

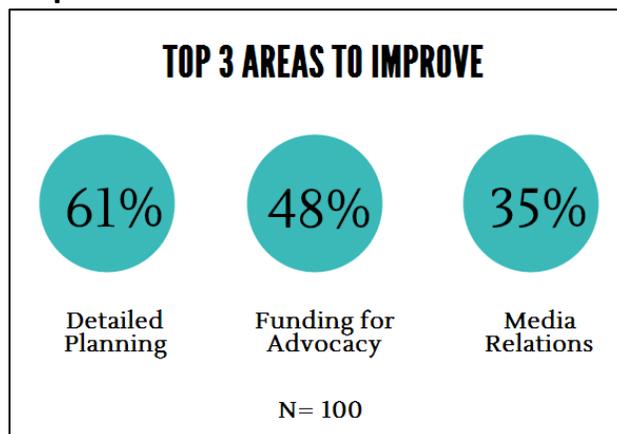
Advocacy Capacity Tool (ACT) Report: First 100 User Groups
September 2013
Executive Summary

To influence public policy, nonprofits pursue change through a number of avenues: legislatures, the courts, administrative agencies, and through elections. One of the ways Alliance for Justice’s Bolder Advocacy initiative assists nonprofits is by helping them assess their ability to engage in effective advocacy using our free, online [Advocacy Capacity Tool](#) (ACT). The tool measures the resources, skills, knowledge, and practices that are necessary for influencing public policy.

We’ve now analyzed the results from the first 100 nonprofit organizations to complete the ACT. This is a snapshot of the findings.¹ While the results do not represent the entire nonprofit sector, they offer a glimpse of how groups assess their strengths and weaknesses related to policy change and can help funders and nonprofits understand what nonprofits believe they need to be better advocates.

FINDINGS

Where nonprofits want to improve



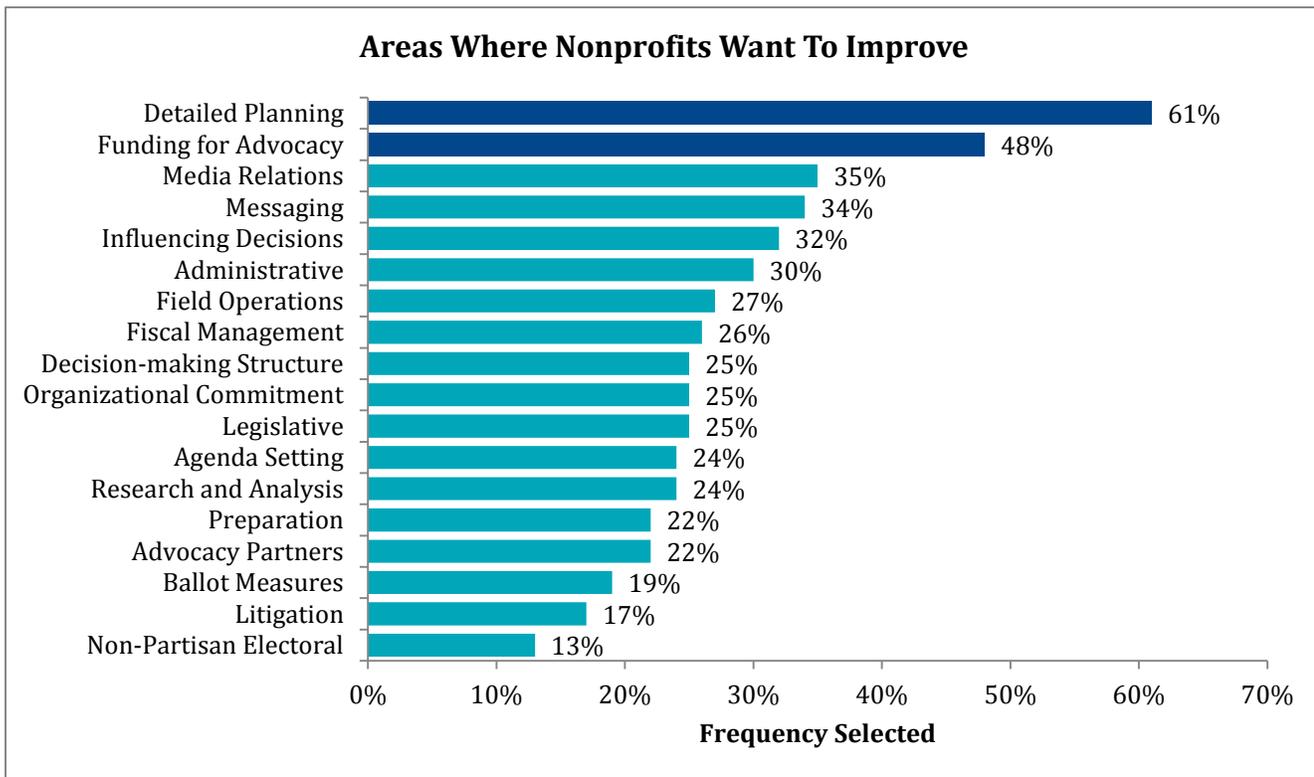
- **Detailed planning² is the surprise top choice for improving advocacy work.** Nonprofits completing the ACT report that they are good at “big picture” items but need help with the details.

The groups report that they are **strongest at early preparation for advocacy work**—skills like choosing which issues to pursue that fit their organization’s mission and expertise, scoping out opponents and supporters for their issues, and reading the policy environment—of all the capacities in the survey. Where they would most like to improve, however, is in the **detailed planning** of tactics and strategies **necessary to accomplish their advocacy goals.**

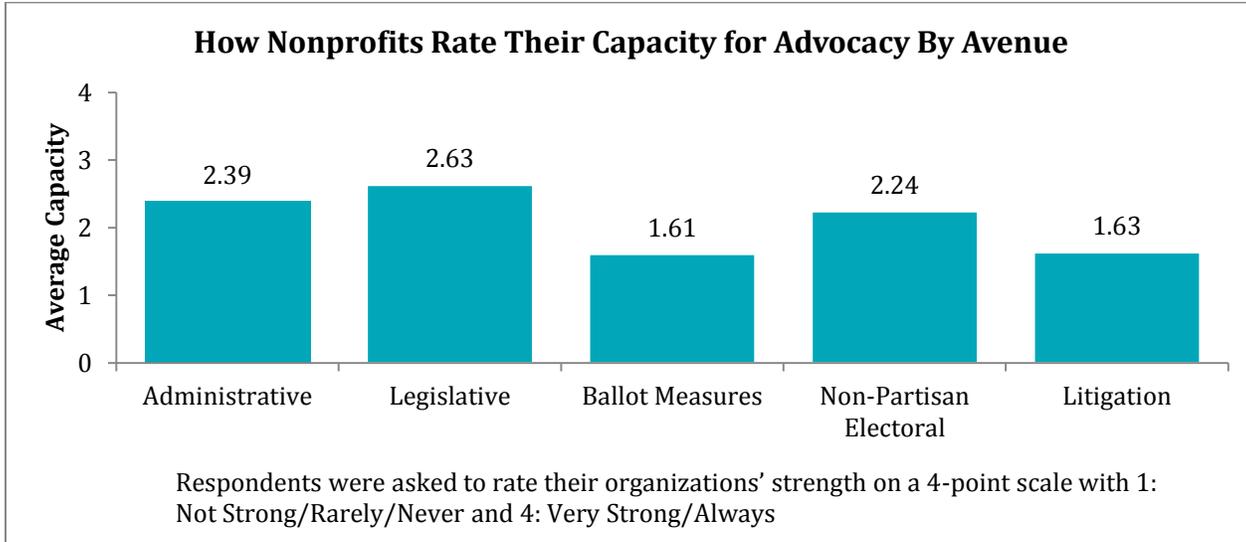
¹ The Applied Research Center at the University of Wisconsin prepared these “practically significant” or meaningful statistics

² Referred to as “Plans, Strategies & Adaptability” in the tool

- Nonprofits’ second most-popular choice to improve, **funding for advocacy**, reflects the ever-present need for financial support. **Media relations** and **messaging** ranked third place, demonstrating how important nonprofits view communications to the effectiveness of their advocacy work.
- **Areas to improve don’t match weakest areas of capacity.** When selecting areas to improve, respondents did not necessarily choose the areas where they felt their current performance was weakest. This suggests that they prioritized which advocacy activities are most important for their organizations to conduct.

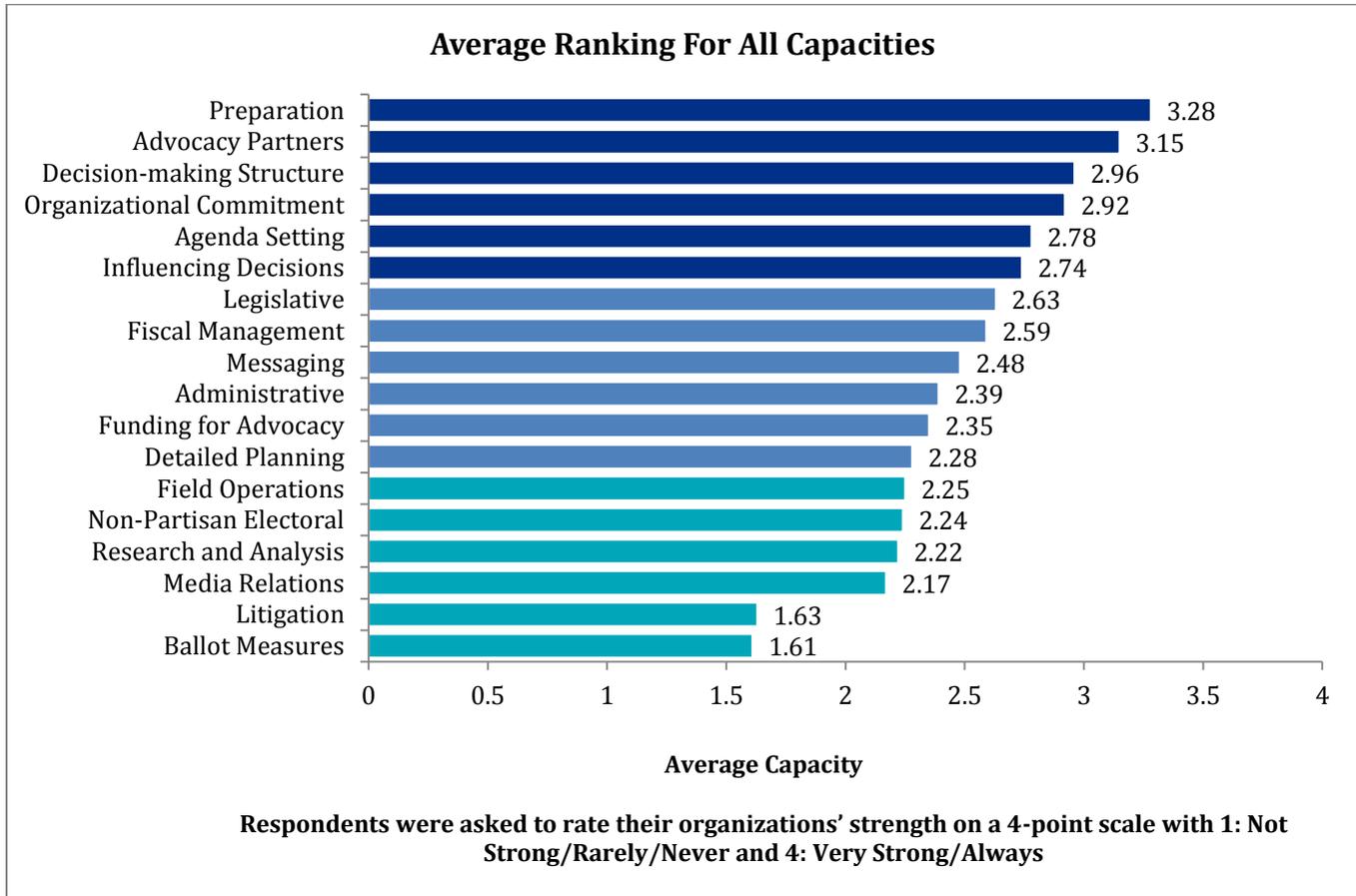


How Nonprofits Rate Their Capacities for Advocacy: Avenues for Policy Change



- **Nonprofits believed, of the advocacy avenues above, they are strongest in their capacity to influence legislatures and administrative agencies, and to conduct nonpartisan election activity.**
- **Respondents reported lower capacity to seek change through litigation or by opposing or supporting ballot measures.** This is not surprising because not all states are highly active in this area. Some states allow voters to put a measure on the ballot directly if they can obtain enough signatures; in other states direct participation in lawmaking may be limited to voting on state constitutional amendments first passed by legislatures. Litigation is an expensive and highly specialized form of advocacy, limited primarily to a small number of legal advocacy nonprofits.
- **Groups partner appropriately.** Many nonprofits recognized their limitations in ballot measures and litigation work and report they rely on partners for these two advocacy strategies. This suggests a commendable practice in the field, where nonprofits recognize they do not need to do everything themselves, but can collaborate with others when necessary.
- **The respondents most often chose administrative advocacy as the avenue they wanted to improve.** While respondents rated themselves higher in administrative advocacy—influencing executive branch agencies—than in the three other avenues they also indicated they wanted to be stronger in this area. Particularly in times of legislative gridlock, strengthening work with administrative agencies may be a way to gain positive results.

How Nonprofits Rate Themselves: All Capacities Combined



Nonprofits using the tool give themselves strong marks in many areas important to effective advocacy. Out of 18 possible choices in the tool they rate themselves:

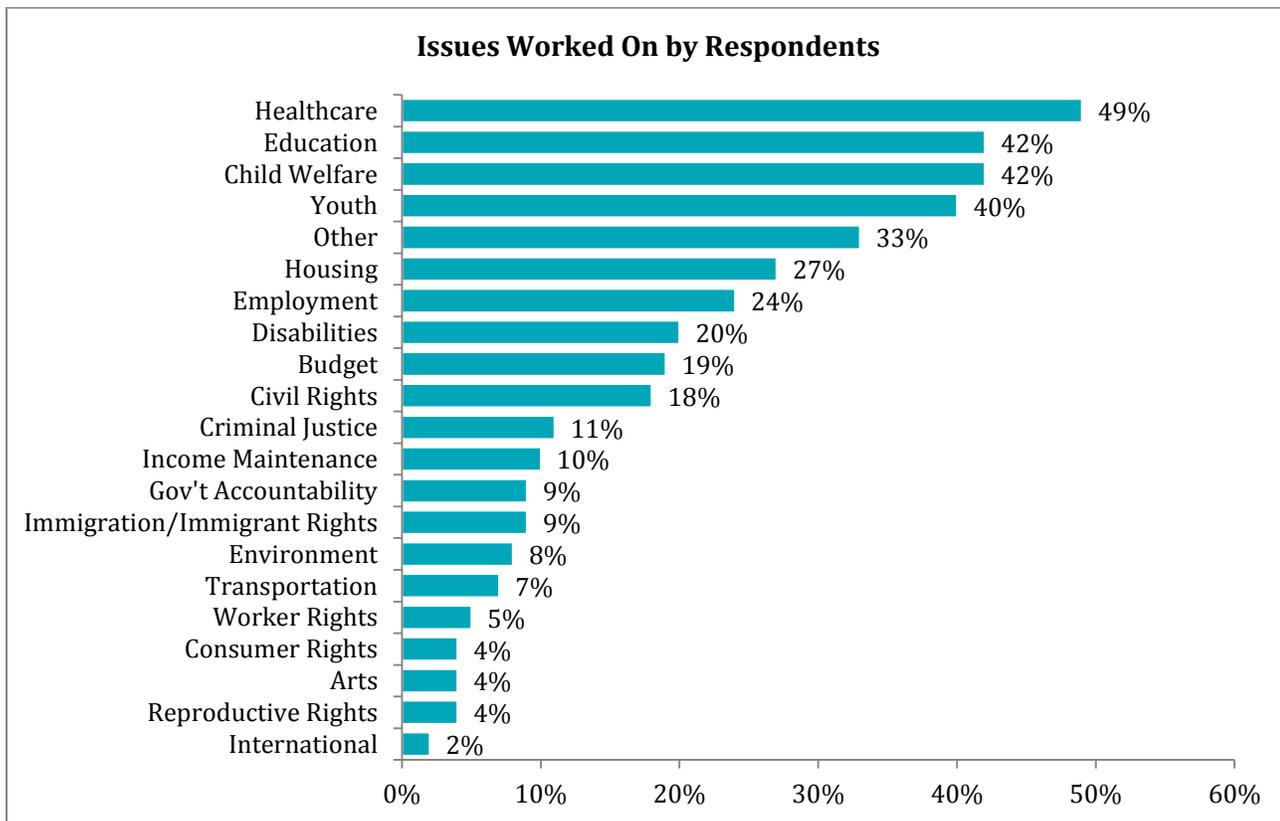
- High in **partnering** with other organizations to advance advocacy goals
- High in internal regard for advocacy, both in their ability to make timely and well thought-out **decisions** and the **organizational commitment** to advocacy work
- High in their **influencing skills**, their ability to build useful relationships with decision-makers
- High in **early preparation** and **agenda setting**.

Other notable findings

- **Budget size did not affect an organization's perception of its capacity.** While one would expect advocacy capacity to grow with an organization's budget size, groups with smaller budgets did not report significantly less capacity.
- **Whether an organization works at state or federal level is linked to capacity.** Those organizations working at the federal level scored themselves higher in overall capacity.

- Groups are not taking full advantage of legal options for lobbying.** The groups’ ratings indicate that there are opportunities for nonprofits to pursue practices that could promote more nonprofit advocacy. Many groups reported not having investigated and/or decided whether to elect the **“501 (h) expenditure test”**—which makes it easier to do more lobbying. In addition, the low average score for **using general operating support** for advocacy suggests an opportunity for foundations to provide and groups to use more unrestricted funds for lobbying.

What issues do these groups address? (more than one answer could be selected)



About the Advocacy Capacity Tool

AFJ’s Bolder Advocacy initiative released this free, online tool in 2012 to help groups measure their readiness to engage in advocacy. The tool assesses organization’s skills, knowledge, and resources, and provides analysis of the results. It has been used by boards of directors, staff, or volunteers. Funders also find it useful to help them identify the advocacy capacities of grantees or potential grantees or to engage in advocacy themselves.

To see the complete results, go to www.bolderadvocacy.org/act. For more information, email advocacycapacity@afj.org or contact Sue Hoechstetter at 202-822-6070 (sue@afj.org)