

Trying to Mesh All of These Groups
into Some Sort of a Force

Some fifty-five years after she first encountered the Leadership Conference as a fresh-faced lobbyist for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Jane O’Grady reflected on the daunting task facing the coalition during its year-long campaign to secure passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She recalled that the Leadership Conference

had to try to mesh all of these groups into some sort of a force . . . to give some energy to the bill that was in the Congress. Many of these groups were not in an organizational position to have much of a presence in Washington. . . . Many of these groups were just one person sitting in an office who would come to the Leadership Conference meetings in an effort to show solidarity and to do some lobbying if they could, so I must say as I look back on it, the Leadership Conference leadership had one tough time trying to mesh all of this together.¹

The challenge O’Grady identified—the attempt “to mesh all of these groups into some sort of a force”—is at the heart of this book’s inquiry into the LCCR’s role in the Second Reconstruction. As others have recounted (and as Chapter 2 describes in some detail), an array of civil rights, labor, religious, civic, professional, and fraternal organizations had grown active in advocating for federal civil rights legislation by the end of World War II. But their general agreement that Congress should enact civil rights reform was not sufficient to ensure

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that they would collaborate in pursuit of this shared goal—or, for that matter, that they would even unite around a common vision of what federal civil rights legislation should entail. Nor was their coalescence under the aegis of the Leadership Conference by the mid-1950s enough on its own to facilitate such coordination. Rather, it took deliberate and persistent initiative by entrepreneurial interest group officials to facilitate the formation of civil rights lobbying coalitions (including the LCCR) and coordinate professional and grassroots lobbying activity by their member organizations on an ongoing basis.

While subsequent chapters trace these processes as they played out in the LCCR's organizational development through the mid-1960s, the current chapter proposes that the challenge O'Grady identified was not an idiosyncratic feature of the Second Reconstruction-era Leadership Conference but is an essential undertaking for interest group coalitions more generally. Building on the insights of prior research on interest groups' role in policy making, it problematizes interest group coalitions' capacity for coordination and contends that the very qualities that allow them to signal broad-based support for their policy positions simultaneously complicate their efforts to advance such claims effectively. The chapter further proposes that interest group coalitions' coordination capacity derives from their organizational parameters. Coalitional operating procedures can facilitate or hinder interest group coalition leaders' efforts to mobilize member groups for concerted lobbying activity, in turn shaping their ability to actualize their resource potential to influence the policy process.

Interest Group Coalitions in U.S. Politics and Political Science

The LCCR was not quite a decade old when Donald R. Matthews, a political scientist and observer of the postwar Senate, posited that “the full potential of a lobbying coalition is seldom if ever achieved.” While the pooled resources of numerous groups with common interests should in principle enhance their ability to achieve shared legislative goals, he sensed that, in practice, “a broad-based coalition is likely to be shot through with conflicts of interest and opinion.” Conversely, “a homogeneous coalition of groups may suffer from fewer internal strains but will be less effective.” Either way, he concluded, “the in-fighting between lobbyists is likely to be substantial.”² Interest group coalitions have nevertheless become ubiquitous in contemporary politics. Within a decade of Matthews's assertion, fellow political scientist Donald R. Hall observed that “cooperative and intergroup lobbying . . . are becoming increasingly important as influences on group activity and on governmental decision making.”³ Fully two-thirds of the 175 organizations Kay Schlozman

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and John Tierney surveyed during the early 1980s reported an increase in coalition activity in the preceding decade.⁴ Recent interviews and surveys of interest group officials have similarly found that participating in coalitions is an activity organizations commonly undertake in pursuit of their policy goals.⁵ Michael Heaney thus writes that collaborative lobbying has become “a standard part of interest groups’ strategic repertoires” in the United States and, in a new study of lobbying coalitions in Europe, Marcel Hanegraaff and Andrea Pritoni claim that coalitions are “perhaps the most widespread tactic interest groups use to channel constituent demands to the political arena.”⁶

In addition to highlighting their prevalence, political scientists have identified interest group coalitions as a potential means for leveling the playing field in a pluralist system that is notoriously imbalanced.⁷ Though she does acknowledge several limitations, Dara Strolovitch maintains that “coalitions hold a great deal of potential as a form of advocacy for intersectionally disadvantaged subgroups.” To the extent that doubly marginalized constituencies tend to fall through the cracks of interest representation, “coalitions . . . can encourage advocacy . . . by highlighting connections among issues and constituencies; by promoting feelings of trust, solidarity, and intersectionally linked fate; and by advancing more comprehensive solutions to the complex issues that face marginalized groups.”⁸ Robin Phinney similarly contends that various parameters of the social policy advocacy sector in the United States encourage those advocating on behalf of low-income constituents to adopt coalition lobbying strategies. Appreciating these interest group coalitions’ role in representing low-income interests and the conditions under which they are most influential, she argues, is important for understanding why disadvantaged groups sometimes secure important policy gains in a political system that is, by and large, stacked against them.⁹ And, in a recent analysis of a large survey of lobbyists in five European countries, Wiebke Marie Junk demonstrates that active cooperation among less advantaged groups can yield policy results akin to those of an individual organization’s resource expenditure. “Coalitions can *effectively* function as ‘a weapon of the weak,’” she concludes, “allowing less advantaged interests to exert more influence on policy” than their relatively meager resource endowments would normally permit.¹⁰

Still, for all their ubiquity and potential significance for democratic interest representation, interest group coalitions’ role in the policy-making process is not well understood. A burgeoning political science literature sheds a good deal of light on interest groups’ motivations to form and join coalitions,¹¹ their behavior within the coalitions they join,¹² and the impact of coalition membership on individual groups’ policy influence.¹³ A growing number of studies have begun to investigate interest group coalitions’ impact on policy outcomes.¹⁴ But, as recent reviews suggest, the field is still far from having

definitive answers as to whether interest group coalitions do in fact enhance groups' influence on policy outcomes and, to the extent that they do, the conditions that contribute to or detract from their impact.¹⁵ While this chapter does not purport to answer these questions conclusively, it advances the conversation by synthesizing insights from prior research and drawing on the LCCR's experience to revisit an emerging consensus around the implications of diversity for coalitions' influence within the policy process.

Diverse Interest Group Coalitions as Robust Policy Signals

Most efforts to theorize interest group coalitions' policy influence build on prior studies that identify signaling—essentially, indicating to public officials where key constituencies stand on important policy questions—as a key mechanism through which interest groups influence legislative outcomes.¹⁶ Policy makers value this input from interest groups because it mitigates uncertainty about the substantive and electoral consequences of policy change. For members of Congress in particular, interest group signals can alleviate concerns about new policy proposals while easing demands on resource-strapped legislative offices.¹⁷ Viewed from this standpoint, interest group coalitions are signal boosters that enable interest groups to convey pertinent information to policy makers more forcefully than is possible when acting on their own. In principle, such amplification might accrue for interest group coalitions across the board; as David Nelson and Susan Yackee write, “government decision makers are influenced by coalition lobbying because it sends a signal regarding the *overall* strength of support or opposition for a policy proposal.”¹⁸ But their own and others' empirical findings suggest that the mere fact of coalition and even coalition size alone tell at most part of the story.¹⁹

An emerging consensus identifies diversity—that is, the extent to which a coalition's member organizations represent different constituencies or bring different skill sets, expertise, and political connections to the table—as a key determinant of interest group coalitions' effectiveness.²⁰ Unified signaling by groups known to represent constituencies that do not always see eye to eye assures policy makers that the interest group coalition's preferred policy outcome enjoys broad support. A diverse interest group coalition's signal is thus not merely louder than that of an individual organization or even a very large alliance of similarly situated groups.²¹ It is, rather, a qualitatively different signal that provides uncertainty-mitigating information that may encourage hesitant legislators to act in accordance with interest group coalition interests. Clear evidence of heterogeneous support for a particular policy change can ease concerns about its electoral ramifications. It can also facilitate legislators' efforts to gauge the substantive impacts of the policy in question. And,

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finally, it can assure supportive legislators that their sponsorship or other work on behalf of the interest group coalition's position early in the legislative process will not be for naught—that, as Phinney writes, the “issue is likely to progress through Congress with minimal disruptions.”²²

In addition to signposting the breadth of support for coalition positions, diversity enhances the possibility of assembling a broad array of resources that might be deployed in service of conveying a strong signal to policy makers. As Phinney explains, “diversity within coalitions matters because it gives a set of organizations access to different types of information and enables varied tactics for communicating information. This informational and tactical diversity in turn allows the coalition to reach the large number of legislators who share authority in a given policy area.”²³ Frank Baumgartner and his coauthors similarly note that “the resources of an individual organization are much less important than the aggregate resources on their side of the issue.”²⁴ Their expansive study of lobbying on ninety-eight policy issues finds that “one group's resources are only weakly correlated to the resources of the other groups sharing the same policy side.” Consequently, they maintain, “aggregation of advocates into policy sides helps provide a greater range of resources for the policy fight. Teams are stronger than individuals because of the diverse resources most teams bring to the table.”²⁵

The Downside of Diversity

I have been careful thus far to couch interest group coalitions' signaling capabilities in terms of possibility and potential. In doing so, I heed Darrin Halpin's caveat that the availability of resources does not guarantee effective resource mobilization; as he writes, “resources alone are not enough; they have to be purposefully utilized by groups to generate specific capacities. . . . Resource levels alone do not tell us about the capabilities groups possess; groups must decide how to put these to use and develop what they see as important abilities.”²⁶ To bridge the leap from measuring organizational resource endowments to gauging the impact of their deployment in policy-making contexts, Halpin suggests scholars consider how interest groups' policy-oriented activities reflect their policy capacity—essentially, their readiness to engage in specific types of policy work, a trait that is in turn a function of their organizational design. “Groups are surely not all *equally capable*,” Halpin writes; rather, “the organizational form a group manifests at one point of time shapes the range of capacities a group might reasonably generate and thus possess.”²⁷

In problematizing interest groups' capacity to act on their resource potential, Halpin exhorts researchers to be more attentive to organizational form

when studying the policy work of individual groups acting as standalone units within the political arena. But it stands to reason that the task of transforming resource potential into effective policy work is even more critical for interest group coalitions, whose resources are diffuse and subject to disparate mobilization by the leadership and staff of each member organization. Similarly, the coherence of a coalition signal cannot be taken for granted. Nelson and Yackee find that interest group coalitions' influence depends on the extent to which the signals they convey to policy makers represent a consensus position among coalition members,²⁸ but this raises the question of when and how such consensus comes about—or, put differently, why some interest group coalitions succeed at presenting a united front to policy makers while others do not.

Viewed from this standpoint, diversity is a double-edged sword. Even as it creates the possibility for a coalition to signal uncommonly broad support for a policy position, it exacerbates the challenge of actually aligning and activating numerous organizations with different legislative priorities, resource endowments, governance structures, and approaches to advocacy. Member groups vary in their attentiveness and commitment to coalition affairs, moreover. While some eagerly make the coalition's cause their own and bring the full weight of their organizational capacity to bear on its work, others “tag along,” lending their name to the cause but contributing little if anything at all to coalition maintenance and collaborative advocacy.²⁹ Capitalizing on a diverse interest group coalition's potential for signaling broad, unified support for a coalition policy position is thus no easy task. It is not simply a matter of pooling member organizations' resources nor is it even a straightforward function of their combined policy capacities. Rather, as O'Grady's recollection of the LCCR's Civil Rights Act of 1964 campaign highlights, coalition leaders have “one tough time” corraling groups with different orientations and capacities to agree on shared legislative priorities and tactics, adjust their consensus as new developments unfold, channel professional and grassroots lobbying resources accordingly, and sustain this unity over the course of lengthy lawmaking episodes.

These activities all fall under the rubric of *coordination*, the process of aligning or otherwise priming parts of a larger whole to work together effectively. That interest group coalitions entail coordination is acknowledged in prior scholarship, which counts coordination costs among the disincentives to groups' willingness to form and participate in coalitions.³⁰ Instead of conceptualizing coordination as a cost individual groups assess in deciding whether and how to engage in coalition work, however, I view it here as an iterative process coalition leaders enact to build, maintain, and project a united front in support of coalition policy objectives. Effective coordination hinges on member groups' willingness to commit time and resources to coalition

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endeavors, to be sure, and this willingness merits ample consideration.³¹ But in shifting the focus to coalition leaders' management of the coordination process, I suggest that fully appreciating diverse interest group coalitions' signaling capabilities requires shining light into the black box of coordination to reveal how coalitions go about producing unified signals and why some interest group coalitions manage to do so with greater facility than others.

Coordination Capacity

Just as individual organizations with similar resource levels might differ in their capacity to engage in policy work, interest group coalitions with similarly large and diverse membership rosters may vary considerably in their readiness to coordinate their member groups' lobbying activities. It is thus useful to think about interest group coalitions' ability to overcome the fundamental challenge of converting coalition resource potential into unified signaling in the policy arena in terms of their *coordination capacity*—that is, the facility with which they can identify coalition positions and mobilize the resources of their member organizations for concerted action in pursuit of shared objectives. Much like Halpin's policy capacity, moreover, coordination capacity derives from coalitions' organizational design; simply put, some interest group coalitions operate in ways that enable them to readily determine points of common ground among their members and motivate them to engage their professional lobbyists and grassroots constituencies accordingly. In contrast, some lack adequate organizational mechanisms for negotiating agreement among member groups and encouraging them to direct resources in ways that advance coalition goals.

There are no doubt myriad ways in which interest group coalitions see fit to organize themselves in light of prevailing technologies and approaches to organizational management; as Donald Hall explained his decision not to catalog the forms interorganizational cooperation take, “there simply are not one or two methods of arriving at a consensus.”³² Rather than identify a one-size-fits-all organizational chart or list of must-have operating procedures, therefore, the present discussion teases out the capabilities interest group coalitions need to coordinate effectively.

First and foremost is some mechanism for engaging member organizations in coalition decision making. To the extent that interest group coalitions' value rests with their potential for presenting a united front to policy makers, they need to be able to identify what exactly the consensus of their members is with respect to both substantive preferences, including which policy objectives to prioritize and which policy positions to advocate, and legislative strategy. Identifying the nature of member organizations' consensus is par-

ticularly important for interest group coalitions whose purview encompasses a broad policy area. As subsequent chapters show, a recurring challenge for the Leadership Conference was to find agreement on the coalition's lobbying agenda. While the prevailing understanding of what properly fell under the rubric of civil rights was relatively narrow through the mid-1960s, and while all the LCCR's member groups were firmly in favor of civil rights, there was substantial disagreement about which specific civil rights policy objectives were most vital and politically salable. Nor was identifying coalition priorities ever quite a done deal. Exogenous developments—especially unanticipated actions by presidents and legislators to propel new issues to the forefront or otherwise alter lobbyists' sense of the politically possible—periodically compelled Leadership Conference officials to revisit an established consensus and reach out to member groups to clarify the extent of their agreement, identify which organizations would join in a newly drafted statement or action on behalf of a subset of members rather than the coalition as a whole, or otherwise discern the possibility for the coalition's response to changing circumstances.

Interest group coalitions must also be able to implement the collaborative decisions they make. Implementing these decisions necessitates some means of promulgating agreed-upon positions and strategies among member organizations as a first step toward mobilizing their resources for concerted action. By definition, interest group coalitions lack the authority to deploy collective lobbying resources unilaterally; rather, they rely on member organizations to serve as faithful mouthpieces for coalition preferences and enjoin their professional and grassroots lobbying forces to act in accordance with coalition plans. It is therefore essential that these preferences and plans are well understood by member groups' officials and staff, a task that may be complicated by bureaucratic distance between those delegated by their home organizations to participate in coalition deliberations and those who direct organizational policy and rank-and-file engagement. Moreover, just as compositional diversity can be a double-edged sword for interest groups, the federated structure of many U.S. interest groups enhances the potential for showcasing nationwide support for coalition positions but also exacerbates the challenge of unified mobilization.

Implementing collaborative lobbying plans also necessitates some administrative capacity to orchestrate member groups' participation in coalition initiatives. This capacity encompasses a wide-ranging set of activities: fielding suggestions and inquiries, circulating joint statements for endorsement, event planning, printing and distributing promotional and instructional materials, compiling feedback from professional and grassroots lobbying interactions, facilitating information sharing among groups, managing publicity, and other tasks too numerous to catalog exhaustively. Though mundane, these tasks

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can be critical to the success of a lobbying campaign and can fall through the cracks if there is no mechanism for ensuring that they are well attended to—a possibility that is exacerbated when coalition objectives compete with member organizations' individual priorities for attention and resources.

Finally, it is important for coalitions to be able to sustain coordinated mobilization once they achieve it. While some policy-making episodes are of relatively short duration, many span long months or even years as bills progress slowly through a legislative process that is prone to delay by obstructionist veto players. A very forceful point-in-time signal might yield fruit in such cases. It is likelier, however, that persistent activity by the full range of member groups' professional lobbyists and grassroots constituents is necessary to assure sympathetic policy makers that public opinion remains broadly supportive of the coalition's view, persuade their more hesitant counterparts to come around to the coalition's position, and ensure that the policy proposal in play is not sidelined or diluted. It is especially difficult to sustain momentum within a diverse interest group coalition that includes member organizations for whom the coalition's focal issue is of secondary concern. While these groups may be amenable to committing resources to an initial or otherwise high-profile push for the coalition's legislative objectives, it is another matter to encourage them to continue devoting staff hours and mobilizing their base in support of coalition goals that, although not in conflict, still compete with other organizational priorities. While issue salience can alleviate this challenge—as it likely did during the LCCR's year-long lobbying campaign for the Civil Rights Act of 1964—it does not eliminate the challenge entirely nor is the mitigation necessarily automatic.³³ Rather, coalition leaders must be able to capitalize on these rare opportunities to keep member groups engaged and active in coalition efforts.

Improving Coordination Capacity

The discussion thus far has implicitly treated coordination capacity as a static trait, which raises the questions of whether and how readily coalition leaders can introduce organizational changes to facilitate more effective coordination. While perhaps less relevant to ephemeral interest group coalitions that form on an ad hoc basis to coordinate a single lobbying campaign, for coalitions like the Leadership Conference, which exist on a relatively formal and enduring basis, the ability to rework their organizational structure and operating procedures when deficiencies become apparent could have portentous consequences for their ongoing relevance and, ultimately, their survival.³⁴

Prior research on interest group coalitions offers little insight into the possibilities for improving coordination capacity for reasons alluded to earlier: the literature tends to focus on the incentives for coalition-oriented

action by individual member groups rather than the maintenance of interest group coalitions as organizational entities in their own right; it tends to black-box coordination and other organizational processes; and its empirical approaches tend to home in on episodic coalition activity and discrete policy-making situations rather than delve into the mechanics of long-term intergroup relationships. Some starting points can be gleaned from research on standalone interest groups, however. Halpin, for example, emphasizes that organizational form is usually quite durable. “After taking decisions on organizational form and structural set-up,” he writes, “groups are not always easy to change—even where circumstances seem to demand it.”³⁵ This is not to suggest that organizational structures are immutable. Indeed, Halpin’s own work with Carsten Daugbjerg offers an illustrative account of what they call “radical change” in one British interest group, which transformed from an amateur scientific society into an environmental campaign organization several decades after its founding.³⁶ But such drastic change is rare, and scholars who have explored the dynamics of organizational change have highlighted a number of factors that predispose groups to maintaining their organizational status quo. To the extent that interest groups seek out niche identities and specializations within a competitive interest group sector, introducing new ways of doing business is risky. As McGee Young observes, “all organized interests face an essential tension between the organizational desire to maintain a stable identity and changing political circumstances that threaten such efforts.”³⁷ Young further suggests that several “path-inducing effects” militate against change. Group leaders may view continuing returns on their earlier investments in existing operating procedures as “large enough to reduce short-term incentives to experiment with alternative organizational designs,” for example, and they may be disinclined to innovate in ways that render existing human resources and process knowledge obsolete.³⁸

While securing a niche within a crowded organizational field may be less of a priority for interest group coalitions than it is for unitary groups, other factors that tend to promote organizational stasis are likely still at play. Moreover, it stands to reason that implementing capacity-enhancing change could be even more difficult for a coalition than for a standalone group. Coalition leaders might sense that proposing such change would be unduly disruptive, or potentially even threatening to the coalition’s survival if member organizations opt to disaffiliate rather than adapt to new procedures that they perceive as compromising their autonomy or that place great demands on their resources. Coalition leaders might also lack authority to implement such change without the express consensus of member groups, which they might in turn perceive to be too arduous to obtain. Indeed, to the extent that coordination capacity is lacking, simply ascertaining member groups’ appetite for reform to the coal-

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tion's structure and operating procedures may be—or may at least be perceived to be—unfeasible.

These change-inhibiting dynamics were evident in the LCCR's early development, as Chapter 3 details. For a full decade after Leadership Conference officials decided to institutionalize their alliance, they presided over a coalition with rather feeble coordinating capabilities—a state of affairs they acknowledged and justified in terms of a perceived tradeoff between coordination capacity on the one hand and, on the other, the continued participation by key member groups that fiercely guarded their autonomy. But Chapters 4 and 5, which examine the LCCR's organizational development during and after its campaign for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, illustrate how changes in the policy-making context can motivate coalition leaders to overcome inertial tendencies and introduce organizational reforms that enhance coordination capacity.

The circumstances that prompted Leadership Conference officials to enact changes to the coalition's organizational structure and operating procedures in 1963 and 1967 were quite different. They were capitalizing on a momentous political opportunity in the former and reacting to a confluence of threats to both coalition solvency and the advancement of civil rights in the latter. Nevertheless, these disparate episodes of organizational development yield similar observations. In line with Young's expectations, LCCR officials were generally disinclined to revolutionize the coalition even as they implemented changes that had transformative effects; rather than invent new organizational practices out of whole cloth, they opted to refine or repurpose existing arrangements, or to borrow "familiar scripts" from within the broader advocacy group sector when innovation was necessary.³⁹ Both change episodes also suggest that coalition leaders do indeed understand their organizational capabilities to be at least as important as the diversity of their membership roster. While Leadership Conference officials did engage in strategic coalition expansion (and sometimes culling) to enhance the variegation of their support base and gain access to resources that were not already extant within their existing membership ranks, their focus during these critical junctures was primarily on developing organizational practices to facilitate coalition decision making and collaborative lobbying.

Conclusion

The framework sketched out in this chapter envisions diverse interest group coalitions as potentially—but not necessarily—robust signalers and understands their capacity for presenting a united front of broad-based support for

coalition positions as a function of their organizational wherewithal to coordinate member groups' lobbying activities. While not quite at odds with prior research, this approach does suggest some reorientation. Following Junk, it suggests that the value of compositional diversity for interest group coalitions is conditional.⁴⁰ However, where Junk's framework conditions the impact of diversity on issue salience—that is, a feature of the policy-making context within which interest group coalitions operate, I suggest that it is mediated by coalitions' own organizational properties, which constrain coalitions' ability to capitalize on political opportunities as well. In turn, my framework calls for delving into the organizational mechanisms interest group coalitions use to orchestrate collaborative advocacy. This approach necessitates defining interest group coalitions as deliberately cooperative enterprises,⁴¹ and it calls for understanding interest group coalitions as having an organizational life of their own; that is, they are not merely the sum of their constituent parts or an abstract product of intergroup transaction.

I return to these considerations in the Conclusion, which further explicates the implications of this framework for research on interest group coalitions. First, however, Chapters 2 through 5 tell the story of the LCCR's founding, organizational development, and participation in federal civil rights policy making through the mid-1960s. Their narrative is analytical rather than comprehensive; rather than detail every initiative the Leadership Conference undertook during the Second Reconstruction era—a task that would exceed the scope of any book of reasonable length—it zeroes in on LCCR officials' approach to coalition management at different points in the coalition's early history and key policy-making episodes that illustrate how their organizational choices shaped their capacity to mobilize and bring the resources of LCCR members and allied organizations to bear on the legislative process.

The Second Reconstruction—era Leadership Conference was a singular coalition operating during a unique historical juncture; as such, its experience cannot purport to serve as a definitive test of the framework presented in this chapter. But it is an instructive case for several reasons. As the lobbying arm of the civil rights movement during its heyday, the LCCR is historically significant; just as the civil rights movement has served as an important touchstone for the development of social movement theory,⁴² the Leadership Conference ought to be an influential case in the study of lobbying coalitions. The Leadership Conference has also enjoyed unusual longevity and resilience. Rather than a uniform snapshot of coalition dynamics, its organizational development during the 1950s and 1960s presents within-case variation that enables exploration of different organizational arrangements and their implications for coordination. The LCCR's endurance well beyond

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the civil rights movement's prime likewise sheds light on interest group coalitions' adaptation to changing circumstances. While this book's coverage ends in 1967, its examination of the challenges the Leadership Conference faced in the aftermath of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts' passage lends insight into the politics of coalition maintenance and collaborative lobbying as the Second Reconstruction's window of opportunity was closing.

Nothing like the Present Ferment Has Been
Seen for Seventy-Five Years

In 1951 Joseph B. Robison, a staff attorney for the Commission on Law and Social Action of the American Jewish Congress surveyed the field of advocacy groups that were active in promoting civil rights legislation in the postwar United States. He described a core set of African American and other minority-group organizations from which emanated “the direction and principal motivating force” for a burgeoning movement to eradicate racial discrimination. But, he added, “a very important part of the work and energy has been supplied” by what he called “peripheral groups,” or “organizations whose general viewpoint inclines them to support the cause of equality even though that cause is not the primary reason for their existence.”¹ Robison further observed a series of initiatives to coordinate pro-civil rights organizations’ efforts and “set up machinery through which they can speak with a single voice, particularly with respect to legislation.”² The first attempts at such coordination coalesced around specific policy objectives—for example, to abolish poll taxes or promote fair employment legislation. But, he wrote, they eventually came to embrace “a broader function, that of reaching and implementing joint decisions as to priorities of goals.”³

This chapter situates the LCCR’s formation within this organizational landscape. A coordinating agency that was just barely in the offing at the time of Robison’s writing, the Leadership Conference grew out of and exemplified the developments he described. As a relatively late-forming coalition, moreover, the Leadership Conference took shape against the backdrop of earlier efforts to coordinate the activities of pro-civil rights organizations. Most, if not all, of its