United States Civil Rights and Social Action Associations: Trends in Formation, Finances, and Activities

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Throughout US history, individuals have joined together in associations to fight for their rights and for a more equitable society. These associations have been major agents of social and political change. In this paper I will chart trends in the creation of civil rights and social action groups, their financial health, program and advocacy activities in an effort to understand the capacity of these organizations and how individuals are using such associations to obtain their rights today.

The research questions include: What kinds of civil rights and social action are being formed in the United States in recent years? What kinds of activities are they undertaking? What proportion of their funding comes from government, fees, and contributions and does that proportion differ by size, type or age of the organization? Are traditional civil rights organizations, those formed in the 1960s and earlier, growing, declining or holding their own? Have they adapted their programs to address new issues?

Using data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics I will look closely at the approximately 2000 organizations classified as civil rights and social action groups. These groups include those that primarily address civil rights for a wide variety of constituencies—women, ethnic and racial minorities, gays, youth, older people, disabled, and others. These data, based on Forms 990 filed with the IRS, will allow me to chart their financial status over the past decade, and to review their reported program activities over the past three years. I will supplement this data with information from annual reports, web sites, the encyclopedia of associations and other sources. Interviews of a sample of organizations will fill in details.

This paper will be part of a series on specific subsectors of the Nonprofit Sector in the United States. It builds on the chapter, “Civic Participation and Advocacy,” by Elizabeth Boris and Jeff Krehely in, The State of Nonprofit America, edited by Lester Salamon.