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# Nonprofit Political Engagement: The Roles of 501(c)(4) Social Welfare Organizations in Elections and Policymaking

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a framework for understanding the role of member-based, politically active 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations in U.S. civil society. Tax-exempt social welfare (501(c)(4)) organizations make up the second largest group of nonprofit organizations in the United States. Among them are a mix of membership organizations, social clubs, professional associations, and advocates that are permitted to lobby and engage in partisan political activities. Informed by the literature, case study research, and a dataset of politically active 501(c)(4) organizations, we identify categories of politically active (c)(4) organizations involved in electoral and policy change actions including national advocacy organizations, local and state member organizations, (c)(4) funders, and shell entities. We discuss four analytic considerations that can guide future research on member-based, politically active organizations including (1) engagement activities, (2) organizational characteristics, (3) context, and (4) outcomes. We then provide an example of how we have applied this approach to a subset of organizations that build civic leadership and political capacity in communities that have experienced structural inequality and racism. We explain how these organizations engage members in grassroots organizing and advocacy strategies in order to impact elections and policy change. By explaining how the (c)(4) structure can enable organizations to involve members in political action, we enhance theoretical understanding of politically active (c)(4)s as mediating structures of political engagement. The paper concludes with proposed avenues for further empirical investigation.

**Keywords:** social welfare organizations, 501(c)(4) organizations, nonprofit advocacy, political action, grassroots community organizing

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# 1 Introduction

Nonprofit advocacy and political organizations operate within a complex environment of civil society groups vying to influence public policy and electoral outcomes (Suárez 2020). The heterogeneous mix of 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) nonprofit organizations that engage in advocacy, lobbying, and other forms of civic and political activities presents conceptual, definitional, and empirical challenges for researchers interested in studying these organizations (Pekkanen and Smith 2014; Post, Boris, and Stimmel 2022). A focus of our research is on creating a framework for categorizing and understanding organizations that fall under IRS designation 501(c)(4) (“social welfare organizations”) and that engage in activities ranging from nonpartisan voter registration drives to partisan campaigns aimed at changing public policy or electing candidates.

Social welfare 501(c)(4) organizations are entities that by virtue of that legal status are permitted to engage members in a combination of issue advocacy, lobbying, support for candidates and ballot initiatives, and partisan voter registration, education, and mobilization (see Figure 1). However, most 501(c)(4) organizations—an estimated 85 percent—do not engage in these activities. Among them are community service organizations, social clubs, professional and employee associations, homeowner and tenant groups, and sporting clubs (Koulish 2016). In Post, Boris, and Stimmel (2022), we estimate that a small subset of 501(c)(4) organizations—approximately 15 percent—are politically active, conducting advocacy and lobbying and interfacing with government and the legislative process.<sup>1</sup> Such organizations include well-known national advocacy organizations like the AARP, the League of Women Voters, and Disabled American

## Engagement Activities of Politically Active 501(c)(4) Organizations

- Issue Advocacy
- Lobbying: paid lobbyist or grassroots lobbying
- Partisan or issue specific voter mobilization
- Voter registration and education
- Candidate endorsements
- Ballot initiative support or opposition
- Other partisan engagement

**Figure 1:** Engagement activities of politically active 501(c)(4) organization.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper offers a detailed methodology that can be used to identify politically active 501(c)(4) organizations using the Business Master File. We also outline the methodological challenges using the IRS Form 990.

Veterans, along with their local and state chapter affiliates. This subset also includes notable dark money entities backed by wealthy liberal and conservative donors.

An even smaller number of politically active 501(c)(4) organizations is the focus of our research: membership organizations located in communities that have experienced structural inequality and racism, chronic disinvestment, and unequal access to services including quality housing, health care, and education. These organizations focus on promoting civic and political engagement activities among their members to influence policy and electoral change.<sup>2</sup> This paper outlines how we investigate organizations that fit these criteria among the 15 percent of politically active 501(c)(4)s. Excluding chapters of national advocacy organizations, like the League of Women Voters and the NAACP, we estimate that there are fewer than 1000 organizations that match these criteria.<sup>3</sup>

Although our prior research provides a roadmap for identifying the politically active organizations among social welfare organizations (Post, Boris, and Stimmel 2022), classifying such organizations using aggregate IRS data is time-consuming and often imprecise. There are limited indications on IRS Forms 990 that enable researchers to identify this subset of organizations, such as membership dues or political activities reported on Schedule C. Mission statements and descriptions of activities reported on Forms 990 are useful, but often too general. The limitations of IRS Forms 990 hinder researchers from accurately identifying politically active 501(c)(4) organizations or analyzing their roles in society. We find that qualitative investigation is a necessary complement for understanding the structures and functions of these organizations. Further, the lack of conceptual clarity about what these organizations do and how they fulfill their social welfare missions is another barrier to understanding.

Surprisingly little research has focused solely on the structures and functions of 501(c)(4) organizations and the roles they play in facilitating member participation. Our research aims to fill this gap, investigating the structures, organizational characteristics, activities, and outcomes of politically active, member based

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<sup>2</sup> We are currently conducting qualitative analyses of these organizations. We describe them as politically active, member based, and grassroots. The boundaries of this definition enable us to identify and investigate organizations that prioritize building a base of members who are directly impacted by the policy issues they seek to change and who are the focus of the organization's civic engagement programs.

<sup>3</sup> The combination of data from IRS Form 990 and qualitative research allows us to narrow the scope of this investigation by using specific variables for member engagement and civic and political action to identify organizations that are rooted in local communities, focus on members' civic development and participation, and engage in political activities directly related to the member interests.

**Table 1:** Analytic framework: Electoral and policy activities of social welfare organizations.

Engagement	– Methods to engage members and constituencies in civic and political action (see Figure 1)
Organizational Characteristics	– Organizational characteristics that facilitate engagement and policy/political outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Affiliated/hybrid legal form (C3, C4, PAC)</i></li> <li>– <i>Access to financial resources and philanthropic support</i></li> <li>– <i>Staffing and leadership development</i></li> <li>– <i>Membership size</i></li> <li>– <i>Alliances and coalitions</i></li> </ul>
Context	– Factors that contribute to an organization’s ability to engage members and change policy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Ecosystem embeddedness</i></li> <li>– <i>Political opportunities and constraints</i></li> <li>– <i>Local economic and social issues</i></li> </ul>
Outcomes	– Direct and indirect goals that organizations can achieve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Policy changes</i></li> <li>– <i>Electoral wins – candidates and ballot initiatives</i></li> <li>– <i>Newly engaged members</i></li> <li>– <i>New financial resources and capacity for political action</i></li> <li>– <i>Positioning and reputation in policy field or ecosystem</i></li> </ul>

501(c)(4) organizations. To shed light on this under-researched group of organizations, this paper first distinguishes four categories of politically active 501(c)(4) organizations. Second, we recommend a framework for analyzing the roles of member organizations in elections and policymaking (Table 1). Third, we discuss how we apply the framework in our qualitative research.

The categories and framework described in this paper evolved from case study research (Post and Frank 2019), a program evaluation with a national 501(c)(3)-(c)(4) organization (Fox and Post 2021), the development and pilot test of an assessment tool for multi-entity (c)(3)-(c)(4) organizations, and a dataset of politically active 501(c)(4) organizations based on administrative IRS data (Post, Boris, and Stimmel 2022). Part of our effort has been participatory research with staff and organizational leaders to gain a better understanding of the dynamics and challenges within 501(c)(4) organizations and across the field of nonprofit advocacy. The dataset we developed (reported in Post, Boris, and Stimmel 2022), advances knowledge of this diverse and complex universe of social welfare organizations, most of which do not engage in advocacy or partisan political activities. Empirical exploration of the dataset is ongoing.

Consistent with Ragin and Amoroso (2019) and George and Bennett (2005), we synthesize these research endeavors using inductive and grounded methods for

the development of new theoretical propositions and conceptual and analytic frames. In doing so, we distinguish categories of 501(c)(4) organizations and four elements of a framework that nonprofit researchers can use to develop designs and methodologies for analyzing the specific group of politically active, member based nonprofit organizations (Fyall and McGuire 2015; Ragin and Amoroso 2019). Following Fyall and McGuire's (2015) approach to building a nuanced approach to the complex activities of advocacy nonprofits, the framework we have built incorporates attention to core aspects of nonprofit research – understanding the complex and diverse structure, function, and outcomes of nonprofit entities. It also recognizes the unique complexity and diversity of the universe of 501(c)(4) organizations and focuses on specifying the pro-democracy functions of the organizations—those activities that advance participatory achievement of member interests, values, and goals in the political process (Boyte 2011, Goss, Barnes, and Rose 2019; Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2022).

## 2 Background

Since 2012, the number of registered 501(c)(4) organizations has ranged from 109,000 in 2012 to under 85,000 in 2020 (DataLake).<sup>4</sup> Similar to 501(c)(3) public charities, social welfare organizations are tax exempt, do not have to disclose donors, and can undertake a wide variety of activities, vaguely characterized in the Internal Revenue Code as primarily for civic betterment and social improvement (I.R.C. §501(c)(4)). Unlike charities, donations to social welfare organizations are not deductible from income taxes, the organizations may conduct unlimited lobbying, and they may participate in political campaigns as long as that is not their primary activity (Aprill 2018; Colinvaux 2018; Reid 2006). While public charities fall under regulations that limit advocacy and lobbying activities and prohibit partisan electoral campaign activities, social welfare organizations benefit from the provisions that permit unlimited advocacy and lobbying (Fei and Gorovitz 2018). When the two types of organizations are linked, 501(c)(4) organizations can play instrumental roles in expanding the civic and political activities available to 501(c)(3) organizations. Table 2<sup>5</sup> indicates the mix of activities that

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<sup>4</sup> We use circa 2019 data which is the most up to date and complete 990 data at this paper's writing. 501(c)(4) exempt organizations registered between January 2017 and December 2019 filing Forms 990 or 990-EZ for fiscal years ending circa 2018 as of December 2020; DataLake Nonprofit Research ([www.datalake.net](http://www.datalake.net)) © 2021, DataLake, LLC.

<sup>5</sup> Table 2 is based on guidance from Bolder Advocacy, a resource, training and technical assistance organization for nonprofit advocacy and lobbying.

**Table 2:** Comparison of Permissible Political Activities: 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) Organizations (Adapted from Bolder Advocacy). Rows shaded gray indicate where a hybrid structure facilitates more opportunities for political engagement.

Activity	501(c)(3)	501(c)(4)
Lobby for/against legislation	Limited	Unlimited
Support/oppose ballot measures	Limited	Unlimited
Conduct public education and training sessions about participation in the political process	Yes	Yes
Educate candidates on issues within purview of the organization	Yes (must offer information to all candidates)	Yes
Sponsor a debate between candidates, where all viable candidates are invited and given equal opportunity to speak on a broad range of issues	Yes	Yes
Distribute voter guides to the public that set out the candidates' views on a broad range of issues	Yes	Yes
Distribute voter guides to the public that compare candidates on issues of importance to the organization	No	Yes
Rent mailing lists and facilities at fair market value to other organizations, legislators, and candidates	Yes (if rent, must allow any candidate to rent)	Yes (may rent to select candidates only)
Conduct nonpartisan get-out-the-vote activities, voter registration, and education drives	Yes	Yes
Conduct voter registration and GOTV activities based on party affiliation or how people will vote	No	Yes
Conduct nonpartisan voter protection activities	Yes	Yes
Establish a related organization	Yes (c4)	Yes (c3 or 527 political organization)
Endorse candidates and publicize its endorsements	No	Yes
Fund independent expenditures in support of or opposition to a candidate	No	Yes

Table 2: (continued)

Activity	501(c)(3)	501(c)(4)
– Make campaign contributions (monetary or in-kind)	No	Depends on election law (prohibited for federal candidates; permissible in some states) Yes
– Establish and pay for the administrative and fundraising costs of a connected political organization (separate segregated fund)	No	Yes
– Criticize sitting elected officials	Yes (may not attack their personal characteristics or attack them in their status as a candidate)	Yes
– Compare organization’s issue position with that of a candidate	No	Yes
– Connect organization’s criticism of public official to voting in an election	No	Yes
– Highlight differences between candidates for public office on high-profile issue on which candidates have diverging views	No	Yes
– Ask candidates to sign pledges on any issue	No	Yes
– Post partisan political messages on facebook, twitter, or tumblr	No	Yes

Source: Bolder Advocacy (2019).



such related organizations can engage in and what activities are permissible only as non-primary purpose activities of 501(c)(4) entities.

The nonprofit literature has focused primarily on advocacy organizations that have a 501(c)(3) status (Andrews and Edwards 2004; Child and Grønberg 2007; Minkoff, Aisenbrey, and Agnone 2008; Mosley 2012; and Pekkanen, Smith, and Tsujinaka 2014). There also has been extensive investigation of the roles of interest groups in the political process (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Berry 1999; Walker 1991), member-based civic organizations (Han 2014; Skocpol 1999; Skocpol 2003), and various dimensions of citizen participation and democratic governance (such as Berry 2005, Fung 2004, and Sirianni 2009). While some research describes the increasing numbers of 501(c)(4) organizations that act as shells for donors motivated by anti-democratic interests (Mayer 2016), less is known about the growing ecosystem of pro-democracy social welfare organizations active in the political process (Pillai 2019). Researchers have rarely considered the permissible political activities that differentiate 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) advocacy organizations when describing the organizational structures and activities of interest groups, social movements, and other types of advocacy organizations. Building from Minkoff, Aisenbrey, and Agnone (2008) that explores the diversity of advocacy organizations and the changing nature of nonprofit organizational forms engaged in national politics through permissible political activities, our research covers new ground by considering how the regulatory framework structures the formation and activities of advocacy and political engagement by nonprofits.

The 501(c)(4) organizations we focus on are politically active and organized around a membership base of people within communities left out of politics and policymaking. Our qualitative research helps us to identify member-based organizations that are grassroots from among the approximately 12,000 that we estimate are politically active (c)(4) organizations (Post, Boris, and Stimmel 2022). While the (c)(4) structure allows some groups to advance the goals of economic and policy elites, the groups we study seek to widen participation and empower individuals and communities to pursue interests that improve their well-being and the vitality of their communities. As either a stand-alone organization or through a related structure with 501(c)(3) organizations, politically active, grassroots (c)(4) organizations can function as a bridge between diverse constituencies and the public and private institutions that govern society (Billis 2010; Harris and Milofsky 2019). They, and the funding mechanisms that sustain them, facilitate direct engagement in politics and policymaking, often augmenting the activities of related 501(c)(3) advocacy and civic organizations (Skocpol 2003; Sirianni 2009; Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021). These types of organizations typically are comprised of individual members, and they focus on involving members in taking actions on issues they care about through civic education, advocacy and lobbying, community organizing, and other direct actions like petitions, rallies, and protests.

These organizations operate within complex networks of political and civil society actors, a concept we define as “ecosystem embeddedness.” By acting as mediating structures that enhance civic participation, these organizations are part of a nonprofit infrastructure that strengthens democracy.

## 2.2 Social Welfare Organizations

Researchers have not paid much attention to social welfare organizations, perhaps because it is difficult to identify and describe them. They consist of many membership groups, parent-teacher associations, sports and social clubs, seniors’ groups, and other organizations that would seem to be identical to 501(c)(3) charities (Koulish 2016). Social welfare organizations are sometimes freestanding and local organizations. They may be aligned with a national or state organization as affiliates or chapters. Other 501(c)(4)s are affiliated with related charities and or political action committees (PACs) (Schadler 2022). Most attention is directed toward the large policy advocates: the National Rifle Association, the AARP, the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, and other national organizations organized as stand-alone entities or membership organizations with state and local chapters. These groups and their leaders frequently make headlines for controversial activities or high-profile engagement in political campaigns and debates.

For example, in the summer of 2019, both Wayne LaPierre of the National Rifle Association (Hakim 2019) and Leana Wen, ousted president of Planned Parenthood (Bernstein, Cha, and Goldstein 2019) were featured in the national press for controversy about their leadership. Around the 2020 U.S. Election, several politically active, member-based (c)(4) organizations were highlighted in national news and social media accounts for their contributions to turning out the vote in communities of color and helping win key elections in battleground states. These include organizations such as Living United for Change in Arizona, Voces de la Frontera in Wisconsin, and Fair Fight Action in Georgia, founded by the well-known activist and former gubernatorial candidate, Stacey Abrams. Entities on both the right and the left also have been exposed for a “shadow political infrastructure” that has infused billions of new dollars from big money donors into partisan politics (Vogel and Goldmacher 2022).

These examples scratch the surface of the complex constellation of individuals, organizations, and networks at play. 501(c)(4) organizations are a widely heterogeneous category that includes groups, on the one hand, that seek to avoid donor disclosure and disguise their agendas as they funnel money into political activities. On the other hand, many organizations fulfill their social

welfare missions in service to their members through permissible, member-driven activities. This dynamic points to the necessity for clear categories and frameworks to understand and analyze three phenomena: (1) the shifting landscape of politically-oriented nonprofits and the growth of new political infrastructures; (2) the roles and relationships of member-based, politically active (c)(4) groups; and (3) the potential unintended impacts on membership groups of proposed laws and regulations designed to stem the flow of money from undisclosed dark money sources into the political process.

Some scholars characterize the 501(c)(4) category as a *mélange* of organizations that for one reason or other, could not qualify for charitable status. Others think of them as primarily advocacy organizations (Aprill 2018; Hill and Mancino 2002; Hopkins 2007), which has become the primary way of describing them, an inaccurate characterization as further research has revealed. The advocacy view of 501(c)(4)s was reinforced in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United vs. Federal Elections Commission* (2010). With the *Citizens United* ruling, (c)(4) organizations were able to engage in unlimited lobbying and significant campaign activities while shielding donor identities which made them the organizational form of choice for many types of political activities. As Jane Mayer (2016) documents, conservatives bankrolled a network of organizations that conducted political campaigns and lobbied on an unprecedented scale. More recent investigative reporting documents increasing use of these groups by liberal actors intent on influencing key electoral outcomes (Vogel and Goldmacher 2022).

Many smaller organizations have benefited from opportunities afforded by the (c)(4) status to expand their repertoire of engagement and advocacy activities, working to improve the material conditions of their members and communities (Axt 2019). In contrast, some (c)(4) entities have been established to direct money into partisan political campaigns. In the wake of *Citizens United* such organizations garnered high profile attention as wealthy donors and political elites created and funded (c)(4) organizations to conceal donors and infuse resources into politics. This dynamic elevates the importance of studying 501(c)(4)s so that policymakers considering regulatory reforms have a clearer understanding of the diversity of activities and types of engagement by such groups (Miller 2019).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There has been significant controversy over the extent to which (c)(4)s should be regulated, especially given that some 501(c)(4)s are structured as shells for conservative and liberal donors to bankroll money into campaigns without disclosure. For example, see Miller (2019).

### 3 Identifying and Categorizing Politically Active 501(c)(4) Organizations

Research to understand the activities of 501(c)(4) actors is important because policy prescriptions based on erroneous understanding of 501(c)(4) organizations are likely to have unintended negative consequences for the many civic, membership, service, and advocacy roles that these organizations play in U.S. democracy. Similarly, there is confusion about what organizational actions may constitute *political* activities. This murkiness is further complicated by the fact that public charities may engage in nonpartisan advocacy and limited lobbying, as long as it is consistent with mission, and not a substantial part of their activities (Bass et al. 2007; Dougherty 2018; Fei and Gorovitz 2018).<sup>7</sup> Because the 501(c)(4) designation includes a range of organizational types and activities without a clear way to distinguish which organizations are engaged in political activities, it is difficult for researchers to determine the size, scope, and extent of politically active 501(c)(4) groups.<sup>8</sup>

To address this methodological and empirical challenge, we refined an approach that Koulisch (2016) developed to identify politically active 501(c)(4)s from the total registered organizations (Post, Boris, and Stimmel 2022). We used a multi-stage methodology to examine the total universe of (c)(4)s to identify the subset of organizations that are politically active. We specifically aimed to identify those organizations that enact their social welfare mission through a mix of civic and political activities beyond the more common public education and limited nonpartisan lobbying and advocacy methods found in (c)(3) public charities. Within this group is an even smaller group of politically active, membership organizations that work to create pathways for grassroots participation in the political process (Post, Boris, and Stimmel 2022).

Identifying organizations that meet these criteria proved to be a more cumbersome task than we first anticipated. We used both the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) classification system that codes nonprofit organizations by major purpose, and a combination of filters and keywords on program descriptions, mission statements and titles on IRS registered (c)(4) organizations to identify those groups that engage in some sort of political activity (Post, Boris, and

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<sup>7</sup> Because lobbying cannot constitute a substantial portion of a charity's activities, they can use the 501(h) election that defines expenditure limits for lobbying. According to the National Council of Nonprofits, this option may be the most effective "insurance" for a nonprofit to safeguard itself from exceeding the lobbying limits. <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/taking-the-501h-election>

<sup>8</sup> It is possible to discern some of these politically oriented activities from Schedule C for the larger organizations required to file the full IRS Form 990.

Stimmel 2022). Using websites and secondary documents like annual reports, we included qualitative investigation of almost 1000 organizations to verify keywords, look for anomalies, and identify additional civic and political activities and descriptions that do not necessarily appear on the Form 990 (many smaller entities are not required to file the full 990). The qualitative inquiry gave us a more descriptive picture of organizations and it exposed inconsistencies in NTEE categorization. It also suggested differences in staffing and governance structures, program and issue priorities, approaches to advocacy and partisan, political activity, methods for member engagement, and outcomes. This qualitative analysis also informed the development of the analytic framework described below.

From this process we revised keywords and refined other search parameters, including the addition of organizations that file IRS Form 990 Schedule C for political activities and IRS Form 990 Schedule R for affiliation with other organizations. This yielded a dataset of 12,000 organizations that are likely to be engaged in advocacy, civic action, and/or partisan political activities, although they do not necessarily engage directly impacted individuals in civic action. The dataset is the starting point for achieving a central aim for nonprofit research on (c)(4)s: to understand how politically active organizations function, accomplish their social welfare goals, are led and governed, and their relationships with philanthropy, government, and communities.

### 3.1 Methodological Challenges

Developing the dataset of 12,000 politically active organizations revealed four relevant methodological issues that impact appropriate sampling approaches for future research. First, there is a significantly heterogeneous mix of organizational type, affiliations, ideology, issue focus, and approaches to advocacy and action among the organizations we identify. These include stand-alone organizations, related organizations, advocacy funds of philanthropy, chapters of national organizations, and national intermediaries that provide advocacy and political pathways for members. Second, the need to distinguish these groups from one another is a key issue, and with the wide diversity of organizations in the sample, it is challenging to draw conclusions about the entire group. Third, qualitative investigation is necessary to decipher the extent to which these groups engage in electoral and partisan policymaking activities. Only with qualitative inquiry such as web searches, textual analysis, and interviews can we differentiate among the heterogeneity of organizations and begin to understand the array of structures, activities, funding relationships, and outcomes of these organizations. Finally, our efforts to verify the data indicated the clear limits to the IRS data files and the NTEE

classification system for this type of research. Small organizations, informal groups, those embedded in larger structures, and some affiliates of national organizations may not file IRS Forms 990, or they may provide little information. Some organizations are not properly classified or classified at all. These limitations must be addressed with technology for keyword searches of missions and program activities and qualitative inquiry.

## 3.2 Analytic Framework

Once we identified the dataset of politically active 501(c)(4) organizations, distinguishing among them was the next step. In politically active 501(c)(4) organizations, advocacy and civic action activities can be elements of organizational strategies that target members, public officials, and policy elites, as well as the general public to accomplish their goals. Organizations can incorporate these activities to achieve dual missions – to engage members in political action while also influencing policy outcomes. However, not all politically active 501(c)(4)s engage members or seek to expand their participation in politics and policymaking. Finding those that do this work is our goal.

The analytic framework focuses on providing conceptual boundaries for defining engagement activities and understanding the organizational form, characteristics, operating contexts, ecosystem connections, and outcomes of member-based, politically active 501(c)(4)s. We characterized the organizations based on how they engage members and constituencies in civic and political action. We also distinguished characteristics that facilitate engagement and desired political or policy outcomes, such as purpose, goals, and program structure. The framework provides an efficient approach for identifying and categorizing organizations that engage members in politics and policymaking and those that rely on their 501(c)(4) status for other permissible purposes such as providing a mechanism for funding policy initiatives and campaigns.

The four categories of politically active 501(c)(4) organizations include: (1) national advocacy organizations; (2) local and state member organizations; (3) (c)(4) funders; and (4) shell entities. As indicated above, this is a starting point to guide future research. They are broad categories that can be subdivided and refined with additional investigation. Organizations that are national advocacy organizations or local/state member organizations primarily have members and an issue agenda based on the interests of those members. 501(c)(4) funders and shell entities also have specific issue agendas but do not have a membership that they engage in advocacy and political action. Table 3 provides examples of those organizations that are member-based and politically active.

1. **National advocacy organizations:** Large organizations focused on specific policy issue agendas. These groups include member serving associations, issue advocacy and infrastructure organizations that support the work of state or local advocacy organizations as intermediaries and with technical assistance. Some have a large membership base of either individuals or organizations, others do not; some have local or state affiliates or chapter members.
2. **Local/state member organizations:** Heterogenous local and state organizations that include professional associations formed to support the interests and needs of a particular group, profession, or field; affiliates or chapters of national organizations; and community-based or grassroots, volunteer-led organizations formed around a particular geography, issue, concern, or identity.
3. **501(c)(4) Funders:** Entities that are established as either institutional “action funds” or funding intermediaries that pool resources to support the activities of (c)(4)s. Both funder types typically support local organizations, advocacy agendas, or other policy or political campaigns.
4. **Shell entities:** Dark money groups that are established as pass through entities to advance and fund partisan political objectives. Their names often disguise their goals, and their documents obscure the interests behind their activities.

**Table 3:** Examples of member-based, politically active 501(c)(4) organization categories.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Mission</b>
<i>National advocacy organization:</i> America Votes	<i>To advance progressive policies, win elections, and protect every Americans' right to vote.</i>
<i>National advocacy organization:</i> Eagle Forum	<i>To enable conservative and pro-family men and women to participate in the process of self-government and public policy making so that America will continue to be a land of individual liberty respect for family integrity public and private virtue and private enterprise.</i>
<i>National advocacy organization:</i> March for Our Lives Action Fund	<i>To harness the power of young people across the country to fight for sensible gun violence prevention policies that save lives.</i>
<i>Local/state member organization:</i> Maine People's Alliance	<i>To create a world where everyone has what they need, contributes what they can, and no one is left behind.</i>
<i>Local/state member organization:</i> New Virginia Majority	<i>To build the power of marginalized communities to change the political systems that aren't working for us.</i>
<i>Local/state member organization:</i> Voces de la Frontera Action	<i>To protect and expand civil rights and workers' rights through leadership development, community organizing and empowerment.</i>

These categories clarify what makes politically active organizations distinct from one another, considering how they are structured, what purpose they serve in advancing a social welfare mission, and what types of activities they prioritize. The categories also support analyses that focus on those (c)(4)s that have members (national advocacy organizations and local/state member organizations) and those that do not (c4 funders and shell entities).

In the following discussion we provide an example application of the framework by exploring organizations that we characterize as “local/state member organizations.” It is within this group that we find the politically active, member-based grassroots organizations that are the focus of our research. While these organizations are typically connected to 501(c)(4) funders and other national organizations, the targeted focus on the local and state organizations enables us to describe and analyze those groups that are organized around a specific geography and draw their membership from specific constituencies. We apply the framework in the following discussion to illustrate how it can be used to explain one group of politically active, member-based 501(c)(4)s.

## 4 Applying the Framework: Promoting Participation through Grassroots (c)(4)s

Grassroots organizations are generally rooted in the traditions and practices of community organizing and social movements (Christens, Gupta., and Speer 2021; Minkler and Wakimoto 2022). They tend to be member-led and located within communities most directly impacted by the issues they want to change with significant efforts devoted to promoting civic participation (DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge 2010). After the passage of *Citizens United*, many such groups established or enhanced their 501(c)(4) capacity. The four elements of our framework—engagement activities, organizational characteristics, context, and outcomes (such as the ability to achieve electoral or legislative goals)—allow us to look at key variables and relationships that shape how these organizations function to achieve their goals and act as mediators of democracy.

### 4.1 Engagement

Member and constituent engagement is a central activity that distinguishes politically active grassroots 501(c)(4) organizations from other (c)(4)s (Guo and Saxton 2010; Han 2014). Groups that are oriented to grassroots engagement are embedded in local communities. Local policy issues and community-identified needs and interests drive organizational mission and goals. Using community organizing strategies such as door-to-door, in-person canvassing, one-to-one



meetings with new members, and house meetings focused on specific community issues, these organizations recruit and train members as leaders and spokespeople. The organizations we study use professional staff to train and support directly impacted people for citizen action and advocacy (Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021), unlike organizations that typically have professional staff who serve as lobbyists and advocates for members and who speak on behalf of a constituency (Minkoff, Aisenbrey, and Agnone 2008; Skocpol 1999; Walker 2014).

Members in politically active grassroots 501(c)(4)s learn the tools for democracy such as deliberation, shared decision making, power analysis, public speaking and communication, and collective mobilization.<sup>9</sup> Typically in partnership with a 501(c)(3) related organization, leadership development and civic engagement trainings are regularly offered to constituents and members to prepare them for increasingly significant participation in public actions and interactions with public officials. As members develop and practice civic engagement skills, organizations activate members for action through campaigns. Campaigns are structured to involve members in voter registration, education, and turnout; public forums and press conferences; legislative advocacy (the “inside game”); rallies and protests (the “outside game”); and corporate or government accountability (Pekkanen and Rathgeb Smith 2014, 5–6). Most importantly, with 501(c)(4) status, organizations can participate in partisan activities as long as they are not the primary activities, enabling them to run partisan get-out-the-vote campaigns and also recruit, train, and endorse candidates. The member recruitment, leadership development, and public action functions of these organizations are essential elements of their pro-democracy role (Christens, Gupta, and Speer 2021; DeFillipis, Fisher, and Shrage 2010; Han 2014; Wood and Fulton 2015).

## 4.2 Organizational Characteristics

The use of organizational characteristics reported on IRS Forms 990 such as mission statements and financial records are useful for nonprofit research that investigates patterns of similarity and difference. We use a mix of quantitative and qualitative characteristics to explore the structure and programs of politically active grassroots (c)(4)s. High capacity politically active grassroots 501(c)(4)s employ fully the partisan and nonpartisan advocacy levers that the (c)(4) legal structure allows while also engaging their members in civic actions such as rallies, protests, public forums, and

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars have documented extensively the activities and leadership development functions of community organizing groups. See for examples, (Fisher 2009; Sen 2003; Warren 2001; Wood 2002).

other tactics that target public officials (Post and Frank 2019). The (c)(4) structure permits them to exercise partisan policy influence in electoral campaigns, and other collaborations that help to achieve policy goals, along with core engagement activities including constituent participation in civic action, leadership development of members, and ongoing mobilization for electoral and legislative campaigns. Affiliated organizations and coalition structures offer organizations more options for increasing engagement in partisan politics and broadening their reach and influence in elections and the policymaking process (Schadler 2022).

Public charities may opt to create or affiliate with a (c)(4) legal entity to avoid the boundaries of permissible (c)(3) nonpartisan advocacy activities or to expand the scope of their advocacy strategies to include partisan undertakings. These organizations also may form PACs and join coalitions or alliances with peer organizations and labor unions. Grassroots organizing groups partner with other nonprofits with various tax statuses and engage in inter-organizational collaborations like formal alliances or temporary campaign coalitions as a core component of their social change strategies. These mechanisms help organizations achieve policy objectives through collaborative entities, pooling organizational and financial resources in ways that magnify impact and increase the likelihood that policy goals are achieved (Tattersall 2010; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010).

Organizations that have (c)(4) status can spend more on policy advocacy with fewer restrictions than (c)(3) organizations with similar goals. The (c)(4) structure gives organizations the flexibility of a wider range of political strategies to effect policy decisions and electoral outcomes, such as ballot measures to increase the minimum wage or local candidate elections for city council, county commissioner, and district attorney. Strategically, grassroots organizations seek to increase the civic power of their members and organizations. Organizing as social welfare (c)(4) entities, becoming affiliated organizations with other (c)(4) and (c)(3) legal entities, or joining coalitions provides organizations the structural and legal context for policy impact.

In sum, we have observed three trends among grassroots organizations. As noted, some grassroots (c)(3) organizations will establish a “sister” (c)(4) organization in which they develop resource sharing agreements that specify the staffing and financial relationships between the entities. Others form initially as a (c)(4), such as the organization behind the large-scale gun control mobilization in 2018, the March for Our Lives and The March for Our Lives Action Fund. Third, more recently established local and state grassroots organizing groups have been reorganized or merged from previously existing community-based organizations. For example, when ACORN organizations disbanded between 2009 and 2010 following a widely publicized scandal over the legality of their services and programs, new entities formed as leaders, community groups, and former ACORN organizers reimagined their missions, goals, and strategies for building civic leadership and winning progressive policy changes.

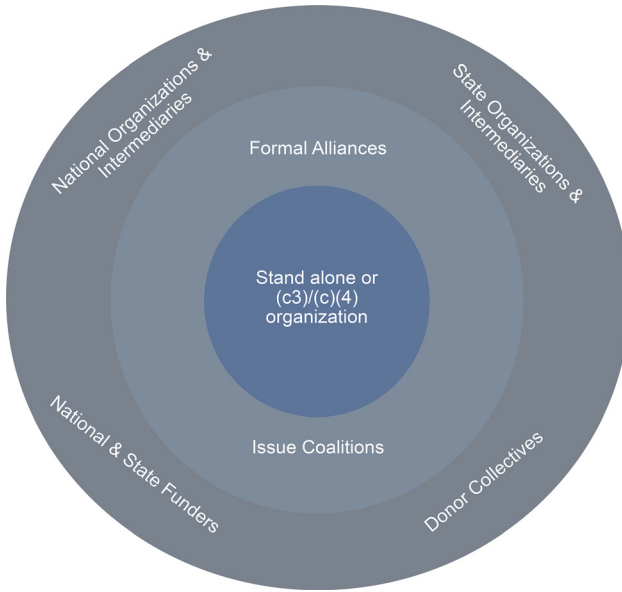
Reorganizations and mergers of social movement organizations also have been the result of increased competition for financial resources and recognition as well as efforts by local leaders to create more durable structures for greater policy impact and political influence (Healey 2015). For example, Take Action Minnesota, New Virginia Majority, and Colorado People's Alliance were established within the last decade as statewide organizations intended to produce sustainable policy wins that could directly address poverty and inequality.

In addition to their ability to create and align with complementary organizations, participate in alliances with other nonprofit advocates, and collaborate with unions, politically active grassroots (c)(4)s benefit from other organizational structures and capacities to achieve their goals. Findings from Post and Frank (2019) indicate that a mix of internally and externally focused capacities facilitate participation in politics and policymaking, and advance organizations' ability to win campaigns and change policy. These include internal capacities common to healthy organizations such as executive leadership, well-articulated staff management structures, diverse fundraising capabilities, and financial and legal expertise, as well as externally focused capacities including the ability to build and maintain relationships with peer institutions, public decision makers, and policy elites. Also required are skills necessary for direct political action including the ability to recruit and train members and a high degree of proficiency in running and winning campaigns.

### 4.3 Context

Politically active grassroots (c)(4) and related organizations operate within contexts that we describe as "*ecosystem embeddedness*." Whether stand-alone entities or hybrid structures, these organizations are embedded within broader networks and policy domains and operate as part of a larger field of action that supports them with financial and human resources, training, and capacity building (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Stone and Sandfort 2009). They are connected to other entities like funders and policy coalitions while remaining grounded in communities in which they try to build and access power (Fung 2020). Position and reputation within the ecosystem impact their ability to leverage capacity, resources, and influence over the strategic direction of their policy campaigns (Barsoum and Farrow 2020; Post and Frank 2019). Connections beyond the local environment and out to state and national organizations and funders can provide avenues to resources. Being embedded within these relationships fuels organizations' ability to fulfill their missions and achieve their goals.

Figure 2 depicts the context for the organizations featured in our research. While there is commonality in organizational structure and function, most



**Figure 2:** Ecosystems of politically active member based 501(c)(4) organizations.

politically active grassroots (c)(4)s and (c)(3)-(c)(4) related organizations exist within complex environments that are characterized by different collaborative and networked relationships. These inter-organizational relationships – and the ecosystems that form as a result – are contingent on local political context, personalities of local leaders and policy elites, dynamics of trust, cooperation, and collaboration, and relationships that extend beyond the local context.

Politically active grassroots (c)(4) organizations can be linked as chapters or affiliates of national organizations like America Votes, Planned Parenthood, the NAACP, and the Sierra Club organizations.<sup>10</sup> They can rely on state and national intermediaries for training, technical assistance, strategic advice and funding. Collectives of donors can serve as important funding vehicles for these groups. For example, “donor tables,” a term coined by progressive activists, come together to support local and state campaigns and typically are comprised of individual donors, representatives from private philanthropy, and progressive elites that may orchestrate the flows of financial resources into and among campaigns (Hersh 2020). The California Donor Table is one such example. A project of the national

<sup>10</sup> Our research focuses primarily on progressive organizations. However, we are also observing similar trends in the chapters of Right to Life and Tea Party groups. These are preliminary findings and therefore not explored extensively here.

intermediary, Tides Advocacy, The California Donor Table's mission is to "build a strategic, diverse, powerful and permanent progressive movement in California supported by a network of committed donors" ([californiadonortable.org](http://californiadonortable.org)).

Similar to the social justice funders described in Suárez (2012), donors in the (c)(4) space typically play a catalytic role, providing critical resources that help to launch and maintain the groups. Some evidence suggests that funding for progressive or liberal groups tends to be focused on episodic, outcomes-driven campaigns versus long-term organizational capacity and infrastructure investments, as has been a prominent feature of conservative groups (Barsoum 2019; Post and Frank 2019). The relationship between politically active (c)(4)s, individual donors, and philanthropic intermediaries is an especially salient area for future research.

#### 4.4 Outcomes

Assessing organizational outcomes is multidimensional (Ebrahim 2019), particularly for grassroots advocates. Even when an organization does not achieve its intended policy change goals, it can be effective in advancing democratic practice (de Souza Briggs 2008; Han 2014; Sirianni and Friedland 2001). Grassroots (c)(4)s are successful when they elect the candidates they support and when they change the policies that have a direct impact on the lives of their members and within their communities. But winning elections and changing public policy is not the full story. These organizations are also successful when they advance community-driven interests by organizing members and constituent leaders for engagement in politics. Holding public officials accountable for their promises and influencing governing power are also aspects of their strategies (Healey 2015; Rahman and Russon-Gilman 2019).<sup>11</sup> For example organizations may engage in public accountability campaigns. Barsoum (2019) documents how grassroots (c)(4) organizations were able to make demands of local sheriffs and district attorneys for accurate and thorough policy implementation (Barsoum 2019). These types of outcomes undergird the roles of such groups in strengthening democracy as both staff and members are engaged in civic and political activities.

Like the flow of resources, organizational leadership is an essential ingredient of an organization's success and sustainability and building such leadership at the community level is an important outcome. Post and Frank's case study research

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<sup>11</sup> There has been a recent trend among progressive organizations and philanthropic leaders to promote the notion that organizations need to build "independent political power" to be in deeper co-governing relationships with local public officials and elected leaders. Some foundations now build their grantmaking strategies around this idea and scholars are just now beginning to investigate the implications of this strategy (Rahman and Russon-Gilman 2019).

(2019) showed that executive leadership in high-capacity (c)(4) organizations is characterized by specific skills needed to achieve success and sustain effective (c)(4) political activities including strategic planning and political analysis to implement policy change strategies, the capacity to direct and manage different types of campaign operations, and the ability to facilitate collaborative efforts to realize a vision for social and political change rooted in the organization's mission (Post and Frank 2019). Organizations benefit from leaders and staff who can inspire community members' trust and involvement, be effective stewards of community resources, and establish models of shared governance and democratic decision-making with members. Achieving these leadership capacities are important outcomes for the long-term viability of politically active (c)(4)s.

## 5 Conclusion

The organizations we investigate are entities that can be described as mediating structures of democracy—organizations that facilitate civic and political engagement to influence outcomes for and with their communities. Our research aims to identify and characterize these organizations and explain how they serve as civil society mediators that strengthen participation and representation in democracy. Politically active, member-based and grassroots 501(c)(4) organizations undertake democracy building work within their memberships and provide a direct pathway to engagement in advocacy and politics through the permissible activities afforded to (c)(4) entities. While on the negative side, however, among (c)(4) groups are those only purporting to be member-based and those that further goals of anti-democratic forces or magnify the voices of wealthy elites and corporate interests.

This paper expands what we know about social welfare organizations by first differentiating categories of politically active (c)(4) organizations, and second, by describing the organizational structures and strategies that member based organizations can use to achieve electoral and policy outcomes that benefit their constituencies and promote member participation in civil society and democratic governance. The analytic framework we provide is useful for exploring the organizational arrangements that facilitate their work with a goal of encouraging future empirical investigation of this under-researched segment of U.S. nonprofit organizations.

The framework has important implications for nonprofit research and practice. First, researchers can pursue a set of *strategic propositions* for how social welfare organizations are structured and operate to achieve their missions. Organizations that seek to change the public policies that affect their constituents benefit from tactical mechanisms that allow them to engage fully in the policy arena. The 501(c)(4) structure provides pathways for these organizations to expand civic engagement

opportunities for members and to influence legislative and electoral outcomes that can lead to long-term changes for communities most often at the margins of the policymaking process. Future research can investigate these structures, strategies, and processes using individual organizations as the unit of analysis.

Beyond any individual organization, our research also aims to understand how social welfare nonprofits together contribute to strengthening democracy. Through the conceptualization of ecosystem embeddedness, one can explore *field-level or sector wide propositions* that explain how politically active, member-based nonprofit organizations operate within networks of other nonprofits and in relationship to government, business, and philanthropy. The 501(c)(4)s that we investigate act as mechanisms for civic action and policy change because they have structures and tools that facilitate their ability to activate and engage populations that have been systematically and historically left out of the policymaking process. Future research needs to pursue deeper understandings of these webs of relationships with an eye towards identifying the contributions politically active grassroots 501(c)(4)s make to increasing engagement and influence of low-income communities and communities of color.

Finally, this research begins to describe and categorize the astonishing variety of organizations found among social welfare organizations. Further research to document the types of organizations and their activities is necessary because the widespread lack of understanding is likely to lead to regulatory actions that unintentionally harm many organizations and their members.

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