



Community Brief Strength Through Diversity:

*Four Cases of Local and
State Level Coalition Success*



Forced to continually respond to external requests and crises, most [American Muslim organizations] have not been able to obtain a broader understanding of how their work relates to the broader civil society landscape, and identify potential partners they could work with to achieve common goals.”¹

— “Enhancing Impact in the Public Square”,
2011 Brookings Institution report

Research Team



Alejandro J. Beutel,
Co-Principal Investigator
and Project Manager for
Islamophobia: A Threat
to All, ISPU Policy and
Research Engagement
Fellow



Jelena Jankovic, ISPU
Graduate Research Intern
and Kroc Institute for
International Peace Studies

**Shazia Kamal Farook, Afif Rahman,
and Hamza Syed Mannan**, Research
Assistants

Zeba Iqbal, Editor, Consultant

Patrick Cates, Co-Editor, ISPU Senior
Communications Associate

Dalia Mogahed, ISPU Director of Research

Farhan Latif, *Impact Assessment* - ISPU
COO & Director of Policy Impact

For more information about the study,
please visit:
<http://www.ispu.org/islamophobia>

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WHY THIS STUDY?

Since 9/11, the public spotlight on American Muslims has been intense, and much of the time the exposure has been negative.² The level of scrutiny on American Muslims has increased over the years, particularly since 2010 when Florida-based pastor Terry Jones sought to burn the Qur'an publicly; a national controversy erupted over plans to build a Muslim community center near the World Trade Center; and Louisiana and Oklahoma adopted anti-Islam legislation seeking to prohibit Muslims from practicing their faith.³

Adding its unique voice to the growing chorus of research on anti-Muslim prejudice, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) has launched a new project, *Islamophobia: A Threat to All*. The project's focus is providing research that is relevant to American Muslim advocates, community leaders, and their allies. This specific community brief, *Strength Through Diversity: Four Cases of Local and State Level Coalition Success* highlights and explores four (4) cases of successful advocacy in coalitions.



Key Findings

All the case studies had a set of common overarching themes that promote successful coalition building and advocacy. The following are six (6) “key findings” common across the four (4) cases:

- **Coalitions are important to securing success.** This report’s findings reaffirm the need for organizations to work together to achieve a particular goal. In many situations, one or two organizations may be considered the “lead”, but other groups playing secondary roles can provide strategic resources, interpersonal connections or operational capabilities that other organizations may not have.
- **Depending on context, funding may or may not matter.** These four case studies illustrate that pooling resources and establishing divisions of labor within a coalition can offset resource and skillset disparities. However, these case studies broadly suggest that the longer, more complex, and ambitious an organization/coalition’s advocacy goals are, the more resources—including funding—are required.
- **Unity of purpose is central to coalition effectiveness.** Unity of purpose not only helps provide overall strategic and day-to-day operational direction, it also serves to maintain internal cohesiveness.
- **Relationships and trust matter substantially.** Coalitions are more likely to be successful when there is a level of trust built from working together on other issues over time. Building relationships is a long-term investment that eventually pays dividends once trust is established. That said, the Washington state and Tennessee case studies illustrate that communication and relationships can be initiated based not just on trust and shared interests, but also on shared values—even with some of the most unlikely of groups and individuals.
- **No one strategy or tactic was responsible for achieving “success.”** The report’s findings suggest that the more complex and ambitious a coalition’s goals are, the more tactics and strategies are needed to “get the job done.” As long as there is trust among coalition members and a well-defined unity of purpose, diverse strategies and tactics can be complementary not conflicting. However, the report’s findings suggest that the ability to implement certain strategies tends to correlate with an organization/coalition’s overall level of capacity.
- **Finally “success” is more than achieving legislative goals.** Defeating or passing laws and creating new policies tell only part of the success story. The mobilization of communities that are new to civic and political engagement—whether immigrants, broadly, in Maryland or Muslims in our other cases—were considered to be highly significant victories by themselves. Other positive “side effects” include building strong political reputations and forcing one’s legislative adversaries to acknowledge that newly mobilized communities are a political reality that will have to be constructively engaged.

Key Recommendations

In light of the findings highlighted in the previous section, this report concludes with the following recommendations addressed to: 1) Current and prospective American Muslim advocates interested in local and state-level advocacy and 2) Potential external foundations and funders of American Muslim advocacy organizations.

To Current and Prospective American Muslim Advocates

- **American Muslims need to work with other communities in coalitions to secure their communities' interests.** Muslim communities and supporting organizations lack the numbers, skills, and influence to successfully “go it alone” without assistance from other communities. As a starting point, when deciding to join a coalition, prospective organizations should examine how their highest priority issue areas may overlap with the interests of others. To assist with this, ISPU has developed a set of tools (<http://www.ispu.org/islamophobia>) that demonstrates how anti-Muslim bigotry, such as anti-sharia laws, overlap with legislative attacks directed against other communities. Using this data can be an important conversation starter with potential partner communities and organizations.
- **When thinking about coalitions, focus on shared goals and interests, rather than differences in ideology and methodology.** This applies as much to forming coalitions, as it does to joining them. If you are joining a coalition, leaders should ask themselves, “Does my organization align with the coalition’s ‘unity of purpose’?” If seeking to create a coalition, “What are the goals and objectives of this coalition? What are the common areas of agreement that can bring about the most collaborative and effective coalition partners?” These considerations will also need to be balanced out with ethical considerations and the capacity to meaningfully participate in a coalition.
- **Be realistic about what your organization can and can’t do.** Many American Muslim organizations lack the capacity, particularly in the form of funding, to contribute certain resource-intensive tactics and strategies in a coalition, like issue area/policy research. Before formally joining a coalition, prospective organizations should already know in advance what unique contributions they can provide to their potential partners. That said, don’t let concerns about capacity completely deter your organization from participating in a coalition. Assuming that a coalition is aligned with your organization’s goals, having some presence and participation, even if symbolic, is better than none at all. There will probably be creative, low-cost, and effective means of contributing to coalitions. In New York City, Muslims were instrumental in organizing street demonstrations and “pack the courthouse” events. In Maryland and Washington, junior coalition partners very selectively and strategically provided assistance with things such as facilitating meetings with key officials and offering lobbying advice.
- **Build and maintain strong relationships with coalition partners.** In the short-term this will help enhance working relations with your various partners. In the medium-term, it will further demonstrate your shared interest and commitment to issues that both parties care about. It can also help mitigate potential internal and external pressures that seek to undermine the partnership. In the long-run, because of your relationships, and the track-record of partnerships upon which it is built, other communities and organizations are more likely to come to your organization and community’s assistance on other issues when the time comes.

Key Recommendations continued

To Potential External Foundations and Other Funders

- **Play the role of the *convener*, who can facilitate the bringing together of multiple parties for a common goal or purpose.** Due to the need for constantly responding to crises, American Muslim advocacy organizations and others have been unable to take stock of the larger strategic landscape. Foundations and other funders can provide assistance by having meetings where they can discuss “big picture” strategic questions

and share experiences and lessons learned with other organizations and communities throughout the country, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

- **Address resource asymmetries.** Many American Muslim organizations are also woefully underfunded and under-resourced, which inhibits their full potential. One potential model is the work of the North Star Fund, which provided \$100,000 in grants to under-resourced organizations that participated in the New York City-based Community United for Police Reform coalition.

Introduction and Background

ISPU's project *Islamophobia: A Threat to All* seeks to reliably track trends related to the nation's ongoing social, political, and demographic transformations in the years leading to 2050. The project includes several reports.

Among them, *Manufacturing Bigotry: A State-by-State Legislative Effort to Pushback Against 2050 by Targeting Muslims and Other Minorities* identifies legislative efforts to erode the legal rights of groups that are projected to be part of the new American demographic by the year 2050, and documents the link between anti-Muslim activism and support for other forms of prejudice by analyzing state-level laws passed and bills proposed on a number of key public policy issues.

Strength Through Diversity seeks to highlight positive and constructive advocacy efforts. It researches and documents the positive work of local and state level coalitions; and highlights the positive and successful efforts of coalitions' working together to promote pluralism and community empowerment.

Strength Through Diversity provides insights into the elements that help advocacy coalitions achieve success, and explores “what works, and what doesn't” in terms of local and state-level coalition advocacy. The focus is on local and state-level advocacy because the backlash against American Muslim communities starts at the local and state level; and because federal level laws are often modeled after successful local and state level laws. As the late Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, put it, states often serve as “laboratories” of democracy.⁴

Currently, academic and applied research literature examining what defines success and effectiveness in coalitions, and what elements make an advocacy coalition successful and effective is somewhat sparse.⁵ In other words, *what is currently known about coalition advocacy effectiveness is as much art as it is science*. Therefore, this report is an original and crucial contribution to the growing body of knowledge on this topic.

Introduction and Background continued

Methodology and Scope of the Study

This report relies on a mix of sources and methods, including primary source data gathered from semi-structured interviews with coalition advocates from around the country, in addition to the author's independent analysis of financial and electoral data taken from in-house documents provided by interviewees as well as reputable information clearinghouses, like the National Institute on Money in State Politics. Using multiple methods and sources empirically grounds the research and provides reliable insights to the reader.

The report draws from a limited number of examples selected by this report's author, in conjunction with a working group established when this publication was commissioned.⁶ The four (4) case studies included in this report were selected from an initial list of six (6)

case studies identified through informal discussions and formal interviews with ISPU stakeholders experienced in local and state level advocacy. The selection criteria included: 1) the primary organizations, 2) the coalition partners, 3) the coalitions' geographies and government focuses (local or state level), and 4) the complexity of the cases.

The report's primary limitation is that given the small, but in-depth sample size, the findings are not generalizable. Furthermore, due to time and resource limitations, the case studies do not include examples of "failed" or "unsuccessful" coalitions as a point of comparison against which to further isolate and identify factors that create "effective" and "successful" coalitions.

Key Terms

The five (5) key terms central to this report are coalition, advocacy, lobbying, Islamophobia, and success.

Coalition	A group of organizations whose members commit to an agreed-on purpose and shared decision making to influence an external institution or target, while each member organization maintains its own autonomy.
Advocacy	Advocacy includes a broad group of activities that encompasses pleading for or against causes, as well as supporting or recommending positions.
Lobbying	An attempt to influence specific legislation, including both legislation that has already been introduced in a legislative body and specific legislative proposals that an organization, or group of organizations (such as a coalition) may oppose or support. It is important to note that lobbying is a specific type of advocacy technique. While lobbying can be part of an advocacy strategy, advocacy does not necessarily include lobbying.
Islamophobia	An exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from America's social, political, and civic life.
Success	Success is not limited to achieving certain legislative goals, like passing a law or a resolution. "Success" often includes an organization or a broader community establishing and cementing relationships with new allies or having their issue(s) supported by a broader set of organizations and communities.

ADVOCACY



Endnotes

- 1 Brie Loskota and Nadia Roumani, "Enhancing Impact in the Public Square: Building Capacity and Developing Leadership among American Muslims and Their Organizations." *Brookings Institute*, August 2011, P. 8.
- 2 For instance, see: Siwar Bizri, "Word Use and Placement Associating Arabs and Arab-Americans with Terrorism in the American Media." *Virginia Tech*, <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-12042007-153628/unrestricted/finalthesis.pdf>; Mucahit Bilici, "'American Jihad': Representations of Islam in the United States After 9/11." *American Journal of Islamic and Social Sciences*, 22, no. 1, (2005): 50-69. Available online at: http://www.mucahitbilici.net/web_documents/americanjihad.pdf. Stephanie Pappas, "Negative Portrayals of Muslims Get More Media Attention." *Live Science*, November 29, 2012, accessed December 25, 2013, <http://www.livescience.com/25110-negative-messages-muslims-media.html>; Evelyn Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a "Postrace" Era." *American Quarterly*, 65, no. 1, (March 2013): 161-169. DOI:10.1353/aq.2013.0008;
- 3 *Legislating Fear: Islamophobia and its Impact in the United States*. (Washington, D.C.: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2013): 65. Available online at: <http://www.cair.com/images/islamophobia/Legislating-Fear.pdf>.
- 4 *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 U.S. 262 (1932). <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=CASE&court=US&vol=285&page=262>. noting, "It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."
- 5 Terry Mizrahi and Beth Rosenthal, "Complexities of Coalition Building: Leaders' Successes, Strategies, Struggles, and Solutions." *Social Work*, 46, no. 1, (2001): 63-78. Full text available at: <http://www.biomedsearch.com/article/Complexities-Coalition-Building-Leaders-Successes/70649142.html>. Accessed December 25, 2013; Jared Raynor, et. al, "What Makes an Effective Coalition? Evidence-Based Indicators of Success." *TCC Group*, March 2011, accessed December 23, 2013, http://www.tccgrp.com/pdfs/What_Makes_an_Effective_Coalition.pdf; Ronda C. Zakocs and Erika M. Edwards, "What Explains Community Coalition Effectiveness? A Review of the Literature." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 30, no. 4, (2006): 351-361.
- 6 Working group members were comprised of ISPU staff and a representative of an outside foundation financially sponsoring this research.



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RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT

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ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan think tank and research organization committed to conducting objective, empirical research and offering expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing the United States. These issues include U.S. foreign policy, national security, the economy, and public health. In addition, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines and built a solid reputation as a trusted source for information about American Muslims and Muslim communities around the world.

ISPU scholars provide insight into the major debates taking place across the country. They offer context-specific analysis and recommendations to journalists, policymakers, and the general public through reports, policy briefs, articles, op-eds and books. ISPU disseminates its publications through a variety of channels and holds regular congressional briefings, policy events and academic conferences.

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

6 Parklane Blvd., Suite 510
Dearborn, Michigan 48126

Tel: 1-800-920-ISPU or 1-800-920-4778
www.ispu.org • Email: info@ispu.org

Washington, DC

1110 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005

Tel: 202-768-8751