**Nonprofit change-makers? Looking beyond the narrow conceptualization of advocacy**

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### Abstract

In the last two decades, nonprofit scholars have extensively examined the topic of advocacy. However, two remaining limitations stand out. It seems as if advocacy is nonprofits’ only political activity and empirical research is often limited to a liberal nonprofit context. In this paper, we address both research gaps. We include public sphere effects next to advocacy as a nonprofit political activity. Then, for both political activities, we look at their efforts, use of tactics and possible explanatory variables in a neo-corporatist context. Making use of a large-N survey database of Flemish nonprofits, our findings show that: (a) advocacy is present to a large degree in comparison with public sphere effects, (b) that field of activity and public funding are important explanatory variables and (c) that there is an overlap in the use of indirect/outsider advocacy tactics and public sphere effects tactics.

### Keywords

Nonprofit organizations, political activities, advocacy, public sphere effects, neo-corporatism

# 1. Introduction

In the field of nonprofit studies, a great body of literature has been devoted to nonprofit advocacy, especially in the last two decades (Pekkanen & Smith, 2014; Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008). However, before digging deeper into all this scholarly interest, we have to know what is exactly meant with nonprofit advocacy – hereafter referred to as advocacy. Looking at one of the most encompassing definitions (Jenkins, 2006, p. 267), advocacy includes *“any attempt to influence the decisions of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest.”* Besides discussing alternative definitions (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; Lu, 2018), nonprofit scholars have other research interests as well when examining advocacy. Roughly, we distinguish four domains: (a) whether, and the extent to which, nonprofits engage in advocacy, (b) advocacy tactics, (c) explanatory variables of advocacy and (d) whether advocacy endeavors are effective and legitimate or not (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014; Mosley, 2011; Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Suárez & Hwang, 2008). In this paper, the former three domains will be further discussed below.

However, although the literature on advocacy is already quite comprehensive, two limitations still remain: (a) an overreliance on studies conducted within a liberal nonprofit context and (b) the lack of interest in other nonprofit political activities beyond advocacy. First, when examining literature reviews on advocacy and based on social origins theory (Anheier, Lang, & Toepler, 2020), we find that the majority of studies referred to, are conducted within a liberal nonprofit context (e.g. United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia) (Guo & Zhang, 2014). From an international perspective, this context is characterized by a large nonprofit sector more reliant on fees, charges and donations and a small level of government cofinancing of the nonprofit sector and spending on welfare programs, compared to, for example, a neo-corporatist (i.e. a context with both a large nonprofit sector and a large size of government spending and cofinancing) or a social democratic nonprofit context (i.e. a context with a small nonprofit sector but with sufficient government social spending) (Anheier et al., 2020). We could thus expect that path dependency is at play in these different nonprofit contexts, leading to different advocacy-related findings. Furthermore, a large part of the studies conducted within this liberal nonprofit context, solely focus on the American nonprofit sector. Said differently, most advocacy-related findings are not only biased by path dependency in a liberal nonprofit context under social origins theory, but also by country specific characteristics. For example, legislation limiting the advocacy efforts of American nonprofits (Berry, 2005). In sum, we cannot simply assume that advocacy findings within a predominantly liberal and American nonprofit context can be transposed to other research contexts.

Second, nonprofit scholars almost exclusively focus on advocacy as if it is nonprofits’ only political activity (Busso, 2018; Fyall & Allard, 2017; Shier & Handy, 2015; Suárez, 2020). However, within sociological and political theory and predominantly linked with the broader concept of civil society, other possible nonprofit political activities are discussed as well. Not to be exhaustive but we identify two other frequently cited nonprofit political activities besides advocacy: developmental and public sphere effects (Fung, 2003; Lechterman & Reich, 2020; Warren, 2001, 2003). Although it is hard to completely separate these three political activities empirically, they all differ from each other in the political goal to be achieved. Advocacy aims at influencing the decisions of an institutional elite. Public sphere effects include nonprofits enabling debate and opinion formation in the public sphere. Developmental effects relate more to individuals whereby nonprofits serve as ‘schools of democracy’ to instill citizens with civic skills and virtues. In other words, even though these three political activities are characterized by a possible overlap in their issues of concern, used tactics and chosen venues, they differ concerning their ultimate goal: i.e. influencing decisions of institutional elites, influencing the general public and opinion and developing individual skills and virtues (Warren, 2001).

In this paper, we want to address both research gaps by examining self-perceived advocacy and public sphere effects in a neo-corporatist context. First, a neo-corporatist context is very different from a liberal nonprofit context. Therefore, it should be noted that the combination of a high level of public sector spending and a large nonprofit sector is not the only characteristic. As a particular system of interest representation, not to be confused with earlier anti-democratic corporatist systems, it is typified by its strong intertwinement between the government and nonprofit sector (Streeck & Schmitter, 1985). Moreover, nonprofits are not only delivering social services but also actively taking part in the policy and design of these services in close partnership with the government (i.e. some parts of the nonprofit sector are even included in the state structure) (Salamon & Anheier, 1998). In this context, agreements with government are negotiated through institutionalized channels in order to preserve social consensus (e.g. direct contact with politicians and government administrations) (Pauly, Verschuere, De Rynck, & Voets, 2020). Thus, we expect to find a higher extent of – direct/insider – advocacy for nonprofits within a neo-corporatist context than for nonprofits in a liberal or social democratic context because it is inherent to neo-corporatism.

Second, public sphere effects is one of the most frequently cited nonprofit – and more broadly civil society – political activities besides advocacy. Warren (2003, p. 46) defines public sphere effects as *“developing and communicating information to the public, providing groups in society with a public voice, and, more generally, providing representations of difference and commonality in ways that underwrite and focus public deliberation”.* Although it is clear that this political activity has hardly been examined within the nonprofit research tradition, there are indications of a rapprochement between the research strands of both (a) nonprofit literature interested in advocacy and (b) sociological and political theory focused on public sphere effects (Rogers & Cohen, 1993; Warren, 2001). Looking at nonprofit literature, the advocacy definition of Andrews and Edwards (2004, p. 481) is very popular and a good example to underline our argument: *“promoting or resisting social change that, if implemented, would conflict with the social, cultural, political, or economic interests or values of other constituencies and groups”.* In this definition, even the words policy and government are not mentioned anymore. We can see a clear link with public sphere effects: i.e. different groups exists, with different interests, all seeking social dialogue and social change in the end. Moreover, when focusing on political tactics, we can see that through time, more scholars use the distinction between indirect/outsider and direct/insider tactics (Onyx et al., 2010). It can be noticed that these indirect/outsider tactics– also referred to as public education and public awareness raising (Shier & Handy, 2015) – are similar to the tactics used for facilitating public sphere effects, but than from the angle of policy influencing and not only opinion formation. For example, a protest campaign can both facilitate public sphere effects as well as indirectly influencing policy makers to address issues. Also in political and sociological theory literature, there is a convergence noticeable. At first, the public sphere was idealized as a rational public arena where citizens and nonprofits discuss issues as equals, eventually leading to consensus (Habermas, 1989). However, throughout the years and due to criticism (Shapiro, 1999), these ideas became more refined. The state was introduced as an important actor, potentially getting influenced by public sphere effects, and the existence of different public spheres, power struggles and conflict was recognized. Moreover, a distinction was made between ‘weak’ (i.e. only involved in public sphere effects) and ‘strong’ publics (i.e. involved in both public sphere effects and advocacy) (Dryzek, 2010; Fraser, 1990; Hendriks, 2012; Mansbridge et al., 2009). Said differently, when the public understanding changes, consequently, the policy directions of those with political power may – but not necessarily have to – change as well (Pousadela, 2016). Nonetheless this rapprochement, these two nonprofit political activities stand on their own characterized by their distinct goals. In this regard, Woodly (2015) said the following: *“While the living wage movement experienced over 120 policy victories and the marriage equality movement suffered many policy defeats, the overall impact that marriage equality had on changing American politics was much greater than that of the living wage because of its deliberate effort to change mainstream political discourse, and, thus, the public understanding of the politics surrounding the issue.”* Based on these considerations, we can formulate the following research question:

*Do nonprofit political activities involve both advocacy and public sphere effects? If so, to which extent, in what way and how are both related to explanatory factors?*

To answer these questions, we make use of a large-N survey database of nonprofits in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium (N=496). Flanders makes a good case for these research questions because the Flemish nonprofit sector is characterized by its neo-corporatist context (Verschuere & De Corte, 2015). Although we expect a high level of advocacy in this particular Flemish context, there are clear indications that nonprofits are paying – more – attention to other nonprofit political activities as well: e.g. public sphere effects (Debruyne & Van Bouchaute, 2014). One of the main reasons is the negative connotation surrounding advocacy, which can be traced back to a period of pillarization in the second half of the previous century. Pillarization is characterized by a tight coupling between nonprofits, political parties and government representatives who share the same values or interests (Pauly et al., 2020). In the following sections of this paper, we will first discuss advocacy and public sphere effects and formulate several hypotheses. Next, we will address the methods that have been used. We conclude by discussing the overall findings and the possible impact for nonprofit managers and scholars.

# 2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

## 2.1. What’s in a name? Nonprofit political activities

In this section, we conceptualize the two political activities we are interested in: i.e. advocacy and public sphere effects. First, advocacy spawns many possible actors, venues and tactics (Grønbjerg & Prakash, 2017). Nonprofits can target governments but also corporations and other nonprofits at a local, subnational, national or international level. However, concerning corporations and other nonprofits, it is only considered advocacy as long as it involves public policy areas. Nonprofits also have a wide range of tactics available. We believe that the definition of Pekkanen and Smith (2014, p. 3) summarizes the essence: *“the attempt to influence public policy, either directly or indirectly”.* Even though different types of advocacy tactics can be found in the literature (Kimberlin, 2010; Mosley, 2010), this definition appeals to the most common one, i.e. direct and indirect advocacy tactics (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014). Nonprofits can thus work directly together with policy makers, politicians and administrators within governments, lobby political parties, join advisory councils and attend private meetings with corporate leaders. On the other hand, these organizations can – and at the same time – transform public opinion by appealing to voter mobilization, organize a demonstration, public awareness raising and public education with the intention of indirectly influencing institutional elites (Andrews & Edwards, 2004; Casey, 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2010). Taking the above into account, we thus need an encompassing definition. Therefore, we relate to Jenkins (2006, p. 267), who broadly defines advocacy as *“any attempt to influence the decisions of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest.”*

Second, when considering public sphere effects, most literature is of theoretical nature and predominantly situated within political and sociological theory (Calhoun, 1993; Chambers, 2009; Cohen & Arato, 1994; Warren, 2001). However, there is also empirical research available, predominantly qualitative case study-based papers (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2019). Warren (2003, p. 46) defines public sphere effects as *“developing and communicating information to the public, providing groups in society with a public voice, and, more generally, providing representations of difference and commonality in ways that underwrite and focus public deliberation”.* Nonprofit organizations can help people to uncover, expand and refine their preferences, ideas, opinions and interests by facilitating public deliberation and influencing public opinion (Benhabib, 1996; Elstub, 2010). Moreover, by bringing (collective) concerns to the public sphere, they are up for discussion and possible solutions. Communication in this informal public sphere is unconstrained, highly unpredictable and spontaneous. Its scope ranges from face-to-face discussions through to nationwide protests by nonprofits (Dryzek, 1990, 2002; Habermas, 1996). In this capacity, nonprofit organizations support what Habermas (1989) initially conceptualized as the public sphere. However, the underlying assumptions of his work have been questioned and further refined by others scholars, as discussed above. Moreover, although a full and encompassing overview of tactics is lacking, we can identify several based on case-studies: for example a protest or demonstration, public awareness raising via street art, social media campaigns, information brochures, public opinion formation in newspapers and mobilizing citizens via bottom-up initiatives (Banaszak & Ondercin, 2016; Bebbington, 2007; Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Dodge, 2015; Fiig, 2011; Gaby, 2016; Leggett, 2017). In the literature, a distinction is often made between cooperative and confrontational strategies. When we think of confrontational strategies, we mean protests, boycotts and even radical activism, while cooperative strategies can entail information campaigns or broader news coverage (Mansbridge et al., 2009).

## 2.2. Theoretical framework

Scholars agree that both advocacy (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007; Suárez & Hwang, 2008) and public sphere effects (Boggs, 1997; Öberg & Svensson, 2012) are present but only to a moderate or low degree. Moreover, a decline in advocacy is supposed or reported under more general tendencies ((e.g. New Public Management) Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012) and specific contexts ((e.g. constraining tax code systems) Berry, 2005). Even studies reporting a status quo or increase in advocacy efforts, warn for a ‘qualitative thinning out’. This means that nonprofits choose more direct strategies instead of indirect ones or more cooperative strategies instead of confrontational ones. The risk is then that nonprofit organizations lose their independence from government institutions (Fyall & McGuire, 2015). Also scholars interested in public sphere effects report a decline. Although there seem to be more opportunities in an age of new technology and mass media, it becomes harder for nonprofits to get noticed in the public sphere (Binderkrantz, 2012; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Strömberg, 2004). To better understand which organizations are more involved in advocacy and public sphere effects, we identify those organizational characteristics that are related with the extent of advocacy and public sphere effects. Therefore we develop a theoretical framework based on relevant research and theories.

First, we discuss the field of activity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suárez, 2020). All nonprofits belong to a certain field of activity, within which they tend to show similar behavior (isomorphism) like advocacy and public sphere effects. Child and Grønbjerg (2007) argue that the level of advocacy is higher for the health, environment and animal related policy domains in comparison with education, arts and human services. Van Dyke, Soule, and Taylor (2004) found that environmental, peace, international human rights, single-policy and ethnic movements were more likely to strive for state attention and advocacy goals, while civil rights, LGBTQ and women’s movements were more likely to focus on public sphere effects and thus opinion formation. Hence, we hypothesize that the level of advocacy and public sphere effects will vary depending on the field of activity in which the organization is active (H1).

Second, we have a look at organizational size. Based on resource mobilization theory, we expect that only those nonprofits with sufficient internal capacity – in terms of professional staff with the necessary skills – will be more involved in advocacy (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007; Lu, 2018) and public sphere effects (Christiano, 1996). Therefore, we believe that organizational size is positively related to both political activities (H2a). However, a growing body of scholars argues that size could be negatively related with public sphere effects. In line with the reasoning of Skocpol (2003), the more paid staff or professionals an organization has, the more it risks to get alienated from society, thus pressuring public sphere effects (H2b).

Third, we examine organizational age. Older and established organizations are supposed to have more legitimacy to be involved in advocacy (Donaldson, 2007) and public sphere effects (Deephouse, 1996). Thus, we expect organizational age to be positively related with both political activities (H3a). However, this reasoning is being questioned for public sphere effects, as these older organizations risk a lack of innovation to maintain their public sphere effects activity (Ramírez De La Piscina, 2007), especially in a context of neo-corporatism (H3b).

Last we discuss the organizational resources – i.e. public funding and market income. Based on resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), we expect to find a negative relationship between public funding and both political activities (H4a). Nonprofits ‘do not want to bite the hand that feeds them’ and therefore decide to lower their advocacy and public sphere effects efforts (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Guo & Saxton, 2010). However, more scholars start to argue that a positive relationship exists between public funding and both political activities (H4b). Nonprofits build relations with decision makers, leading to advocacy opportunities (Mosley, 2010; Neumayr, Schneider, & Meyer, 2015), especially in a context of neo-corporatism. Also for public sphere effects, a positive relationship is possible when the government attaches importance to a rich and varied public debate (Chaves, Stephens, & Galaskiewicz, 2004).

When examining market income, and also based on resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), we expect a negative relationship with both political activities (Zhang & Guo, 2020). There is a risk that advocacy efforts will be lowered because these activities are hard to commercialize and measure in comparison with public service delivery and due to mission drift (Alexander, Nank, & Stivers, 1999; Fyall & Allard, 2017; Grønbjerg & Salamon, 2002). Eikenberry and Kluver (2004) also warn for the dangers of market income related to the potential democratic contributions of nonprofit organizations (i.e. also public sphere effects). They risk alienating their public sphere position in order to focus on the commercialization of services. Thus, we hypothesize a negative relationship between market income and advocacy and public sphere effects (H5).

# 3. Method

## 3.1. Data collection

In this paper, we focus on NPOs in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. As a comprehensive database was lacking, we conducted a systematic mapping effort by analyzing different (membership) databases of both public institutions and umbrella associations. Our scope was limited to nonprofits active at the Flemish regional level in either the human wellbeing, sociocultural or social economy sector. The human wellbeing sector is composed of organizations involved in care for minors (i.e. youth welfare), people with a disability (i.e. services for people with disabilities) and underprivileged people (i.e. poverty reduction). The sociocultural sector is more diverse than the other two sectors and consist of professional associations, patient associations, social rights movements, political organizations, sociocultural associations, youth associations, ethnic-cultural associations and faith-based associations. Last, the organizations in the social economy are internationally better recognized under the label of ‘work integration social enterprises’ (WISEs). These organizations offer vocational training and job opportunities to disadvantaged workers (e.g., people with a disability or living in poverty) by producing goods and services for the market.

Moreover, looking at each of these three sectors, there are indications that (most) nonprofits devote time and resources to advocacy and/or public sphere effects. For example, in the human wellbeing sector, a part of the organizations concerned with poverty reduction, recognize that they now attach greater importance to awareness raising and opinion formation directed at the general public rather than to advocacy (Cools & Oosterlynck, 2020). Also, in the sociocultural sector, a fierce debate is going on about how nonprofits can combine different political activities in a coherent and innovative way, mostly stimulated by umbrella organizations and bottom-up initiatives (Debruyne & Bouchaute, 2014). If we compare this with the social economy, it seems that the political activities are more limited to advocacy, predominantly by its umbrella associations (Wouters & Vermeersch, 2020). To conclude, although it seems that public sphere effects are present, we expect that advocacy is – still – a very important political activity in all three sectors. A possible explanation could be the neo-corporatist context in which the Flemish nonprofit sector is embedded.

**Table 1: Presence of the three sectors in both survey waves**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Human wellbeing | Sociocultural | Social economy |
| Population(N = 2475) | 603(24.36%) | 1713(69.21%) | 159(6.42%) |
| Sample framework(N = 747) | 210(28.11%) | 468(62.65%) | 69(9.24%) |
| Survey wave 1(N = 496) | 158(31.85%) | 289(58.27%) | 49(9.88%) |
| Survey wave 2(N = 403) | 130(32.26%) | 239(59.31%) | 34(8.44%) |

Eventually, we were able to identify 2475 NPOs. Paying attention to the distribution of the three sectors within the mapped population, a disproportional stratified sample was extracted (N=747). These organizations have been contacted and invited to participate in our study. A two wave-survey was developed aimed at NPO managers. Considering methodological prescriptions, the survey was pre-tested and respondents were incentivized by the promise of information about the results. After sending introductory letters, the first wave included a face-to-face interview conducted by trained interviewers. For the second wave, the respondents could opt for a second personal interview or a questionnaire via email or an online web-tool. The first wave included questions about the different political activities and tactics of nonprofits, while the second wave included questions about the organization’s age, size and types of income. Several reminders have been send and eventually 496 organizations responded to the first wave and 403 organizations to the second one. Thus, the response rates are respectively 66.4% and 53.9% (see table 1). We used a Chi-squared test to check whether the survey respondents reflected the composition of the sample framework. We can report that no significant difference is found between the sample framework and the final sample for the three sectors under scrutiny.

## 3.2. Measures

## *3.2.1. Dependent variables*

Concerning the dependent variables, there is no need to say that it is hard to measure the self-perceived extent of advocacy and public sphere effects. Therefore, we first developed a 5-item political activities scale, with each item related to the goal of advocacy and/or public sphere effects, respectively influencing the decisions of an institutional elite and enabling debate and opinion formation in the public sphere (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Warren, 2003). For each of these items, nonprofit managers had to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale the extent to which their organizations pursued these political goals ranging from ‘none’ to ‘utmost important’ Second, with the aim of strengthening the validity of our research, we constructed indices for both political activities. As can be seen in table 2, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). All items loaded on the respective factor that we beforehand expected too. However, one item could belong to both advocacy and public sphere effects: i.e. “putting a theme on the public or political agenda”. Although belonging to advocacy, the loading on the public sphere effects factor is rather high as well (.381) in comparison with the other items, but not above the threshold of a sufficient item loading. However, it is intuitively clear why this item belongs to the advocacy factor: it indirectly stresses the importance of both insider (i.e. ‘political agenda’) and outsider (i.e. ‘public agenda’) strategies with the goal of influencing public policy. Subsequently, we constructed an index for both factors by calculating the sum scores in order to get a measure of the extent of advocacy and public sphere effects.

Last, looking from a methodological perspective, all the criteria are met (Finch, 2019): sufficient item loadings (≥ .40), no item loadings on more than one single factor and factors that are internally consistent or reliable, as determined by the Cronbach’s α (≥ .70). Moreover, researchers agree that a valid factor solution should include three or more items (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). Although this criteria is not met for the public sphere effects factor, a 2-item factor solution is considered valid when the correlation between both items is higher than .70 and the factor explanation is clear (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006; Yong & Pearce, 2013), which happens to be the case for this factor solution.

**Table 2: Confirmatory factor analysis**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Items | Factors and loadings | | Communality | Reliability |
| 1 | 2 |
| Factor 1 - Advocacy |  |  |  | .794 |
| Influencing the policy of governments and/or corporations on specific themes | .894 | *.091* | .807 |  |
| Representing the social interests of your target group(s) or your constituencies to governments and/or corporations | .818 | *.016* | .669 |  |
| Putting a theme on the public or political agenda | .766 | *.381* | .732 |  |
| Factor 2 - Public sphere effects |  |  |  | .814 |
| Focusing on a dialogue with citizens about their concerns and enable to organize themselves | *.097* | .906 | .830 |  |
| Awareness raising and mobilizing citizens | *.148* | .903 | .837 |  |

## *3.2.2. Independent variables*

As outlined in the theoretical framework above, we selected five independent variables that are considered important for explaining both advocacy and public sphere effects: i.e. size, age, field of activity, public funding and market income. For our operationalization, we made use of the literature review of Lu (2018). This author gives an overview of how scholars, throughout the years, have measured these independent variables in advocacy research. First, organizational size is measured by the number of paid full time equivalents of the organization. This measure is more frequently used than other size measures (e.g. total organizational income). Secondly and rather straightforward, age is measured as the years of existence after its formal foundation. Third, public funding is measured as the relative share of public funding in the total nonprofits’ income. Public funding can vary from structural subventions to project subventions by all kinds of governmental actors. Fourth, market income is similarly measured, but here we look at the relative share of market income in the total income. Although market income is trickier to define, it is in general about selling goods and services with a profit motive as well as revenues generated from partnerships with corporations. In the survey, we made clear to the respondents what can be considered public funding or market income by giving some examples. Last, for the field of activity, we distinguish eleven categories that are reflecting the diversity of the Flemish nonprofit sector (Verschuere & De Corte, 2015). Each case of the sample belongs to one of these categories. For our analysis, we chose to dummy-code the different categories.

## *3.2.3. Political tactics*

In order to answer our research questions completely, we also have to look at the relationship between on the one hand advocacy and public sphere effects and on the other hand different political tactics. Based on our conceptual and theoretical overview, we can distinguish direct/indirect and outsider/insider tactics for advocacy and confrontational/cooperative tactics facilitating deliberation and opinion formation for public sphere effects. However, we have noticed that a certain overlap exists between indirect/outsider advocacy tactics and public sphere effects tactics. Based on previous empirical work on both advocacy and public sphere effects (Bebbington, 2007; Clear, Paull, & Holloway, 2018; Leggett, 2017; Öberg & Svensson, 2012; Onyx et al., 2010; Shier & Handy, 2015; Smith & Pekkanen, 2012; Verschuere & De Corte, 2015), we eventually distinguished 17 tactics. The use of these different tactics was measured by making use of a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ‘no tactic at all’ to ‘utmost important tactic. Subsequently, nonprofit managers had to indicate the extent to which a certain tactic was important for their organization.

## 3.3. Statistical analysis

Our statistical analysis has been performed by making use of the software program SPSS. First, we engaged in a descriptive analysis of our sample by calculating median, mean and standard deviation scores for both political activities. Moreover, we looked whether a correlation exists between advocacy and public sphere effects. Secondly, we performed a multiple linear regression analysis for both political activities. Since our dependent variables are composite indices, these variables can be considered continuous and thus applicable for linear regression analysis. However, we need to test the underlying assumptions beforehand (Feldman, Stanley, & Berry, 1985; Norušis, 2006). First, the assumptions concerning normality (i.e. based on the normal P-P plot) and homoscedasticity (i.e. based on the scatterplot with standardized predicted values and standardized residuals) are met for both models. Secondly, there are no issues with the autocorrelation of unstandardized residuals (i.e. based on a Durbin-Watson test 1.5 < d < 2.5), multicollinearity (i.e. based on a VIF < 10) and significant outliers (i.e. based on a Cooks distance < 1). Last, we also controlled for common method bias through separating the dependent and independent variables in either a proximal (i.e. buffer items) or temporal (i.e. different waves) way. Also ex post, no evidence of this bias could be found (i.e. based on a Harman one-factor test < 50%) (Eichhorn, 2014; MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). Third and last, we applied a partial correlation analysis for looking at the association between both political activities and the 17 political tactics. We opted for a partial correlation analysis because we wanted to control for the correlation between advocacy and public sphere effects, when looking at the relationship between a political activity and the different political tactics.

# 4. Findings

In this part, we discuss the results of our statistical analyses. First, we will descriptively analyze both factor-based indices and their relationship to each other. Second, and by making using of a correlation table and multiple linear regression analyses, we explore a possible causal mechanism between both indices on the one hand and some organizational and environmental characteristics on the other hand. Last, we focus on both indices again and their correlations with possible political tactics.

## 4.1. Advocacy and public sphere effects in Flanders

The construction of both indices allows us to analyze whether nonprofits in Flanders are involved in advocacy and/or public sphere effects, as identified by nonprofit managers themselves. As one can see in table 3, for our descriptive analysis, we make a distinction between the full sample (N=438) and the three sectors the sample consist of, i.e. sociocultural (N=265), human wellbeing (N=138) and social economy (N=35). First, we analyze the entire sample and it becomes evident that nonprofit managers indicate that their organizations are involved in both political activities. Nonetheless, advocacy (.72 corresponding with ‘rather important’) is on average a more important activity than public sphere effects (.58 corresponding with ‘between not important and important’). Moreover, as can be seen from both standard deviations, the extent of public sphere effects (std. deviation .27) is much more dispersed than the extent of advocacy (std. deviation .22). In other words, these findings show us that public sphere effects are less institutionalized in the nonprofit sector in comparison with advocacy and second, that there are greater differences in the extent of public sphere effects in comparison with the extent of advocacy. Secondly, we aim our analysis at the three different sectors. We can see for all three sectors that the self-identified extent of advocacy is higher than the extent of public sphere effects. Moreover, we noticed that the extent of advocacy is more or less the same across the sociocultural (.72), human wellbeing (.72) and social economy sector (.67), all corresponding with ‘rather important’. However, when looking at public sphere effects, we can see some clear differences between sectors. The extent of public sphere effects scores on average around .67 for the sociocultural sector (corresponding with ‘rather important’), while the scores for both the human wellbeing and social economy center around .50 (corresponding with ‘between important and not important’). When looking at the standard deviations, we can see that for all three sectors the scores are more dispersed for public sphere effects than for advocacy.

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics advocacy and public sphere effects.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | N | Median | Mean | Std. deviation |
| Advocacy | Full sample | 438 | .69 | .72 | .22 |
| Per sector |  | | | |
| Sociocultural | 265 | .69 | .72 | .23 |
| Human wellbeing | 138 | .69 | .72 | .21 |
| Social economy | 35 | .66 | .67 | .16 |
| Public sphere effects | Full sample | 440 | .57 | .58 | .27 |
| Per sector |  | | | |
| Sociocultural | 267 | .61 | .67 | .28 |
| Human wellbeing | 138 | .53 | .50 | .26 |
| Social economy | 35 | .45 | .50 | .19 |

Third and last, we analyzed whether a correlation exists between both political activities. When looking at the total sample in table 4, a significant correlation could be found between public sphere effects and advocacy. This result can be transposed to the correlation analyses for all three sectors. However, we see that the correlations are stronger for the human wellbeing (.542\*\*\*) and, to a lesser extent, the social economy sector (.351\*) compared with the sociocultural sector (.233\*\*\*).

**Table 4: Correlation advocacy and public sphere effects**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | N | Public sphere effects |
| Advocacy | Full sample | 438 | .322\*\*\* |
| Per sector |  | |
| Sociocultural | 265 | .233\*\*\* |
| Human wellbeing | 138 | .542\*\*\* |
| Social economy | 35 | .351\* |

## 4.2. Explaining the level of advocacy and public sphere effects in Flanders

Here, we analyze whether the level of advocacy and public sphere effects can be explained based on five independent variables that are considered important in the research traditions of both political activities. In other words, we test whether we can confirm our pre-defined hypotheses in the beginning of this paper. In table 5, we first look whether significant correlations could be found between our independent and dependent variables. Considering public sphere effects, the independent variables size, age and market income are negatively and public income positively correlated. However, for all variables, no significant correlations could be found. If we compare this with advocacy, the results are different. The independent variables size, age and public income are positively and market income negatively correlated. Moreover, the negative correlation with market income (-.123\*) and the positive correlation with public income (.166\*\*) are statistically significant. However, linear regression analyses offer a more elaborate overview of the explanatory value of both models.

**Table 5: Correlation matrix independent and dependent variables**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Advocacy | Public sphere effects |
| Size | .043 | -.022 |
| Age | .045 | -.049 |
| Public income | .166\*\* | .032 |
| Market income | -.123\* | -.097 |

Thus, we performed linear regression analyses for both advocacy and public sphere effects as can be seen in table 6. Our model for advocacy is statistically significant (p < .000) and explains 10.3% of the variance. In this model, only the hypotheses for public income and field of activity are supported. In other words, a significant positive association can be found for both public income (.261\*\*) and the ‘work, profession and economy’ field of activity (.222\*\* with social economy as reference category). The model for public sphere effects is also statistically significant (p < .000) and explains 11.3% of the variance. For this dependent variable, only the field of activity is significantly associated. More precisely, it is about adult social work (.212\*), new social movements (.191\*), ethnic cultural organizations (.210\*\*) and political organizations (.181\*). We should notice however, when interpreting these results, that the social economy field of activity is again the reference category.

**Table 6: Linear regression results**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Advocacy | Public sphere effects |
| Size | .028 | .027 |
| Age | .121 | -.045 |
| Public income | .261\*\* | .109 |
| Market income | -.065 | -.068 |
| Field of activity |  |  |
| *FOA: Work, profession and economy* | .222\*\* | -.020 |
| *FOA: Adult social work* | -.095 | .212\* |
| *FOA: New social movement* | .018 | .191\* |
| *FOA: Ethnic cultural organization* | .067 | .210\*\* |
| *FOA: Youth social work* | -.087 | .084 |
| *FOA: Religious organization* | -.106 | .082 |
| *FOA: Human wellbeing association* | -.068 | .147 |
| *FOA: Political organization* | .065 | .181\* |
| *FOA: Human wellbeing institution* | -.156 | -.085 |
| *FOA: Health, illness and disability* | .029 | .169 |
| *FOA: Social economy* | Reference | Reference |
|  |  |  |
| Adjusted R² | .103 | .113 |
| F | 3.371 (p < .000) | 3.642 (p < .000) |
| N | 291 | 292 |

## 4.3. Political activities and tactics

In this last results section, we look which tactics are correlated with subsequently advocacy and public sphere effects. If we look at table 7, we can first see that there is a significant association between advocacy and all the included tactics, except from raising awareness among citizens and applying the societal vision or views to its own services. The most important tactics seem to be direct contact with politicians (.597\*\*\*), direct contact with government administrations (.516\*\*\*) and participating in advisory councils (.433\*\*\*). If we compare these results with public sphere effects, we can see that a higher number of tactics is not significantly associated: i.e. the four direct policy advocacy tactics (direct contact with politicians, direct contact with government administration, direct contact with corporations and participating in advisory councils), filing a legal complaint or setting up a lawsuit and setting up improvement actions in the own organization. The most important public sphere effects tactics are raising awareness among citizens (.658\*\*\*), mobilizing citizens to defend and propagate these opinions (.623\*\*\*) and organizing debate and discussion (.401\*\*\*). We can thus conclude that advocacy is taken up by making use of a whole range of tactics, predominantly direct ones. If we compare this with public sphere effects, the range of tactics is smaller and predominantly focused on organizing debates and raising awareness to facilitate opinion formation.

**Table 7: Correlation matrix political activities and tactics**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Advocacy | Public sphere effects |
| *Controlled for public sphere effects* | *Controlled for advocacy* |
| Investing in an own study service | .239\*\*\* | .119\* |
| Collecting and mobilizing external knowledge | .285\*\*\* | .096\* |
| Direct contact with politicians | .597\*\*\* | .016 |
| Direct contact with government administrations | .516\*\*\* | -.017 |
| Direct contact with corporations | .264\*\*\* | -.045 |
| Participating in advisory councils | .433\*\*\* | -.022 |
| Disseminating opinions in all kinds of media | .389\*\*\* | .232\*\*\* |
| Raising awareness among citizens | -.015 | .658\*\*\* |
| Organizing debate and discussion | .209\*\*\* | .401\*\*\* |
| Mobilizing citizens to defend and propagate these opinions | .153\*\* | .623\*\*\* |
| Organizing a rally or demonstration | .259\*\*\* | .287\*\*\* |
| Organizing a protest of protest campaign | .282\*\*\* | .252\*\*\* |
| Filing a legal complaint or setting up a lawsuit | .345\*\*\* | .095 |
| Setting up improvement actions in the own organization | .130\*\* | .072 |
| Collaborating with other organizations | .284\*\*\* | .115\* |
| Giving space to voices that would otherwise not be heard in the public debate | .303\*\*\* | .305\*\*\* |
| Applying the societal vision or views to its own services | .039 | .170\*\*\* |

# 5. Discussion and conclusion

With this paper, we contribute to nonprofit advocacy literature by (a) our encompassing conceptualization of nonprofit political activities (i.e. looking beyond advocacy and including public sphere effects) and (b) the choice of research context (i.e. neo-corporatist instead of a liberal nonprofit context). Taking all of this into account, three conclusions can be drawn. First, although self-perceived advocacy is more important than public sphere effects, even across sectors, a great deal of nonprofits consider both political activities to be important. This finding is in line with what we would expect in a neo-corporatist context, because advocacy – especially direct/insider advocacy – is inherent to neo-corporatism (Pauly et al., 2020). Moreover, it seems that advocacy and public sphere effects are significantly correlated. This could mean that nonprofits are predominantly interested in both advocacy and public sphere effects simultaneously (Fraser, 1990). Nonetheless, there are also nonprofits only interested in advocacy or public sphere effects, which allows us to suggest that both political activities are different from each other in their ultimate goal – i.e. influencing decisions of institutional elites and influencing the general public and opinion (Warren, 2001).

Second, although we cannot confirm most of our hypotheses, public income and field of activity seem to be important explanatory variables to take into account when looking at advocacy (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007; Neumayr et al., 2015). Moreover, the field of activity is also an important variable to explain the extent of public sphere effects (Van Dyke et al., 2004). When looking more closely, these findings clearly show that our research was conducted within a neo-corporatist context. The positive relationship between public funding and advocacy can be explained by the strong neo-corporatist intertwinement between nonprofits and the government. Due to this, nonprofits build relationships with decision-makers which can offer them several advocacy opportunities, especially through direct/insider institutionalized channels. More evidence for this argument is offered, when looking at the significant correlations between the advocacy index and most of the direct tactics – compared to the indirect tactics – that we included in our statistical model (Neumayr et al., 2015). Next, when looking at the field of activity, it does not have to surprise that advocacy is positively and significantly related to the *‘work, profession and economy’* field of activity because, strictly speaking, neo-corporatism is predominantly concerned with the interest representation and negotiation of economic and labor-market related issues (Lijphart, 2012; Siaroff, 1999; Streeck & Schmitter, 1985). For public sphere effects, there is a significant and positive relationship with the following fields of activity: *‘adult social work’*, *‘new social movement’*, *‘ethnic cultural organization’* and *‘political organization’*. These fields are less institutionalized within a neo-corporatist context. For example, the *‘new social movements’* field of activity even clearly opposes the neo-corporatist – and pillarized – way of working and stresses the importance of being active in the public sphere (Van Dyke et al., 2004). Thus, we could assume that variables such as organizational size are less important to determine the extent of both public sphere effects and advocacy in a neo-corporatist context. A great deal depends on the institutional field of activity – i.e. context matters (Suárez, 2020).

Third, nearly all of the political tactics we included are correlated with advocacy, allowing us to make a distinction between more direct (e.g. direct contact with government administrations) and indirect (e.g. organizing a rally or demonstration) advocacy tactics (Pekkanen & Smith, 2014). However, this is different for public sphere effects, which intuitively makes sense, because there is no correlation with the political tactics we could classify as direct advocacy tactics. Nonetheless, still a great deal of the political tactics are both correlated with advocacy – i.e. indirect tactics – and public sphere effects. Of these overlapping tactics, the ones oriented at public debate and opinion formation (e.g. raising awareness among citizens, organizing debate and discussion and mobilizing citizens to defend and propagate these opinions) are more important for public sphere effects than for advocacy purposes (Shier & Handy, 2015). Thus, even though there is an overlap in the political tactics used for public sphere effects and advocacy purposes, not all tactics are equally important for both political activities.

Future research could build on our findings. By making use of a mixed-methods or qualitative design (Sandfort, 2014), scholars could look at other variables possibly explaining the extent of advocacy and public sphere effects (e.g. mission statement and organizational culture) (Kim & Mason, 2018). It could also be interesting to quantitatively investigate how overlapping political tactics are applied from the perspective of both advocacy and public sphere effects (e.g. a protest to influence institutional elites or to enable debate in the public sphere). Moreover, examining the legitimacy and effectiveness of nonprofits involved in political activities, is best done from a qualitative point of view (Bass, Abramson, & Dewey, 2014).

Last, this paper also has some practical relevance. Nonprofit managers should know that the political role of their organizations is very broad, not necessarily limited to advocacy. This broad conceptualization can shed another light on ongoing discussions. For example, scholars claims that there is a qualitative thinning out of advocacy tactics. This means that nonprofit organizations rely more on direct advocacy tactics alone instead of indirect ones as well, leading to a qualitative impoverishment of the tactical repertoire (Fyall & McGuire, 2015). However, with the knowledge of this paper, we know that some of the tactics used for indirect advocacy are also used for public sphere effects purposes. Thus, the possible qualitative thinning out could be even more threatening when taking both political activities into account.

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