

Why Membership?

Interest Group Associations as Policy Entrepreneurs in Israel

Jennifer Oser

November 2007

Acknowledgments

For going above and beyond the call of advising duty, I am deeply grateful for Prof. Itzhak Galnoor of Hebrew University's Political Science Department for advising the thesis upon which this working paper is based. For encouragement to pursue public policy as a field of study, I thank Prof. Eran Feitelson, Head of the Federmann School of Public Policy & Government. As a model of combining theory and praxis as a way of engaging academic life, I am grateful to Prof. Marshall Ganz of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. For introducing me to the world of academic research on civil society and serving as a model of research determination and creativity, my thanks to Prof. Theda Skocpol of Harvard University.

About the Author

Jenny Oser is a doctoral student in The Federmann School of Public Policy & Government at Hebrew University. She has worked as a community and political organizer and trainer for the past ten years in nongovernmental organizations in the U.S. and in Israel. She completed an undergraduate degree at Harvard University in social studies in 1999, and a master's degree in public policy at Hebrew University in 2007.

Abstract

Despite declining traditional political participation, Israeli citizens profess an increased belief in their ability to influence policy. This research confirms the general hypothesis that this puzzle can partially be explained by the increased activity of civil society organizations. The theoretical contribution of this research is the development of a conceptual model which posits three main hypotheses for why organizations would choose to invest in a membership-recruiting strategy despite the significant investment this strategy requires. Drawing on a diverse theoretical literature, a set of hypotheses is developed regarding *leverage*, *leadership*, and *legitimacy*.

The empirical contribution of the case study comparisons of three leading interest group associations – the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), and the Movement for Quality Government (MQG) – confirms the hypothesis of an increased use of membership as an organizational strategy for building policy influence in Israel. The organizations are shown to be more interested over time in developing political *leverage* for influencing policymaking processes. Only one organization views membership primarily as a strategy for formal *legitimation*, but even this organization uses membership as a tool for gaining greater leverage resources. Yet, the case study findings are not optimistic regarding the capacity for such organizations to develop civic *leadership*. The research concludes with a number of practical policy implications, including suggestions for civic leaders regarding membership development and electoral reform.