groups' relationships with the state legislature are important determinants of the scope and content of their policy agendas. However, in this case, the effect is negative rather than positive. The measure *Legislator meeting* ranges from zero to four, with zero indicating that the group never meets with legislators and four indicating that the organization meets with legislators on a weekly to daily basis. The number of intersectional issues on a group's agenda decreases by 14 percent (incident rate ratio of 0.86), when group leaders increase their meetings with legislators by a single unit (e.g., moving from monthly to weekly meetings with legislators). Meeting with legislators more frequently also decreases the proportion of organizations' agendas focused on intersectional issues and the effect is slightly stronger (statistically) moving to a 0.05 significance level. As

the coefficient for *Legislator meeting* in Model 2 demonstrates, if an organization that previously never met with legislators began meeting with them on an annual basis, the proportion of intersectional issues on its policy agenda would decrease by slightly over four percentage points. These negative effects support previous research on the relationships between political institutions and advocacy organizations. Deborah Minkoff's (1997) study of women's rights organizations found that over time, many women's rights organizations became "institutionalized" and focused predominantly on mainstream issues that were easy for legislators to support. In contrast, she found that organizations that were more concentrated at the grassroots level, being comparatively more aware of their constituents' needs, were more likely to prioritize the diverse interests of their supporters over political expediency. When it comes to agenda-setting, group supporters seem to have less influence than advocacy leaders, scholars, and the general public might like to believe.

Finally, although not a variable of primary interest, group type significantly affects attention to intersectional issues. As mentioned previously, the comparison (excluded) group type is LGBT rights organizations and the interpretation of all group type coefficients will be in relation to LGBT rights groups. In terms of the number and proportion of intersectional issues on policy agendas, *Women's rights* and *Racial minority rights* groups are significantly more likely to have higher levels of attention to intersectional issues relative to LGBT rights organizations. In fact, these differences are rather large: the number of intersectional issues increases by 95 percent and 105 percent for *Women's rights* and *Racial minority rights* groups, respectively, when compared to LGBT rights organizations. A simpler way to understand these results is that women's rights and racial minority rights groups include one additional intersectional issue on their policy agendas relative to LGBT rights groups. Similarly, the proportion of intersectional issues on a group's policy agenda is about 14 percentage points higher for *Women's rights* organizations and approximately 11 percentage points higher

for *Racial minority rights* organizations in comparison to LGBT rights groups. There are no significant differences in the attention paid to intersectional issues by disability rights, economic justice, and LGBT rights organizations.

## Conclusion

When setting policy agendas, advocates must consider the constraints and opportunities offered by the legislative context in which they work. On the other hand, state lobbying context has very little effect on the number or proportion of intersectional issues on groups' agendas with the size of the interest group community being the only measure to negatively affect attention to intersectional issues. Several primary measures of legislative and lobbying context, namely, the ideological composition of the state legislature and the fiscal health of the state, fail to significantly affect organizations' agenda-setting. The lack of effect of African American legislators is informative in that women's presence seems to outweigh racial minorities' presence in shaping groups' policy agendas. As the presence of female legislators seems to improve both the diversity and amount of intersectional advocacy offered by organizations, increasing women's state legislative presence could potentially change the policy agendas of advocacy organizations and legislatures, alike. However, these results also demonstrate that legislative professionalism has a positive effect on attention to intersectional issues, which conflicts with previous research on gender and politics demonstrating that fewer women, particularly Democratic women, are elected in professionalized legislatures (Hogan 2001; Sanbonmatsu 2002). These contradictory findings leave open the possibility that legislative professionalism and women's representation could have mixed effects on organizations' attention to intersectional issues. For example, the relationship between legislative professionalism and women's representation may have changed over time (Camobreco and Barnello 2003), as more women have gained access to political spaces, or it may be that the higher levels of

policy diversity associated with legislative professionalism simply counteract the potential negative effect professionalism could have on attention to intersectional issues.

Advocates consistently negotiate conflicts between the preferences of their supporter networks and the constraints provided by legislative and organizational contexts. However, after controlling for several aspects of this internal context, analysis shows that group leaders' relationships with legislators more significantly affect their policy decisions than communication with their members. This effect is negative, indicating that the more frequently groups meet with legislators, the less attention they pay to intersectional issues. These findings present another interesting tension: although women's legislative presence provides possible support for issues affecting intersectionally marginalized groups, organizations' relationships with legislators generally decrease their attention to these types of issues. The opposite signals provided by this analysis suggest that the negative relationship between advocates and legislators could begin to change as more women are elected to state legislative office. They also demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between context and agenda-setting at the organizational level. The complicated dynamics between the effects of legislative professionalism, women's representation, the size of interest group communities, and advocates' relationships with legislators illustrate a consistent conclusion from studies of interest groups: their presence, activity, and influence in the policy process is highly contingent and far from uniform.

So, where does this leave us in terms of understanding the factors that shape groups' agenda-setting behavior? Although this research provides information about general legislative context, we are left with questions regarding the types of policy issues that were on the legislative agenda at the time of the study. Comparing group policy priorities to the policy priorities of the state legislature may help to explain these findings regarding the effect of legislative context on intersectional advocacy. Also, granting greater

priority to their relationships with members may encourage advocates to broaden the diversity of their policy agendas and it is important to take into consideration levels of diversity and intersectionality within the memberships of these organizations (see Marchetti 2014 for a preliminary examination of this question). Gaining a better understanding of both the policy priorities of the state legislature and levels of diversity within group supporter networks will account for two major factors that could shape attention to intersectionality. Ultimately, this research represents a first cut at understanding the role that identity-based advocacy groups play in policy making at the state level and the importance of context in shaping agenda-setting around intersectional issues.

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### Notes

1. More information about legislative and lobbying context data can be found in the Supplemental Appendix.
2. This was the most recent year of comprehensive lobbying data available at the time of this study.
3. Coding of private and advocacy groups based on Gray et al. (2013).
4. Klarner's index measures the probabilities of Democratic control of a legislative chamber, nine

months in advance, averaged between the two chambers. The party control measure is then folded to form the party competition measure. To be consistent with many of the other lobbying context variables, this measure reflects conditions during the 2007 legislative session and adjusts for states without elections in 2007.

5. The most recent year these data were available from the National Conference of State Legislatures.
6. The 2009 Squire measure of legislative professionalism uses staff per legislator and has been rescaled for ease of interpretation by multiplying by 100.
7. This 2007 Klarner measure of legislative control was part of the Gray et al. (2013) data and therefore corresponds to the timing of other variables in their study.
8. The multilevel approach accounts for the clusters of organizations at the state level with the organization specified as level 1, the state specified as level 2. The Poisson model is appropriate for a dependent variable that is a count while the OLS regression is used for the proportional measure for ease of interpretation. Incident rate ratios can be interpreted in the following way: anything above 1.0 represents a positive change in the dependent variable (e.g., an incident rate ratio of 1.15 is a 15 percent increase in the dependent variable) while anything below 1.0 represents a negative change in the dependent variable (e.g., an incident rate ratio of 0.70 represents a 30 percent decrease in the dependent variable).

### Supplemental Material

The online data supplements are available at <http://slgr.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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