

Achieving and Leveraging Diversity through Faith-Based Organizing

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After a perceived hiatus of several decades—“perceived” for reasons discussed below—religious progressives have reappeared in the public eye in recent years. Though mostly very marginal players in the Occupy Wall Street movement that made inequality a prominent public issue in American life by framing it as a struggle between “the one percent and the ninety-nine percent,” religious progressives have been prominent participants in the subsequent debates over house foreclosures, banking reform, racial inequities in law enforcement and sentencing, and comprehensive immigration reform (Sanati 2010; Waters 2010; Wood and Fulton 2015). Even before the Great Recession, religious progressives had been among the crucial sectors articulating why access to healthcare was a fundamental moral issue (Wood 2007). Their advocacy helped lead to renewal of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program that was twice vetoed by President George W. Bush before being signed by President Barack Obama; their subsequent moral advocacy was crucial to the passage of national healthcare reform in 2009—and particularly to its inclusion of significant subsidies for healthcare for the poor and lower middle class (Parsons 2010; Pear 2009).

The perception of religious progressives as absent from the public arena is itself an interesting phenomenon (Fulton 2016a). It is hard to argue that they have indeed been absent, given the presence of religious voices in favor of the successful immigration reform of the 1980s (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 2004), in favor of peace and human rights (Nepstad 2004; 2008; 2011) and against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Kairos Theologians Group 1986; Wood 2000), in defense of social welfare in the 1990s (Marsh 2006), and in support of civil rights and

against the American-led war in Iraq after 2001 (Religious News Service 2003). Rather than an actual *absence* of religious progressives, then, the key dynamic has been of vastly reduced *efficacy* of religious voices and organizations in claiming a strong position in favor of politically liberal and progressive social policy within public discourse.

We suggest this reduced efficacy of religious progressives—and thus the perception of their absence from public discourse—has less to do with religious progressivism itself than with three related factors: First, American political culture has shifted dramatically rightward since the Reagan administration, meaning that the arguments and policy positions of religious progressives get less of a public hearing. Second, religious conservatives have mobilized so effectively for a media-oriented political culture that they have crowded out religious voices supporting other policy alternatives. Third, as noted in the introduction to this volume, secular voices—sometimes simply non-religious voices, sometimes clearly anti-religious ones—increasingly dominate progressive policy discourse. The key question then is not whether religious progressives exist, but rather whether they can claim space in public discourse and power relations commensurate with their continuing presence in American society.

We explore that question by analyzing the field of faith-based community organizing (FBCO), which has enabled one sector of religious progressives to gain greater political influence. Our analysis suggests that religion need not be condemned to being a politically conservative force, nor to exist without effective public voice. It also suggests that progressive politics need not do without resonance with the moral instincts and religious ethical teachings that undergird many American communities. Progressive politics can draw on religious commitments rooted in many communities and across all social strata to bridge the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic divides that currently eviscerate progressive policy-making.

We focus on the high levels of diversity across religious, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic divides that the FBCO field's organizational infrastructure in congregations and other institutions has generated. That diversity and the sheer scale of mobilization enabled by the FBCO infrastructure together constitute faith-based organizing's most significant

sources of power and most important credentials for legitimacy in the public arena. Most crucially for the FBCO field and its potential contribution to progressive politics and deepening democracy in the United States, the field bridges social divides in ways rarely seen within American civil society. Faith-based community organizing thus deepens the wells of “bridging social capital” that Robert Putnam and others have found so desiccated in the United States, and leverages that social capital to build power and influence in the political arena.¹ Furthermore, we argue that the FBCO field has the potential to advance progressive socioeconomic priorities at a scale that will matter for the future direction of American society. Realizing its potential, though, will require navigating and leveraging its internal social differences for the collective good and overcoming the challenges facing progressive politics in general.

Faith-Based Community Organizing and Progressive Politics

The full history of the field of community organizing and its most prominent variants today has been told in a number of venues.² Rather than retell that history here, we note simply that the field emerged from foundations in the work of Saul Alinsky and prior organizers in American civic life, but over the last twenty years the field has also significantly transcended those origins by drawing on innovative work within and beyond its own boundaries. Nonetheless, most political work that falls under the rubric of “community organizing” today sustains Alinsky’s focus on a particular set of socioeconomic issues: those that affect residents’ quality of life in communities falling somewhere on the spectrum from the desperately poor to the working class to the middle class made newly vulnerable by recent economic restructuring and its attendant insecurity and “fear of falling” into poverty.

We use the term “religious progressives” to identify political progressives who trace their political views to their religious and spiritual commitments. Religious progressives thus may or may not be “progressive” in theological or religious or spiritual terms; rather, we use the term to denote political progressives, noting that relatively conservative theological and religious positions sometimes undergird rather progressive political views. Of course, the term “progressive” as applied to politics

in turn raises a host of ambiguities: Must one hold to progressive orthodoxy across every issue to be considered politically progressive? Who gets to determine that list of issues, and what counts as the progressive view on each?

To avoid these conundrums, for the purposes of this chapter we use the term “progressive” to denote only those who are active in the public arena in a way that places substantial political emphasis on one or both of two efforts: first, the effort to expand the effective representation of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, or immigrant groups previously marginalized in American political decision-making at all levels; second, the effort to roll back the staggeringly high levels of economic inequality (i.e., income and wealth) that have been rebuilt in the United States over the last few decades and were previously unprecedented in American life since the Gilded Age. In this, we follow the lead of one of the recent classics of American political sociology in emphasizing the role of *voice* and *equality* as central to the effort to defend and deepen democracy in America.³

The FBCO field embraces both of these aspirations. As documented below, most FBCO coalitions are organizing a highly diverse base of communities, addressing issues related to poverty and economic inequality (see Figure 1.1), and seeking to empower voices that had previ-

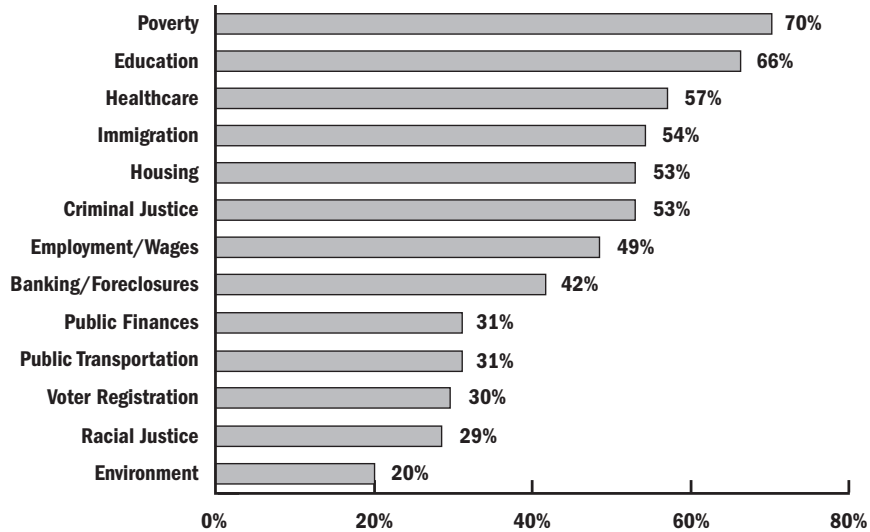


Figure 1.1. Percentage of coalitions actively addressing the following issues

ously been politically marginalized. Although this chapter focuses on the FBCO field, we by no means claim (or believe) that this field or the issues it addresses are the only important foci of “progressive” political engagement.

The National Study of Community Organizing Coalitions

To document and analyze the current state of the FBCO field, we conducted the National Study of Community Organizing Coalitions, which surveyed the entire field of FBCO coalitions (see Figure 1.2) (Fulton et al. 2011).⁴ This study achieved a response rate of 94 percent—gathering data on 178 of the 189 coalitions in the country and demographic information on the 4,145 member organizations, 2,939 board members, and 628 paid staff affiliated with these coalitions (Fulton 2016b). To measure diversity, the data include the religious affiliation and predominant race of each member organization, and the gender, age, religion, race, income, education, and occupation of each board member and paid staff.

Since 1999, the FBCO field experienced a net growth of 42 percent—102 new coalitions were established and 46 had become inactive. In most areas where a coalition had become inactive, another coalition still exists.



Figure 1.2. Map of the entire field of FBCO coalitions in 2011

The overall growth of the field corresponds with an increase in its geographic spread. In 1999, 33 states had active coalitions; now, coalitions are active in 40. As the field extended into new areas, it also deepened its presence in former areas with the highest concentrations being in major urban areas.

The base of the FBCO field is its member organizations, of which there are approximately 4,500. Congregations remain the large majority of member organizations and 30 percent of the coalitions have a member base comprised exclusively of congregations. Furthermore, the members' shared identity as people of faith often provides the cultural glue that holds a socially diverse coalition together (Braunstein, Fulton, and Wood 2014). Most coalitions regularly incorporate religious practices into their organizing activities and many support "congregational development" initiatives designed to use organizing as a means to strengthen member congregations.⁵

Since 1999, the number of non-congregational member organizations has doubled from approximately 500 to 1,000 (see Figure 1.3). These organizations include schools, faith-based nonprofits, unions, immigrant associations, economic development corporations, and other civic associations. Although congregations and their faith commitments remain central to the FBCO organizing model, non-congregational members

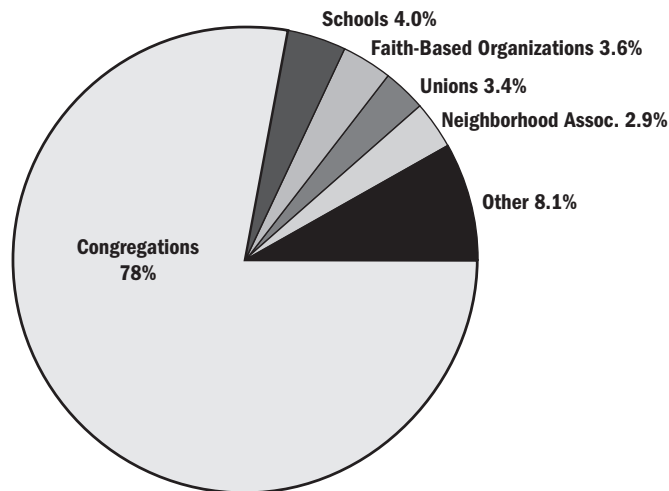


Figure 1.3. Types of FBCO member organizations

now make up 22 percent of all member organizations; 70 percent of coalitions have at least one non-congregational member (Fulton and Wood 2012).

Beyond the field's ability to form enduring coalitions with organizations across multiple organizational sectors, we here document its effectiveness in building a socially diverse base. We examine religious, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity in turn. FBCO coalitions achieve this diversity through their member organizations, which individually may be relatively homogenous, but collectively represent substantial diversity along religious, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. FBCO coalitions pursue this diversity intentionally, believing that they gain political credibility in the public sphere by organizing a base that is representative of its surrounding community.

Religious Diversity

Since at least the 1970s, religious congregations have been the primary institutional members that organizers have recruited. As of 2012, 7 percent of all U.S. congregations are involved in some form of faith-based community organizing.⁶ Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Black Protestant congregations have been the core of this membership base, while Conservative Protestant, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, and Muslim congregations represent a much smaller share.⁷ Over the last decade, however, the religious composition of the field has become more evenly distributed among the various religious traditions (see Figure 1.4).⁸

Even though congregations from every major religious tradition are involved in faith-based community organizing, the participating congregations do not represent the religious composition of congregations in the United States (see Figure 1.5). While Mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations represent a majority in the FBCO field, they represent a minority among congregations in the United States. On the other hand, almost half of the congregations in the U.S. are Conservative Protestant, yet they represent a small minority in the FBCO field. Black Protestantism is the only religious tradition in which the percentage of congregations in the field matches its percentage among all U.S. congregations. With regard to the minority religious traditions, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, and Muslim congregations are relatively well represented in the

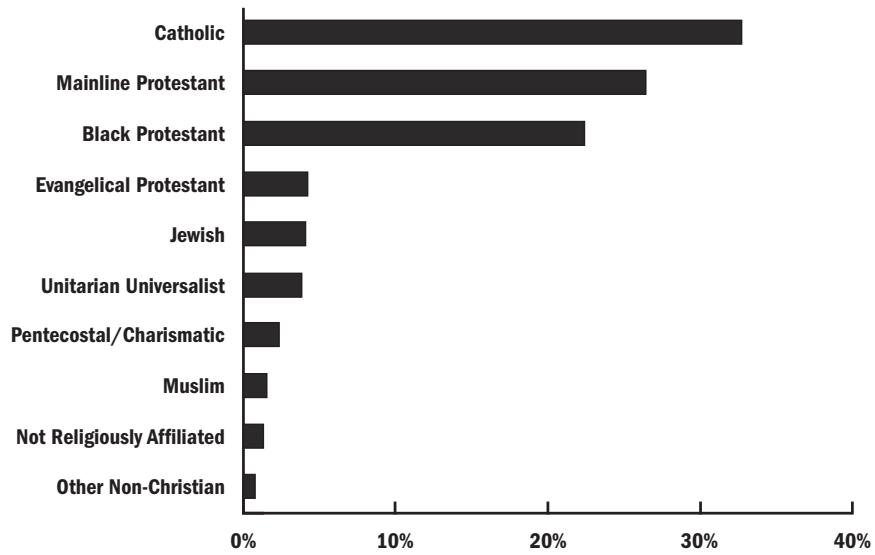
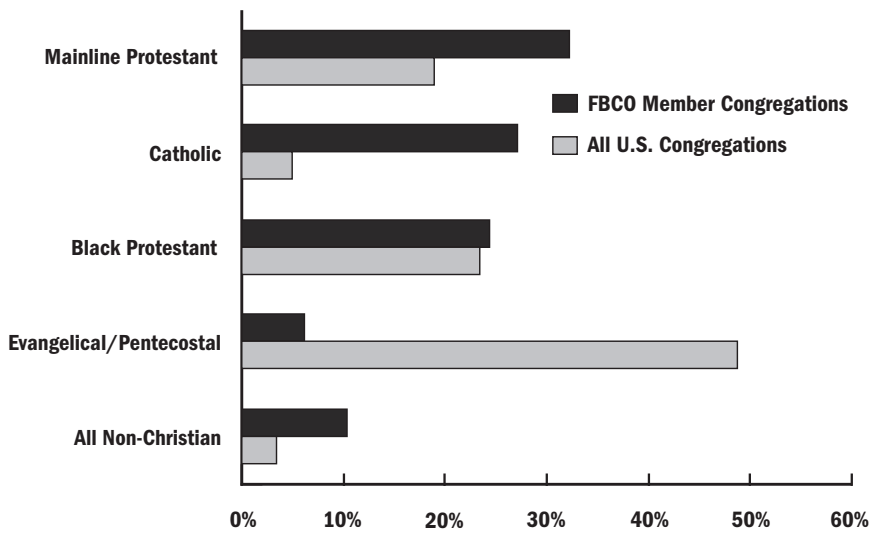


Figure 1.4. Religious affiliation of FBCO board members



Source: Chaves, Anderson, and Eagle 2014

Figure 1.5. Religious affiliation of FBCO member congregations compared with all congregations in the U.S.

FBCO field. Jewish synagogues, for example, make up roughly 2 percent of all U.S. congregations, whereas they make up 5 percent of all FBCO member congregations. Unitarian Universalist and Muslim congregations each make up less than 1 percent of U.S. congregations, and respectively they make up 4 percent and 1.3 percent of all FBCO member congregations.

The substantial religious diversity of the field is also reflected within most individual coalitions. The percentage of coalitions that have only Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and/or Black Protestant congregations—the historic religious core of the FBCO field—decreased from 25 percent to 15 percent between 1999 and 2011. Almost half of the coalitions have at least one Conservative Protestant, Jewish, or Unitarian Universalist congregation, 20 percent have at least one Muslim congregation, and 15 percent have at least one Jewish *and* one Muslim congregation. Furthermore, over 50 percent of the coalitions have at least one secular member organization and 20 percent of the member organizations of a typical coalition are non-congregations.⁹

Through its religiously diverse member base, the FBCO field is building power by bridging the divides that separate religious traditions from one another and from secular institutions. Moreover, religious diversity within individual coalitions indicates that this bridging is occurring on the ground locally, rather than only at aggregate state and national levels (which might not constitute “bridging” at all). This base in diverse religious traditions allows these organizations to project influence more effectively in two ways. First, by drawing communities linked to divergent faith traditions into shared work in the public arena, faith-based organizing coalitions broaden their mobilizing base and increase their legitimacy in the religiously pluralistic political arena of the United States. Second, by drawing on religious sources of meaning, these coalitions infuse their work with moral authority and a sense of transcendence that not only mobilizes constituents but also links their political interests and real-life struggles to moral traditions that are broadly shared by diverse publics.

Racial/Ethnic Diversity

Similarly, the FBCO field is building power by bridging racial/ethnic divides. Figure 1.6 shows the racial/ethnic composition of the field’s

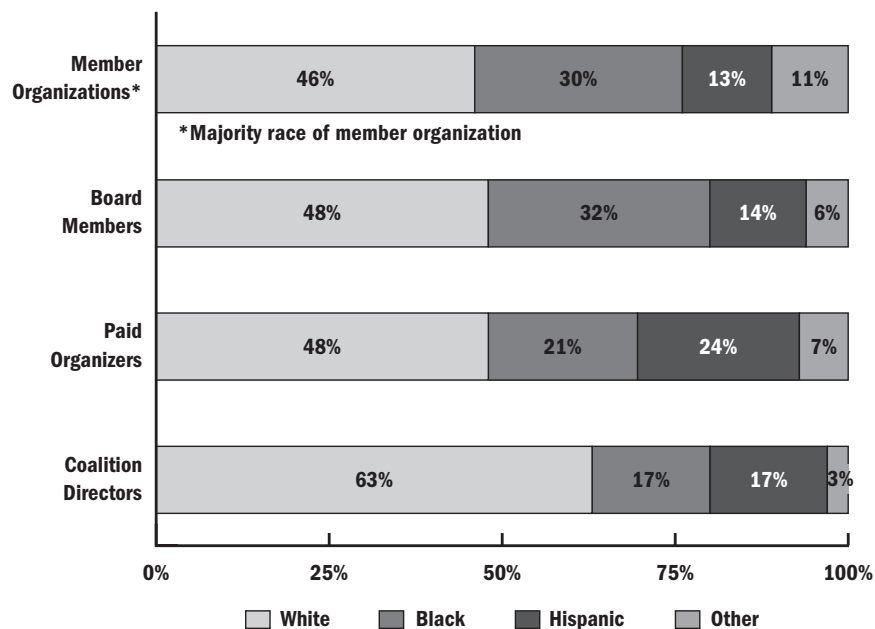


Figure 1.6. Racial/ethnic composition of the FBCO field

member organizations, board members, paid organizers, and coalition directors.¹⁰ Over 50 percent of FBCO coalition board members are nonwhite (see Figure 1.7). For purposes of comparison, note that only 19 percent of all nonprofit board members in the U.S. and 13 percent of Fortune 500 board members are nonwhite (Ostrower 2007; Lang et al. 2011).

The field's substantial racial/ethnic diversity is also reflected within most individual coalitions.¹¹ We calculate the racial diversity of a coalition's board using the Blau index, which takes into account both the number of racial/ethnic groups and the proportion of each group represented on the board.¹² It generates a diversity score that ranges from 0 to .80, and the score can be interpreted as the probability that two randomly selected board members of a coalition are of a different race/ethnicity.¹³ Based on this index, a coalition with a mono-racial board has a diversity score of 0, and as the number of different racial/ethnic groups represented on a coalition's board increases and as the proportion of each group becomes more evenly distributed, the coalition's diversity score approaches .80. Figure 1.8 shows the distribution of coalitions

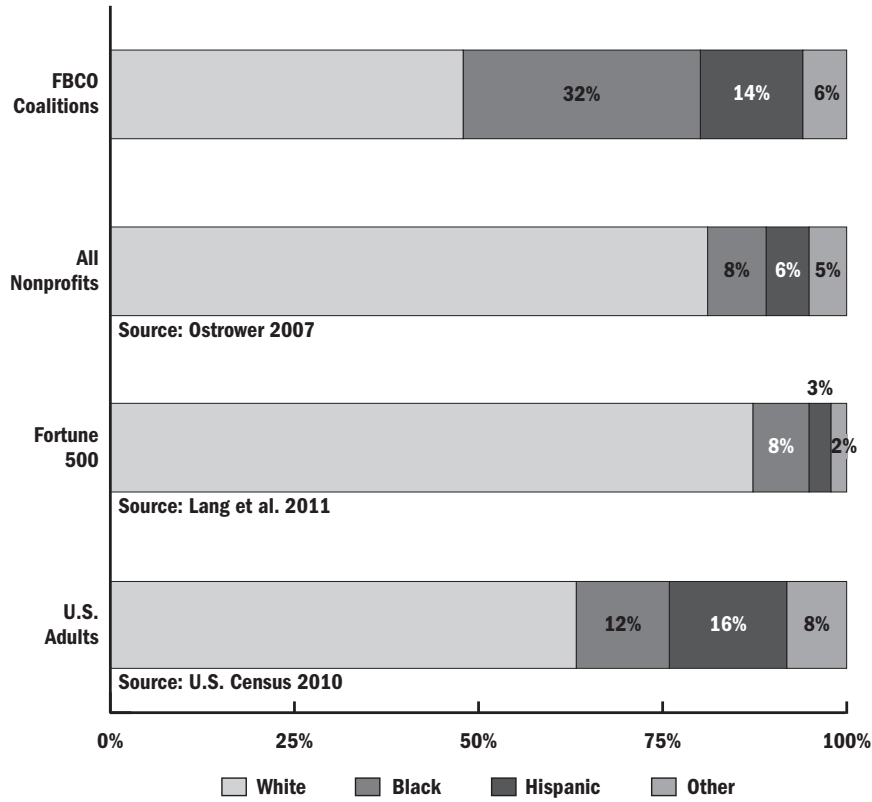
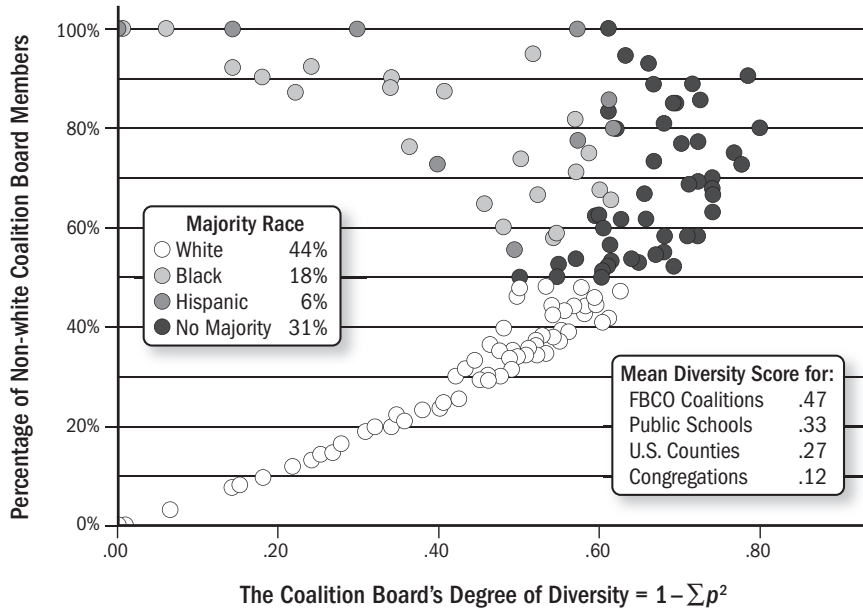


Figure 1.7. Racial/ethnic composition of FBCO coalition boards compared with other boards and all U.S. adults

tions based on their board’s diversity score, the percentage of the majority race/ethnicity, and the identity of the majority race/ethnicity.

Using the Blau index enables us to compare the racial/ethnic diversity of FBCO coalitions with that of other community-based institutions.¹⁴ The mean diversity score for FBCO coalitions is .47, whereas the mean diversity score for public schools is .33, for U.S. counties is .28, and for congregations is .12.¹⁵ FBCO coalitions thus tend to be more diverse than public schools and U.S. counties, and much more diverse than congregations. In an era of declining social capital, it appears that the FBCO field plays a crucial role in bolstering bridging capital by linking Americans across the divides that otherwise separate them.

No simple summary can fully capture the complex patterns of racial/ethnic diversity within FBCO coalitions. However, by all measures, their



Sources: Aud et al. 2010; 2010 U.S. Census; Chaves, Anderson, and Eagle 2014

Figure 1.8. Racial/ethnic diversity score of FBCO coalition boards

boards are much more racially/ethnically diverse than most corporate and nonprofit boards, and their member base is more diverse than most schools, neighborhoods, and congregations. In this way, the field's ability to bring Americans together across racial and ethnic divides is extraordinary within American political culture and institutions. Currently, that capacity allows some of these coalitions to simultaneously: (i) organize effectively in communities heavily made up of racial/ethnic minorities and recent immigrants; (ii) confront "colorblind" ideologies that refuse to take seriously continuing racial divides of American life; and (iii) advance "universalist" policy solutions that transcend race-based politics (Wood and Fulton 2015).

Socioeconomic Diversity

Similarly, assessing the education and household income level of the coalition board members shows that the FBCO field also exhibits substantial socioeconomic diversity. This dimension of diversity is among

the most unique and most important characteristics of the FBCO field. Twenty-three percent of the coalition board members have less than a bachelor’s degree. Although this figure is lower than the proportion in the U.S. population as a whole, it demonstrates that these boards are not comprised solely of the highly educated. More significant is the spread of household incomes among the coalition board members (see Figure 1.9). Twenty-three percent have a household income of less than \$25,000 per year (an amount slightly above the 2011 federal poverty level for a family of four). Another 35 percent have a household income between \$25,000 and \$50,000 per year. Although no nationally representative data on the socioeconomic status of nonprofit or corporate board members exist, the field of FBCO board members clearly reflects much greater socioeconomic diversity than most other fields.

Altogether, the proportion of board members with a household income below \$50,000 per year almost precisely matches the proportion of American households below that income level. This substantial socioeconomic diversity is also reflected within most individual coalitions. Over 90 percent of the coalitions have at least one board member who has no more than a high school degree, and over 75 percent of the

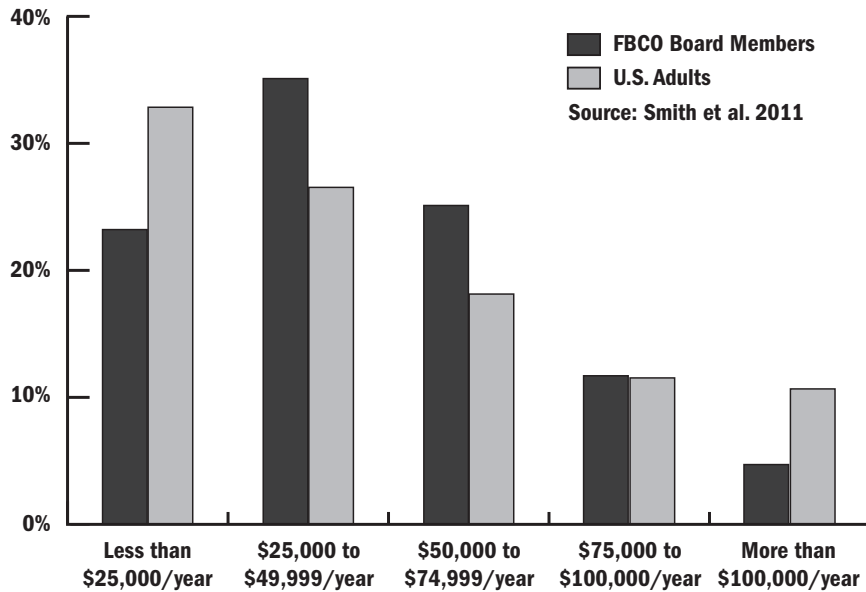


Figure 1.9. Income composition of FBCO board members compared with all U.S. adults

coalitions have at least one board member with a household income of less than \$25,000 per year. Although systematic comparative data on the class composition of social movement organizations do not appear to exist, such organizations are rarely class diverse and when they are, internal class differences often undermine their work (Leondar-Wright 2014). This makes the socioeconomic diversity of the FBCO coalitions and their success all the more noteworthy.

The combination of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity documented above makes these coalitions unusual within American civil society, rivaled only by those labor unions that have successfully organized in diverse settings in recent years (Bronfenbrenner 1998; Martin 2007; Voss and Sherman 2000). Adding in their religious diversity—and (in some cases) fluency in religious ethical teachings—appears to position them uniquely to offer a credible moral voice on issues of economic and racial inequality in American life.¹⁶

The Effects of Internal Social Diversity on Organizing Activities

Given the high levels of diversity documented above, one might expect this field of faith-based and progressively oriented political activity to struggle to maintain internal cohesion. Yet many of these coalitions have maintained a stable presence and unified voice on socioeconomic issues in the political arena for years or decades. How do they navigate these differences?

Although many coalitions simultaneously exhibit substantial levels of religious, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity, they navigate each dimension of diversity in distinct ways. While most coalitions are religiously diverse and leaders are often encouraged to draw on their specific religious traditions, participants seldom focus on their religious differences. The majority of coalitions reported discussing religious differences only “rarely” to “sometimes,” and most indicated that religious differences had a minimal effect on their planning meetings. Interestingly, the coalitions that reported “often” discussing religious differences were more likely to report that those differences affected their planning meetings (the direction of causality is not clear). Yet a coalition’s propensity to discuss religious differences is unrelated to its degree of religious diversity. Furthermore, the directors of religiously diverse coalitions did not report

it to be any more difficult to accommodate different religious traditions in their organizing work than did directors of less diverse coalitions.

These patterns along with ethnographic research in these coalitions suggest that, as coalition members from different religious traditions work together to improve their communities, they navigate their religious differences by downplaying them. Instead of focusing on potentially divisive differences, they leverage their shared commitment to address common concerns about inequality and social policy that disproportionately affect poor, low-, and middle-income families. In an increasingly polarized political culture, in which religious differences are often used to amplify political disagreements, FBCO coalitions are strikingly counter-cultural. Rather than pitting religious traditions against each other (or advancing one strand within a particular tradition over other strands), they seek to transcend religious differences by focusing on shared values, engaging in mutually acceptable spiritual practices, and pursuing common socioeconomic goals—often by emphasizing the ways their religious ethical teachings overlap on socioeconomic terrain.

In contrast to how coalitions handle religious differences, some now handle racial/ethnic differences by addressing them directly. Even though historically faith-based organizing typically downplayed racial/ethnic differences, in 2011 most coalitions reported discussing racial/ethnic differences either “sometimes” or “often,” and coalitions that are more racially/ethnically diverse tend to discuss racial/ethnic differences more often. In addition, the racial/ethnic diversity of a coalition is significantly associated with the extent to which racial/ethnic differences complicate, prolong, hinder, and enhance its planning meetings.¹⁷

FBCO coalitions respond to religious differences and racial/ethnic differences in contrasting ways. They tend to talk less about religious differences, and religious differences tend to have little impact on their planning meetings. Conversely, they tend to talk more about racial/ethnic differences, and racial/ethnic differences tend to have a greater impact their planning meetings. Moreover, these opposite ways of responding to differences become amplified as the respective level of diversity of the coalition increases.¹⁸

This suggests that a substantial portion of coalitions do not operate with a “colorblind” disposition, as they strove to do in the past. Rather they are cognizant of racial/ethnic differences, focus on addressing them,

and shape their organizing activity with an eye toward their internal diversity. This change in orientation toward race represents a significant shift in the culture of these coalitions, prompted in part from “below” by a younger and more diverse generation of organizers and in part from “above” by decisions taken in some of the organizing networks to systematically foster explicit attention to racial justice (Wood and Fulton 2015).

The Role of Religion in Faith-Based Organizing

Despite the FBCO field’s tendency to deemphasize religious differences and the growing proportion of secular member organizations and religiously unaffiliated organizers, drawing on religious faith continues to be an integral part of the FBCO ethos. Sixty percent of the coalitions’ offices contain objects with religious references and 80 percent of the coalitions reported that their promotional material contains religious content. Furthermore, the directors of the coalitions are, on average, more religious than the general U.S. population (i.e., they pray, read sacred texts, and attend religious services more often than the average U.S. adult).¹⁹

Most coalitions actively integrate religious practices into their organizing activities. Over 90 percent of the coalitions reported that they often open and close their meetings with a prayer, and over 75 percent often have discussions about the connection between faith and organizing. Most coalitions incorporate some form of religious teaching into their organizing activities; however, it is less common for their activities to include people singing or reading religious-based content together. The least common practice within coalitions is people making announcements about upcoming religious events. This presumably reflects the tendency in FBCO culture to focus on shared commitments and avoid giving preference to or promoting specific religious traditions. Furthermore, greater religious diversity in a coalition does not seem to dampen the influence of religious faith in the coalition. In fact, religiously diverse coalitions are *more* likely to incorporate religious practices into their organizing activities, and the directors of religiously diverse coalitions reported feeling more comfortable doing so.

FBCO coalitions *led* by people who engage in the spiritual practices of their religious tradition tend to incorporate religion into their orga-

nizing activities more often, and religiously active directors were also more likely to report that religious differences *enhanced* their coalition's planning meetings. It appears that religiously active directors help to cultivate an organizational environment that is at ease with religious differences and comfortable with incorporating religion into their activities, *or* that coalitions more grounded in religion tend to recruit directors who reflect that orientation.

Alongside the above patterns, all FBCO coalitions in the U.S. are facing the challenges presented by the stagnant or declining number of congregations from the field's three core religious traditions. As the number of Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Black Protestant churches declines, some coalitions are responding by developing ways to retain current congregational members and recruit new members. They have generally adopted one of the following three strategies. Some coalitions are investing organizational resources to help member congregations strengthen their congregational life in an effort both to reinvigorate existing members and reverse denominational decline. Other coalitions are actively recruiting congregations from *other* religious traditions and/or secular institutions to become members. Finally, some coalitions see congregational decline as widespread and irreversible, and they have decided to dedicate their resources to starting new kinds of institutions (such as community schools, homeowners' associations, after-school care programs, food co-ops, and day labor centers) in poor and middle-class communities, essentially striving to create their own organizational members.

Faith-based community organizing thus intersects with religion in complex ways. Although each individual coalition adopts its own practices, an overall pattern exists. Many coalitions tend to ignore religious *differences*, yet they do not ignore religion altogether. Rather than being venues for interfaith dialogue, FBCO coalitions are vehicles for interfaith action. In addition to employing non-religious principles rooted in the American democratic tradition, these coalitions incorporate faith into their organizing efforts, drawing on various religious teachings, narratives, prayers, and symbols. These practices serve to motivate and mobilize their faith-oriented members around issues of common concern, while building relationships between leaders from different religious traditions. Moreover, these effects are amplified among coalitions

that are more religiously diverse and led by religiously active directors. All this is occurring within the context of a shifting American religious landscape, with decline in some sectors presenting new challenges to the faith-based organizing field.

Overall, these findings indicate that many FBCO coalitions are quite comfortable with bringing religion into the public arena. Their comfort with public religion combined with their strong interfaith cooperation contrasts sharply with *both* radical secularism and intolerant forms of faith-based politics (see also Bretherton 2011; 2014; Jacobsen 2001). The former would drive all religious voices from the public sphere, while the latter have alienated many from religion altogether.

Approaches to Political Engagement

Coupled with the field's growing diversity are its more sophisticated approaches to political engagement. A decade ago, it was rare for FBCO coalitions to address issues beyond the city level; since then, however, this organizing strategy has become much more commonplace (see Figure 1.10). In 2011, 87 percent of the coalitions reported addressing at least one issue at the state or national level. In addition, many coalitions have become more intentional about engaging political officials personally in order to be more effective at influencing decisions in public life. In 2011, 92 percent of the coalitions had met with a city-level political official in the last year to discuss a particular issue. These meetings do not always focus exclusively on winning a particular issue; they are also used to lay the relational groundwork for future negotiations or to gain political knowledge. Although many coalitions restrict their organizing area to a city, most are engaging political officials beyond the city level. Eighty-four percent had met with a state-level official within the last year and 66 percent had met with a national-level official (see Figure 1.11).

Overall, the picture of higher-level issue work and extensive meetings with state and federal officials, along with specific issue victories in those higher arenas, provide evidence of intensified power projection in the FBCO field over the last decade.²⁰ That power has been achieved despite a decline in attendance at the largest public actions—previously the field's primary tactic for bolstering its influence. Instead, FBCO coalitions have developed a wider array of tactics. They now turn out

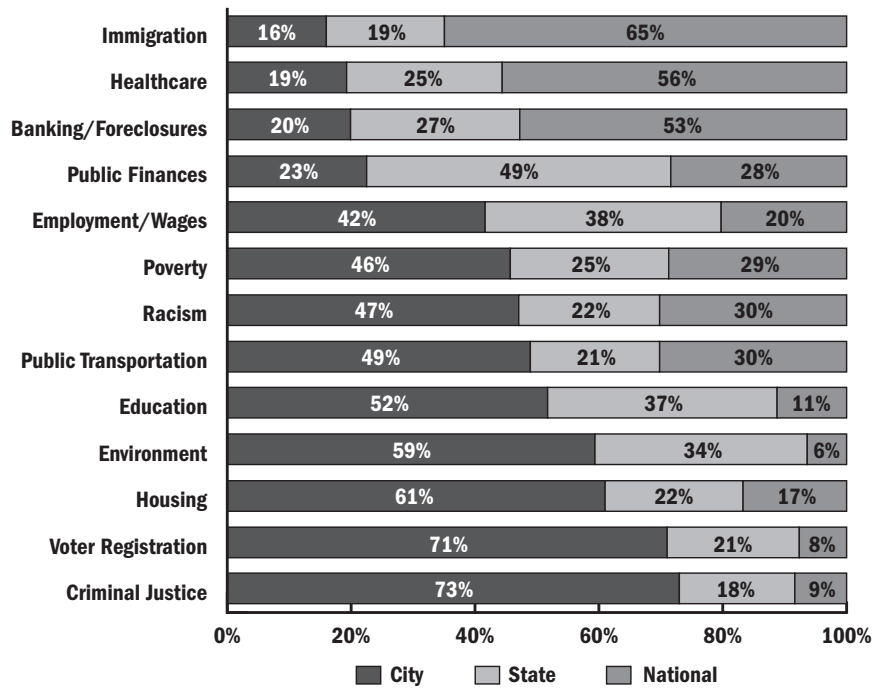


Figure 1.10. Highest level at which FBCO coalitions are addressing the following issues

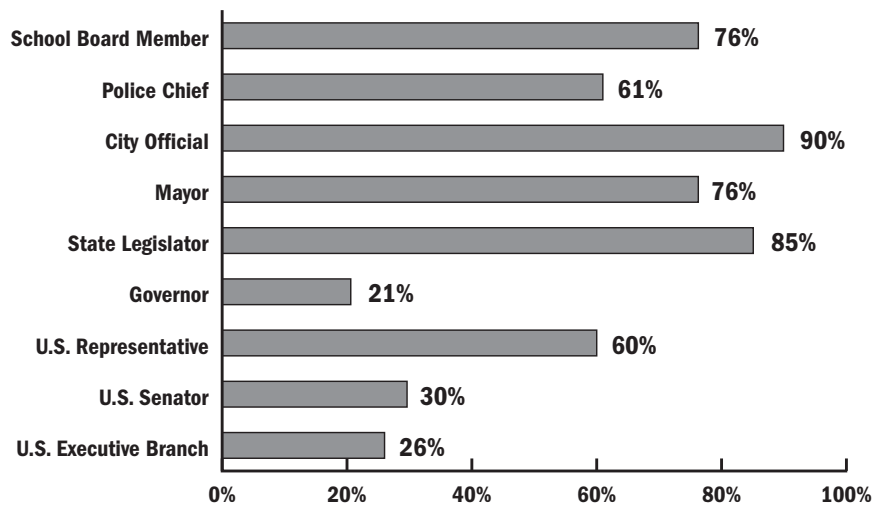


Figure 1.11. Percentage of FBCO coalitions that met with the following political officials sometime in the last year

people for more events, coordinate efforts at multiple political levels simultaneously, and cultivate strategic relationships with political officials and institutional leaders. For example, those addressing racial injustice in American law enforcement have organized locally for “ban-the-box” and transition-to-work initiatives at the county level, advocated new reduced sentencing legislation at the state level, and pressed federal officials for new policy intervention at the national level. Beyond this, some coalitions and organizing networks now systematically use electronic communication technologies, actively cultivate media coverage, and draw on outside policy expertise more routinely than in the past. In addition, some coalitions that previously collaborated only within their own organizing network (if at all) now operate within broader strategic partnerships in nationwide efforts. Beneath these diverse strategic and tactical differences, all FBCO coalitions share a common commitment to build democratic power, reverse rising inequality, and strengthen public life while bridging social divides.

Opportunities and Challenges for Religious Progressives and Progressive Politics

With the decline of liberal hegemony in American political culture in recent decades, religious progressives seeking to influence public policy cannot rely on moral sermonizing about injustice. They have been largely outmaneuvered on that terrain, to such a degree that what counts as a “moral argument” in much of American political culture already prejudices many issue areas in favor of the conservative position. That is, the Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, and their successor organizations of the religious Right have redefined the cultural terrain of morality such that the policy preferences of religious progressives are simply excluded from being embraced as moral concerns.²¹

To be taken seriously in the broad American political arena, while simultaneously swimming upstream against this narrow definition of morality, will require religious progressives to construct political space within which to articulate their own moral-political vision—and to attain sufficient influence to have that vision actually heard. In turn, this will involve establishing the organizational infrastructure to undergird such political space. This chapter has described such an organizational infra-

structure to illustrate what building this political space might entail for a wider and deeper movement among religious progressives. We do so not because faith-based community organizing is the only example of such an organizational infrastructure; the introduction of this volume, as well as groups such as Interfaith Worker Justice, Domestic Workers United, and the living-wage campaigns of various labor unions and community-labor coalitions offer other examples (Medina and Scheiber 2015).

Among the opportunities religious progressives face, perhaps the key insight from the above analysis is that it is indeed possible to build an organizational infrastructure to sustain political work on this terrain. Religion is not condemned to being a politically conservative force, and progressive politics are not condemned to “thin” moral ground without recourse to the deep ethical traditions that flow in American life—many of them religious. Likewise, because religious commitment reaches widely across the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic divides that bedevil American society, and reaches deeply into most communities and social strata, faith-based progressive politics can create precisely the kind of bridging social capital that transcends the cleavages that are used to prevent policy reform that strives to address our nation’s challenges.

Achieving this outcome, however, requires overcoming not only conservative definitions of what counts as “moral,” but also the vast power of those whose wealth and/or privilege leads them to oppose all progressive socioeconomic policy, from universal healthcare to living wages to immigration reform to reasonable checks on the ability of the financial sector to endanger American and global economic growth. Thus, despite all the evidence here for the promise of an organizational infrastructure for religious progressivism, our underlying argument is somber: the faith-based community organizing field, religious progressives more broadly, and the entire movement for more progressive social policy face enormous challenges.

If any of those sectors are to achieve widespread influence, several challenges must be met: First, the best practices of progressive organizing models must be identified, replicated, and multiplied extensively beyond current strongholds—along with the “softer” skills of organizing that can creatively adapt such practices to fit emerging strategic needs. Second, religious progressives must deepen their ability and orientation toward collaborating with other religious and secular political actors

who possess complementary political skills and practices. Third, religious progressives must bolster their locally rooted organizing work while coordinating it with higher-level organizing work at the state and national levels, in order to create leverage across all of the arenas in which social policy innovation and adoption occur.

All that would require a pragmatic orientation that only a minority of religious progressives have demonstrated up to now. But if more religious progressives embrace this orientation, a decade from now the American political landscape may be less distorted by economic inequality and the dearth of full democratic voice for all who inhabit that landscape.

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NOTES

- 1 On the paucity of bridging social capital in America, see Putnam (2000; 2007) and Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2004).
- 2 On the background of the faith-based organizing field (also called broad-based, congregation-based, and institution-based community organizing) and other variants that emerged partly from Alinsky's work, see Boyte and Kari (1996), Bretherton (2014), Chambers and Cowan (2003), Delgado (1986), Fisher (1994), Gecan (2009), Hart (2001), Horwitt (1989), Swarts (2008), Warren (2001), and Wood (2002).
- 3 See Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) for a now-classic study of how democratic skills are developed in American society.
- 4 This study was conducted as a follow-up to a 1999 study of the FBCO field (Warren and Wood 2001), and when we estimate changes in the field over the last decade, we compare data from the 1999 study with data from the 2011 study. The

organizing networks included in this study are the Gamaliel Foundation, Industrial Areas Foundation, National People's Action, and PICO National Network. The regional networks include the Direct Action Research Training (DART) Center, Inter-Valley Project, and Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations (RCNO).

- 5 Denominations and congregations that have sponsored efforts to use faith-based community organizing as a strategy for congregational development (also termed “institutional development”) include the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and many Jewish faith communities (see Interfaith Funders 2004 and Flaherty and Wood 2004).
- 6 All statistics related to U.S. congregations are based on estimates from the 2012 National Congregations Study (Chaves, Anderson, and Eagle 2014).
- 7 The category “Conservative Protestant” includes all Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic congregations.
- 8 Also noteworthy is the increase in the number of religiously unaffiliated (i.e., secular) member organizations. This is the result of an increase in involvement among non-congregational organizations.
- 9 Similar levels of religious diversity exist among the coalition board members as well. This is not surprising, since coalitions’ boards are comprised of representatives from their member organizations.
- 10 We define the racial/ethnic identity of a member organization to be the racial/ethnic group that represents a majority in that organization. If no group represents more than 50 percent, then the organization is identified as being multiracial.
- 11 Only 8 percent of the coalition boards are mono-racial (i.e., all of the board members have the same racial/ethnic identity). Furthermore, “mono-racial” looks different in different settings. Five of the thirteen mono-racial coalitions are all black and practice a model of organizing that focuses explicitly on organizing in black churches. One of the thirteen is all Hispanic and is located in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas—an overwhelmingly Hispanic region. The remaining seven coalitions have only white board members and are located in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Oregon—states with relatively low racial diversity.
- 12 Diversity = $1 - \sum_k \rho_k^2$ where ρ_k is the proportion of board members in group k .
- 13 Because the racial diversity score is calculated using four racial groups (i.e., $k = 5$), the maximum possible score is .80.
- 14 We use the racial/ethnic composition of a coalition’s board to calculate the racial/ethnic diversity of the coalition. We obtain similar results when we use the racial/ethnic composition of a coalition’s member organizations.
- 15 The mean diversity score for public schools is based on the 2009–10 NCES Common Core of Data Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey, the score for counties is based on the 2010 U.S. Census, and the score for congregations is based on the 2012 National Congregations Study.

- 16 Compared to 1999, when men predominated in professional FBCO organizer roles, gender representation has also shifted significantly in the field: in 2011, 55 percent of organizers and 46 percent of coalition directors were female.
- 17 Even when controlling for the effects of language differences, racial/ethnic differences continue to effect planning meetings. Language differences have the strongest effect on coalitions that have at least one immigrant member organization.
- 18 Further research might delve into these dynamics more fully—including the fact that roughly 70 percent of the coalitions have a policy in place for dealing with religious differences, and 50 percent for dealing with racial/ethnic differences. Also urgent is further research on the dynamics of class diversity within organizations (Leondar-Wright 2014).
- 19 Source: Smith et al. 2011.
- 20 For analysis of higher-level issue engagement in the field, see Wood (2007), Wood and Fulton (2015). For examples, see Pear (2009), Sanati (2010), and Waters (2010).
- 21 The Catholic tradition here represents a complex picture: the American Catholic bishops have preserved progressive teachings on immigrant rights, racism, labor rights, and inequality, but in recent decades have given far greater prominence to teaching on abortion and sexuality (even while continuing major funding for anti-poverty work, including faith-based organizing). This disparity makes particularly interesting Pope Francis's current efforts to revitalize Catholic teachings against inequality and exclusion, as well as Ruth Braunstein's chapter in this volume on the "Nuns on the Bus" phenomenon.

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