



Are "Organizing for Obama" and Successor Mobilization Efforts Building a Robust Progressive Movement?

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Barack Obama's experience as a community organizer did not disappear when he entered presidential politics. He and his allies built an information-age grassroots organization that proved central not only to his two presidential campaigns but also to the enactment and implementation of Obama's signature legislative achievement, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010. Born during the 2008 campaign as "Organizing for Obama," this mass mobilization effort was inserted into the Democratic National Committee as "Organizing for America" during Obama's first term in the White House; and after 2012 it was spun off as a nonprofit social-welfare entity called "Organizing for Action." Through all these phases, "OFA" as we will call it for simplicity has played a critical part in revitalizing progressive grassroots efforts and preparing the ground for a new progressive governing coalition.

At its best, OFA mobilizes constituencies that represent the maturing of the Great Society – minorities, youth, and educated white voters, especially women – and at the same time uses sophisticated targeting data to extend its reach to moderate suburbanites who can be persuaded to view Obama's pragmatic version of progressivism as preferable to the current stridency of Republican politics. Most scholars and activists presume that grassroots mobilization is diametrically opposed to centralized action through an institution like the U.S. presidency. But in fact, reform-oriented presidents have repeatedly acted in synergy with social movements to push major political transformations. President Lyndon Johnson's interplay with civil rights activists and President Ronald Reagan's interactions with Christian right activists are two cases in point – and Obama's alliance with OFA may come to be seen as another major instance. Combining high tech targeting and old fashioned canvassing – neighbor to neighbor appeal – Obama has attempted, explains political scientist Hugh Hecl, to forge a "reciprocal top-down and bottom-up campaign strategy" that mobilizes followers to "realize their collective strength."

Organizing for Obama in 2008

What distinguishes Obama is that his original presidential campaign built its own movement. Organizing for Obama took shape during the 2008 campaign and ultimately amassed 13 million email addresses, including three million donors and two million active participants. Under the original OFA umbrella, 35,000 local social network groups registered on the website MyBarackObama.com. Once individuals and local groups entered their data, the Obama campaign used email, text messaging, YouTube videos, and podcasts to explain the candidate's positions, fire up campaign enthusiasts, encourage supporters to recruit friends and relatives, and alert activists to rallies, fundraisers, and other campaign events. The Obama team asked supporters to use standard campaign materials and messages, but also encouraged them to personalize their efforts by organizing their own events, posting their own campaign testimonials, and bundling donations from friends and colleagues. Network members used both door-knocking and electronic social networking to canvass in the areas they represented.

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The Fight for Health Reform

After Obama was elected, his massive campaign apparatus was regularized to become Organizing for America and serve, in the words of Democratic National Committee Chair Tim Kaine, as “the grass roots arm of the Democratic party.” Some activists did not want to accept institutionalized guidance from above, but many staff and community volunteers stuck with the effort because they were dedicated to seeing Obama’s progressive agenda, especially health care reform, translated into government action. During the protracted fight to get health reform legislation through congress, this new version of OFA gathered more than 238,000 “health care stories” that dramatized the problems of the existing system. Supporters were encouraged to write letters to the editors on behalf of health reform, and ultimately more than 250,000 such letters were sent by the end of 2009, according to the organization’s tallies.

Finally, OFA asked supporters to lobby members of Congress. In an October 20, 2009 “day of action,” members made more than 315,000 phone calls to members of Congress in support of health care reform. Supporters argue that the health care bill would have died without their “robust communication with members of Congress through phone calls, letters and meetings,” as one staffer put it. After a special Massachusetts election sent Republican health reform opponent Scott Brown to the Senate and deprived the Democrats of a filibuster-proof majority, every White House aide advised Obama to postpone health reform. But OFA was one of the grassroots networks that pushed both President Obama and Democratic foot-draggers in Congress to persist until the Affordable Care Act passed and was signed into law.

Beyond Electing (and Reelecting) Obama

As Obama faced re-election dragged down by a sluggish economy and bitter partisan battles over Affordable Care and other reforms, his grassroots organization far outperformed that of his Republican opponent Mitt Romney. As one volunteer explained, “Everyone was excited in 2008; in 2012 people may have been less passionate, but they worked just as hard. It was more businesslike.... more about: ‘This is important and we’re going to do it whatever it takes.’”

This dogged sense of mission persists now that Obama is well into his second presidential term and the partially independent “Organizing for Action” works to mobilize support for progressive priorities such as immigration reform, efforts to fight climate change, gun safety legislation, and the implementation of health reform in the face of continuing intense opposition. Removal from the Democratic National Committee is supposed to enhance OFA’s potential for grassroots advocacy in cooperation with partners such as MoveOn.org, the National Women’s Political Caucus, the Service Employees International Union, the National Council of La Raza and the Human Rights Campaign.

As progressives seek to both learn from and counteract Christian right activists and conservative Tea Partiers, it remains to be seen whether this latest interplay between the White House and grassroots activism can make a difference for key priorities. So far, most action is focused on immigration reform at the national level and state-level battles over Medicaid expansion for health reform. Beyond current struggles, the challenge for “Organizing” will be to move beyond loyalty to Obama himself and find ways to deepen his political and policy legacies beyond 2016.