



## Crossing the intersection: the representation of disadvantaged identities in advocacy

Kathleen Marchetti

To cite this article: Kathleen Marchetti (2014) Crossing the intersection: the representation of disadvantaged identities in advocacy, *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2:1, 104-119, DOI: [10.1080/21565503.2013.876919](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2013.876919)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2013.876919>

 View supplementary material [↗](#)

 Published online: 27 Jan 2014.

 Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

 Article views: 131

 View Crossmark data [↗](#)

 Citing articles: 7 View citing articles [↗](#)

## Crossing the intersection: the representation of disadvantaged identities in advocacy

Kathleen Marchetti\*

*Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA*

*(Received 14 September 2013; accepted 13 December 2013)*

This paper is motivated by current research in political science and women's studies on interest groups, representation, and intersectional disadvantage. Using original survey data from over 200 advocacy groups (women's rights; socio-economic justice; racial-minority rights; disability rights; and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender rights) in 14 states across the USA, this study examines whether groups disproportionately advocate on behalf of some intersectional identities over others. Descriptive analysis of the correspondence between the demographics of organizations' supporter networks and their issue agendas revealed that groups consistently over-represent class-based issues and under-represent gender-based issues relative to the proportions of low-income and female individuals contained within their constituencies.

**Keywords:** political representation; intersectionality; advocacy; interest groups

### Introduction

The representation of people's interests in and before government serves as the linchpin in the proper functioning of a democratic society. Political parties, citizens, and elected officials are often viewed as the main actors in democratic processes of representation, yet the role(s) of organized interests in policy-making cannot be ignored. Considering the fact that people facing multiple levels of disadvantage are generally unlikely to engage in political activity (Verba et al. 1993), many marginalized citizens rely instead upon advocacy groups to represent their interests. Thus, it is vitally important that scholars understand whether or not advocacy groups can be counted upon to fill representational gaps or if the interests of marginalized individuals must be represented in other political venues. Previous research (Strolovitch 2007) shows that national-level advocacy organizations infrequently represent the interests of individuals who face intersectional disadvantage in society and politics. The question of whether organizations lobbying lower levels of government fill in the representational gaps left by their national-level counterparts remains open.

Using information from an original survey of over 200 advocacy organizations in 14 states across the USA, I examine how organizations' policy agendas correspond to intersectional identities contained within their constituencies. I simultaneously consider the numbers and types of intersectionally marginalized constituents each organization has and whether particular types of advocacy groups (e.g., women's rights groups vs. socio-economic justice groups) represent a

---

\*Email: [kmarchet@umn.edu](mailto:kmarchet@umn.edu)

larger proportion of intersectionally marginalized supporters. I also consider whether particular types of intersectional disadvantage (e.g., class-based vs. gender-based disadvantage) are being represented more strongly than others. Ultimately, I find that organizations' representation of intersectional disadvantage does not necessarily mirror the population of these individuals within groups' constituencies. I argue that these disparities are problematic as they demonstrate identity hierarchies within advocacy which could (re)produce bias in public policy recommendations and implementation.

This study provides important information regarding the types of disadvantage that are receiving the most (and least) attention from advocacy groups and is one of only a few studies to provide information about groups' advocacy agendas *and* the demographic composition of their supporter networks. It is also one of the few studies to focus in-depth on advocacy organizations lobbying state, rather than national, policy-makers. As such, this study adds to the body of knowledge on interest groups, state politics, political representation, and gender and minority politics. In the following sections, I build a foundation for exploring questions related to intersectional advocacy via the rich history of scholarly work on organizations as representatives. I also highlight some shortcomings in current understandings of the motivating factors behind organizations' agenda-setting and, ultimately, their representation of supporters.

### **Pluralist utopias vs. political realities**

Pluralists initially viewed interest groups as a solution to grievances in the general population and their purpose to directly represent citizen preferences before the government (Dahl 1961; Truman 1951). As scholars focused their attention on the costs associated with group formation, activity, and maintenance, they found evidence that group systems were biased toward the interests of upper-class members of society or wealthy institutions and corporations (Olson 1965; Schattschneider [1960] 1975; Walker 1983). In terms of numbers, funding, and flexibility, business and institutional interests dominate activity in Washington, DC while individuals advantaged by socio-economic and/or educational backgrounds engage in higher levels of collective action (Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Gray and Lowery 1996; Heaney 2004; Salisbury 1984). Additionally, advocacy groups are not "bias-free" and representational inequity can be found within organizations themselves (Baumgartner and Leech 1999; Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Strolovitch 2007). That is, organizations often provide differential levels of activity on behalf of various groups of people involved in the organization.

For example, the preferences of supporters with relative advantages (monetary and educational) are often privileged over those of supporters with fewer expendable resources to contribute to advocacy or participation in politics (Berry et al. 2006; Miller 2008). Internal biases that emerge on behalf of more advantaged subgroups of organizational supporters also bias organizations' policy agendas toward the interests of people who are more advantaged in the political process to begin with (Strolovitch 2007).

In addition to general bias, scholars find that intersectional disadvantage complicates paths of representation as organizations lay claim to broad constituencies containing secondary or tertiary identities within their boundaries (Cohen 1999; Kurtz 2002; Young 2000). Crenshaw (1989) was one of the first to use the word "intersectionality" to describe a methodology that examines how various biological, social, and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality interact on multiple levels and contribute to systemic social inequality. However, the concept of intersectionality is one that existed in black feminist scholarship for decades prior to Crenshaw's coining of the term. From Sojourner Truth's illuminating question of "Ain't I a Woman" to black feminists' critiques of the classed/raced assumptions promulgated by the second-wave feminist

movement, the concept of intersectionality structures individuals' lived experiences, political representation, and relationships with advocacy groups.

Garcia Bedolla (2007) and other feminist scholars argue that people's life experiences have the potential to include marginalization and privilege simultaneously (Collins 1993; Lorde 2009). As such, research immersed in theories of intersectionality accounts for the fact that people do not experience life from a single lens or viewpoint; their life experiences are constantly shaped by context and factors of their identity (Hancock 2007; Moller 2002; Simien 2005). However, these intersections of experience were frequently ignored by both activists and scholars (Dill 1983; Jordan-Zachery 2013). Scholars often focus on how inequality *generally* matters in society, rather than what types of inequality matter, and in what circumstances.

As Dill (1983) points out, organizations in pursuit of policy change on behalf of disadvantaged individuals are generally more likely to focus on "winnable" policy issues centered on advantaged, or single, axes of oppression. No organization focusing on a single axis of oppression can guarantee the full representation of people whose lived experiences are shaped by the intersections of multiple identities unless activists prioritize these types of issues in policy agendas (Strolovitch 2007; Young 2000). Often, advocates must choose between equitable issue agendas that account for intersectional experience vs. more limited, but politically expedient, agendas that may not encompass intersectional disadvantage.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have found that organizations choose the latter option in order to maximize their chances of political success and simultaneously appeal to advantaged subsets of their supporters (Marchetti 2013; Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995; Strolovitch 2007).

### ***Who is being represented and why is it important?***

Studies of organizational bias and intersectional identities provide a solid foundation for understanding how disadvantaged interests are represented in politics. However, there are areas for improvement and this paper bridges several gaps in knowledge about who advocacy organizations represent and how they do so. By focusing explicitly on diversity within organizations' supporter bases and linking this diversity back to the identities represented in groups' policy agendas, this study exposes *who* exactly is left out of the representational process.<sup>2</sup> I also move beyond a general understanding of organizational supporters by examining multiple axes of oppression among groups' constituents. Studies that examine internal group decision-making (Barasko 2004; Berry 1977) often discuss "constituents" or "members" as largely homogenous groups and fail to further problematize the idea of multiple levels of disadvantage.

Strolovitch (2007) was one of the few scholars to distinguish, both conceptually and analytically, between groups' members and constituents, finding that the majority of organizations in her sample devoted differential levels of attention and representation to advantaged subgroups of their supporters. Like Strolovitch, I argue that focusing only on the relationships between group leadership and organizational members leaves out a large piece of the representational puzzle. Though both members and constituents are represented by the organization, the latter group does not necessarily provide the organization with any additional resources. Given that constituents do not need to regularly contribute time or money to the group in order to receive the benefits of representation, this subgroup of supporters is more likely to encompass individuals with fewer monetary or skill-based resources to contribute to advocacy, thus increasing the probability that constituencies will contain higher numbers of disadvantaged individuals than memberships will. In this study, I focus on how policy agendas correspond to identities contained within organizations' constituencies rather than their memberships.

The combination of complex advocacy goals and supporters without significant amounts of time, education, or money to devote to advocacy also means that many advocacy organizations

face enormous obstacles to survival (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Minkoff 1995; Wilson [1974] 1995). Given that intersectional issues are necessarily complex and often controversial, groups in need of support may be hesitant to prioritize them. Instead, it is generally in a group's best interest to cater to the less-complex preferences of individuals who are able to strengthen the organization through resource contribution (Barasko 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1973; Staggenborg 1988). This does not mean that groups cannot work on intersectional issues, but that it is generally unlikely to see an organization claiming to *exclusively* represent an intersectionally marginalized constituency as it limits both their donor pool and policy agenda. That being said, it is still reasonable to expect organizations to represent the needs of their intersectionally marginalized supporters.

Intersectional and feminist frameworks argue that thinking about issues of representation, advocacy, and public policy within a majoritarian framework is problematic as it reproduces tyranny of the majority and skews political representation toward the needs of the numerically (or politically) dominant. Strolovitch's (2007) redistributive representational concept of "affirmative advocacy" suggests that organizations should be expected to devote as much, if not more, attention to the needs of disadvantaged subgroups as they devote to advantaged subgroups of supporters. Guinier (1994) takes a strong anti-majoritarian stance in her argument for a cooperative style of political decision-making guided by a "taking turns" solution to majority rule. In her discussions of race, class, and gender bias, Young (2000) argues that public policy should be broad enough to encompass any intersections of social or economic identity that can produce injustice in a democracy. This is precisely where questions of who is being represented by advocacy organizations become most relevant.

### **Data collection: survey of organizations<sup>3</sup>**

Though the literature suggests that it is difficult for organizations to advocate on behalf of intersectional issues generally, it is unclear whether people with particular types of intersectional disadvantages receive more (or less) representation as compared to other types of oppression. One of the reasons scholars have little information about *who* exactly is left out of political organizing is due to the difficulties associated with surveying or even identifying organizations' supporters. Many organizations claim to represent broad groups of people that do not coalesce easily into groups for survey data. It is difficult to measure the preferences of advocacy organizations' supporters and even more difficult when intersectional identities are considered. This lack of information has important implications for the representational standards to which one can reasonably hold organizations. For example, is it reasonable to expect a women's rights organization to advocate for disabled women if there is no information about the extent to which disabled women are present among its supporters? Without knowing the demographic composition of groups' supporters, it is difficult to assess whether they are under or over-representing particular groups.

Additionally, gathering information about advocacy groups' issue priorities can be difficult. Previous research (Strolovitch 2007) asked groups directly about their activities on particular sets of predetermined issues and while this approach improved upon other studies, it potentially constrains the scope of groups' issue agendas. It may be that an organization is particularly active on intersectional issues that are not included on the provided list. Or, the organization may be active on multiple intersectional issues but is only asked about one. To answer questions regarding who exactly is represented through advocacy, the scope of organizations' policy agendas, and the extent to which groups' issue agendas correspond to supporters' identities, I asked advocates directly about both the composition of their constituencies and the issues on their policy agendas.

To gather this information, I built and surveyed an original data set of over 700 advocacy organizations in 14 states in the nine Census regions of the USA, aiming for diversity in state size and political culture. I chose one state from each of these nine regions along with five

additional states to balance out regions where particularly small states were selected. That is, I did not want to bias my sample toward states with larger populations and more interest groups. After constructing a sample of 14 states, I used a combination of state lobby registration records and the GuideStar non-profit database to identify advocacy organizations in each. Specifically, I focused on groups working on behalf of people united by sexuality (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning [LGBTQ] organizations), gender (women’s rights organizations), race/ethnicity (racial minority rights organizations), belief in social and economic justice (social/economic justice organizations), or the rights of disabled persons (disability rights organizations). There are varied definitions of an “advocacy organization” and I chose to focus on groups that were explicitly involved with lobbying state government in some capacity. Though lobbying is not all that advocacy entails, I defined an advocacy organization as one that works on behalf of citizens to change laws in a given state.

I initially used state lobby registrations to build a list of advocacy organizations in each of the 14 states focusing on the five main group types listed above. The typical lobbying registration record includes the name of the organization as well as organizational type (e.g., mass membership or public interest lobby vs. a business or corporate lobby) and I used a combination of name and registration type to guide inclusion in the study (e.g., Planned Parenthood of Pennsylvania, public interest lobby). However, lobby registration requirements are far from uniform and many non-profit organizations can engage legislators in an “educational” capacity without having to register as lobbyists (Berry and Arons 2003). To account for differential registration requirements, I supplemented the lobby registration searches with information from the GuideStar non-profit database.<sup>4</sup> To search the database, I used keywords that corresponded with the five main group types (e.g., “women” and “economic justice”) in each of the 14 states.<sup>5</sup> I wanted to include *all* relevant organizations in the sample and excluded groups only if they focused on national-level policy, focused primarily on service provision without any attention to legislation, or were defunct.

From August 2011 to October 2011, each organization in the sample was contacted to confirm participation and then emailed an original survey designed to capture information about their supporters and policy agendas; in total 716 surveys were sent.<sup>6</sup> Of the 716 groups receiving the survey, 22 groups responded that they were inapplicable or disbanded, thus reducing the total eligible sample to 694 groups across 14 states. After placing follow-up calls to non-responsive organizations, the final sample contained information from 204 organizations out of 694 eligible groups for a final response rate of 29%.

Though surveys of non-profit organizations generally have lower response rates than surveys of individuals (response rates from organizations are often between 25% and 50%), these response rates are less likely than individual-level surveys to result in severe non-response bias (Haycock 1992; Tomaskavic-Devey, Leiter, and Thompson 1994). As Smith (1997) points out, the factor that creates the most non-response bias among surveys of non-profits is one that researchers generally cannot control; the lack of time that executive and policy directors have to devote to tasks outside of their primary organizational responsibilities. Table 1 shows the distribution of responsive organizations across the five group types.

Table 1. Response rate by group type.

	Women’s rights	Socio-economic justice	Racial-minority rights	Disability rights	LGBTQ rights
Percentage	24	28	16	29	32
Number	51	47	25	45	36

Response rates for four out of the five group types are within 8 percentage points of one another, ranging from a low of 24% to a high of 32%. Racial minority rights organizations appear to be an outlier, with a response rate that is eight points lower than the response rate for women's rights organizations, 10 points lower than socio-economic justice groups, 11 points lower than disability rights groups, and 16 points lower than the response rate for LGBTQ rights organizations.

Based on the survey methodology, there is no systematic reason for racial minority rights organizations to respond at a lower rate vs. any other group type. However, racial minority rights organizations may be underrepresented in the overall sample of groups and those that chose to participate may be unrepresentative of the population of racial minority rights organizations in the states. As a check on the latter of these two possibilities, I compared the operating budgets of responsive racial minority rights organizations to a random sample of racial minority rights organizations that did not respond to the survey.<sup>7</sup> The average operating budget for responsive organizations was \$7,000,000 greater than the average operating budget for non-responsive organizations. However, this difference may have been driven by one very wealthy outlier in the set of responsive racial minority rights organizations. Despite what appears to be a substantively large difference between the average operating budgets of responsive vs. non-responsive organizations, a two-tailed difference of means test indicated that the average budgets were statistically indistinguishable from one another.

### Measuring priority and diversity in organizations' policy agendas

Each organization received a survey that included questions measuring various aspects of representation through advocacy. Specifically, I asked each respondent to: (1) "List up to five issues your organization has worked on over the past year." To determine whether an issue was intersectional, I considered whether the issue affected the organization's primary constituency in general, or whether it would affect a subset of intersectionally marginalized individuals within this primary group, similar to the approach taken by Strolovitch (2007). For example, a women's rights organization could list reproductive rights and welfare reform as two issues on their advocacy agenda. Issues related to reproductive rights could be important to many types of women and are not necessarily limited to a disadvantaged subgroup; thus, this would not be considered intersectional advocacy. On the other hand, if a women's rights organization listed welfare reform as one of its top issues, *this* issue would be considered intersectional, as poor women are intersectionally disadvantaged along lines of both gender and class. Other examples of intersectional issues include racial minority organizations focusing on domestic violence or rape (intersectional by gender), disability rights organizations focusing on the needs of low-income disabled persons (intersectional by class), and economic justice organizations focusing on issues of immigration (intersectional by race/ethnicity).

To measure the priority organizations assigned to intersectional advocacy, I also asked respondents to identify one of the five issues listed as their "most important" priority for that year. This measures organizations' highest possible commitment to intersectional organizing. I then considered whether the chosen issue encompassed some type of intersectional disadvantage. Table 2 shows that for most organizations (156 groups or 79% of the sample), their chosen "most important" issue was *not* intersectional. There are 41 groups (21% of the sample) that do have an intersectional issue listed as most important. Looking at the percentages in the last column of Table 2, 21% of the organizations in the sample choose an intersectional issue as their main focus. Similar percentages of women's rights and LGBTQ rights organizations place intersectional issues at the top of their agendas. On the other hand, racial minority rights groups are more likely to place an intersectional issue at the top of their agendas relative to the

Table 2. Most important issue by group type.

	Women’s rights	Socio-economic justice	Racial minority rights	Disability rights	LGBTQ rights	Total
No	38 (76%)	38 (84%)	17 (68%)	37 (84%)	26 (79%)	<b>156 (79%)</b>
Yes	12 (24%)	7 (16%)	8 (32%)	7 (16%)	7 (21%)	<b>41 (21%)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>197</b>

Notes: Columns depict the group type and rows depict whether or not the organization’s most important issue was intersectional. The total of 197 reflects the fact that seven organizations did not signify an issue as “most important” when completing the survey.

overall sample. The fourth column in Table 2 shows that 32% of racial minority rights groups identified an intersectional issue as the most important. Socio-economic justice and disability rights groups are less likely to prioritize an intersectional issue at the tops of their agendas relative to the sample as a whole. Only 16% of socio-economic justice and disability rights groups place such substantial priority on intersectional advocacy. Although the majority of organizations did not prioritize an intersectional issue as their most important, there are significant populations of each group type that chose to do so.

To account for dimensions of intersectionality, I coded the type of disadvantage encompassed by each intersectional issue on an organization’s agenda. In so doing, I considered the following questions: Is the issue intersectional based on gender, race, class, sexuality, or disability? Again, an issue that affects a group’s primary constituency would not be considered intersectional based on any of the potential dimensions. Table 3 shows the percentages of each group type that represent at least one issue that is intersectional by a given identity dimension. The cells depict the percentage and number of each organization type (women’s rights; socio-economic justice; racial minority rights; disability rights; and LGBTQ rights) that included at least one issue on their agenda that was intersectional by each of the measured dimensions: gender, class, race, disability, and sexuality.

Table 3. Dimensions of intersectional representation by group type.

	Group type				
	Women’s rights	Socio-economic justice	Racial/minority rights	Disability rights	LGBTQ rights
<i>Dimension of intersectionality on policy agenda</i>					
Gender	–	17% (8)	8% (2)	5% (2)	6% (2)
Class	59% (30)	–	60% (15)	41% (18)	44% (16)
Race	14% (7)	43% (20)	–	5% (2)	8% (3)
Disability	6% (3)	6% (3)	8% (2)	–	0% (0)
Sexuality	10% (5)	9% (4)	12% (3)	0% (0)	–
No intersectional issue	29% (15)	40% (19)	32% (8)	50% (22)	50% (18)

Notes: Numbers of organizations in parentheses beside percentages. Percentages do not add to 100 and the number of organizations does not equal 204 as some organizations have multiple intersectional dimensions on their policy agendas and can be included multiple times in the percentage and count of each group type representing an intersectional dimension. For example, if a women’s rights group had two intersectional issues, one in terms of race, the other in terms of class, it would be counted in the percentage/number of women’s rights groups that had a dimension of race on their policy agendas as well as counted in the percentage/number of women’s rights groups that had a dimension of class on their policy agendas.

For example, the first row of [Table 3](#) shows the percentages of each group type that focused on at least one issue that was intersectional in terms of gender. Seventeen percent of socio-economic justice groups included at least one issue on their policy agendas that was intersectional in terms of gender, while eight percent of racial/minority rights groups focused on at least one gender-based intersectional issue. Reading down the second column in [Table 3](#), 59% of women's rights organizations included at least one issue on their agendas that was intersectional in terms of class while 29% did not focus on any intersectional issues. Given the linkages between gender and poverty (Conway, Ahern, and Steuernagel 2005; Moller 2002; Reid and Tom 2006), issues of class are an easy way for women's organizations to expand the diversity of their issue agendas while remaining true to their supporter base. Issues that are intersectional according to race are also represented by women's organizations (14% of women's groups had at least one issue intersectional by race), followed by sexuality, and finally disability. Women's rights organizations, relative to other organization types, are making a greater effort to promote the interests of low-income women. However, this focus may be to the detriment of women (minority women and lesbians/bisexuals/transgendered) who have traditionally been marginalized from the mainstream feminist movement.

Reading down the third column in [Table 3](#), socio-economic justice organizations are most likely to have racial issues on their agenda with 43% of this organization type focusing on at least one issue that is intersectional by race. However, 40%, almost an equal proportion, of socio-economic justice organizations had no intersectional issues on their agendas. Smaller proportions of socio-economic justice groups focused on issues intersectional by gender, sexuality, and disability. Thus, the intersectional interests of low-income, minorities are represented by socio-economic justice groups while women's organizations represent the interests of low-income women. However, low-income LGBTQ and disabled individuals are unlikely to receive much representation from socio-economic justice groups. The fourth column in [Table 3](#) shows that a significant portion of racial minority rights groups, 32%, had no intersectional issues on their agendas while 12% focused on intersectional issues of sexuality or gender, respectively. Only eight percent focused on issues intersectional according to disability. Racial minority rights groups have a strong commitment to representing the interests of low-income minorities, as the proportion of racial minority rights organizations active along this intersectional dimension (60%) was much higher than the proportion for any other dimension. Racial minority rights groups focus much less on minority women's interests; only eight percent of the racial minority rights groups in the sample focused on an issue that is intersectional by gender.

It seems that disability rights groups largely shy away from intersectional advocacy as 50% of these groups included in the survey had no intersectional issues on their agenda. The second row in the fifth column of [Table 3](#) shows that when disability rights groups do focus on an intersectional issue, it is generally intersectional by class; 41% of disability rights groups focused on an issue affecting low-income disabled people. A much smaller percentage of these groups focus on issues related to gender or race (5% of disability rights groups in the sample focused on intersectional issues along these dimensions). There are no disability rights groups in the sample that focused on issues intersectional by sexuality. Also, it is important to note that generally the needs of people intersectionally marginalized by disability are not represented by other organization types (women's and racial minority rights, LGBTQ rights, and socio-economic justice groups). Though the needs of low-income, disabled individuals may receive some attention from disability rights organizations, they are unlikely to be represented anywhere else. People facing disadvantage by disability and gender, disability and race, or disability and sexuality have virtually no representation in advocacy organizations, including disability rights groups.

This limited representation may be due to disability rights groups' unique focus on issues related to disability *only* and a desire to distance themselves from more mainstream advocacy

organizations. For example, disability rights organizations have maintained an ambivalent stance on abortion rights, given the potential to abort disabled fetuses; this ambivalence did not go unnoticed by pro-life groups that have actively courted disability rights groups since the 1990s (Holmes 1991). Also, given that the vast majority of disability rights advocates with whom I spoke mentioned that they provide services in addition to advocacy, they may be forced to limit their agendas to those issues related to client needs. Consciously or not, disability rights organizations have largely limited their advocacy to the needs of a generalized disabled community without accounting for additional intersections of disadvantage.

Finally, LGBTQ rights organizations similarly limit their focus to the non-intersectional needs of their constituents; the sixth row in Table 3 shows that 50% of the LGBTQ rights groups in the sample have no intersectional issues on their agendas. Forty-four percent of the sampled LGBTQ rights groups represent issues intersectional by class, another eight percent focus on issues intersectional by race, and six percent focus on gender-based intersectional issues. Once again, there is no evidence of representation for disabled LGBTQ's.

It seems that groups often focus on issues intersectional by class even if they do not identify low-income individuals as their primary constituency. However, organizations' lack of attention to issues intersectional by gender and disability is potentially problematic. Similarly, disability rights organizations are typically the only groups to focus on issues affecting disabled populations. Considering these findings as a whole, class receives a great deal of attention, followed by race, with representation of issues related to gender, sexuality, and disability largely left up to groups that identify women, LGBTQ, and disabled individuals as their primary constituents.

In order to gauge whether organizations are over-representing or under-representing particular types of intersectional identities, I must consider how patterns of race, class, sexuality, disability, and gender within groups' constituencies map onto the types of disadvantage encompassed by groups' policy agendas. The survey question used to compute these data allowed respondents to choose the following categories for each minority group: did [the minority subgroup] make up "few to none;" "less than half;" "about half;" "more than half;" or "all" of their constituency? Though these are descriptive ordinal categories, in speaking with respondents during follow-up calls, I found that they generally thought of "less than half" as approximately a quarter of their constituency. Thus, I use this ordinal category as a guide for the demographic composition of groups' constituencies. Table 4 shows the percentages and numbers of each organization type that responded that they had "less than half" (or about 25%) or more of each minority subgroup within their constituency. Though this is a relatively large proportion for any minority subgroup, it

Table 4. Demographic composition of group constituencies.

	Group type				
	Women's rights	Socio-economic justice	Racial/minority rights	Disability rights	LGBTQ rights
<i>Minority subgroup in constituency</i>					
Women	–	81% (38)	96% (24)	96% (43)	94% (34)
African-Americans	78% (40)	60% (28)	–	60% (27)	69% (25)
Latinos	82% (42)	60% (28)	–	64% (29)	69% (25)
LGBTQ	73% (37)	55% (26)	68% (17)	56% (26)	–
Low-income	90% (46)	–	100% (25)	93% (42)	78% (28)
Disabled	51% (26)	45% (21)	68% (17)	–	53% (19)

Note: As categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., a single group could respond that "less than half" or more of its constituency is African-American *and* LGBTQ) totals are not listed for each column.

may take proportions of this size to motivate an organization with limited resources to devote a significant amount of attention to intersectional issues.

The first row of [Table 4](#) shows the percentage of each organization type claiming that women comprise at least a quarter (25%) of their constituents. That is, when asked “About how much of your constituency is comprised of women?”, 81% of socio-economic justice organizations, 96% of racial minority rights groups and disability rights groups; and 94% of LGBTQ rights groups said that women comprised at least a quarter of their overall constituency. Women comprise a large portion of constituents across all group types. However, this large constituency representation is not reflected in organizations’ issue agendas when referring to the results contained in [Table 3](#). The first row in [Table 3](#) shows that 17% of socio-economic justice organizations have an issue on their agenda that is intersectional by gender. This is compared to only eight percent of racial/minority rights groups, five percent of disability rights groups, and six percent of LGBTQ rights groups. Given that nearly all of the organizations claimed that women comprise at least a quarter of their constituents, their lack of attention to gender-based intersectional issues demonstrates widespread underrepresentation of gendered concerns in groups other than women’s rights organizations. As highlighted in [Table 3](#), women’s rights organizations are most likely to prioritize issues that are intersectional by class and less likely to prioritize issues intersectional by race, disability, and sexuality. These same organizations (racial minority rights groups, disability rights groups, and LGBTQ rights groups) are unlikely to be working on women’s issues despite identifying sizeable proportions of women within their constituencies. It seems that advocacy groups of *every* type under-represent minority, lesbian, and/or disabled women.

In terms of class, 90% of women’s groups, 100% of racial minority rights groups, 93% of disability rights groups, and 78% of LGBTQ rights groups say that at least a quarter of their constituencies included low-income individuals. Thus, one should expect to see a significant number of organizations working on issues that are intersectional by class to reflect relatively large proportions of low-income constituents. Referring back to the second row in [Table 3](#), one can see that organizations *do* devote a significant amount of attention to issues that are intersectional by class: approximately 60% of both women’s rights and racial minority rights groups focus on class-based intersectional issues, while 41% of disability rights groups and 44% of LGBTQ rights groups focus on issues intersectional by class. As discussed previously, issues intersectional by class were the most commonly represented by organizations of all types and especially by women’s rights and racial minority rights groups. Disability rights groups seem to be under-representing their low-income constituents, given their significant presence; [Table 4](#) shows that 93% of disability rights groups in the sample identify at least a quarter of their constituents as low-income. However, [Table 3](#) demonstrates that only 43% work on issues that are intersectional by class. That said, when compared to groups’ representation of gender-related issues, it seems that advocacy groups are more frequently representing people who are intersectionally disadvantaged by class than those intersectionally disadvantaged by gender.

Organizations also tend to have sizeable proportions of African-Americans and Latinos in their constituencies. Reading down the second column in [Table 4](#), 78% of women’s organizations claimed that African-Americans comprise at least a quarter of their constituents and 82% of women’s groups said the same for Latinos. Compared to other group types, women’s rights organizations seem to be the most racially diverse. The percentages of other types of organizations claiming that “less than half” or more of their constituents are African-American or Latino tend to be in the 60–69% range. When one compares this to the extent to which groups work on issues that are intersectional by race, the third row of [Table 3](#) shows that 14% of women’s rights, five percent of disability rights, and eight percent of LGBTQ rights groups have issues on their agendas that are intersectional by race/ethnicity. These percentages do not directly correspond with the percentages of each organization type that have significant numbers of racial minorities in their constituencies.

Comparing Tables 3 and 4, one sees that socio-economic justice groups come closest to representational parity: 43% of socio-economic justice groups work on issues that are intersectional by race and 60% say that African-Americans and/or Latinos make up a quarter or more of their constituents. Generally, when organizations advocate on behalf of intersectionally disadvantaged individuals, they are most likely to represent individuals who are intersectionally disadvantaged by class and race and are under-representing individuals who are intersectionally disadvantaged by gender, relative to the proportions of women they claim to be in their constituencies.

Tables 3 and 4 also show a large disparity between the percentages of advocacy groups that have disabled individuals making up at least a quarter of their constituency and groups with at least one issue on their agendas that is intersectional by disability. The sixth row of Table 4 shows that 51% of women's rights groups, 45% of socio-economic justice groups, 68% of racial minority rights groups, and 53% of LGBTQ rights groups say that disabled individuals make up at least a quarter of their constituencies. When compared to the percentages of these groups that are working on issues that are intersectional by disability, Table 3 shows that six percent of women's rights and socio-economic justice groups, eight percent of racial minority rights groups, and zero percent of LGBTQ rights groups are working on issues that affect disabled constituents. Groups are routinely leaving work on issues of disability up to the disability rights organizations.

In terms of sexuality, the fourth row of Table 4 shows that 73% of women's rights groups, 55% of socio-economic justice groups, 68% of racial minority rights groups, and 56% of disability rights groups say that at least a quarter of their constituents are LGBTQ. When it comes to the representation of LGBTQ identities, Table 3 demonstrates that 12% of racial minority rights and 10% of women's rights groups have at least one issue on their agenda that is intersectional according to sexuality. Socio-economic justice organizations have similar levels of intersectional representation (nine percent have at least one issue that is intersectional according to sexuality). On the other hand, Table 3 shows that no disability rights groups include LGBTQ issues on their agendas. Similarly, no LGBTQ rights group had an issue on its agenda that was intersectional by disability.

### **The substantive effects of under-representation**

It seems that intersectionally marginalized women are the most under-represented across all organization types that do not focus exclusively on women's rights. This observation does not excuse organizations from their lack of work on behalf of intersectionally marginalized LGBTQ and/or disabled constituents; this lack of activism is, undoubtedly, problematic. However, women comprise at least a quarter of the majority of organizations' constituencies, yet their voices seem to only penetrate women's rights groups where they are the primary constituency. Unless *all* women's rights groups focus simultaneously on issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality, women facing intersections of disadvantage are not being represented by a variety of advocacy organizations. Expecting one group type to consistently represent such a diverse array of interests is not only unreasonable, it fails to hold organizations accountable to the unique needs of their female constituents. Low-income individuals are represented in organizations of all types, even when they do not make up as significant a proportion of constituents as women. Though it might be easy to assume that organizations' intersectional activism in terms of class might equally benefit women, poverty is undoubtedly a classed *and* gendered issue. Given the predominance of female-headed households in poverty (Conway, Ahern, and Steuernagel 2005) socio-economic justice organizations' failure to work on issues related to gender ultimately marginalizes the largest proportion of low-income individuals nationwide.

The findings that advocacy groups over-represent class-based issues while under-representing gender-based issues and that few organizations choose an intersectional issue as their top priority, provide mixed support for findings (and speculations) of other scholars that state-level advocacy organizations are more likely than national-level groups to engage in intersectional advocacy (Berry and Arons 2003; Skocpol 2004). Strolovitch (2007) finds that connections with state-level affiliates increase national-level groups' attention to disadvantaged subgroup issues and suggests that a solution to national-level organizations' underrepresentation of intersectional issues may be a strengthening of ties to state (and local) affiliates. However, this study suggests that state-level organizations' attention to intersectional issues is extremely attenuated and unequal across various types of intersectional disadvantage.

Though state-level organizations frequently represent class-based intersectional disadvantage, their attention to all other types of disadvantage was severely limited. This lack of attention to non-class-based disadvantage at the state level undermines the assumption that advocacy outside of Washington, DC will be more representative of all marginalized populations in the states. Rather, these findings suggest that representation can be biased toward particular types of disadvantaged identities, even among organizations with the express purpose of representing marginalized individuals in politics.

Groups' over-representation of class to the detriment of other types of intersectional disadvantage raises normative implications about the representativeness of both the interest group system and democratic governance more generally. Interest group activity serves a critical role in the expression of citizen preferences. This is especially true for citizens facing political or social disadvantages that inhibit their direct political participation. If organizations primarily focus on only one type of intersectional disadvantage, public officials hear less about other types of intersectional concerns. This is especially troubling in light of the fact that women, who comprise over half of the US population and high proportions of organizations' constituencies, are underrepresented in formal governmental bodies in addition to organizational policy agendas. The same can be said of disabled and LGBTQ individuals' representation in houses of government and issue agendas. This skewed attention compromises the democratic ideal of equal representation and participation in government for those individuals who exist at the margins of society and politics.

The question of why organizations chose class-based intersectional disadvantage to the detriment of gender, disability, and sexuality remains open. One potential explanation lies in my conceptualization of the term "class." Compared to other types of intersectional disadvantage, "class" constituted one of the broadest categories. I considered any issue that addressed economic injustice or primarily affected low-income individuals as focused on "class." The types of issues meeting these criteria were incredibly wide-ranging. For example, one racial minority rights organization prioritized financial literacy and job readiness. These issues affect individuals who are in difficult financial situations and/or currently unemployed and their prioritization by a racial minority rights group indicates that subgroups of its constituents were facing economic hardship. A women's reproductive rights organization focused on providing grants to low-income women seeking reproductive health services, while a LGBTQ rights organization focused on housing for constituents living with HIV-AIDS. In these cases, individuals with adequate income would not be in need of outside assistance for medical treatment or housing. The one positive thing to be said about organizations' primary focus on class is the fact that these foci were wide-ranging and diverse, thus increasing representation for a variety of disadvantaged individuals.

Alternatively, groups' disproportionate attention to economic and class issues may be due to the timing of the survey. Given the slow recovery in the US economy after the 2008 recession, organizations may be focusing their efforts on class-based issues because *all* types of individuals, especially those who were formerly middle class, are facing new financial hardships. In other

words, organizations may be focusing on class because there has been a significant increase in the proportion of their constituents who are low-income. Other types of identity (e.g., gender, sexuality, etc.) would not be directly affected by the financial crisis, thus leaving the proportions of female, minority, disabled, and LGBTQ constituents relatively unchanged. Constituents who may have been the former financial backbone of the organization have now become those in need of economic aid. For example, if a women's rights organization typically relies upon middle-class donors for financial support, a significant decline in the number of middle-class supporters would undoubtedly get the organization's attention. New financial hardship brings new issue concerns and constituents may be voicing economic hardships to leaders of all group types, not just socio-economic justice groups.

Alternatively, organizations may be mimicking governments' attention to issues related to class. Over the past few years, federal and state governments have taken up several key pieces of legislation focused on economic recovery. From President Obama's "Jobs Bill" to the distribution of federal stimulus money in the states, governmental bodies have espoused a strong financial focus. Given the salience of economic issues, policy-makers may be focusing disproportionately on class-based issues in an effort toward securing reelection. This may in turn produce a trickle-down effect where attention to class-based issues by government is subsequently reinforced by advocacy groups' economically focused agenda-setting.

### **Conclusions and new directions for research**

This study was motivated by questions of whether organizations fill representational gaps and whether advocates act as faithful representatives for the voiceless in politics. The answers to these questions do not paint an overwhelmingly positive picture of the representation of intersectional interests, but they leave room for improvement and learning. Recent years have been difficult for "progressive" non-profit organizations; these difficulties range from funding issues to outright attack by conservative organizations and legislators. Thus, advocates are operating in a time of unprecedented targeting of women's reproductive choice, immigration issues, and funding cuts to programs that support low-income and disabled individuals. In spite of these hardships, a majority of organizations (119 groups or approximately 58% of the sample) placed at least one intersectional issue on their policy agendas. Similarly, many scholars would argue that organizations continue to serve as the best vehicle for minority groups to gain a political voice (Berry and Arons 2003; Strolovitch 2007; Weldon 2002). So, what is to be done regarding groups' disproportionate attention to class at the expense of other types of intersectional disadvantage?

One possible solution lies in Guinier's (1994) aforementioned idea of "taking turns." Guinier (1994) argues that democratic systems should have some mechanism in place so that groups are able to "take turns" to ensure that marginalized groups have the opportunity to make their voices heard. Young (2000) makes a similar argument; i.e., that oppressed groups should receive extra representation to counteract the privilege of more advantaged individuals. Finally, in keeping with Strolovitch's (2007) concept of affirmative advocacy, groups could focus on a redistributive concept of political representation, treating the representation of different types of disadvantage as a way to enhance social justice (212). If organizations "took turns" in their prioritization of intersectional disadvantage, it would ensure a more equitable distribution of attention to constituents facing various types of intersectional marginalization. Similarly, if organizations considered agenda-setting as a tool for social justice, they would inevitably engage with a diverse array of issues. As Strolovitch (2007) points out, the idea of "extra" attention to particular types of disadvantage does not conflict with the ideal of democratic participation. Rather, the US political structure was designed in such a way to balance the influence of majorities *and* minorities. Whatever the solution, raising groups' consciousness about representational bias will be the first step in this

process. As such, the results of this study will be shared with participating organizations with the hope that by calling attention to biases within policy agendas, advocates may feel compelled to rectify these representational imbalances in future organizing.

In order to better understand advocacy, one must account for factors motivating group behavior. These data and descriptive analyses serve as a preliminary study of organizations' activism on behalf of disadvantaged populations in the states. Many organizations have a long way to go in terms of adequately representing intersectionally marginalized segments of their constituencies. When making decisions about issue priorities, organizational leaders simultaneously negotiate the preferences of constituents, donors, group members, the activity of competing or oppositional groups, and the legislative atmosphere in which they work. Thus, questions about the impediments and motivations behind organizations' intersectional advocacy remain: Which contextual aspect matters more in processes of representation? What was the nature of the non-intersectional issues groups work on? What types of disadvantage (if any) do non-intersectional issues address? The answers to these questions will help to explain the motivations behind organizations' intersectional advocacy. Thus, the next step in understanding intersectional advocacy is to account for the forces behind organizational behavior and issue attention.

### Supplemental Appendix

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2013.876919>.

### Notes

1. I focus on intersectional disadvantage as potentially distinct from intersectional identities. Intersectional identity is important, but these identities are simultaneously tied to disadvantages in politics and society.
2. For the purposes of this study, I use the term "organizations" to refer to groups representing individuals, rather than business entities or institutions. These are commonly known as "citizen organizations."
3. More information about the sample selection of states, organizations, and survey questionnaire can be found in the Supplemental Appendix.
4. Whether the original source was state lobby registrations or GuideStar, most organizations' websites were double-checked to ensure inclusion in the study.
5. The supplemental appendix contains detailed information about keywords used to search for groups and sample construction.
6. A survey pre-test revealed that organizations prefer to conduct business via email rather than regular mail, which is why questionnaires were delivered electronically.
7. The supplemental appendix contains detailed information about the random selection of non-responsive organizations and difference of means test, the construction of the sample of organizations and states, and the survey questionnaire.

### References

- Barasko, Maryann. 2004. *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*. Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Baumgartner, Frank, and Beth Leech. 1998. *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Baumgartner, Frank, and Beth Leech. 1999. "Business Advantage in the Washington Lobbying Community: Evidence from the 1997 Lobby Disclosure Reports." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest political science association, Chicago, IL., April 15–17.
- Berry, Jeffrey. 1977. *Lobbying for the People*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Berry, Jeffrey, and David Arons. 2003. *A Voice for Nonprofits*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Berry, Jeffrey, Kent Portney, Robin Lissm, Jessica Simoncelli, and Lisa Berger. 2006. "Power and Interest Groups in City Politics." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American political science association, Philadelphia, PA, August 31–September 3.

- Cohen, Cathy J. 1999. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1993. "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection." In *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, edited by Susan Shaw and Janet Lee, 60–67. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing.
- Conway, Margaret, David Ahern, and Gertrude Steuernagel. 2005. *Women and Public Policy: A Revolution in Progress*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1): 139–167.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1961. *Who Governs?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dill, Bonnie Thornton. 1983. "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood." *Feminist Studies* 9 (2): 131–149.
- Garcia Bedolla, Lisa. 2007. "Intersections of Inequality: Understanding Marginalization and Privilege in the Post-Civil Rights Era." *Politics and Gender* 3 (2): 201–225.
- Gray, Virginia, and David Lowery. 1996. *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation: Lobbying Communities in the American States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Guinier, Lani. 1994. *The Tyranny of the Majority*. New York: Free Press.
- Hancock, Ange-Marie. 2007. "When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm." *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (1): 63–79.
- Haycock, Nancy. 1992. *The Nonprofit Sector in New York City*. New York: Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York.
- Heaney, Michael. 2004. "Outside the Issue Niche: The Multidimensionality of Interest Group Identity." *American Politics Research* 32 (6): 611–651.
- Holmes, Steven. 1991. "Abortion Issue Divides Advocates for Disabled." *New York Times*, July 4.
- Jordan-Zachery, Julia. 2013. "Now You See Me, Now You Don't: My Political Fight Against the Invisibility/Erasure of Black Women in Intersectionality Research." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 1 (1): 101–109.
- Kurtz, Sharon. 2002. *Workplace Justice: Organizing Multi-Identity Movements*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 2009. "There Is No Hierarchy of Oppression." In *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, edited by Susan Shaw and Janet Lee, 70–71. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing.
- Marchetti, Kathleen. 2013. "Mission Statement: Militarized Discourses in Women's Advocacy Organizations." *Gender, Place & Culture*. Published online, March 2013. doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2012.759909
- McCarthy, John D., and Mayer N. Zald. 1973. *The Trend in Social Movements in America: Professionalization and Resource Mobilization*. Morristown, NJ: Chatham House.
- Meyer, David, and Suzanne Staggenborg. 1996. "Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity." *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (6): 1628–1660.
- Miller, Lisa L. 2008. *The Perils of Federalism: Poor People and the Politics of Crime Control*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Minkoff, Deborah. 1995. *Organizing for Equality: The Evolution of Women's and Radical-Ethnic Organizations in America, 1955-1985*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Moller, Stephanie. 2002. "Supporting Poor Single Mothers: Gender and Race in the US Welfare State." *Gender and Society* 16 (4): 465–484.
- Olson, Mancur. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reid, Colleen, and Allison Tom. 2006. "Poor Women's Discourses of Legitimacy, Poverty, and Health." *Gender & Society* 20 (3): 402–421.
- Salisbury, Robert. 1984. "Interest Representation: The Dominance of Institutions." *American Political Science Review* 78 (1): 64–76.
- Schattschneider, E. E. [1960] 1975. *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, and John Tierney. 1986. *Organized Interests and American Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Simien, Evelyn M. 2005. "Race, Gender, and Linked Fate." *Journal of Black Studies* 35 (5): 529–550.
- Skocpol, Theda. 2004. *The Minority Rights Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Smith, Jackie. 1997. "Nonresponse Bias in Organizational Surveys: Evidence from a Survey of Groups and Organizations Working for Peace." *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 26 (3): 359–368.

- Spalter-Roth, Roberta, and Ronnee Schrieber. 1995. "Outsider Issues and Insider Tactics: Strategic Tensions in the Women's Policy Network during the 1980s." In *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, edited by Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin, 105–128. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Staggenborg, Suzanne. 1988. "The Consequences of Professionalization and Formalization in the Pro-Choice Movement." *American Sociological Review* 89 (3): 543–565.
- Strolovitch, Dara. 2007. *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tomaskovic-Devey, Donald, Jeffrey Leiter, and Shealy Thompson. 1994. "Organizational Survey Nonresponse." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39 (3): 439–457.
- Truman, David B. 1951. *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*. 2nd ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman H. Nie. 1993. "Race, Ethnicity and Political Resources: Participation in the United States." *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (4): 453–497.
- Walker, Jack L. Jr. 1983. "The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America." *American Political Science Review* 77 (2): 390–406.
- Weldon, S. Laurel. 2002. "Beyond Bodies: Institutional Sources of Representation for Women in Democratic Policymaking." *Journal of Politics* 64 (4): 1153–1174.
- Wilson, James Q. [1974] 1995. *Political Organizations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Young, Iris Marion. 2000. *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.